

Incentives for work environment improvements at manufacturing companies from a manager perspective

Wijk, K., Bergsten, E., Mathiassen, S. E., Tigerfors, A-M.

Centre for Musculoskeletal Research, Department of Occupational and Public Health Sciences, Faculty of Health and Occupational Studies, University of Gävle, Sweden

Work environment management and improvement is a natural part of everyday activities in most Swedish companies, irrespective of working sector branch or size. Sweden has a Work Environment Act, and the Work Environment Authority, commissioned by the Government, acts with the purpose of securing and promoting continuous development of a safe and healthy work environment for the individual worker. With a basis in research, recent EU Directives require effective work environment management to be a continuous process. Some research also claims a relationship between a good work environment and company profitability. Research has also shown that there is a need for further knowledge about how to increase the interest, particularly in small and medium companies, in work environment issues.

The primary aim was therefore to investigate the reasons why Swedish companies within the manufacturing industry carry out work environment improvements, and to identify the position(s) of the worker(s) initiating and implementing these changes. The study further addressed whether managers considered profitability to be associated with factors in the work environment, if so, to what extent, and whether they explicitly used work environment changes as a tool to increase profitability.

Sixty managers were interviewed and the associated companies were visited in order to survey how they work. Incentives for work environment changes were divided into three categories: individual, organizational, and external factors. In the analysis, companies were classified according to the extent work environment improvements were intended to increase profitability. Enterprises, regardless of their size, were classified as being “green”, “yellow” or “red”. An analysis was then conducted to classify and compare work environment changes conducted in the green, yellow and red companies.

Big work environment changes were mainly initiated by managers or company boards (60/60), and by employees (56/60). In many cases changes were also initiated by safety delegates (37/60), or by the occupational health service (13/60). There was no difference in who initiated changes between companies with different work environment standards, sizes, or profitability levels from the most recent fiscal year. The workers implementing the work environment changes were, in most cases, the same as those initiating the change. Requirements from the Swedish Work Authority and requirements and wishes from established and/or potential customers were found to be key incentives for change in companies with less than 50 employees. In medium- and large-size companies, customer requirements were still the dominant incentive along with factors linked to the organization of safety or productivity. Small companies urged quick decisions and actions while medium- and large-size companies had more planned, systematic and organized work environment activities. Fifty-eight of the sixty interviewed managers believed that a healthy work environment would have at least some positive effects on profitability. Thirty-two respondents agreed that a comfortable working situation [trivsel] for employees is related to the work environment and is associated with company profitability.

This study has contributed to the knowledge concerning implementation of work environment changes. Changes are initiated and implemented by workers at similar levels across all companies, irrespective of size. Incentives for work environment improvements, however, do vary by company size. The study demonstrates that company managers, in general, believe that a healthy work environment offers a potential for company profitability. However, they implement changes to a much lesser extent that would be expected from this attitude. These results stress the need for supporting assistance, e.g. from occupational health services, both in initiating and implementing improvements. For occupational health services these results may lead to revised strategies for customer relations and in which supporting services they should offer.

