

Activities and Ways of Organizing Better Occupational Health and Safety in Small Workplaces: Special Focus on Information

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Received August 31, 2005 and accepted November 24, 2005

Abstract: Information is needed in all activities aiming at the development and improvement of working conditions. The information and communication technology has made it possible to have information available 24 h a day, 360 d a year. The administrative structures in various countries also call for more information steering at the workplace level. This means that more web-based and other materials for small enterprises are needed in all countries in order to improve safety and health of the workers. Four different approaches to improve workplace level activities are described here to provide models for others to modify them to their local conditions. The networking of small workplaces supports the development of their safety and thereby also their productivity and possibilities to offer jobs also in the future.

Key words: Small-scale workplaces, Occupational health, Occupational safety, Information

Introduction

There is a shortage of well-quantifiable data on the occupational health and safety (OH&S) situation of small enterprises, even though their number in most countries is high. The search at the Internet with a pair of words 'small enterprises' gave as a result about 370,000 hits, whereas 'OH&S in small enterprises' brought only 422 hits. Small enterprises are usually not covered at all or are covered only partly by occupational health services or other systems providing such services, even though the aim of the International Instruments is universal service provision.

The information and communication technology (ICT) has brought about profound changes to the information environment of all working people, including those in small enterprises, by rendering the information easily accessible throughout the world. Evidence-based information is sought for decision-making in all sectors of the society, not least in the area of occupational health and safety. Well-informed decisions are needed also for practical actions at workplaces. Especially in the European Union, there seems to be a trend towards less regulations. This means that more information steering is needed at the workplace level. There are numerous ways for information steering. Some of these are shown in Table 1.

The challenge is to provide information in such a form that each workplace—small or large—can utilize it for its own purposes cost-effectively. There are some good websites available with rich information on occupational health and safety for small enterprises, such as the websites of the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (www.cdc.gov/niosh) and the Health and Safety Executive in the United Kingdom (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/smallbusinesses/index.htm>).

Special Aspects of Small Workplaces

There are problems in organizing both information and occupational health services (OHS) for small workplaces, which are often scattered over large areas and thus difficult to reach. The level of education and vocational training of the workers is low, and their knowledge of occupational health and safety is practically nonexistent. Furthermore, they often lack both time and motivation to carry out any additional health and safety measures, and their ability to absorb general information on occupational health and safety, let alone apply it to their own enterprise, is often insufficient to lead to any practical actions. Small enterprises have, however, many advantages that should be fully utilized in the implementation of various programmes with them.

Table 1. Ways of information steering¹⁾

Information sources
Statistics
Fact sheets
Surveys
Barometers
Information events
Campaigns
Good practices
Good practice guidelines
Codes of practices
Successful cases
Non-binding standards
Competitions
Group participation
Benchmarking
Training and education
Training of experts
Training of end users
Training of decision-makers
Training of managers
Awareness raising and training of the public
Development projects
Interventions
Demonstrations
Consultations
Group actions
Public commitments
Evaluations and audits
Process analysis
Outcome and impact analysis
Quality systems
Auditing and certifying

Examples of these are flexibility for quick decision-making, and closeness to their clients; they can thus respond rapidly to the clients’ needs. It is also noteworthy that small enterprises are anticipated to be the most common form of employment in the future, thus creating the largest share of job opportunities.

Four Examples of Practical Actions and Tools for Disseminating Information at Small Workplaces

FIOH Action Programme on Small-scale Enterprises

The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) Action Programme on Small-scale Enterprises was implemented in 1995–2000. A total of 900 enterprises were reached, and 115 OHS units participated in the Programme^{2,3)}.

The economic cost-effectiveness of the project for the small enterprise was also calculated. FIOH compiled the relevant information into 25 practical guidelines, booklets and checklists that are easy to use by both small enterprises

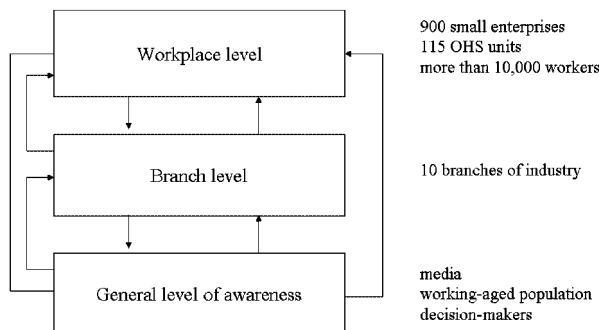


Fig. 1. Levels of information dissemination in FIOH Small-scale Enterprises Programme.

and occupational health service units. In addition, 60 articles were published in various magazines, in addition to over 100 scientific reports (Fig. 1).

The telematic network of small workplaces, occupational health service units, and the FIOH is an efficient way of providing and disseminating information. In most of the small enterprises that participated in the Action Programme, the level of awareness as well as the motivation to improve working conditions had increased. The support of the OHS units to small enterprises is crucial for sustaining their achievements.

TYKY-Step

Another tool for introducing practical measures for small-scale enterprises to improve the work ability and well-being of their workers is the TYKY-Step method developed by the FIOH⁴⁾. The aim is to help workplaces launch and implement workplace health promotion programmes. The method, including a self-evaluation matrix, provides a basis for discussion on how to further develop work ability and well-being at workplace level. This tool —when used by a small workplace— often needs some supportive training organized by research institutions or other actors, in order to be fully utilized.

Developing OH&S information in the agricultural sector in Estonia

A project aiming at effective dissemination of information was carried out within the Finnish-Estonian Twinning Project in 2003–2004. The information was disseminated in various practical forms, especially designed for agricultural workers. For instance, one-page fact sheets were used. The involvement of the Farmers’ Trade Unions was of utmost importance in ensuring the continuity of the activities. Their interest was very much raised by the preparation of a sectoral profile in occupational health and safety in Estonian agriculture⁵⁾. This kind of an approach clearly revealed gaps of information and identified problems, but also recognized

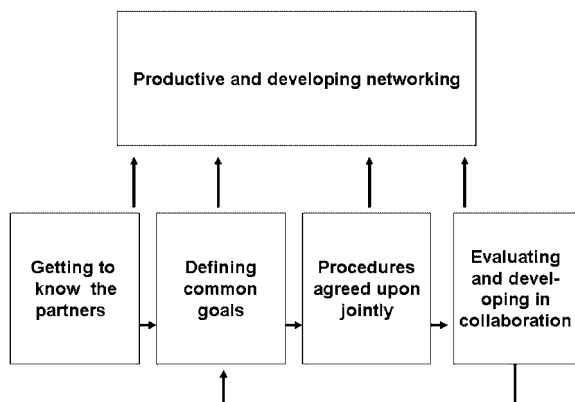


Fig. 2. Model used in connection with Development Days.

the strengths and opportunities for collaboration at the local level.

The number of Internet users is growing also among the small enterprises, and e.g. Estonia and Finland rely on web services as an appropriate channel for information dissemination. A good example of a local branch-oriented network is the recently established Agricultural Network in Occupational Health and Safety in Estonia (<http://osh.sm.ee/systems/estnet-work-agriculture.htm>).

The responsibility of the information producers is, however, to ensure that also those who do not want or who are not able to use Internet, can have access to the services. When taking the information technology into effective use, especially the representatives of small workplaces and the agricultural sector need support in strengthening their IT utilization.

VIPA learning OH&S on the web

Most of the small workplaces in Finland nowadays also utilize electronic information through the Internet. Small workplaces, employing up to 50 people, suffer from more severe accidents than do the very small micro-enterprises or the large enterprises. To tackle this problem, a networking project was launched by Professor Saari and co-workers at FIOH in 2002⁶⁾. Large enterprises can utilize their size in accident prevention, they can learn from their own near-accidents.

A model was developed for small enterprises to reduce occupational accidents through learning from each other within the network. Nine small metal industry companies participated in the networking project, called VIPA (acronym from the Finnish word for Virtual Workshop). An extranet was created for these companies to enable them to share their experience and knowledge about their accidents and near-accidents (Fig. 2).

The purpose was to allow others learn from the mishaps and to help prevent their own potential accidents in future.

The networking model included site visits to the companies before the start of the project, kick-off seminars, 4 Development Days, an Extranet for communication of information among the participants, and various development projects in each enterprise.

The development projects led to several (5–15) improvement proposals in the enterprises. When the implementation of the proposals was followed up, it was found that three out of five enterprises had implemented all proposed improvements. In one of the enterprises, ten targets for developing working conditions were identified. In four months half of the problems were solved, and the method for improving working conditions had been accepted as an integral part of the daily work. Increased discussion on safety issues is one step towards a better safety culture.

In the networking project, also problems were faced. The level of ICT facilities of the small companies is not that good as was anticipated. Also the ICT competence in the participating enterprises varied. Small enterprises lack resources for long-term development of OH&S. Therefore, support from the network was sorely needed.

Lessons Learnt

Small enterprises face numerous occupational health and safety problems. They do not have the same resources as larger enterprises for tackling the problems. They need support from research and advisory organizations to implement their development projects properly. When they participate in development projects, decisions are made quickly, as the management is committed to the implementation of the project. Creating well-functioning networks may provide new support frameworks for small enterprises, strengthened by the electronic communication of information. Time is also needed for investing in collaboration and the building of trust among the actors. Establishing smoothly working networks may in the beginning call for facilitators. Their role would be to provide solid evidence-based competence for making risk assessments at each individual workplace, to provide methods for information and knowledge sharing, and to enhance the use of feasible tools and good practices to improve occupational health and safety, as well as the productivity of small enterprises.

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