

Using perceptions to include ergonomics in performance measurement

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this project was to increase the use of ergonomic knowledge, particularly in companies designing technology with an impact on the efficiency and safety of work environments. A phenomenographic approach was used with a focus on capturing the variation in meanings and perceptions that people assign to ergonomics.

2. Methods

A case study was designed around a mediating object, a power-lift truck with enhanced ergonomic features and was carried out in the construction industry. Data was constructed in observations and interviews and subsequently analyzed in two steps: 1) identifying categories of meaning, and 2) comparing how the categories align with the dual objectives of ergonomics as stated by the IEA.

3. Results

The first step of the analysis yielded eight categories of meaning. Ergonomics is: 1) Related to people's health 2) Related to a person's body 3) Something that keeps people in good health 4) A respectful attitude 5) Efficiency at work 6) A differentiator 7) Something of minor importance 8) Something unknown. The second step of the analysis showed that four categories mapped to the social goal of ergonomics and two categories mapped to its economic goal.

According to the results, ergonomics is predominantly seen as being about health and safety. This understanding may be one explanation to why ergonomics knowledge is often left out in product development processes. Another explanation may be that its terminology is perceived as unfamiliar and alien. According to social-cultural theory, knowledge is constructed by people, in their communities of practice, in their own language. To be relevant to practitioners, ergonomics knowledge needs to be named and framed in their occupational language, not in an ergonomist's terminology.

Three suggestions to how ergonomists can increase the use of ergonomics knowledge

and thus contribute to improve system performance are presented:

- Capture existing meanings of ergonomics and identify their roots in specific work contexts.
- Challenge existing perceptions and explore alternatives that could lead to new approaches to describing and measuring system performance.
- Find cues to how ergonomics already contributes to improving system performance, on the individual, organizational and industry levels, and incorporate those ratings into the performance measurement system.

Conclusion

Ergonomists can contribute in a new way by reframing ergonomics into something that is understood to improve system performance – reclaiming by reframing.