

Worker participation in OHSM knowledge process at a paper mill

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1. Introduction

Swedish law gives employees, and their representatives, rights to participate in the employer's systematic work environment management (SWEM). Research on worker participation in SWEM and other OHSM has mainly focused on its structural conditions e.g. organizational arrangements, industrial relations, or union support. However, less is known about how worker participation contributes to SWEM, seen here as a joint knowledge process between management and workers for work environment issues.

The aim of the study is to understand the prerequisites and conditions for worker participation in the SWEM knowledge process. The study's focus is on the social conditions for and practices of participation in SWEM as a "boundary practice" (Wenger 1998), meant to generate knowledge sharing between employer and employees. More precisely, the study aims to analyze the significance of workers' local and situated knowledge and understanding of work and of risks, the construction of participative practices, and the problems and advantages of representative participation.

2. Methods

The empirical basis is a case study at a paper mill. The mill was chosen as its SWEM to a large extent fulfils what research claims are necessary structural conditions for effective participation such as: a well implemented organization of SWEM; good relationships between the unions and the employer; active, trained and union supported safety representatives; possibilities for direct participation through, for example, everyday conversations with first line managers; regular meetings with senior management where health and safety was on the agenda; and reporting systems.

Qualitative interviews were conducted, mainly with workers and safety representatives, but also with two managers, the SWEM coordinator, the union chairman, a human resources officer, and a physician within the OHS medical service. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods such as thematic analysis and discourse analysis. The author's experience of working at a paper mill also helped interpret the interview data. The analysis uses a combination of three theoretical perspectives on work and (situated) knowledge: Etienne Wenger's (1998) approach to communities of practice (CoP); Paavo Bergman's (1995) analysis of teamwork in the process industry; and Sverre Lysgaard's (1961) theory of the workers' collective.

3. Results

The analysis is developed in four parts. The first part shows how workers develop knowledge and competence as part of the work within a community of practice. Situated, process specific knowledge to “put the factory in motion” is developed and circulated among workers, giving them both a certain degree of control and freedom, as well as strength as a collective in negotiations with the employer. The second part explores how risks at work are included in workers’ meaning systems and dealt with through everyday work practices. The understanding of risks and the competence to identify and deal with them then, is developed and negotiated within the social setting of workers communities of practice and therefore not external to the functioning of the communities. The third part analyses practices for workers participation in SWEM. These practices are formed by knowledge boundaries, and by the impact of worker-management relationships on the possibilities of establishing a mutual knowledge process. The fourth part discusses representative participation, focusing on the contradictory role of safety representatives, and the personal consequences when crossing the boundaries of their local community of practice to be a representative in management practices.

The results of this study show that workers possess knowledge about work and working conditions that are crucial for maintaining safety; however, this does not easily lead to them taking part in the practices of worker participation in the joint knowledge process of SWEM. Neither do developed structural preconditions for worker participation seem to be a sufficient prerequisite for establishing a well-functioning boundary practice between the workers’ and management’s communities of practice.

The analysis shows that organized forms of worker participation seem to be based on practices that differ from – and in many ways are incompatible with – practices, and competencies and social identities that are developed within workers’ communities of practice. These differences are also part of the long-established relationship between the workers’ collective and “technical/economical system”.

For individuals, such as safety representatives, overstepping these boundaries may cause conflict with the workers’ collective, leading to a marginalization of representatives. As a consequence, safety representatives refrain from engaging and remaining active in their representative role.

Following the results from this study, it is of both practical and scientific interest to conduct further research on worker participation in SWEM with focus on workers’ knowledge contributions. From a practical point of view such studies would help generate knowledge on how to best make use of workers’ situated knowledge, as well as how to improve the overall management of OHS. Both research and practice would also gain from a better understanding of the relationships between regulative structures, management systems, and workers’ situated knowledge and local systems of meaning.