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Employee Participation

The High Road to a Better Work Environment?

Lind, Jens; Busck, Ole Gunni; Knudsen, Herman Lyhne

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Herman Knudsen, Aalborg University (**hk@plan.aau.dk**)
Ole Busck, Aalborg University (**oleb@plan.aau.dk**)
Jens Lind, Aalborg University (**jlind@socsci.aau.dk**)

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INTRODUCTION

It can hardly be doubted that psychological work demands have increased during the last couple of decades, where the focus has been on increased competition and organisational rationalisation strategies in companies. It is also a well known observation that employee participation in decisions regarding their job has increased during the same period, but it is also a fact that this has not been able to – or designed to - offset increased pressures on employees.

In the prevailing paradigm for the conception of psycho-social workloads, heavily relying on the work of Karasek and Theorell (1990), it is assumed that the risk of strain decreases as employees' control (job-autonomy and skill discretion) increases at work. If work loads increase, increased strain is mitigated to the extent that control simultaneously increases. This effect of employee participation seems not to be quite in accordance with present developments.

This paper reports on recent Danish research on how employee participation affects the quality of the work environment. The research departs from the dual expectation that employee participation in general has positive effects on the quality of the work environment (QWE) but that in certain contexts the effects may be negative. The positive effects were expected on the basis of the huge literature on employee participation accumulated notably within the human relations and organisational participation research traditions (see for instance Heller et al 1998 and Markey et al 2001), whereas the expectation of possible negative effects mainly stems from critical literature on modern forms of flexible and 'self-managed' work (Busck et al 2009).

In the paper we first introduce some key theoretical markers from the participation literature, leading to the formulation of our hypotheses. The next section presents the design, methodology and core concepts of the study. Then follow a presentation and discussion of findings, before some conclusions are drawn.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Employee participation is usually perceived as a plus-word in industrial relations – it is seen as good for employees and good for productivity. However, at the same time it is a complex phenomenon with different meanings and rationales. In one part of the literature, employee participation is metaphor for the democratisation of working life. Among others Harvie Ramsay (1983) interpreted the historical growth of workers' participation as steps in the direction of 'industrial democracy'. Its development in industrialised countries came in 'cycles' triggered by an offensive labour movement (Harley et al 2005). Michael Poole (1978 and 1986) similarly saw

workers' participation as originating in demands and aspirations among workers, unions and labour parties. While Ramsay and Poole mainly studied developments at a macro- and meso-level, others found democratising – or at least humanising - effects also at the micro-level. This goes for the human relations and socio-technical traditions as well as the Scandinavian work development programs unfolding from the 1960s and onwards (Hvid and Hasle 2003).

However, from the early 1980s participatory arrangements based on unionism and democratic and humanist principles came under attack, ideologically by the assertive neo-liberal offensive and also politically by neo-liberal leaders such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK, Ronald Reagan in the US, and – somewhat later - John Howard in Australia. The EU, though, was never part of this political offensive. On the contrary, here various directives aimed at consolidating workers' participation as an element of the so-called European Social Model.

While neo-liberalism strived to roll back institutional forms of participation based on legislation and collective agreements, the simultaneously developing HRM current advocated individual forms of participation designed exclusively by management. These new forms of participation typically came under labels such as 'empowerment', 'involvement' and 'commitment' and were partly inspired by Japanese production concepts (Marchington 2005). Jeff Hyman and Bob Mason (1995) found that 'employee participation' had given way to 'employee involvement', i. e. had become employer driven and individualised. And Michael Poole, Russell Lansbury and Nick Wailes (2001) found it pertinent to revise Ramsay's cycles theory. Instead they proposed a 'favourable conjunctures approach' as a tool of understanding historical changes in participation; in this, strategic choices made by management at firm level are recognised as a main driver of participation.

While this change from collective, often union based, forms of participation to individual, management-directed participation often took radical forms in Anglo-Saxon countries, this was much less the case in Scandinavian and most other European countries. New forms of direct participation, such as team-work and individual appraisal and development schemes, were added on to already existing forms of direct participation, and the structures for representative participation remained intact. There was no class war over the changing forms of participation, rather a renewed and updated class compromise, cf Box 1 with a Danish formulation of the compromise.

Box 1. Quotation from the Cooperation Agreement between the Danish Employers Confederation (DA)and the Danish Trade Union Confederation (LO)

" [The parties agree that] a constant improvement of competitiveness and job satisfaction are the preconditions for the continuous development of the establishment and for greater well-being and security for employees…
The development of day-to-day cooperation is based on the interplay between management and employees. Management forms that are motivating and an active participation by employees and their elected union representatives are necessary conditions for the development of the cooperation in the establishment.
Hence, the forms of management, cooperation and information applied must prompt as many employees as possible to be involved in the arrangement and organisation of daily work. In this way it is safeguarded that the participation of employees through their knowledge, insight and experience contributes to the development of the establishment.
A decentralisation and delegation to the individual employee or groups of employees must therefore form part of these efforts"
(quoted and translated from Hasselbalch 2005).

Thus, at least in the Danish industrial relations context there is an explicit consensus that 1) both direct and representative forms of participation are desirable, and 2) both play a positive role for productivity as well as workers' well-being.

Nevertheless, recent research has questioned the assumption that participation – in all forms and at all times – promotes a good work environment and workers' well-being. Let us here concentrate on

the recent debate on the validity of Robert Karasek's demand-control model (Karasek and Theorell 1990). This model, which has been substantiated by empirical evidence from the early 1980s and onwards, postulates that unhealthy jobs in particular are those where job demands are high and workers' job control low, whereas healthy jobs are found both with the combinations low demands-high control, and high demands-high control. In other words, job control (which to some extent can be seen as an equivalent to employee influence based on participation) is the important factor determining whether a job leads to strain, stress and cardio-vascular illness, or keeps the worker in a healthy condition.

Recent research is beginning to question the validity of the demand-control model in present work contexts (Busck et al. 2009, Hvid 2009). Over the past years we have seen the simultaneous increase in participation and work-related strain, often resulting in stress, long periods of absence from work and perhaps even exclusion from the labour market. This seems to indicate that present forms of participation are framed in a way, or are embedded in contexts, which fail to secure the relatively autonomous type of job control that Karasek identified and advocated. On the contrary, there seems to be structures and contexts that prevent workers from 'being in control' when performing their jobs, even though more responsibility and decision-making powers have been delegated to workers. More specifically, participation may fail to deliver worker well-being, if a) work demands are so excessive that even the highest degree of job control does not help because b) participation has been individualised to an extent where it no longer contains elements of a defence against over-exploitation, and c) participation is embedded in work systems, often computer based, which strongly reduces discretion of workers (Busck et al. 2009).

On the basis of these theoretical considerations briefly presented above we can formulate two contradictory hypotheses for the study:
1. Participation has positive effects on the quality of the work environment
2. In certain contexts, participation has negative effects on QWE.

CONCEPTS, DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In the study, employee participation was defined as all forms through which employees take part in decisions affecting their working life. Such decisions may be taken in the immediate work surroundings, at department or workplace level, or at higher levels such as the corporate headquarter or, in the public sector, local and central government, and the decisions may involve operational, tactical as well as strategic issues. We distinguish between direct and representative (or indirect) participation (Knudsen 1995, Markey et al 2001). Direct participation means that individual employees or groups of employees take part in decisions together with management or make decisions themselves. Although direct participation is practised in many ways the central element is the degree of job autonomy devolved to employees. Direct participation may be exercised by the individual employee or by groups or teams of workers, but also collectively through meetings and consultation arrangements at department or workplace level.
Representative participation is also collective in character, but here it is elected representatives that take part in decisions. In the Danish context the representatives are trade union delegates (shop stewards), health and safety representatives and worker representatives elected to company boards. The main corresponding fora for representative participation are:
- meetings and other interactions between shop stewards and managers
- the works council (the 'cooperation committee', a joint management-employee body; employee representatives are primarily shop stewards)

- joint health and safety groups and committees
- the company board.

In the study we not only attempt to uncover the forms and processes of participation, but also its outcomes in the form of employee influence on decision-making, as in our view participatory processes at work can only be successful if they result in influence, cf. Frank Heller's observations on 'inauthentic participation' (Heller et al. 1998). In particular in the questionnaire part (see below) of the study we attempt to measure the extent and intensity of participation mainly through questions on employee influence. We perceive influence as the possible outcome of participation: participation leads to influence to the extent that decisions reflect the opinions, ideas and choices of employees and their representatives – as opposed to exclusively expressing management views. Analytically employee participation and influence are placed as independent variables, while QWE is analysed as the dependant variable. The content of the latter concept is close to the perhaps more familiar concepts of 'quality of working life (QWL)' and 'job satisfaction' which have often been used in studies of workers' well-being. Our choice of QWE as a core concept is related to the fact that in the Scandinavian countries the discourse on occupational health and safety and workers' well-being are usually subsumed under the concept of work environment. A good work environment is more than just healthy and safe working conditions; it is an environment in which the worker is able to thrive – socially, psychologically and physically.

The study was conducted as a multiple case study of 11 workplaces from six industries, more precisely two food manufacturing factories, two hotels, two schools, two hospital wards, two banks and one workplace from the IT sector. From the outset it was the intention to include two relatively similar workplaces regarding work processes and products from each of the six industries, but with a clear difference regarding the rate of absenteeism which is usually a good indicator of QWE (Lund et al 2003). However, this ambition was only partly fulfilled. In the bank sector the pair of workplaces we were able to get access to, had rather identical absenteeism rates – and also QWE, it turned out in our research - and in the IT sector, we only managed to get one workplace on board. In the hotel sector, the difference in absenteeism rates was not as big as we would have liked. Generally, it proved difficult to get access to workplaces with high absenteeism rates. As a consequence, where we had wanted a sample of six 'good' and six 'not so god' workplaces in QWE terms, we ended up with eight good or rather good ones and only three 'not so good' ones as measured by absenteeism rates. This did not prevent us from pursuing our research, but it did mean that work environment contrasts within the sample were smaller than hoped for. Absenteeism, by the way, generally proved to be a good indicator of QWE, although not in the hospital sector. Actually, the hospital ward chosen for its relatively high absence rate turned out to be the best QWE workplace in the whole sample. (This apparent paradox was explained when we learned that the staff was strongly instructed to stay away from work if suffering from a cold or any type of contagious disease.)

Data were collected from April to November 2008 through an array of different methods. At all workplaces interviews were conducted with the top manager, one or two shop stewards (at the eight workplaces that had at least one), a health and safety representative, and sometimes also with middle managers and HR managers. The interviews were later transcribed and condensed in accordance with the themes treated by the study.

A questionnaire was used to get responses from lay employees. At some of the workplaces a paper format was used, at others the questionnaire was filled in and returned electronically. Response

rates varied from 51 to 79 percent. The questionnaire was not addressed to all employees but to the core group(s) of employees – at the schools for instance only to teachers, at the factories only to workers in production and distribution. Generally, managers and administrative staff were excluded – an exemption being secretaries at the hospital wards, where, in return, doctors for various reasons were not included. Given these exceptions and given the satisfying response rates, the responses can be considered as representative of those employees who perform the core work operations at the 11 workplaces. We have no information indicating any characteristic differences between respondents and non-respondents.

A third data source consisted of documents obtained from the studied workplaces, typically documents describing the organisation of work, personnel policies, policies related to the work environment, absenteeism statistics etc. Further, we got access to minutes from works council and H&S committee meetings and to workplace assessments (a mandatory tool to identify H&S problems and take action to solve them).

The methodology applied in analysing the data is primarily based on triangulation and comparisons. Triangulation is used in the sense that data obtained through the questionnaire are interpreted in the light of data from the interviews and documents, and vice versa. The data from the three sources supplement each other, but sometimes also contradict each other. In the latter case we are forced to seek explanations as to why reality looks different for managers and employee representatives (who were interviewed) and lay employees (who were asked through the questionnaire).
We have attempted to apply comparative methodology in a consistent way and at different levels. On top of the 11 individual case studies we first have the comparison of the pairs of workplaces within each sector. Given a context where factors such as work processes and employment regulation are almost identical, which similarities and differences do the two workplaces then display? To what extent can differences in QWE be explained by differences in employee participation? At the next level we make comparisons – as in this paper – between all the workplaces. The core data are here the questionnaire responses transformed into scores on scales. For all questions there were five reply options, ranging from 'always'/'very good' etc. to 'never', 'very bad' etc. These qualitative options were transformed into quantitative scales by giving 40 points to responses in the highest category, 30 points to those in the next highest category, 20 to those in the middle category, 10 to those in the next lowest category, and 0 points to the 'never' or 'very bad' answers. The mean of the scale is thus 20 points, corresponding to the middle response option 'sometimes' or 'acceptable'. This makes it possible analytically for each workplace to display levels of participation variables as well as QWE variables, and on this background *and* the qualitative data we can discuss the relationship between participation and QWE within the sample of workplaces.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN PARTICIPATION AND QWE: FINDINGS

Quality of Work Environment

QWE for the studied workplaces was primarily measured on the basis of six questions:
- assessment of total work environment
- assessment of physical work environment
- assessment of psychosocial work environment
- experience of stress
- experience of fatigue

- experience of problems in work-life balance.

Responses to the three latter questions were integrated into an index of well-being (well-being thus being defined here as the relative absence of stress, fatigue and problems with work-life balance). In Table 1 are shown the numerical scores of these QWE indicators for the 11 workplaces.

Table 1. QWE scores on scale from 0 to 40 (the two highest scores on each dimension are shown in bold)

Workplace	Total work env.	Psychosocial work env.	Physical work env.	Well-being
Hosptal Y	**33,0**	**33,0**	**35,1**	**30,0**
School X	**29,0**	28,0	28,0	27,7
IT X	28,8	27,6	**30,5**	26,7
Hotel X	28,3	**29,6**	25,2	26,8
Hotel Y	28,3	27,8	26,5	25,5
Bank X	27,9	27,3	29,4	24,8
Bank Y	27,6	27,1	27,6	26,2
Factory X	26,2	25,8	24,5	**28,8**
Hospital X	25,8	29,4	18,9	27,3
School Y	24,4	23,4	22,0	24,4
Factory Y	22,3	22,3	23,0	20,5

Hospital Y comes out as a clear number one on all dimensions. This hospital ward is dealing with a prioritised specialty and does not suffer from a lack of staff or other resources as is often the case elsewhere in the public healthcare system. School X, a small primary school situated in a village, achieves the second highest score regarding the total QWE. In third place IT X, a development affiliate of a US multinational, scores high on the physical environment, but only about average when it comes to the psychosocial work environment and well-being. At the other end of the table we find Factory Y and School Y. The candy producing factory was in a process of change from traditional organisation principles to lean and team-based work. The school, with primary as well as secondary level and situated in a small provincial town, had recently experienced cuts in resources; it took place at the same time as changes in school legislation had resulted in additional work demands.

In between the extremes we find Hospital X placed rather low. This is mainly due to a strong dissatisfaction with the physical work environment, more precisely, as revealed in the interviews, the localities in which work is performed. While Factory X has modest scores on the other dimensions we find it at a second position when it comes to well-being. This is quite surprising given that work here is shift-work and is carried out day and night and at weekends as well. As the factory is situated in a rural area where 'real men do not have stress' we are tempted to interpret this high level of reported well-being as an expression of the so-called John Wayne syndrome. Finally, we find it remarkable that both hotels – with low paid and low skilled work, often performed at unsocial hours – score relatively well on all QWE measures. Without going into a long methodological discussion let us just remark that when you measure QWE on the basis of people's own experience, as we do, not only their experience of the job but also their expectations to it enter into their assessment. So, while this result no doubt reflects good work environments at the hotels, the backcloth is a sector with relatively tough working conditions and health hazards clearly above the average.

If we add the scores in Table 1 for all four dimensions we get almost the same rank order as for the dimension 'total work environment'. For this reason and the sake of brevity we will concentrate on this measure when we now move on and begin analysing the interplay between employee participation and QWE.

Participation Profiles: A Brief Overview

The interviews gave us a good understanding of the forms of participation practised within the individual workplaces and also the intensity of the participation. Participation was relatively well developed at all workplaces, but different profiles appeared as to how participation was embedded in the organisational context. At School X, in particular, but also clearly at Hospital Y, participation was inscribed in a spirit of genuinely democratic governance. The two workplaces went considerably further in allowing employees collectively to take part in decision-making than just following the formal regulatory structures defined in legislation and collective agreements. Employees were able to influence the planning, organisation and development of work through regular meetings for all employees and ad hoc committees where specific issues were discussed prior to final decisions. The strong element of direct, collective participation was supported by managers and employee representatives alike, and there was a close and trustful cooperation between managers and representatives.

At other workplaces, notably the IT site and the two hotels, participation was much more a function of HRM and management initiative. Representative participation was weak, in the main contained to the mandatory health and safety structures, and the limits to participation were given by management considerations as to what is beneficial to productivity, employee well-being being one element. Participation was embedded in a humanistic HRM approach.

A third model was found in the two factories and also to a large degree in School Y and Hospital X. Here participation was part of a union-management partnership and practised very much in accordance with the formal regulatory framework. Many issues were discussed between managers and employee representatives, and the representatives played important roles. However, unlike at the democratic workplaces, lay employees were only marginally invited to take part in decisions affecting the whole workplace.

Finally, in the banks we found a hybrid model combining features from the HRM and partnership models. The local union representatives were consulted and informed, but were involved in a narrower range of issues than union representatives at the schools, hospitals and factories. Their main function was to take up possible grievances and be mediators between management and individual employees. The shaping of direct participation, for instance a recent change to team-work, was unambiguously in the hands of management and connected to productivity considerations; as a manager put it, "As long as you are a success you decide yourself".
Table 2 groups the workplaces according to participation profile. The partnership model is the one that is closest to formal Danish institutions regarding employee participation; the democratic model is constructed as the partnership model plus additional elements of democracy in the governance of the workplace.

Table 2. Workplaces grouped according to participation profile

Democratic model	Partnership model	HRM model	HRM/partnership model

School X	Factory X	IT X	Bank X
Hospital Y	Factory Y	Hotel X	Bank Y
	School Y	Hotel Y	
	Hospital X		

As all the workplaces form part of larger complexes – corporations, groups, the public school and health systems etc. – the forms of participation we studied at close hand were confined to decisions at the operational and tactical levels, although we also took note of representative forms of participation at higher organisational levels. However, with our focus on the workplace, our study cannot account for how QWE is affected by participation in strategic and tactical decisions taken at higher levels. Generally, the closer you are to the strategic level, the weaker participation is. At some of the workplaces it was evident that strategic and tactical management decision taken above the level of the workplace had negative effects on QWE. This tells us that, although participation at the workplace may be a necessary condition for a good work environment, it is not a sufficient condition

To the extent that decisions taken at higher levels restricted employee participation and influence at the workplace level, this was usually seen as regrettable by managers as well as employee representatives; often they saw themselves in the same boat rocked by detrimental top level management decisions. In particular at the four public sector workplaces, the hotels (both belonging to chains) and the IT workplace (part of a US multinational) there was a strong awareness of the restricted autonomy granted to the workplace and how this reduced the real space for participation. The starkest example was found at IT X where the highly educated engineers felt annoyed by the rigid and bureaucratic procedures they had to adhere to due to decisions taken at the corporate headquarter; local management was also highly critical to these procedures.

Direct Participation and QWE

Quantitative measures for direct participation were developed from questions concerning:
- influence on work load
- influence on work speed
- influence on arrangement of work
- information from management
- learning possibilities
- efforts among colleagues to secure fair work demands
- desire for more influence.

The three first questions are core variables as far as direct participation is concerned. Regarding the next ones, adequate and timely information from management is an important precondition for participation (Knudsen 1995); learning is hardly possible without participation (Wenger 1998); and joint efforts aimed at influencing work demands attempts to uncover the presence or absence of a norm-creating and norm-maintaining employee community at the workplace, which may function in cooperation with management *or* in opposition to it, as was the case with Sverre Lysgaard's (1967) 'workers' collective'. Finally, a question asking whether employees would like to have more influence was included in order to measure whether they experience a 'participation deficit'. We were interested in knowing not just how QWE correlates with actual direct participation but also with employees' desires for more participation.

Table 3. Workplace scores on direct participation dimensions

Workplace	Influence on work load	Influence on work speed	Influence on work arrangement	Information from management	Learning possibilities	Joint efforts for fair work demands	Want more influence*	Rank order all dimen- sions
Hospital Y	21.9	23.8	**29.5**	27.6	**34.9**	**27.6**	**26.2**	**1**
School X	**24.0**	**27.0**	**31.0**	**30.0**	29.0	19.0	**29.0**	**2**
IT X	23.8	26.1	27.2	18.4	27.0	20.0	18.1	7
Hotel X	**26.5**	**29.6**	27.8	23.5	28.3	19.5	20.9	4
Hotel Y	17.4	18.7	23.5	24.3	25.2	22.9	23.5	9
Bank X	20.3	22.1	25.8	21.2	29.4	19.7	20.6	8
Bank Y	21.0	23.8	25.2	19.5	28.6	22.4	20.5	5
Factory X	15.2	25.0	20.2	20.3	17.7	21.1	19.2	10
Hospital X	21.8	24.0	27.7	**27.7**	**33.1**	**26.9**	23.2	3
School Y	24.1	26.1	29.3	19.8	29.0	18.1	18.3	6
Factory Y	17.2	20.4	23.0	16.4	24.2	21.3	14.2	11

(*values in this column have been reversed so that a high score means low desire for more influence; the two highest scores on each dimension are shown in bold)

Table 3 collects the scores obtained by the individual workplaces, ranked by QWE, on these participation dimensions. If we first concentrate on the first six columns we see no complete match between QWE and these measures for direct participation. However, it *is* the case that our QWE champion, Hospital Y, is among the two highest scoring workplaces on three dimensions while our QWE number two, School X, is so on four of the six dimensions. Apart from the champions, only two other workplaces, namely Hotel X and Hospital X, get the highest or next highest score on any of the dimensions. These are the workplaces with the second and third best QWE when only the psycho-social work environment is considered, cf. Table 1, so these finding certainly does not 'spoil the picture'. At the bottom of the table there is a good fit between low QWE and low levels of direct participation at Factory X, whereas this is only partly the case at School Y which actually scores high on the three influence variables (column 1-3). However, School Y does get the third lowest score on the information dimension and the very lowest on the question on joint efforts in relation to work demands.

If we then move to the second last column it is quite remarkable that the two top QWE workplaces are also those workplaces where the desire for more influence by far is weakest. Likewise, at the other end of the table, employees at the two bottom QWE workplaces have respectively the highest and third highest desire for more influence. This indicates that not only actual levels of participation as experienced by employees but also desired levels play a role when employees are assessing their work environment. Look for instance also at IT X, which is a knowledge-based workplace located in extremely good surroundings and has highly trained engineers as its core workforce – certainly a potential QWE champion. In our sample it is second regarding physical work environment, third on total work environment, but only sixth when it comes to psycho-social work environment and well-being, cf. Table 1. Now, in Table 3 we can see it is second highest regarding the desire for more influence, which indicates a frustration that was also documented in the interviews. For this workplace a participation deficit, and frustration over this, seems to be an important factor in explaining why its QWE scores are no better than they are.

Finally, the last column gives the rank order of the workplaces when scores on all seven dimensions are added. The top two and the bottom workplace display a complete fit between their position on the QWE scale and their position when all direct participation dimensions are aggregated. In between, the picture is considerably more blurred. At this stage, let us therefore only conclude this:

it is at the two workplaces characterised as democratic we find the highest level of direct participation and also the highest QWE.

Representative Participation and QWE

In eight of the 11 workplaces all the representative structures typical for the Danish IR system were in place. There were one or more union representatives, a works council and one or more health and safety representatives and structures with H&S groups and/or committees (although at Hospital Y the works council was at a level above the ward and in the banks H&S representation took place at the regional level rather than at the individual workplace). Among the remaining three workplaces the mandatory H&S representation was in place, but at the two hotels no union representatives had been elected and no works council existed at the workplace; employees at Hotel X, though, were represented on the group works council. The IT workplace had a works council but no union representatives.

In the questionnaire we approached the issue of representative participation by asking the respondents whether they felt they had influence on their working conditions through
- their union representative
- the works council
- the H&S representative and H&S committee

Table 4, where workplaces again are ranked according to QWE, shows the scores obtained by the individual workplaces on these three dimensions. It is noticeable that scores here are somewhat lower than what we saw for the direct participation dimensions in Table 3. This could be expected, as representative participation is indirect and not always catches the interest and awareness of lay employees. For our purposes, however, the important thing is to compare levels of experienced influence through these channels across the workplaces.

Table 4. Workplace scores on representative participation dimensions
(two highest scores on each dimension shown in bold)

Workplace	Influence through union representative	Influence through H&S representative and bodies	Influence through works councils
Hospital Y	**22.2**	19.5	14.3
School X	21.0	**21.0**	**21.0**
IT X	9.1	13.7	10.6
Hotel X	10.5	18.2	16.4
Hotel Y	7.3	15.2	10.5
Bank X	**20.3**	19.4	**18.5**
Bank Y	18.1	15.8	11.0
Factory X	16.7	16.5	14.4
Hospital X	19.5	**21.6**	15.8
School Y	16.8	14.1	15.4
Factory Y	18.1	11.5	12.1

It appears that the experience of influence through union and H&S representatives is valued highest by exactly the employees from the two highest ranking QWE workplaces. This confirms what we learned from the interviews, namely that collective forms of participation are applied consistently at these workplaces and in forms in which direct and representative participation supplement each other. Next, it is hardly surprising that we find the lowest scores for union representation at the three workplaces without such representation. The scores at IT X and the two hotels really ought to

be zero, but respondents may be excused on the grounds that union representation had existed earlier at all the three workplaces, and at two of them there were persons who functioned informally as representatives.

Further, it is conspicuous to find our number three QWE workplace, IT X, in a very low position regarding the influence employees experience, not only through the non-existing union representatives, but also through the existing H&S representatives and works council. The low figures probably reflect that work is professionalised and individualised to an extent that makes representation structures appear as less relevant. At the bottom of the table School Y only moderately seems to suffer from a lack of representative participation whereas the situation at Factory Y is more critical. Although we know that the representative channels at Factory Y are functioning more or less normally, employees in this lowest ranking workplace regarding QWE do not seem to find much help here; in particular, the significance of H&S representation is experienced as low.

As with direct participation we again find the two best workplaces regarding QWE to score high on participation, this time representative participation. This is understandable seen in the light of the strong role played by collective participation in these workplaces marked by a democratic governance style. However, at the same time the scores of the next workplaces in the table, IT X and the two hotels, prompt us to be cautious with generalisations. *In spite of* weak representative participation these workplaces have relatively good work environments.

OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING QWE: PARTICIPATION IS NOT AN ISLAND

In our questionnaire, alongside the participation variables, we also included some other variables known from earlier research to impact considerably on the work environment, namely:
support from colleagues
recognition and appreciation by management
possibilities of doing qualitatively good work
excessive quantitative demands
working extra hours
demands that strain relations with colleagues
emotionally straining demands

Instead of presenting data on these variables for the individual workplaces we will here briefly state how these variables as well as the participation variables correlate with QWE; this is done on the basis of the totally 509 replies from the 11 workplaces. In Table 5 correlations are measured as gamma-values (the value 1 meaning complete positive correlation, 0 no correlation, and -1 complete negative correlation), and corresponding levels of statistical significance are shown.

Table 5 Correlations between QWE and participation and other variables

Variable	Gamma-value	Statistical significance
Participation variables:		
Direct influence index	.426	.000
Representative participation index	.236	.002
Learning possibilities	.304	.000
Information	.503	.000
Joint efforts to secure fair demands	.348	.000
Desire for more influence	-.442	.000
Demand variables:		
Excessive quantitative demands	-.425	.000
Working extra hours	-.097	.105

Emotional strain	-.303	.000
Demands that strain collegial relations	-.471	.000
Other variables:		
Support from colleagues	.505	.000
Recognition and appreciation by management	.535	.000
Possibilities to do qualitatively good work	.612	.000

It appears that all the variables included in the study, except for 'working extra hours', are correlated with QWE in a statistical significant way. The various participation variables together with 'support from colleagues', 'recognition by management' and 'possibilities of doing qualitatively good work' all impact positively on QWE, whereas demands, when excessive or felt as straining, have negative effects on QWE. Having found this, we could go on and discuss the relative importance of the different variables or factors, but we do not believe that such an 'empiricist' way of determining the relative importance of participation versus other factors is the best analytical approach. Until now we have, for analytical purposes, treated variables as isolated entities, distinguished between independent and dependent (QWE) variables, and on that basis developed the analyses presented so far. It is now time to try to bring the pieces together again and do a bit of synthesizing.

In the real world participation is not an island – participation is always embedded in wider organisational and social structures and is always interacting with other aspects of working life. The 'other factors' in Table 5 are not phenomena that are completely different from participation. How do we, or our respondents, distinguish whether a specific act at the workplace is an act of participation or an act of collegial support? It may very well be both at the same time. And when a manager tells you, "Well done! Just go ahead!", we interpret it as recognition and appreciation of our work, it strengthens our confidence but very likely also our sense of taking part and being able to influence our working life. The variable displaying the very strongest correlation with QWE, whether the employee feels it is possible for them to do a good job or not, is in reality a very complex one and can perhaps be interpreted as the quintessence of all factors that influence QWE. In a recent Danish study it was found to be an important factor in explaining psycho-social QWE (Sørensen et al. 2008). Not to be able to deliver qualitatively products or services may be due to a lack of skills, but is probably more often related to lacking influence, lacking support from management or colleagues, unrealistically high job demands, sub-optimal technological resources, and organisational structures or procedures that are somehow problematic. In our study we found 'possibilities to do a qualitatively good job' to correlate relatively strongly with direct as well as representative participation as measured by the two indexes (gamma values: 0.437 and 0.433 respectively), but also with other variables.

CONCLUSIONS

So far the following conclusions can be drawn from our study of employee participation at 11 Danish workplaces:
Participation, direct as well as representative, correlates positively and in a statistical significant way with work environment quality. Although, theoretically we cannot say anything about cause and effect in such correlations, logically it is more likely that participation causes QWE than vice versa. Other factors are also positively correlated with QWE, and, although participation may be a necessary condition for high QWE, our data also demonstrate it is not a sufficient condition. In particular, hospital X and School Y are examples of this.

From the case studies we develop four different participation profiles based on how participation is embedded in organisational and regulatory contexts: participation may be situated within a democratic governance model, an HRM model, a management-union partnership model, or a model mixing HRM and partnership models. The two workplaces in our sample with the best work environment, Hospital Y and School X, are at the same time the two workplaces characterised by a democratic governance style. Generally, levels of direct participation are higher at these workplaces than at the other nine workplaces, and levels are also high regarding representative participation; the influence experienced through the local union representative is higher than at any other workplace. It is not possible to reach similarly clear conclusions regarding the workplaces characterised by the other models. The HRM dominated workplaces have relatively high QWE scores, but uneven scores regarding the participation variables. The bottom position on QWE score for two partnership workplaces corresponds with low participation scores at Factory Y, but not at School Y. Finally, the banks with their mixed model are placed in the middle both concerning QWE and participation. Taken together, there is a tendency for workplaces with high QWE scores to have high levels of participation, and for lower QWE and lower participation levels to go together, but there are also exceptions to this pattern, notably IT X, Hospital X and School Y.

Our findings so far lend support to our main hypothesis: that participation has positive effects for work environment quality. It remains to be seen whether at a later stage we can also identify some negative effects, or rather some specific conditions under which participation functions in ways that affect QWE and workers' well-being negatively. The problem is hardly participation as such, but rather the wider structures it is embedded in.

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