Employee Representation in the New World of Work: 
The Dynamics of Rights, Voice, Performance and Power

THE IMPACT OF REPRESENTATIVE EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYEEWELL-BEING: COMPARATIVE DANISH AND NEW ZEALAND CASES

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Abstract
The paper introduces an international comparative project evaluating the impact of representative employee participation processes on the work environment. The work environment includes occupational health and safety outcomes, job security, working hours (quantity and distribution in shifts etc.) and employee satisfaction. Two main indicators of the work environment are absenteeism and labour turnover.

Representative employee participation and regulation of the working environment occur through two different but potentially interrelated processes in Denmark and New Zealand (NZ):
1. law-based regulation and OHS delegates, focusing on physical disease/injury;
2. agreement-based participative structures e.g. joint consultative committees (JCCs) or cooperation committees, focusing more broadly on the work environment, including psycho-social issues affecting wellness/well-being.

We had two specific research questions:
1. What characterises employee participation in establishments with good and less good working environments?
2. What correlations are there between effective employee participation and positive work environments?

Boxall et al. (2003) argue that voluntary labour turnover represents one end of a continuum from retention at the other end. This continuum includes a sequence of withdrawal responses including lateness and absenteeism, in response to unsatisfactory employment. Absenteeism includes absence from work because of injury or sickness, which indicates an unsafe work environment if it is work related. Labour turnover and absenteeism are commonly employee withdrawal responses to an unsatisfactory work environment (Boxall et al. 2003). Apart from satisfaction with pay and job security, the major contributors to labour turnover have been found to be the extent to which employees feel that their contributions are valued and their well being cared for by the employer, and if the employer listens and recognises merit and work/life balance. Boxall et al. (2003) found that the propensity to leave a job was mitigated by feelings of empowerment and a sense that employee contributions are valued by employers.

Studies (Walters et al. 2005) have found that worker representation and consultation through OHS committees produced better OHS than management acting alone. In addition, the existence
of a broader framework of participative practice through European-style works councils or JCCs or trade unions tends to impact positively on the effectiveness of OHS committees (Knudsen 2005; Fairbrother 1996; Saksvik and Quinlan 2003). Studies also suggest that OHS committees may broaden their jurisdiction beyond narrow conceptions of OHS, particularly where no European-style works councils exist, as in NZ (Bernard 1995; Knudsen 1995; Walters et al. 2005). In practice it is difficult to separate OHS from work/life issues (Lamm 2002), or from technological or organisational change (Heller 1998).

Linkages have been tested by comparing Denmark and New Zealand. Both have small economies and legislation for OHS delegates, but in NZ wider participative practices are not well-developed by legislation or employer/union agreements as in Denmark with cooperation committees.

Four key service industries were targeted because of their importance and relative under-representation in the literature: Hospitality, Education, IT and Health, as well as Food Manufacturing because of its significance in Denmark and NZ. Two case studies were undertaken for each industry. A multi-method approach included document analysis, interviews of managers and employees and an employee survey.

The results show strong, though complex connections between quality of work environment and effectiveness of employee participation. Danish employees tended to feel more empowered than their NZ counterparts who tended to feel more stressed. However, this did not necessarily translate into greater job satisfaction, or less absenteeism and labour turnover for Danish employees.

References
P. Saksvik, & M. Quinlan (2003), ‘Regulating systematic occupational health and safety management: comparing the Norwegian and Australian experience’, Relations Industrielles, 58(1), 33-56.