

“We Didn’t Have The Right People Involved”

Securing Support For The Implementation Of Participatory Ergonomic Interventions

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This presentation examines the implementation of participatory ergonomic (PE) interventions in two work sites. The interventions, in the transportation and manufacturing sectors, were collaborative efforts of a university-based Research Team (RT), management and organized labour. They were based on a representative form of participation, in which ergonomic change teams (ECTs) were established that included labour and management representatives, with a member of the RT acting as facilitator. The interventions took place over a period of 19 months in the transportation sector site and 16 months in the manufacturing site. This presentation examines the issue of securing support for the process within the worksite. We were particularly interested in examining concerns that arose as the ECTs tried to engage key actors in the settings in the course of implementing ergonomic changes and in how these concerns were resolved.

The analysis is taken from interviews and observations conducted by a member of the RT who was not involved in the intervention process. Field notes were recorded in two contexts. First, detailed notes were taken at the ECT meetings, which were then developed into accounts of team activities and the involvement of different parties in these activities. Second, field notes were recorded on the plant floor, which included accounts of ECT activity on the floor. In each setting, approximately twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with ECT members, managers, and workers who were non-ECT members. The field notes and transcribed interviews were imported into a qualitative analysis software tool. For each data set, a preliminary coding scheme was devised and then revised on the basis of reading of the materials. Sections based on the codes were extracted and then examined to develop the analysis.

The analysis focuses on the ECTs’ attempts to establish effective working relations with key actors in the worksites, both ECT members and those who were not directly involved in the intervention process but were nonetheless critical to its success. Two types of personnel were identified as significant: skilled trades people and managers of units involved in, or affected by, the ECTs’ activities. Challenges to their commitment to the process had two bases: questions about the effectiveness of the ergonomics initiative, and concern about the diversion of energy and attention from the production process to ergonomics. In each setting, engaging key personnel who were not ECT members involved addressing one or both of these concerns. In the transportation setting, members of the ECT approached senior management, who then intervened with plant-level managers to address their concerns about the intervention and assure them of the importance of the participatory ergonomics program. In the manufacturing sector, some of the personnel whose support was needed were recruited on to the ECT. The enhanced communication that resulted facilitated their co-operation with the process.

Findings highlight the significance of gaining broad-based and ongoing support for participatory ergonomic projects and identify specific strategies for securing this support. These strategies include maintaining communication with senior levels of management, and within the worksite, with personnel who are critical to the success of the ergonomics process.

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