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Audit of psychosocial risk management systems

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Audit of psychosocial risk management systems: between tacit knowledge and standardization

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Abstract
The OHSAS 18001 standard for health and safety management provides a framework for organizations on how to manage risks. Internal and external audits of compliance with the standard are key elements. Auditors should be competent to carry out the task and be familiar with risks of the areas they are auditing. The competences and practice of internal auditors have been studied in two Danish municipalities. The results show that auditors have a varied background and a limited knowledge about psychosocial risks. They have difficulties in carrying out audits and the results are mainly influenced by personal preferences.

Keywords: Occupational health and safety management systems, OHSAS 18001, audit competence, public sector

Introduction

Occupational health and safety management systems (OHSMS) can be certified according to the OHSAS 18001 standard, and the system is subject to third party audits. A precondition for the certification of OHSMS is that these systems are auditable both internally and externally. However, the OHSMS standards have difficulty in adequately addressing psychosocial factors at work (Robson et al., 2012). This difficulty is closely related to the standardization and certification regimes itself and by the way audits of the system are carried out (Hasle & Zwetsloot, 2011). Audits contribute to a rather narrow focus on objectively measureable and easy-to-see and assess issues, causing a bias towards safety, and consequently other aspects, especially psychosocial factors, are neglected (Hohnen & Hasle, 2011, Frick & Kempa, 2011).

Audits are a key tool in the certified OHSMS, and an audit is understood as a management tool used to examine processes in the organization and evaluate whether they are confirming to standards and procedures and whether there are any opportunities for improvement (Mallen & Collins, 2003). The audit process includes 1) gathering evidence through systematic data collection, typically by reviewing documentation, conducting interviews and observing worksites, 2) evaluating the evidence against audit criteria and 3) summarizing and reporting the results (Robson et al., 2012). There are two classes of audits: internal and external audit. Audit is most often depicted as a rational, independent, unequivocal and documented process (Boiral, 2012). This paper has a constructivist perspective, and audit is understood as a social construction where audit constitutes an active process of "making things auditable" (Power1996). In other words, auditing can be a

process that actively creates the environment that is supposed to audit (Hohnen & Hasle, 2011).

The OHSMS in an organization shall address the responsibilities, competencies and requirement for planning and conducting audits, reporting the results and the determination of frequency and methods (OHSAS 18001, 2008). Auditors in OHSMS shall therefore have sufficient competences that enable them to examine the management system. However, the standards provide little concrete information about what kind of competences are needed for audits in the psychosocial work environment. Competency of auditors has several components (Blewett & O'Keffe, 2011), and the aim of this paper is to understand the kind of competences for internal audit of the psychosocial work environment that are developed in organizations with a certified OHSMS. It is a topic which is so far not studied in the OHS literature. Competence is defined as work-related knowledge, skills and abilities. Individual competence may be gained through education and experience in the work place, and furthermore, it is fruitful to distinguish between actual competence and formal competence (Nordhaug & Grønhaug, 1994).

Methods

Internal audits were studied in two Danish municipalities which were OHSMS certified. The data collection includes observation of four internal audits and semi structured interviews with 15 persons representing internal auditors, OHS representatives and local management, and professionals at the central level of the municipalities. The representatives of internal auditors and OHS were selected by the OHS units. All participants were informed about the themes of the interview beforehand. Interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The results are categorized in themes and partly presented in a table that is a graphic representation of qualitative data in a concentrated form.

Results

Two different types of internal audit were conducted in both municipalities. "Ordinary audit" and "audit with specific focus on the psychosocial work environment". Semi structured interviews and documentation reviews were the main methods used to gather information. Both municipalities had two audit guides – for general and psychosocial audits respectively. An overview of the results is depicted in table 1.

In Municipality JK the guide for psychosocial work environment was categorized in the following topics: OHS policy, OHS representatives, surveys of well-being, violence, harassment, bullying, sickness absence and social capital. Each topic had sub-topics. Taking "violence, harassment and bullying" as an example, sub-topics were: managing the risks, written instructions, and recording of incidents. The interview guide did not contain questions, but the auditor could decide to develop questions by him- or herself.

In 2013, Municipality FK had expanded the general interview guide with topics about the psychosocial work environment. The topics were surveys of well-being, bullying, harassment, violence, stress, work-life balance, working alone, high emotional demands, and handling of conflicts. Every topic had one or two questions attached. From autumn 2013 it was decided, as an experiment, to extend the audit team with the organizational psychologist who made qualitative semi structured interviews with both employees and managers. The interview guide used for these audits was also developed by the organizational psychologist, and it contained mainly the same topics as the general interview guide but was extended with additional questions for each topics.

The inclusion of the psychosocial work environment in audits was a fairly new issue in both municipalities, and the interviews showed that the auditors considered it to be difficult to audit the psychosocial work environment compared to the physical work environment, as most physical risks were observable.

Table 1. Overview of audit practices in the two municipalities

Municipality JK	Municipality FK
Recruitment	Recruitment
12 internal auditors	14 internal auditors
4 academic education, 8 shorter education	5 academic education, 9 shorter education
5 employed as OHS professionals, 7 as non-OHS professionals (teachers, nurses, etc.)	14 employed as OHS professionals
half of them had some experience in audits, the rest very limited	all had some experience in audits
Qualifications required by municipality	Qualifications required by municipality
prior experience with OHS (either professionals or OHS representatives)	OHS professionals
a three days OHS course	three days OHS course
Purpose and role	Purpose and role
Many different understandings:	Many different understandings:
create dialogue and reflections	suitable challenges for workplaces
help with practical issues	control and documentation
secure employee involvement	guidance, support, consultancy
provide expert knowledge	an exam
create value-added audits	create motivation for working with certified OHSMS
develop learning	value-added audits
control and documentation	
Methods and tools	Methods and tools
every auditor conducts 8 audits a year lasting 3 hours each (alone or in a pair)	every auditor conducts 10 audits a year lasting 3-4 hours each (in a pair)
audit program forwarded in advance prepared by the audit team leader	audit program forwarded in advance prepared by the audit group
preparation in advance for audit team leader, no preparation in advance for the other auditors	preparation in advance for every auditor: read previous audit report and surveys of well-being
preparation of audit at a meeting starting each audit round with an introduction to the particular focus point	audit group: planning and evaluation of audits at meetings 8 days during a year
two audit guides – for general and psychosocial audits respectively	two audit guides – for general and psychosocial audits respectively
main methods: semi-structured interviews and documentation review	main methods: semi-structured interviews and documentation review
audit report: tick off and short text	audit report: tick off and long text
Training after recruitment	Training after recruitment
two days external about audit	two days internal about audit
two days internal about audit in relation to psychosocial work environment	two days internal every year with different audit topics, communication, interview technic, auditor as coach, audit evidence, nonconformities
one day internal every year with focus on priority issues in the municipality	three days internal every year about different topics in work environment
a few of them had participated in other relevant short term training courses	

There were great variations in auditor qualifications. One audit team leader described the different levels of qualifications and the frequency of auditing as a dilemma. Ideally, all the internal auditors should have the same qualifications as the OHS professionals, but on the other hand, it was not possible, because the internal auditors should represent different

departments of the municipality. It was also difficult to improve the level of competences without increasing the frequency of auditing, but no more resources could be applied for auditing.

The internal auditors had different expectations to the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out psychosocial work environment audit. One internal auditor considered it necessary to have an education as a psychologist. Another auditor pointed out that formal education as a psychologist was not so important compared to knowledge about the requirements in the management system, psychosocial risks, and tools for managing the psychosocial work environment. A third auditor had the point of view that ethics, courage, and the abilities of understanding people were the most important skills.

Even if many different topics were mentioned in the interview guides, auditors mainly emphasized violence, bullying and harassment as psychosocial risks. Sometimes organizational change and stress were mentioned, too. One auditor believed it was difficult for many auditors to audit a psychosocial risk assessment carried out by the workplace because it was difficult to decide the best practice for psychosocial work environment interventions. Therefore, it was not easy for auditors to challenge the decisions at the workplace. Some auditors just looked at risk assessment and checked whether it complied with the formal demands such as date and a responsible person for follow-up. When they looked at the action plan, they did not ask the OHS representatives how they had carried out the prioritization and why they had selected the specific solutions. They would only ask in cases where it did not make sense. One audit team leader pointed out that it was challenging to audit the quality of the action plan. The auditor could check the action plan and look at any planned interventions in the psychosocial environment, but the audit team leader believed that only the OHS professionals could be qualified to ask reflexive questions concerning the action plans. He pointed out that these skills were very important, because reflexive questions could challenge the decision making process and there by qualify the chosen solutions.

Discussion

In the two municipalities great differences existed regarding audit with focus on psychosocial work environment and the differences primarily depended on the competency of auditors. Audit results are affected by many dimensions e.g. the characteristics of the audit method, the auditor, the workplace, and the auditing program (Robson et al., 2012), and according to Poksinska et al. (2006), the most important condition for good audit results is the competency of the auditors (Poksinska et al., 2006). Therefore, the requirements of the municipalities of being an OHS representative or an OHS professional seems to be too broad recruitment in relation to auditing OHSMS concerning psychosocial work environment. Being an OHS representative was not equal to being sufficient in relation to auditing OHSMS concerning psychosocial work environment, not either being OHS professionals, as there were great variations in knowledge and skills in this group, too, in relation to psychosocial work environment.

In general, the auditors had much focus on the documentation of the activities that in turn drove workplaces to generate documentation in order to meet the audit criteria. At the same time audits had little focus on whether these activities actually helped to solve the psychosocial work environment problems. The workplaces thought the documentation was mostly created to satisfy the auditor's claim, not to provide value for the workplaces. Preoccupation with bureaucracy at the expense of improvement is often mentioned as negative reactions to the audit process (Poksinska et al., 2006, Damien & Terziovski, 2007, Boiral, 2012) as it distracted both the workplaces and the auditors from the primary goal of

making the workplace healthy and safe (Blewett & O'Keffe, 2011).

The rational approach to OHS management in the OHSAS 18001 standard (Nielsen, 2000) is directing audits towards the formalized, documented and visible aspects of the organization. Methods and procedures concerning psychosocial work environment differ from methods and inspection procedures related to other work environment issues (Rasmussen et al., 2011). It means when audits have to include psychosocial risks it is not enough only to focus on the visible aspects of the organization, but also to focus at the covert aspects. The informal and covert aspects, that certainly have much more influence on the development of psychosocial risks and the effects of the interventions, include the values, beliefs, attitudes, leadership style and behavior, culture and norms of behavior, power, politics, conflicts and informal grouping (French & Bell, 1999). When it is relevant to catch the informal and covert aspects of the organization and get an in-depth understanding of the ways in which people perceive and make sense of their work, qualitative semi structured interviews are suitable (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, Rick & Briner, 2000). The "Guidelines for auditing management systems" mentions that interviews on site are one important audit methods for gathering audit evidence (ISO 19011, 2011). However, the guidelines do not refer to different types of interviews – structured and semi structured interviews – and which implications these types have for generating, processing, and reporting of data.

All the internal auditors in the two municipalities used qualitative semi structured interviews as the main method of collecting data, and the audit reports were based on these interviews and in addition documentation reviewing. Some of the auditors had no formalized education or experiences of doing qualitative semi structured interviews before they were recruited as an auditor, and moreover, they got very little training after the recruitment. The variations in auditor competencies were further increased by the great variations of knowledge about psychosocial work environment. In a qualitative semi structured interview knowledge is created in an interaction between the interviewer and the person, who is interviewed. Therefore, it is necessary to have a great knowledge about the subject when the interviewer has to ask question that follow up the answer of the interviewed person. The quality of the generated data in a semi structured qualitative interview is in that way dependent on both the quality of interviewing skills and the knowledge of the subject (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

The results thus indicate that more training is needed in conducting qualitative semi structured interviews, in reporting the audit results from qualitative data, and in identification, managing and preventing psychosocial risks. In relation to the discussion of the content of the training it would also be important to discuss the purpose of audit and the role of an auditor. In the two municipalities there were many different understandings of the purpose of audit and the role of the auditor and these different understandings may contribute to ambiguity about the requirement and development of auditor competency. In the literature there is general agreement that the role and skills of the non-financial auditor, and by extension the purpose of the audit, require further clarification (Damien & Terziovski, 2007, Poksinska et al., 2006). Damien & Terziovski (2007) distinguish between two different approaches of audit. Traditionally, auditing is for compliance that involves a set of activities designed to demonstrate the organization's conformance with the audit criteria. The other approach is audit for continuous improvement. It is a novel approach and goes further than simply to determine conformance or nonconformance with established audit criteria in OHSAS 18001 (Damien & Terziovski, 2007). Under this approach the auditor moves from the role of inspector to that of continuous improvement facilitator and audit conclusions, which imply consultancy work, are a common practice of auditors (Poksinska et al., 2006). In this way auditor should be actively involved in the

implementation of corrective actions and then helps the organization to improve its processes, resources, performance, and OHSMS (Fernandes-Muniz et al., 2012).

This study showed a need for more research contributing to clarify whether the novel approach of auditing has some advantages and therefore is more suitable for auditing of psychosocial risk management systems than the traditionally one. Furthermore, more research is needed in relation to what kind of methods and tools are most suitable for data collection concerning psychosocial work environment and which implications it has for the competency of auditors.

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