

**“WHAT BENEFIT ARE WE
GETTING OUT OF THIS?”
INVESTIGATING SUSTAINABILITY
IN TWO OCCUPATIONAL
HEALTH PROGRAMS**

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Canadian Association for Research on Work and Health
Toronto, May 28-29 2010

Introduction

- Many OHS programs are intended to endure for extended periods of time
- Evidence exists that programs are not sustained long enough so their anticipated benefits are realized
- Though program endurance is important, we don't know a lot about how parties maintain programs once they are established

Participatory Ergonomics

- ▣ Participatory Ergonomics – “the involvement of people in planning and controlling a significant amount of their own work activities, with sufficient knowledge and power to influence both processes and outcomes in order to achieve desirable goals” (Wilson and Haines, 1997)

Research Questions

- ▣ What activities did the PE program supporters engage in to sustain the programs?
- ▣ What conditions shaped the form that these activities took and what were their outcomes?

Settings

Courier Co.

- ▣ 150 employees about 135 hourly
- ▣ Transported parcels within Canada and abroad

Furniture Co.

- ▣ 300 employees approximately 250 hourly
- ▣ Manufactured parts for office furniture and home appliances

Both unionized, located in Southern Ontario

PE Program Development

- ▣ Terms of reference agreed upon by management, union, and research team
- ▣ ECTs were established as the ergonomic change agent
- ▣ Ergonomic Change Team (ECT)
 - Labour and management representation
 - Ergonomist-facilitator (research team member)
- ▣ ECTs provided with the training in ergonomics and a model that outlined steps for addressing musculoskeletal hazards

Methods

- ▣ Observations recorded during a 30-month period in Courier Co.; in Furniture Co., 48 months
- ▣ 55 semi-structured interviews
 - 45 to 150 minutes (avg. 90 mins), audio-taped, and transcribed
 - Questions were based on issues identified in observations
- ▣ Documents – ECT meeting agendas and minutes, company publications (e.g., newsletters), and websites for background information

Findings

- ▣ Courier Co. the PE program discontinued after 30 months -- Furniture Co. program still operational at 48 months at the conclusion of the research
- ▣ Different interpretations of the program's value
- ▣ Different valuations influenced by organizational and societal contexts
 - Programs assessed on their ability to reduce OHS costs versus address the source of MSDs
 - Discrepant interests regarding OHS
- ▣ Different attempts to advocate for the PE program's continuation

Courier Co.

- ▣ The national health and safety director questioned program results – economic value
 - “How many injuries have we stopped?” and “What benefit are we getting out of this?”
- ▣ The company measures program success in “dollars and cents”
- ▣ “As far as continuance, I will need to be convinced that there is a reason to continue the project in [the depot]. If there is value, then I would support it.”

Courier Co.

- ▣ District manager – ECT was not making progress
 - “We’ve burnt the resources and spelled off the drivers to get you [ECT] the people you need for the meetings, but from my perspective I’m reading the same thing [in the minutes] that was there three weeks ago.”

- ▣ ECT did little to push for the PE program’s continuation.
 - Lack of leadership
 - Advocating would do little to influence management
 - ▣ “None of the employees are going to fight for it because there’s no use fighting for it.”

Furniture Co.

- ▣ Over time senior managers became more supportive
- ▣ WSIB surcharges and plant restructuring
 - Both provided a context to “make the case for ergonomics” as a tool to reduce injuries and ease the above problems
- ▣ Push for awareness of the PE program and its integration into the plant’s H&S system.
 - “My boss asked me at the end of the first year whether [the ECT] had done ANYTHING at all. And I was conscious after that, that we needed to ‘A’ be visible and ‘B’ to prove that we’d done something.”

Furniture Co.

- ▣ Promoting and “Proceduralizing” the PE program
 - Discussed PE in multiple venues
 - “Ergonomic Audit and Evaluation Sheet”

- ▣ Established PE as complementary to the plant’s OHS programs
 - Return-to-work program
 - “they [ECT] are coming up with lifting devices... to bring the parts right up to the employees’ level ... Then people we had on light duty ...could go in and do the job. ...[the company] had two of them [machines] running on two shifts at a time, so really that created some employment for three people that we were taking off of a light duty job and they were now on direct work.”

Conclusion

- ▣ Ongoing challenges
 - Production pressures
 - Competing interests, concerns among key players
- ▣ Seizing opportunities and reacting to conditions as they arise in specific worksites
- ▣ Need for specific and targeted efforts to sustain programs
 - Making the case with different audiences
 - ▣ Supervisors, middle and senior managers
 - Aligning H&S with other interests
 - ▣ Productivity
 - ▣ Financial; e.g. Insurance premiums

Thank you

- ▣ Acknowledgements
 - Research was funded by the Research Advisory Council of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario
 - Workplace parties