

Distance management – a challenge in participatory interventions in virtual organizations

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Abstract. Virtual organizations challenge the first line managers as they have to be able to manage from afar as distance managers. Investigating distance management in participatory multi-level interventions this paper presents a case study of four SMEs which have applied the multi-level participatory PoWRS program (Prevention of Work-Related Stress) over a six month period. Interviews were conducted with employees, in-house process facilitators, project managers and first line managers. The results show that distance managers are even more challenged in interventions especially regarding coordination of activities and ensuring commitment.

Keywords. Interventions, distance management, virtual organizations, SMEs.

1. Introduction

Many businesses today are distributed geographically and employees and teams are often co-located and have dispersed work situations with remote work conditions. In other cases operations require that people work in shifts. According to Jacobs (2004) “*virtual organizations or tele-working can be broadly defined as an activity whereby people work at a distance from an employer using ICT to overcome the distance*” (p.119). Virtual organizations (Fisher & Fisher, 2001; Jacobs, 2004) challenge the managers as they have to be able to manage from afar. Also today’s technologies and business requirements both allow and demand distance management like never before. A manager, leading people, normally not located at the same place at the same time, is by Fisher and Fisher (2001) termed “distance manager”. In small and medium enterprises (SMEs) it is not uncommon that employees are co-located in different branch offices or work in shifts and can therefore be classified as virtual organizations.

Knowledge intensive SMEs in Denmark experience increasing problems with work-related strain and stress (Holt & Lind, 2004; Nielsen & Kristensen, 2007; Statens Institut for Folkesundhed, 2004). One way to address prevention of work-related stress is by initiating primary stress management interventions (Hurrell & Murphy, 1996; Murphy, 1988) for example in a multi-level participatory process (Ipsen & Andersen, 2013). However, SMEs are often uncertain about how to approach primary stress interventions and initiate relevant change processes, as only a few of the SMEs have access to in-house facilitators who can apply these tools and initiate and facilitate these interventions (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010; Nielsen, Grex, & Jørgensen, 2010). It has not previously been a task for safety advisors to facilitate interventions, so SMEs can seldom find help here either.

There is therefore a need for new knowledge on how SMEs can initiate and implement primary interventions (Kompier & Kristensen, 2000; Murphy, 1988) and address the underlying organizational conditions that can lead to work-related stress (European Agency

for Safety and Health at Work, 2010; Nielsen, Raymond, Holten, & González, 2010; Randall, Cox, & Griffiths, 2007).

This research studies the challenges primary interventions (i.e. PoWRS program (Prevention of Work-Related Stress)) in virtual organizations imposes on the distance manager.

1.1 Primary interventions

Interventions to alleviate work-related problems and stress can have various forms. Murphy (1988) has identified three approaches to stress management, labeled primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. These approaches focus either on the organization (1°), the interrelation between the individual and the organization (2°), or the individual (3°) (DeFrank & Cooper, 1987; Murphy, 1988; Newton, Handy, & Fineman, 1995) (See Table 1).

One example of a primary intervention program is the PoWRS program. The program is characterized by taking the lack of professional resources into account and use local resources as facilitators in the implementation of preventive organizational changes (primary interventions) and takes a multi-level and participatory view on the intervention process.

The program itself supports a new view on prevention of work-related stress besides the concrete development of organizational level changes. (Hurrell & Murphy, 1996; Murphy, 1988; Murphy & Sauter, 2003; Roskam, 2009). The program is about re-designing work processes and daily activities as part of a company's organizational design in a multi-level and participatory process (Ipsen, Jensen, & Andersen, 2010; {{508 Ipsen, Christine 2013}})

The principles for primary preventions listed below concern the target and content of the intervention process. Earlier findings show these principles to be of key importance for supporting the re-design of the organizational design in a multi-level, participatory process (Buch & Andersen, 2009; Ipsen, 2011; Ipsen & Jensen, 2012; Sørensen & Holman, 2010). By employing the program the companies become capable of developing new work practices in a multi-level participatory process using local in-house resources as facilitators.

Target of the intervention:

1. A primary prevention approach – i.e. organizational-level interventions
2. The outset is the organizational design and daily activities

Content of the intervention process:

- Multi-level collaborative approach where everyone participates.
- Active support from managers.
- Explication of tacit knowledge among employees and managers regarding work-related problems and potential solutions.
- Continuous collective evaluations and adjustments of the intervention, based on collective reflections and decisions.
- Visualization of the process and results to promote awareness and commitment.
- Appointment of one facilitator for each intervention to be the “ears of the organization”.
- A project period with a number of defined phases and activities, a start and finish time.

1.2 Distance management

Distance can be created by space, time and/or culture. Distance management is thus a term that covers someone who is charged to lead people who are not normally located together at the same place at the same time or employees with different cultural background (Fisher & Fisher, 2001), typically the first line manager. Li and Scullion also point at culture as a dimension of distance together with two other dimensions: physical and institutional distance (Li & Scullion, 2006).

Some of the challenges, for a distance manager, are to ensure top performance, cooperation, effective communications, motivation and coaching across sites, time and cultures. In practice it can regard ensuring information across shifts, continuity in the operations, fairness and appropriate standards and/or input and buy-in from all operations.

Despite the awareness of distance management in daily operations in virtual organizations we still know little about the challenges of distance management in organizational participatory interventions and consequently whether other competences are needed.

2. Methods

Investigating distance management in participatory multi-level interventions this paper presents a case study of four SMEs which have applied the multi-level participatory PoWRS program (Prevention of Work-Related Stress) over a six month period. The cases selected were companies within IT and manufacturing, interested in improving their work processes, productivity and well-being applying the PoWRS program (See Table 1).

In two of the companies, one manufacturing and one software-company, people worked at a distance from their manager as they either worked in three shifts or operated in the field and in remote offices (co-located).

Table 7. Size of the participating companies and number of participants

	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3	Company 4
Company size (overall number of employees)	31	116	150	187
Number of participants in the intervention	31	25	37	36
Number of participating departments	2	2	3	2
Virtual organization	No	Yes 3 shifts per day	Yes Co-located at three sites	No

2.1 The PoWRS program – a multi-level participatory intervention process

The PoWRS program differs from other stress prevention intervention models as it focuses on changing both the organization and work characteristics that cause work-related stress. It thus provides a framework that targets the organization and work (primary interventions) rather than the employees. The program takes its starting point in the work processes and self-reported perceptions of work by the employees. By prescribing a multi-level participatory intervention involving in-house resources the PoWRS program supports explication of tacit knowledge, collective decisions and implementation of

changes, and facilitate the activities in a collective process.

The PoWRS program comprises three phases and a set of activities in which both employees and managers participate step by step in order to explore their workplace. In collaboration, they decide on two organizational-level changes to be implemented, evaluate and re-design their work practices, organizational design and implement the changes over a six month period. The two organizational-level changes in each of the companies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of organizational-level changes in the four case companies

	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3	Company 4
Change 1	Better project management	Improved quality: Error-free subjects and component	Well defined tasks	Polite tone, less gossip, more cooperation and team spirit
Change 2	More recognition and feedback	Improved management: Recognition and employee involvement	Collegiate spirit, unity and feedback	Visible and consistent manager

The research team followed the intervention process in all of the four companies by observing the planned activities and progression of the interventions at onsite visits. Observations were documented through handwritten notes. Furthermore project managers, in-house facilitators, employees and other relevant stakeholders were interviewed during the process, and three rounds of surveys were answered by the intervention participants. In all 53 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed. At the end of the intervention, each company intervention was evaluated by a number of employees in a Chronicle Workshop (Rasmussen, 2011).

3. Results

The results show that engaging in a multi-level participatory intervention is challenging in virtual organizations where employees are distributed across locations and time, and do not meet on a regular basis. The results demonstrate that the virtual organizations face several challenges when applying a participatory and multi-level intervention program which affects the actions from the distance managers.

3.1 Intervention related challenges in virtual organizations

The results of the study demonstrate that virtual organizations face several challenges related to the process when applying an intervention program which demands multi-level participation. First, the PoWRS program stipulates a multi-level collaborative approach where both managers and employees participate during the whole process. However it is difficult to create a common commitment to the process and participation, among shift workers or distributed teams, since everyone does not have the opportunity to participate in common activities throughout the process.

Secondly, the program related activities all have the aim to support a re-design existing activities so they become more efficient and less frustrating. Despite the integration of program activities in the daily operations and activities they are perceived to be time consuming and interfere with the daily operations and thus not everyone are participating. The program also involves explication of tacit knowledge from employees and managers regarding work-related problems and potential solutions. As only part of the workforce is assembled during the different activities it is not all tacit knowledge that is made explicit during the intervention.

Finally the program prescribes appointment of a facilitator for each intervention. The primary task for the facilitator is to be the “ears of the organization” i.e. to interview and listen to all the stories and opinions which play an active role in an intervention. In this case the challenge was that some of them work day shifts and others at other sites. Thus they did not have possibility to meet easily with their colleagues.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The distance managers took some actions to overcome these challenges such as continuously reminding the participants of the importance and to participate active in project. However, if the actions are analyzed using Fisher & Fishers (2001) list of competences which support effective distance leadership, it shows that overall the activities were not initiated or applied. Thus the distance managers did make themselves clear of the importance and role of having a co-located work force in a participatory intervention and what it requires of them as distance managers, so as to be a living example and articulate a clear vision.

Jacobs (2004) state the importance of understanding the character of the work organization in change processes in virtual organizations as the outcome tends towards control, loss of knowledge, decreased sense of belonging and “us” vs “them” attitude in work environment that remains bureaucratic and focused on order, structure and certainty in contrast where there is emphasis on collaboration, empowerment, flexibility, flatter structures and new communication opportunities (Jacobs, 2004). In one of the companies’ bureaucracy and control was the practice which meant that the intervention never became a joint process, but remained a management project. In the company where employees were co-located, there was empowerment and flexibility which would be expected to support the participatory intervention. However, a combination of explicit demands of high performance and deliverables together with diverging signals about the vision of the company meant that the first-line managers focused on performance and daily operations rather than following the program and make it at joint project.

The results show that engaging in a multi-level participatory intervention is challenging in virtual organizations with a distributed work force where employees are distributed over locations and time, and do not meet each other on a regular basis. For the first-line managers the challenge is to ensure even and proper communication to everyone including those who work nightshifts and satellite employees but also to ensure commitment to the process from everyone. The study suggests that the first-line managers have to be focused on how to ensure a common understanding of the intervention as a participatory process which involves everyone at all times. Our findings suggest that further research is needed on interventions in virtual organizations, the role and performance of the distance manager and how he/she ensures performance and daily operations simultaneously with organizational level changes in a multi-level participatory process.

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