

The Hazards of Poor Work Organization

What is work organization?

Work organization is a broad concept with no strict definition. It deals with the way work is organized and managed. The following subjects are among the basic elements of work organization.

Scheduling: This refers to work and rest schedules, over-time, shift work, hours of work.

Job design: This includes the complexity of the work, the pace of work, the skill and effort required, and the degree of control the worker has over the job.

Interpersonal issues: This would include the relationships that a worker has with supervisors and co-workers.

Career concerns: This includes job security and the opportunity for advancement.

Management style: These could include participatory approaches, hierarchical approaches and teamwork.

Organizational characteristics: This refers to the broader corporate culture and the level of corporate communications.

There is a growing understanding that work itself - if it is poorly organized - can be dangerous to a person's health. The risks from poor work organization are quite serious. Numerous studies have shown that workers whose jobs place high demands on them while providing them with few options about how to do the work are at risk of developing heart disease and other adverse health outcomes. Poor work organization is associated with high levels of stress and psychological strain.

It is important to realize that work organization can lead to improved health. For example, workers who have a high degree of control over how their job is done and face a low level of demands have lower rates of heart disease than workers in low-control, high-demand jobs.

Giving Workers a Greater Say in How Work is Done

While the links between work organization and health are clear, researchers do not yet fully understand the way in which these issues are linked. At the same time people are only now beginning to search for ways to limit these health hazards.

The problems of work organization are not

ones that can be simply or easily addressed. With more traditional health and safety issues it is possible to order the installation of guard rails or place exposure limits on a potential hazard and thereby reduce the problem. There is reason to believe that the resolution of many of these problems requires more than finding a safe way of doing a job. It will involve allowing the people who do the job to have a greater say in how it is done.

Work organization is likely to be a complex and, at times, controversial issue, because it focuses attention on the health and safety implications of one of the main characteristics of our industrial society - namely the fact that some people (employers) organize the work of other people (employees).

New Forms of Work Organization

In the last 20 years other forms of work organization have arisen, and many of the companies that have adopted these new models have enjoyed considerable economic success. Work has been reorganized by new technologies, new approaches that attempt to involve workers in improving product quality, and by processes that focus on maintaining low inventories.

These changes can have a variety of results. Computers can create new and challenging jobs and they can also be used to make existing jobs more repetitive. Worker involvement can provide workers with a measure of control over their working lives or it can provide workers with the opportunity to comment on work organization but leave the real power relationships unchanged.

There are ongoing debates about how "new" these new forms of work organization are, how effective they are in making firms more productive, and disagreement on whether they allow workers to work smarter or simply force them to work harder. At the same time many proposals that call for greater worker control are seen as being incompatible with the rights of management.

The future

Because so many employers are redesigning their workplaces, largely in an effort to remain competitive, work organization is going to be on the workplace agenda. Workers, employers and governments must realize that the changes they are making will have impacts on worker health. The possibility exists to make work more democratic and healthier. But this possibility can only be realized if all three parties are open, not only to new forms of work organization, but to more inclusive ways of designing and redesigning work organization.

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Improving work organization What works, what doesn't

Studies of programs intended to reorganize work to reduce occupational stress have come to a number of conclusions.

Successful programs:

- improve employee self-worth by recognizing stress reactions as legitimate.
- allow worker groups to discuss problems and develop plans for solutions.
- provide the needed economic and technical resources for change.

Less successful programs:

- impose totally technical solutions.
- direct attention away from difficult working conditions by treating the symptoms.
- allow management to maintain constant control by limiting awareness or stifling discussion.

Asking questions about job control

The following questions come from a British survey on job stress. It provides a rough guide to determine how much decision making power you have in your job.

1. Do you have a choice in how you do your job?
2. Do you have a choice in deciding what you do at work?
3. Do others make decisions about your work?
4. Do you have a good deal of say in decisions at work?
5. Do you have a say in your work speed?
6. Can your working time be flexible?
7. Can you decide when to take break?
8. Do you have a say in choosing who you work with?
9. Do you have a great deal of say in planning your work environment?
10. Do you have to do the same thing over and over again?
11. Does your job provide you with a variety of interesting things?
12. Is your job boring?
13. Do you have the possibility of learning new things through your work?
14. Does your job require a high level of skill or expertise?
15. Does your job require you to take the initiative?