

New developments in occupational health and safety management in Danish companies

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Abstract. This paper identifies potential impacts of recent legislative OHS reforms in Denmark on OHS management in companies; the focus being how this shift in legislation has manifested itself in the companies' organization and daily work with OHS. We report from an exploratory multiple case study using a qualitative research methodology. Our findings reveal several themes related to the development of OHS management. We have identified eight superordinate themes: managerial change drivers, professionalization of OHS activities, regulation drivers, management systems, integration of OHS into daily work, stratified OHS, streamlining of the OHS organization, and commitment to OHS work.

Keywords: Occupational Health and Safety Management, Legislative changes

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the Scandinavian approach to Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) management has been based on cooperation between employee-elected representatives and company management. In recent years there has been a shift towards deregulation in Danish OHS legislation. The amendment to the Danish OHS legislation in 2004 signaled the beginning of this development. The amendment included a liberalization of OHS consultancies (Kabel et al. 2007). Simultaneously, a tendency to implement OHS management systems in both public and private companies was seen. This tendency was also supported by a legislative initiative which exempted companies certified according to the OHSAS standard from inspection by the Danish Work Environment Authority (WEA) (Hohnen & Hasle 2011). Finally, in 2010 a new amendment to OHS legislation was passed that allows for more flexible organization of OHS activities in companies, which can now, for example, reduce the number of employee-elected health and safety representatives.

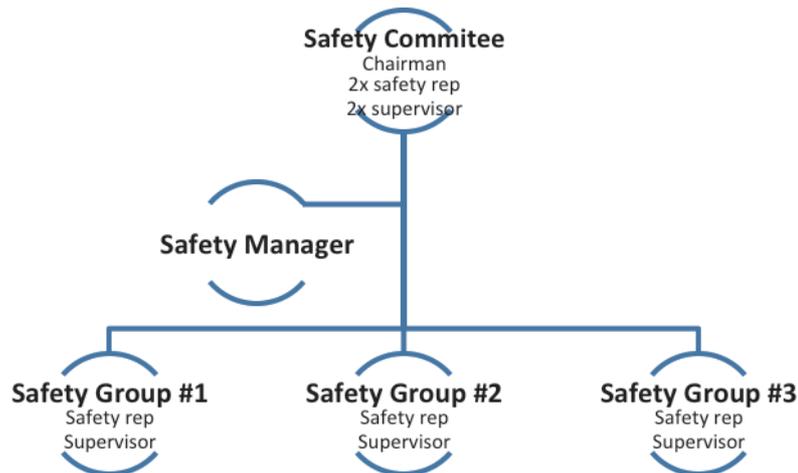
This paper reports on an exploratory study of the development in OHS regulation and management in Denmark during the last decade. We will focus on two questions: 1) Which new trends and drivers for development of OHS management can be seen? 2) What are the implications of this development for the efficiency of OHS management?

1.1 Settings

Danish OHS legislation is based on the cooperative tradition inspired by the Danish labor market model where employees and employers cooperate on, e.g., health and safety activities in the companies.

The previous Danish regulation on the cooperation of safety and health required that

each department establish a safety group consisting of a safety representative elected from among the staff, plus the supervisor of the department. One safety committee had to be set up for the entire company. The committee consisted of two safety reps and two supervisors from the safety groups, plus a chairman representing the employer. In addition, a safety manager had to be appointed. (Hasle 2001).



In 2010, an amendment to Danish OHS legislation was introduced (ref. AT bek.1181) with executive order no. 1181. The amendment included several new elements, the main ones being:

“The employer shall conduct health and safety talks with the members of the health and safety organisation every year” (E.O. no. 1181 §16 1).

These talks include planning the content of HSO activities for the coming year, determining how the cooperation shall take place, assessing whether the goal for the previous year has been met, and setting the goals for the coming year. The amendment also includes a division between operational and strategic working environment activities.

The rules for the number of OHS representatives (HS reps) have been loosened. The amendment is nonspecific and vague about the number of safety reps:

“In cooperation with the employees and supervisors, the employer shall determine how many members and how many health and safety groups are required in the health and safety organisation on the basis of the principle of proximity” (E.O. no. 1181 §16 1).

Furthermore, the mandatory appointment of safety manager has been removed.

The amendment includes a reduction of mandatory health and safety training for HS reps and supervisors from five to three days. At the same time, the amendment allows for the possibility of continuous competence development for the HS organization. While the curriculum of the mandatory three-day health and safety training is described in detail, the amendment is vague as regarding the content of the supplementary training:

“The object of the supplementary health and safety training is to ensure regular updates in the area that strengthen the skills of health and safety representatives and supervisors in the health and safety organisation. Supplementary health and safety training shall impact knowledge and skills that are relevant with regard to health and safety activities in the enterprise.” (E.O. no. 1181 §38).

2. Methods

The empirical material for this paper is from an exploratory, multiple case study based on a qualitative research methodology. In total, sixty companies participated in the study.

2.1 Data collection and reporting

Data were collected by visiting all companies and interviewing actors related to OHS management. Between two and six respondents were interviewed at each company. In all cases, the health and safety representative (HSR) and the health and safety coordinator (HSC) were interviewed. The data for each company were reported in a standardized case report, enabling analysis across cases.

2.2 Data analysis

The case reports comprised the basis for a coding session involving eleven researchers, all of whom had been involved in the data collection. The coding session consisted of three rounds. In the first round, the researchers worked in pairs to develop categories based on a selection of the case reports. In the second round, researchers divided into two groups and repeated the exercise. Finally, both groups worked together to identify categories and variations across the entire dataset. The categories identified in the coding session were synthesized into eight different themes that were central elements in the development of OHS management across the material.

3. Results

In the case analysis, eight themes were identified. In the following paragraphs, we will briefly explain the themes and elaborate on each of them using examples from the case studies.

3.1 Managerial change drivers

Changes in management – both in management style and in individual managers – were an important factor resulting in changes in OHS organization. The managerial changes mentioned referred to both mergers and acquisitions, and minor, internal organizational changes at different managerial levels. These changes triggered delegation to new actors to develop OHS management, opening up for new structures and procedures.

3.2 Professionalization of OHS activities

The category of OHS professionalization included a number of initiatives. Professionalization could entail appointing a new OHS task coordinator. Such a person often functioned as a kind of internal consultant to the management. This can be a full-time or part-time job. OHS professionalization also included the employee level; in some cases, the number of HS representatives was reduced and OHS competences further developed in the remaining HS reps. This type of professionalization is also strengthened by the 2010 amendment requiring yearly supplementary HS training for HS reps. We have also detected changes in the role of the HS reps itself. The traditional representative element of the role is diminishing in favor of a problem-solving element where the HS reps function as internal OHS consultants for both employees and management.

3.3 Regulation drivers

Regulation was found to play an important part in forming and changing the organization of OHS work in the companies. The 2010 amendment, which made a reduction in OHS organization possible, was found to play a role. Other elements of OHS regulation could also be seen as major drivers of changes in organization of OHS management – for example, executive order no. 1192, which exempts OHSAS 18001 certified companies from unannounced WEA inspections. In addition, collective agreements, especially in the public sector, were found to play a dominant role in the organization of OHS management.

3.4 Management systems

OHS management systems were used to systematize OHS work. It was not only OHSAS 18001 that was used to structure OHS; the implementation of management systems not directly addressing OHS issues – e.g., environmental and quality management systems – proved to have an unintentional positive side effect on OHS management.

3.5 Integration of OHS into daily work

The integration category includes initiatives to integrate OHS considerations into the daily work of the general staff. The phenomenon took on many forms; it could be a specific, articulated strategy, whereas in other cases it apparently emerged spontaneously among employees. Sometimes it was coordinated by a centrally located OHS coordinator, or conversely, it was not recognized or identified as OHS work at all.

3.6 Stratified OHS

We have identified a tendency to disconnect strategic OHS work from practical OHS work at the ground level. The nature of this stratified OHS appears to be manifold as it can be both physical, where OHS management does one thing and HSR another, as well as organizational.

3.7 Streamlining of the OHS organization

We also identified a streamlining of the OHS organization exemplified by a reduction in the number of HS representatives. This has been induced by the 2010 amendment, which included a higher degree of flexibility (see Settings).

3.8 Commitment to OHS work

Lack of commitment, in relation to lack of both prioritization from management and motivation from employees, was perceived as a problem in relation to OHS. This lack of commitment can constitute a burning platform which can accelerate commitment to OHS if combined with one of the other themes mentioned, for instance, managerial changes.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Several of the themes identified in OHS management development correspond to findings of previous research focusing on OHS management. Changes in management, introduction of management systems, and the degree of commitment from employees, as well as middle and top management, to OHS activities are all factors recognized as significant for the efficiency of OHS management (Stranddorf et al. 1992). In the following we will focus on the main new findings in this study.

4.1 New trends and drivers for OHS management

Our results indicate that regulation is a major driver for development of OHS

management, especially its organization. Different set of legislations is found to instigate development of OHS management – e.g., collective agreements and specific OHS regulation. In the public sector, the MED agreement dominates OHS management; thus, almost all OHS organizations are merged with the cooperative system in municipal and state workplaces. The 2010 amendment to the OHS legislation (see Settings) has an effect mainly on the development of OHS management in private companies. This can be seen in our results as the theme of streamlining, where several companies have used the amendment to downsize the OHS organization.

Professionalization is a distinctive trend which is seen in many different versions; in some cases, the HS reps become professional OHS staff themselves, spending the majority of their time on OHS management and problem solving. In other companies, it is OHS coordinators who maintain OHS management. These OHS coordinators are often situated close to the line management and are in some cases given management duties; thus, the OHS coordinators are in a key position to drive the development of OHS management in the company.

The stratification theme cannot be seen as a new development in OHS; the original OHS law from 1975 introduces the concepts of OHS committees and OHS groups, thereby incorporating stratification of OHS management in the legislation. However, the 2010 amendment introduced an element of strategic OHS management, which emphasizes the tendency to stratify OHS organization. In some companies, strategic OHS activities are handled solely by the OHS committee, thereby emphasizing the gap between operational OHS activities in the OHS groups and strategic work in the committee.

Integration, compared to professionalization, is a trend that is more difficult to identify, due to the fact that if integration is successful, employees consider procedures not as a way of avoiding OHS issues but simply as procedures.

4.2 Implications for OHS management

An obvious positive effect of the development is the element of flexibility in the 2010 amendment, which allows for a reorganization of OHS management that is more in tune with the overall organization and management of the company. However, as this flexibility is a clear example of deregulation, it can also be used to advocate for a reduction in resources allocated to OHS activities by reducing the number of HS reps, eliminating safety managers, or downsizing the OHS budget. Several of the case companies in the private sector have reorganized their OHS management in connection with the amendment. The majority of these companies have reduced the size of the OHS organization and realigned it with the company by, for example, organizing OHS activities so they correspond to the overall structure of management and operations in the company. The main objective of the amendment was to introduce a higher degree of flexibility by loosening the fixed demands on the companies' internal OHS management organization.

The 2010 amendment reinforces the strategic element of OHS management by introducing annual health and safety talks as a tool for linking operational working environment activities with the general strategy of the company. The amendment can be seen as a gateway to a more strategic approach to OHS, which can entail both a higher degree of linkage between the operational and the strategic level of the OHS organization, but also the opposite development: a clearer stratification of OHS activities due to the fact that strategic decisions are made solely at a higher hierarchical level than they were traditionally.

The positive effect of professionalization is that it can eliminate the risk of the OHS organization ending up on the sidelines (Jensen 1997; Hasle 2001) or in an adjunct function with limited influence on decision making which is often the case. On the other hand,

professionalization can also lead to all OHS activities becoming centered around one person, which is obviously a vulnerable structure. The element of continuing education in the amendment may, in the long run, emphasize the trend toward professionalization by introducing more competent HS reps that are able to undertake more problem-solving OHS activities. This could, on the other hand, put additional pressure on the representative aspect of the HS rep's role. This inherent schism in the Danish model, where HS reps are both employee-elected representatives and problem-solving OHS employees, has been problematized before by Walters and Frick (2000), among others.

In conclusion, the eight themes identified are present in the case companies in different constellations, each of which characterizes the specific development of OHS management in that individual company.

The 2010 amendment was initiated by the social partners; employer organizations especially were critical of the previous Danish regulation on the cooperation of safety and health, which in their opinion did not fit the majority of Danish companies. The shift in legislation represented by the amendment echoes the organizational development of Danish companies. Our results indicate that the shift in legislation to some extent is influencing the development of OHS management in Danish companies, which suggests that the Danish model for OHS management is in a transition phase, going from a traditional, participatory, cooperative approach towards a more problem-oriented approach addressing both OHS issues as well as operations and managerial issues. This tendency has been described in other studies (Hohnen & Hasle 2011; Kristensen 2011).

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