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From employee representation to problem-solving

- Mainstreaming OHS management

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Abstract

The role of occupational health and safety representatives is changing. A study in sixty Danish enterprises indicates that representation, and especially negotiation on behalf of colleagues, has diminished. The work environment is mainstreamed in many enterprises and is rarely an area of conflict. The role of OHS representatives has accordingly changed to focus on solving specific problems in the workplace as an integrated part of the daily operation. Both management and colleagues consider the OHS representatives as a resource that can be utilized to manage the work environment. The consequences of this development for the employees may result in a stronger joint management-employee effort to improve the work environment, but also management domination and an accordingly weaker employee voice in some companies.

Keywords. Safety representatives, employee voice, mainstreaming, regulation, occupational health and safety management

Introduction

The right of the employees to elect occupational health and safety representatives (OHS representatives) evolved in most Western European countries in the decades after WWII. Initially, the push for OHS representatives came in many countries from the labour unions as a supplement to the shop stewards and the right to elect OHS representatives is often based on collective agreements. During the time of work environment reform with new legislation, which took off in the 1970s, the right to elect OHS representatives was included in many European laws (James and Walters, 2002; Walters and Frick, 2000). Subsequently, from 1989 the EU framework directive required provisions for OHS representatives in all the EU countries, also in the countries that did not have OHS representatives before (Walters, 2002; Walters and Nichols, 2009). Having its point of departure in the union movement, the main function of the OHS representatives was considered to ensure the interest and voice of the employees in the effort to secure a healthy and safe work environment. The OHS representatives should therefore give voice to the employees on these matters. The unions had – in order to make a basis for their work - pushed for the right to information and involvement in issues which could have health and safety consequences for the employees, and also required protection against dismissal of OHS representatives. These rights have, to a varying degree, been regulated in collective agreements and legislation. The extent to which these rights have been successfully achieved and whether these rights have resulted in a healthier and safer work environment has been discussed in the literature and the overall conclusion is that, in many cases, the rights are rather fragmented and insufficiently secured in order for the OHS representatives to work effectively, yet in cases where they do, there is a trend towards a better work environment (Wal-

ters, 1995; Walters and Nichols, 2009).

The OHS legislation has changed towards more reflexive regulation during the last decades. It started with the Robens Report (1972) from the UK, followed by reforms of the legislation in the Nordic countries in the 1970s and subsequently implemented in most of the European Union after the EU OHS framework directive in 1989 (Walters, 2002). An important element in this type of legislation is a higher level of self-regulation, where the full responsibility for a safe and healthy work environment is placed more explicitly on the employers (Aalders and Wilthagen, 1997; Wilthagen, 1994). Employee participation was considered to play an important role and workers and OHS representatives became increasingly integrated in the legislation. The role of the OHS representatives also changed, as the representation provided by the legislation also implied that the OHS representatives' role was not only to secure the interest of the employees but also to participate in the implementation of the more reflexive legislation. It may create a development where OHS representatives as employee-elected representatives move closer to a management position as they get involved in problem solving, which has been problematized in the literature (see for instance Sjöström, 2013; Rasmussen et al., 2014).

In conjunction with the development of the regulation of OHS representatives, the employer understanding of, and priority given to, the work environment has also developed, to, among other aspects, focus much more on OHS management (Frick et al., 2000; Hasle and Zwetsloot, 2011; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010). The work environment is more commonly considered an issue which should be managed in the same way as other manageable issues in the enterprises (Frick, 2011; Dyreborg, 2011). Even though

the extent can be discussed, there is also a growing awareness that good OHS management can lead to improved working conditions (Robson et al., 2007) and also to improved productivity (see an example of one of several reviews in Neumann and Dul, 2010).

Over the years, the role of the OHS representatives has most frequently been analysed in the literature from an interest perspective (See for instance Walters and Nichols, 2007). While this perspective is still relevant, it can also be expected that the involvement of the OHS representatives in problems solving as well as development of both employer and employee attitudes have changed the role of the OHS representatives thereby asking for an adjustment of our analytical perspective. This, however, has so far achieved limited research attention. The main research question in this article is whether OHS representatives still play the role as the democratic voice and caretaker of employees' interests, or if more fundamental changes have occurred and altered the role of the OHS representatives. The article presents a novel insight into how the workplace practice of OHS representatives are affected and shaped by the organisational context. As society changes so does the regulation and context of OHS - and therefore the role of OHS representatives (Dyreborg, 2011; Walters and Nichols, 2009). We show – based on empirical evidence from Denmark – how the work environment tends to be mainstreamed in the companies. This has led to the identification of a number of different typologies of roles, where the common denominator is integration in operation of OHS management and limited attention paid to traditional interests.

The article is based on an empirical investigation of the 60 case companies, which have been visited and interviewed regarding the organisation of the OHS management. Building

on data from this study and on insights from the literature, we suggest a typology of five important roles of the OHS representatives, which can be found in different combinations in workplace practice. These typologies also reflect more general developments found in labour market organisation and functions, where there has been a tendency for employee representatives to move from pure interest representation towards a more collaborative approach (Kristensen and Rocha, 2012), but also a decline in the influence of organised labour in most countries (Baccaro and Howell, 2011), which in turn can affect OHS representatives interaction with workers (Ollé-Espluga et al., 2014).

Background

The existing literature on the roles of OHS representatives consists of both quantitative and qualitative studies. The quantitative studies typically aims at mapping the density of OHS representatives and the activities they undertake at their workplaces (see for instance Walters et al., 2012). In spite of the legislation, there are still problems in many countries in securing a sufficiently high coverage of elected OHS representatives (Walters et al., 2012). However, it is difficult to use the quantitative studies to understand how the OHS representatives' role is performed in daily practice. Moreover, other studies have found that OHS representatives give priority to advising employees about safety rules and encouraging them to report injuries, and, in addition, that they often experience too few resources (time and access to knowledge) as well as too little involvement in important decisions regarding the work environment (Blewett and Dorrian, 2011; Frick, 2013; García et al., 2007; Sjöström, 2013; Tasiran et al., 2005). Qualitative research on the role of OHS representatives has the potential to include among others the context and study the perspectives of

different stakeholders, and a number of interesting qualitative studies dealing with the role of OHS representatives have been published over the last few years (e.g. Frick, 2013; Hall et al., 2006; Harris et al., 2012; Hovden et al, 2008; Rasmussen et al, 2014; Sjöström, 2013; Walters and Nichols, 2007, 2009).) Here we will emphasise three of these studies since they also deal with some kind of typology of the OHS representatives' role, although they arrive at different types than we do.

Hall et al. (2006) conducted a study of Canadian industries manufacturing auto parts and showed that OHS representatives mainly utilised two overall strategies. One group followed a technical-legal strategy with a focus on legislative requirements and another followed a more politically active strategy (and thus more often contesting management) (see also Ollé-Espluga et al., 2014: 348). In the politically-active group there were two sub-groups, of which the most successful sub-group focussed on what the authors call knowledge activism, where they utilise knowledge from both colleagues and outside to pressure for improvements of the work environment. This binary distinction was also found in a Spanish study, however with a majority of technical approaches among the OHS representatives, partly explained by the declining impact of organised labour (Ollé-Espluga et al., 2014). While these results are from a European context, it may not be transferable to the Danish context that still remains highly organised, especially compared to Spain. In another study Harris et al. (2012) identified four role types for the OHS representatives: administrators, inspectors, problem solvers, and craft experts. These studies are mainly based on the specific approach or role taken by the individual OHS representative. It is less clear in these studies how the organisational context shapes their role. The expectations from colleagues and management, as well as OHS regulation and OHS management system, define the

frames for the OHS representative function and thereby strongly shape the role of the OHS representatives.

OHS management and regulation with a high degree of employee involvement are generally found to be more efficient in improving the work environment (Gallagher et al., 2001; Knudsen et al., 2011; Walters, 2002; Walters and Nichols, 2007). However, employee involvement is not necessarily simple and straightforward (Sjöström, 2013). In some cases the OHS representatives may experience a conflict of interest related to, for instance, risk assessment - where the colleagues have one experience and the employer and OHS professional have a quite different understanding. That can particularly be the case in the discussion of control measures. Another potential conflict could be between the wish to secure the numbers of jobs and getting rid of the most dangerous jobs by for example automation. It can therefore be an ambiguous question about how to handle the interest of the employees, especially regarding the strategy towards the employers. Do the OHS representatives experience employers as being against the interests of employees regarding the work environment, thereby calling for a conflict-oriented strategy or do they experience a positive employer attitude which calls for a more collaborative strategy? Therefore, securing the interests of the employees has never been a straightforward case for the OHS representatives, with studies showing conflicting role expectations between legislation, employers, employees and the representatives themselves (Hovden et al., 2008; Rasmussen et al., 2014; Sjöström, 2013).

It has been common in Denmark and to a lesser degree in the other Nordic countries to use the metaphor of a ‘sidecar’ for the firms’ health and safety efforts, where the sidecar meta-

phor pointed to a marginalisation of OHS issues from the general management of production, in such a way that OHS was exclusively handled by the OHS representatives and the OHS committees (Aminoff and Lindström, 1981; Cutler and James, 1997; Frick, 1990; Jensen, 2002a). The sidecar metaphor is consistent with the representative and conflict-oriented OHS representative role, as the experience of not having influence and management neglecting of OHS (hence the sidecar) tend to trigger resistance and a strong voice. However, several scholars have suggested that there has been a movement from more distributive and conflict-based negotiations within firms towards more integrated and consensually-based negotiations, particularly in the Nordic countries (Kristensen, 2003, 2011; Kristensen and Rocha, 2012). In line with these tendencies, Danish shop stewards are increasingly seeing themselves as problem solvers rather than negotiators (Navrbjerg and Larsen, 2015), and the question is whether this tendency can also be found in OHS issues.

The potential sidecar problem has been addressed by regulatory and political changes calling for more reflexive and integrative approaches to the work environment. It is the case with the introduction of the EC/1989/391 framework directive and for example Sweden and Norway which developed their own legal requirement for internal control systems (Walters and Jensen, 2000: 98). The question whether this reflexive turn has led to improvements in the work environment have been investigated in many studies (see e.g. Frick and Johanson, 2013; Jensen, 2002b;) as well as whether it simply resulted in deregulation of the OHS regulation as claimed by critics (Busck, 2014, Frick et al., 2000). So far the evidence that the legislative and regulatory changes have led to actual changes in firms' behaviour have been modest (see Frick and Johansson, 2013 for a discussion). It is far from certain that the mere change of legislation will cause substantial changes in the way firms behave. In this paper

we study whether firms attention to the work environment has changed and in particular whether the roles of the OHS representatives have changed.

We propose to use the term ‘mainstreaming’ of the work environment in order to describe important changes in the employers approach to the work environment. The concept of mainstreaming originates from the field of gender equity, and in particular the policy domain - where it was widely promoted by the European Union as a descriptor of the move from treatment of gender issues as separate and isolated issues to integration of gender into the main management decisions (Booth and Bennett, 2002). The concept is also used in this way by the EU in order to increase the integration of OHS and management (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010). We find the concept useful as an obverse to the sidecar concept of OHS, and we argue that it describes a different process than the mere implementation of reflexive regulation. We apply mainstreaming in our analysis where one key finding is that employers increasingly include OHS in the operational management of the workplace based on management logics and not regulatory logics. Nonetheless, mainstreaming has also been criticised and disputed by gender scholars for moving the attention away from the real issue of gender equity and subsuming it under other policy areas (Walby, 2005), which perhaps also could be a relevant critique for the use of the concept in the OHS field.

The Danish context

The role of the unions has followed very different trajectories across the European countries. In most countries the right to establish unions and the fight to secure legitimacy have

been on the agenda for the last century and even nowadays seems to be retracting in many European countries (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). However, the Scandinavian countries have been marked by an early recognition of the unions and a high member density (Andersen et al., 2014; Crouch, 2012; Hasle and Sørensen, 2013), with union density remaining comparatively very high at around 68 % in Denmark (DA, 2014: 187), although declining some over the last decades. Although the unions' power may have shrunk some, Danish unions still have a very strong power base with wide workplace coverage (Andersen et al., 2014). The Danish labour market is characterised by being mainly regulated through voluntary collective agreements between the social partners, and there is no legislation on minimum wages or legal extension of collective agreement (Andersen et al., 2014). Around 84 % of all Danish employees are covered by a collective agreement (DA, 2014). While the political system does not interfere in wage formation and most working conditions issues, there are framework legislations on several issues including working hours and the internal organisation of OHS activities. In this sense OHS issues have been somewhat trapped between the role of the voluntary regulation tradition and the role of legislation, where the unions to some extent have not given the work environment the needed priority in order to improve the work environment, but have at least in some incidents prioritised wages and jobs (Busck, 2014).

Unions and employers have, especially in the face of the long post-WWII economic boom, developed a more collaborative and trust-based approach in the Nordic countries which has influenced the field of work organisation as well as the work environment (Elden, 1986; Gustavsen, 2007; Jørgensen, 2002). Among other factors, this has led to a more teamwork-based and egalitarian work organisation (Lorenz and Lundvall, 2011), stronger local coop-

eration between employers and workers (Hagen and Trygstad, 2009) and a higher influence on work tasks (Gallie, 2009). Unions are also heavily involved in workplace cooperation aimed at improving work outcomes and thus making Danish firms competitive (Kristensen, 2003; Kristensen and Rocha, 2012). The consensual Nordic approach is also reflected in the OHS system especially in Denmark and Sweden (Frick, 2013: 52), and only 8% of Danish OHS representatives feel they have a less than good, or even bad, relationship with management (Navrbjerg et al., 2010: 48) and a 2006 survey in Sweden showed that only 5 % of Swedish OHS representatives felt that management opposed them (Frick, 2013: 63).

Using Denmark as an example, the fundamental right to elect OHS representatives was secured with the Work Environment Act of 1975. An important emphasis of the legislation was on securing rights for the OHS representatives to be informed and involved in the control of the work environment. The specific Danish method was to establish a collaborative system consisting of OHS groups (representatives and first line managers) at the local departmental level and joint OHS committees at enterprise level. This internal so called OHS organisation with election of OHS representatives and establishment of OHS groups and committees got implemented in most of the Danish private and public organisations with more than ten employees (Sørensen et al., 2009) and in 2010 82% of all employees had a OHS representative at their workplace, compared with 52% that had a shop steward (Navrbjerg et al., 2010: 25). The wide coverage was achieved through, among other elements, enforcement by the authorities and positive support from the social partners.

In the first decades after the Work Environment Act was passed by Parliament, the representative part of the role – including negotiating on behalf of colleagues – dominated (Rie-

per, 1985). However, as time passed, the role of the OHS representatives has changed significantly. An important precursor for the new role has been a series of successive changes of the legislative requirements for the establishment of the OHS organisation. The original design was based on the understanding of an organisation as something resembling a medium-sized industrial plant with a couple of hundred employees. As organisations became more complicated, and as the public sector also established OHS organisations and elected OHS representatives, the standard system became a straitjacket, and the Danish Working Environment Authority started to give dispensation for alternative setups - though always with elected OHS representatives as an integral part (Hasle, 2001). This development was subsequently mirrored by changes in legislation which among others allowed the social partners to make local agreements about alternative ways of organising the OHS organisation (Sørensen et al., 2009). The most significant change came in 2010, with a more fundamental reform of the requirements for an OHS organisation. The legislation still requires the establishment of a basic OHS organisation, but it is now much more flexible and it is up to the individual enterprises to design a system suited to the context of their particular enterprises. It is still required to have elected OHS representatives but otherwise there are very few demands for specific organisational forms although there are still requirements for certain activities such as training of OHS representatives and first line managers, and yearly deliberations between the management and employees about the evaluation of the preceding year and plans for the next year.

Despite changes in the industry structure with declining manufacturing employment, where OHS representation traditionally had a strong impact due to imminent risks in manufacturing, Danish workplaces still have a very high density of OHS representatives and due to the

OHS legislation almost all workplaces with more than ten employees have elected an OHS representative. The majority of OHS representatives do not generally see themselves as union representatives and they understand the OHS representative role as being clearly separated from union activity, as do management in general. However, some of the OHS representatives see union activities as a joint role with the shop steward (Navrbjerg et al. 2010: 17); we will further discuss this role below.

Methods

This paper reports from a study that investigated trends in the development of OHS management systems in Danish enterprises, with a special focus on the formal OHS organisation including the OHS representatives. It was carried out in 2013-14; three years after the new flexible Danish legislation had been issued in 2010. It is designed as an exploratory, multiple qualitative case study (Yin 2009). Sixty workplaces were selected from a national survey of OHS activities in workplaces[1] stratified by their extent of OHS activities. Cases were selected from workplaces with high and low activities respectively, in order to secure as much contrast as possible. 54% of the contacted enterprises declined to participate in the research project. Refusal to participate was highest in the construction industry at 68%, and lowest in the healthcare sector, where only 29% refused to participate. Moreover, as might be expected, the greatest dropout rate was found among enterprises with a low OHS activity level, where 72% of the enterprises declined to participate. The cases were also stratified on five main labour market sectors – construction, manufacturing, private service, knowledge and healthcare. By doing so, the most important sectors in the

[1] http://www.arbejdsmiljoforskning.dk/da/arbejdsmiljoedata/arbejdsmiljoe-og-helbred-20/arbejdsmiljo-og-helbred-2012/sammenhaeng-mellem-arbejdspladsernes-svar-og-de-ansattes-svar (accessed 11.03.14)

society were represented. Twelve cases from each sector were included in the study. Workplaces were defined as the local physical unit, which could cover an independent firm as well as a workplace affiliated to a larger private firm or a public organisation such as a municipality.

Key personnel related to each organisation's OHS management were interviewed. Between two and six people were interviewed in each enterprise, with the key interviews being with OHS representatives and OHS managers. In addition, employees, line managers and shop stewards were interviewed, depending on the context and the availability of the relevant staff. OHS representatives and OHS managers were interviewed separately. However, in some cases the parties insisted on joint interviews as they claimed that they shared opinions and experience and separate interviews would give a flawed picture of the workplace practice. In addition, walk-throughs were conducted at most of the workplaces. They included spot interviews with employees and scrutinising issues touched upon during interviews.

The interview guide was designed in order to cover the whole set of activities carried out by the OHS organisation, which, in the Danish context, includes OHS representatives, management representatives, and in most cases an OHS coordinator/manager. The interview guide included the following themes: internal and external context, collaboration and activities of the OHS organisation and the different stakeholders, development in the work environment over the last years, the most important risks and how they are addressed, assessment of effects of the OHS activities, changes in the OHS organisation over the last years, competence development, planning of activities, and the integration of the work

environment with operation and strategy. This approach gave the possibility to study the actual role played by the OHS representatives as their involvement in the various activities of the OHS organisation was clearly identified.

The workplaces were visited by an experienced researcher. Extensive notes were taken during the visit and gathered in a standardised case study report in order to secure comparability. Following this, the reports were analysed for common trends by thematic coding and in conjunction at a coding seminar with the participation of all involved researchers. As part of our qualitative research strategy we identified common themes or 'types' in the data (Kluge, 2000). Based on this systematic analysis of the data gathered in the 60 cases, we arrived at the typology presented below, where we identified five different OHS representative roles which are related to the OHS management is generally practices in the companies.

Results

The results of the multiple case study indicate a significant shift in the role of OHS representatives. The more traditional role of OHS representatives as an employee representative acting as a spokesperson on work environment issues in line with the role of shop steward was only observable in few of the cases, and the interviewed OHS representatives did in general not identify themselves with such a role. They appreciate being included in problem solving, and they did not yearn for a more interest and possibly conflict-oriented role. This OHS position is in accordance with another important finding: a clear trend towards mainstreaming of the work environment in the enterprises. This has become one issue

among many involving certain tasks and the allocation of staff.

Mainstreaming in the workplaces studied can be characterised by four key observations:

- Management does not consider work environment as an issue which needs to be given priority due to employee demands, but as an issue, which is part of the regular operation.
- Systems are established which are expected to handle work environment issues on a day-to-day basis and to ensure that major problems in terms of accidents, diseases, employee complaints and enforcement notices from inspectors are avoided.
- The work environment is treated in the same manner as other specific issues such as quality management, environmental management and HR management.
- Staff and resources are allocated to carry out the tasks in the OHS organisation, and OHS representatives are considered part of this staff.

However, the mainstreaming of the work environment does not necessarily imply that a high health and safety level is given priority and in particularly secured in practice. It merely indicates that the work environment is not a conflict issue and that a purely ad hoc approach results in too many problems.

The setup and function of the OHS organisation as well as the roles of the OHS representatives are very specific for each workplace visited. Each of them has their specific context, history and conditions, which make each workplace and OHS organisation unique.

From the data from the 60 cases studied, we have identified five ideal types the role of the OHS representatives which are based on the style of OHS management, and can be used to highlight important elements of the OHS representatives' roles, even though each individual workplace may contain elements of several typologies. The typologies were identified during the thematic coding of the entire data set, with a focus on trends regarding the role of OHS representatives and the general management of OHS in the cases. The five ideal types are:

1. Professional OHS representatives
2. Systems maintenance OHS representatives
3. OHS representatives integrated in core tasks
4. Political OHS representatives
5. OHS representatives in a management driven system

In the following, we define the characteristics of these five ideal types and present for each one a case which is dominated by the specific typology.

Professional OHS representatives

In some cases, we see a tendency towards fewer OHS representatives, with more resources allocated and extended responsibility. This condensation of the role of OHS representatives can be regarded as a professionalization of the role. In some cases the professionalization of OHS representatives is primarily built on the experience gathered by OHS daily work and spending the majority of the working hours on OHS activities. However, other case companies work in a more structured manner, with further developing competencies including ongoing training and education.

This ideal type is present as a dominant trend in about 20% of the cases. In two of the 60 cases, the OHS representative worked full-time as an OHS representatives, which is also reported to be quite common in Sweden were around 8 % of OHS representatives in 1996 were either full- or half-time representatives and this is not estimated to have changed a lot since (Frick, 2013: 61-62). In both of these cases the OHS representative was the only employee working with OHS, and they were both closely associated with the management. The job description of these OHS representatives was similar to the job description of an OHS officer with a professional degree. The professional OHS representative is a particularly dominant trend in the manufacturing industry, but the trend of concentrating the OHS representative role towards fewer employees is also seen both in healthcare and construction.

The role of the professional OHS representative is particularly expressed in the case of a small food plant, which permanently employs approximately 35 unskilled workers and the double during the peak season. It is owned by a larger corporation. By 2011 the company had started to feel the economic crisis with declining sales. Almost simultaneously labour inspectors visited the company and issued several enforcement notices. This situation was used to reorganise the plant. A new management was appointed, who decided to let the OHS representative (who was also elected as shop steward) take full-time responsibility for OHS management. The OHS representative now handles all daily tasks associated with the work environment. Furthermore, he works closely together with the plant manager on managerial tasks such as production planning, quality control and implementation of new technology. This has resulted in a substantial improvement in the work environment. The em-

ployees expressed satisfaction with the OHS representative's handling of the work environment and regard the close cooperation with management as an advantage in solving daily health and safety problems. Nevertheless, at the same time, several employees expressed incipient wariness of the OHS rep; they had doubts about whether his loyalty lay with management or employees in cases of disagreement and conflict (as also discussed for a Swedish paper mill in Sjöström, 2013: 239).

Systems maintenance OHS representatives

In contrast to the professionalization of the OHS representatives some cases had developed a role for the OHS representatives with a focus on systems maintenance, which are often seen in larger enterprises with high levels of systematising and standardisation of OHS activities. These enterprises have most often employed full-time OHS officers with a professional degree. Here the OHS representatives' main function is to support the OHS officer in the form of systems maintenance, follow-up on procedures and other OHS activities that are directly linked with the daily, operational OHS management at the shop floor, and does not necessarily emphasise contact with colleagues. The OHS representatives are formally allocated time for the task, normally to the extent of one to two days per week. Therefore, there is less room for the OHS representatives to individually define their role.

This ideal type is seen in approximately 35% of the enterprises. This particular type is often seen in larger enterprises in both the public and the private sector. Some of these enterprises have certified OHS management systems, which require a great deal of maintenance, and some of these administrative tasks fall upon the employee-elected OHS representatives.

One example of systems maintenance by OHS representatives is seen in a case from the service sector. This company is a larger enterprise providing facility services and damage control with approximately 400 employees. The company's environmental manager is in charge of the OHS management, and he has designed an OHS management system based on several detailed procedures and checklists. The OHS representatives are responsible for the daily operations of the OHS management system and they report to the environmental manager. Consequently, there is little room for personal initiative for the OHS representatives and the representative part of the role is replaced by a more administrative role. The OHS organisation has, in this case, been transformed into a management hierarchy, where the Environmental Manager is in charge and OHS representatives execute the daily OHS operations.

OHS representatives integrated in core tasks

In some cases OHS activities are handled as an integrated part of the core task of the organisation, and OHS considerations are not addressed as specifically concerning the health and safety of employees. The rationale behind improvements and initiatives are linked to the enterprises' operations of the core tasks. Often OHS representatives work closely together with management and shop stewards about solving day-to-day operational problems as well the longer term development of the workplaces without specifically highlighting the activities as OHS related. The staff involvement is often high as activities important to OHS are part of their daily work.

This ideal type is seen in approximately one third of the cases. It is particularly noticeable in cases from the healthcare and social service sector. One likely reason is that in this sec-

tor, the main work environment problems are the psychosocial factors and musculoskeletal strain closely related to the core activities, for instance in elderly care, child day care and primary schools.

One example is an elderly care centre in a medium-sized municipality. The centre has 40 employees and most of the elderly residents suffer from dementia. It has one OHS representative who works closely together with the shop steward and the centre leader. The OHS representative describes the three as a team where they coordinate activities and, for instance, jointly prepare staff meetings. The work environment activities have focused on the relationships with the elderly and their relatives. The provision of high-quality care to the elderly residents and taking care of the work environment are considered to be completely integrated. Among the most important issues have been coordination across shifts, social support in difficult situations and treatment of challenging residents in order to avoid harassment and violence. The OHS representative explains that the staff inform her about problems which she raises with the manager and the shop steward. However, in some cases staff also go to one of the two other persons and they subsequently share the issues, discuss solutions and put them on the agenda for staff meetings.

Political OHS representatives

It is possible in a few cases to identify important elements of the traditional spokesperson role. However, the modern political OHS representative is not solely the voice of the employees in securing a sound work environment. The modern political OHS representatives both act and regard themselves as politicising actors within the organisation (cf. Hall et al., 2006). In line with the concept of ‘political reflexive coordinator’ introduced by Broberg

and Hermund (2004), the political OHS representatives possess organisational understanding and are able to analyse their own organisation in order to identify converging and conflicting interests. Through this, they thereby secure political support from both management and employees to their own personal OHS agenda.

Elements of the political OHS representative can be identified in seven of the sixty cases. This ideal type is represented in all five sectors.

One example of a political OHS representative is a public construction and road maintenance enterprise with 70 employees. There are two OHS representatives in the company. However, their approaches to the role are very different. While one of the OHS representatives has a more traditional role with employee representation and operational OHS activities, the other OHS representative in this enterprise has an approach in line with the 'political reflexive coordinator'. He is very active and influential on all managerial levels in spite of having no formal power. Moreover, the representative is very conscious of the need to safeguard both the employees' and management's interests while implementing his own personal agenda regarding OHS. The OHS manager in the company has a similar approach, and she has been able to closely position herself to the manager so that all major decisions are made jointly between the manager and the OHS manager. It is the expressed strategy of both the OHS manager and the 'political' OHS representative to utilise this political approach to OHS management internally in the company.

OHS representatives in a management driven system

In several of the cases the management plays the dominant role in OHS. All strategic OHS

activities are centralised at the top level of the enterprise, most of the daily operational OHS activities have been standardised, and the overall responsibility for the daily operation of the work environment is with professional OHS officers or placed with the first line managers. As a result, the OHS representatives are more or less pushed to the side-line, and the employee-elected OHS organisation is left as an empty shell with no real function or power.

Elements of management-driven OHS activities are seen in approximately 25% of the cases. This can most often be observed in larger enterprises, although some smaller and medium-sized enterprises also carry elements of management domination, but in these cases it is more in the form of lack of priority and ad hoc oriented activities.

One extreme example of domination by management is from a larger financial enterprise with >4,000 employees. Top management had assessed the traditional set-up of the OHS organisation as non-functioning; neither the OHS representatives nor the management were adequately committed. In order to increase priority, the senior management decided to integrate the work environment into operations. The line management has therefore been given full responsibility for the OHS management. All managers are required to follow a basic web-based OHS training program. The first line managers are supported by a small unit of professional OHS officers. The number of OHS representatives was subsequently reduced considerably, and they now cover large geographical areas with up to 15 separate locations each, for which they do not have any natural physical contact. The few remaining OHS representatives get access to information and interesting seminars, but they do not play a clear role in the OHS activities, and it seems to be difficult to gain access to work environ-

ment decisions as not all line managers follow up on the new responsibility in the way it was intended.

A mixture of typologies

In the above five typologies we have indicated the approximate share of workplace, which were dominated by a specific typology. However, some workplaces have strong trends from more than one typology and the indicated percentage of typologies therefore adds up to more than the 60 participating workplaces. Moreover there are even a few enterprises (3 cases; 5%) dominated by an ad hoc approach where neither of the typologies are dominant.

Discussion

Several interesting observations can be highlighted from the study. It was remarkable that we found a clear trend towards mainstreaming of the OHS organisation in most of the workplaces. Transferring the concept from gender research is useful to catch the movement of the work environment from a sidecar function into the daily operations in most of the workplaces analysed.

Nonetheless, we have still identified two alternative approaches to the mainstreaming tendency: a continuation of the “sidecar” approach and an ad hoc approach. The sidecar approach is dominant in workplaces where the OHS work is still characterised by having the formal status required but without any genuine or efficient integration into the daily operations of the firms. This approach is mainly found in smaller and medium-sized workplaces

which are known to give lower priority to work environment (Sørensen et al., 2007). The ad hoc approach is characterised by the absence of a systematic approach to OHS as well as overall guiding policies on OHS. The workplaces with an ad hoc approach only undertake activities when they are forced to do so in one way or the other, such as receiving improvement notifications from the labour inspectors or the occurrence of accidents.

Again is it important to emphasise that both these approaches and the OHS representatives' typologies are ideal types and thus tend to occur in various combinations and to varying degrees in the cases and they can obviously change over time. In this study we found that the traditional "side-car" role of OHS (Aminoff and Lindström, 1981; Frick, 1990) was mainly present in workplaces where the *Systems Maintenance* typology dominated, but there were also elements of the side-car approach in conjunction with the *Political* and *Management driven* OHS representative typologies. However, the *Systems maintenance* typology has also associations with the mainstreaming tendencies as management expect the experts to take care of all operational issues before they constitute problems. The mainstreaming of OHS activities and organisation is most closely associated with the *Professionalization*, *Integration* and *Management driven* typologies, though there were trends of mainstreaming in almost all the cases.

The consequence of mainstreaming the work environment is that it is increasingly seen and treated as any other issue in the enterprises. As with other operational issues the management search for OHS systems that contribute to a cost-efficient operation and safeguard against problems which can disturb the core business. The management want to show the enterprise as an efficient and attractive organisation of high ethical integrity, and problems

with the work environment do not fit into such a picture. It wants a system which protects against poor publicity, criticism from the authorities and disgruntled employees. It does not, however, per se secure a high level of work environment. As for other management issues, ambitions, competence or the economy may be a constraint for the level of the work environment.

In the majority of cases OHS representatives are included in the mainstreamed organisational solutions. Even though this mainstreaming does not secure a high-level work environment, we do not identify any general trends of downgrading the work environment or the exclusion of OHS representatives. This development seems to be well aligned with the viewpoint of some OHS representatives who appreciate being included in problem solving (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Hohnen and Hasle, 2010; Navrbjerg et al., 2010: 36). The development is, in many cases, followed by a trend towards fewer and more professional OHS representatives, ones that are better educated and spend more time on the work environment activities. It is therefore possible that this more flexible system opens a stronger OHS representative voice because the representatives become more qualified and are able to spend the necessary time to be involved.

However, the change of focus from representation to problem solving is not without potential drawbacks. There is a risk of contradictions for the OHS representatives e.g. moving away from identification with the colleagues to identification with OHS professionals and/or management (Sjöström, 2013: 231-33),which has also been found in studies of shop stewards working closely together with management (Mathiesen and Hvenegaard, 2001;

Rolfsen, 2011). Through doing so, they gain more insight into the understandings of management and they may therefore tend to accept their positions and move away from the position of their colleagues. In our study, this was particularly true in the case of the food plant, but it was also noticed in other cases. Therefore, there appears to be a need for balancing between a situation where too few OHS representatives spending all or most of their time for the representative function, may move them away from their colleagues and of a sufficient number of OHS representatives with enough time and education - which can be beneficial for both their colleagues and the enterprise.

In addition there are cases such as the financial enterprise where mainstreaming of the work environment and the quest for an efficient OHS management system tend to side-line OHS representatives, leaving them without any real influence (see also Dyreborg, 2011). However, in cases such as the financial enterprise the OHS representatives did not have stronger influence prior to these changes, and their influence was therefore also limited in the old system. OHS management systems with a weak employee voice tend to be less effective (Frick, 2011; Walters and Nichols, 2007). A weak influence for the OHS representatives could probably also be the case in some of the more positive cases when it comes to more strategic decision making. It was difficult in the case studies to gain any clear evidence about this type of decision, although the case of the food plant constitutes an example where the OHS representative did exercise an influence on more strategic decisions. However, many of the workplaces were affiliated to larger organisations, and both local management and OHS representatives have limited access to the strategic decision levels. These larger organisations are normally organised with an OHS committee, where, in principle, the OHS representatives have the possibility to influence strategic decisions, though this

has not been studied in this research project. Often organisational decisions taken at a higher level in the firms or organisations, and outside of the influence of the local OHS rep, can have huge impact on the work environment at the workplace e.g. reorganising of workplaces and processes or changes in work and production practices. In some public institutions the fear of cutbacks affects the work environment very significantly.

This research has been carried out in Denmark, and the results are therefore closely related to the Danish context. There is a clear risk of workplaces with negative attitude towards OHS refused to participate, and the prevalence of mainstreaming may therefore be somewhat lower than indicated in the present study. It is therefore relevant to consider to what extent the results can be generalised to other countries, and in particular whether the trend towards mainstreaming of the work environment and the integration of OHS representatives into daily problem solving can be identified in other countries. Traditions for a stronger top-down management and conflicts with unions may hamper such a development, but it is also likely that such trends can be found not only in Scandinavia but also in other countries. The goal of avoiding problems related to OHS as well as showing a high ethical profile will also exist in other national settings. However, only further research can provide answers to this question.

Conclusion

We conclude that there seems to be a simultaneous development in employer mainstreaming of the work environment and the introduction of a more flexible regulation of the organisation of OHS management systems and the set-up for OHS representatives. This de-

velopment opens up new possibilities for OHS representatives - where they can play an important role in helping to improve the work environment for themselves and their colleagues. But the risk is, among others, that they may move away from identification with their colleagues. It must also be noted that the existence of legislation requiring the election of OHS representatives and an employee voice is an important prerequisite. If not, it could be expected that many enterprises will choose another strategy with a fully professional OHS management system with a rather low level of employee voice, as is seen in some of the workplaces studied.

The results also call for more in-depth studies of the actual function of the OHS management systems and the role of the OHS representatives. Potentially interesting questions may for instance be to what extent the OHS representatives get involved in practical problem solving and whether the risk of moving away from colleagues does, in practice, materialise. Additionally the possibilities for participation in more strategic decisions should be further explored.

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