

## Divergences in descriptions of the internal work environment management, between employees and the management, a case study

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# **Divergences in descriptions of the internal work environment management, between employees and the management, a case study**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the case study was to critically compare the descriptions of employees and managers of how the work environment is prioritised in a medium-sized Swedish retailer belonging to an international group. The study is based upon a questionnaire study of employees (n=55), and on interviews with people in leading positions with partial responsibility for the work environment at the company (n=6) as well as with the local safety delegate (n=1). The results show that the driving forces behind the work environment are, according to respondents, finances, legislation, trademarks and the attitudes of the upper management. The on-going work environment management is described differently in terms of its form and content by employees and persons in leading positions.

# Introduction

The connection between work and health as well as between job satisfaction and health is generally recognised and has been established in a number of national and international reports (1-6). Organisational factors as well as technical, psychosocial and individual factors affect health (7, 8). In contrast with traditional studies involving risk factors for ill health, some studies (9, 10) have attempted to identify predictive factors for sustaining health during a person's working life. The factors that were found were satisfied with own profession and workplace, contentment with the scope of the working hours, mostly no time-related pressure, enough resources to perform good work, appropriate job demands, role clarity, good working posture, support from boss when needed and job performance getting appreciated by nearest boss.

A study by Sandberg (11) showed that sick-leave was highly correlated to the management's prioritisation of work environment management, with the formulation of work environment policy and whether measures adopted to adapt work and enable rehabilitation are followed up on. This indicates that in order to be able to obtain a satisfactory work environment, it is a precondition that both lower and upper management have a stake in the issue (12), where their attitudes, positions and personal actions affect occupational health (13-16). For example, it has turned out that appreciation from lower and upper management is of significance to the job satisfaction experienced by employees (17-19). A number of researchers have shown the significance of having change processes at workplaces that are particularly characterised by a committed and engaged management, legitimacy and employee participation (13, 20, 21).

According to the Swedish Work Environment Act (22), the “employer shall take all the precautions necessary to prevent the employee from being exposed to health hazards or accident risks”. Further, he “shall systematically plan, direct and control activities in a manner which leads to the working environment meeting the prescribed requirements for a good working environment”.

Despite legally binding requirements, a survey by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (24) showed that only 53% of all employees in Sweden was of the opinion that there was an on-going systematic management of the work environment at their workplace. Such deficiencies have by the Swedish Work Environment Authority been explained that employers in small companies place such a large emphasis on their own production that the work environment takes a backseat (25). Bornberger-Dankvardt et al. (26) are of the opinion that today's increased requirements that are being posed of companies concerning their work environment management call for better and more simplified methods in order to achieve a good work environment.

It is however not solely the employer who must contribute to the work environment. According to the Swedish Work Environment Act, the employee shall take part in managing the work environment and the implementation of the measures needed in order to

achieve a good working environment. He shall comply with Provisions issued and use the safety devices and exercise such other precautions as are needed for the prevention of ill-health and accidents (22).

Even if the work environment and its management should be of mutual interest for employers and employees there seem to be discrepancies in how the two parties perceive different aspect of this matter. Westerlund (27) carried out a survey of systematic work environment management at a hospital, in which managers were interviewed and employees filled in a questionnaire. The study showed deficiencies in the action plan, the work environment policy and exchanges of information between management and employees as well as a lack of knowledge concerning the distribution of the tasks. Nordlöf et al. (28) has shown that differences exist in perceptions concerning on-going work environment management at a given workplace, depending upon whether a person is working as a manager or a local safety delegate. They found that managers perceived the work environment to be prioritised higher than local safety delegates did, but not as high as profitability. This discrepancy in how persons in different positions perceive the work environment is supported by a report from the Swedish Work Environment Authority (29), which showed that 41% of the employers were of the opinion that systematic work environment management had been implemented and was functioning well. Among local safety delegates, the corresponding figure was 29%. Furthermore, around 80% of the employers but only 60% of the local safety delegates were of the opinion that management's interest in work environment issues was substantial. The study was based upon data from persons who were working in different organisations. Considering that safety delegates normally are well informed about how the work environment is managed within their company, this raises the question of how regular employees in contrast to persons in leading positions within the same company would describe their work environment. This question is interesting as work environment issues is of concern for many employees and might be a crucial factor for joining or leaving a company. The purpose of the present study was to critically compare whether perceptions on work environment prioritisations within a company differ between the employees and the management. With prioritise we mean the efforts and resources that are put into work environment issues compared to other matters of concern like profit, branding etc.

# Method

## ***Workplace description***

A medium-sized retailer in Sweden that is a part of an international group was studied. The company is divided into a number of departments with varying functional tasks, including sales, customer service, warehousing, interior decorating, craftsmen, real estate services, restaurant and administration. There were about two hundred persons that were listed as employees at the company during the whole year, however most of them are only working a few weeks during the summer or occasionally at weekends. In some departments, there are heavy lifts, generally employees are standing or walking most of their time at work. There is relatively small risk of physical hazards, except from musculoskeletal disorders if lifting wrong, or fatigue if monotony moves. About two of three staff is union members, the union and safety delegates at the company provide, together with the OHS managers, that national laws and OHS-regulations are followed. The company are part of an international group, however the Swedish national laws gear to or override any rules or regulations of the international group.

## ***Data collection methods***

The present study was based upon qualitative and quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with persons in leading positions with responsibility for initiating and/or implementing work environment measures, as well as with a local safety delegate. These individuals will subsequently be referred to as key informants. For the “blue collar “employees a questionnaire was used. The reason for this was that only the upper management was permitted to participate in interviews during working hours. Since it was also deemed to be quite difficult to get employees to come for interviews about their work environment in their free time, questionnaires were handed out at the personnel entrance in connection with the start or end of two working days. The questionnaire took about fifteen minutes to fill in.

The questions that formed the basis for the data collection were inspired by Gunnarsson et al. (30), Westerlund (27), the Swedish postal service's work environment questionnaire (31), and Åteg et al. (32) who performed similar studies concerning prioritisations, methods and systematic work environment management in the form of questionnaires and/or interviews. The questions included topics involving communications, management, solidarity between employees, profitability and the extent to which they felt different areas were being prioritised at the company. The questionnaire was structured in two different parts, where the first consisted of questions involving the implementation of work environment measures and the second concerned perceptions of prioritisations of the work environment in comparison with other measures undertaken by the company. In the questionnaire, the possibility was given through open-ended questions to describe specific work environment measures that *had* been carried out, and specifically which of the most important work environment measures that *had not* been carried out during the past year. Questions were also asked about familiarity with the company's work environment policy. The questionnaire

also contained questions in which the respondent was asked to rank factors from 1-6 in accordance with their opinion on how these were prioritised at the workplace.

The interviews with key informants were divided in a similar manner between implementation and prioritisation, but with open-ended response alternatives.

The interview with the local safety delegate was deliberately a bit different from the others since the results from the interviews and questionnaires were discussed. In our view, letting the local safety delegate reflect over the results was a possibility to validate these, since this person was expected to be familiar with the company's work environment management from the viewpoint of the employees as well as from the perspective of the management. The task of the local safety delegate is to be the spokesperson for the employees in work environment issues and to monitor that the work environment regulations are being complied with. The interview with the local safety delegate was begun with the preliminary results from the interviews with key informants and the questionnaires that the employees had answered, respectively, being read aloud. Thereafter, the local safety delegate's views concerning the statements that had just been presented were requested and he gave his views on the work environment at the company and the specific issues that were being given priority.

The interviews and the questionnaires took place simultaneously in the autumn of 2007. The interview with the local safety delegate was performed last.

## **Sampling**

*Sample 1:* The key informants were selected by the head of human resources at the company, with the motivation that the head of human resources was the individual with greatest insight into which people that were suited to be key informants regarding work environment. Six key informants in leading positions involving safety, personnel, logistics and sales at the company were selected, as well as the local safety delegate (n=7). All of the key informants contacted agreed to participate in the interviews. The interviewees consisted of three men and four women from 40 to 65 years of age who had been employed at the company for one to five years. All of the key informants were interviewed individually during working hours at the company.

*Sample 2:* The questionnaire was distributed to employees of the company regardless of their form of employment (in terms of occasionally or permanent), gender or age. In order to include the majority of the employees, two workdays were selected for data collection. During these two days, a research assistant was present the entire day from when the employees began in the morning until the company closed. The research assistant was placed at the personnel entrance in order to consequently come into contact with as many employees as possible. Seventy-five employees were at work during these two days when the data collection took place and all 75 were asked to participate in the questionnaire-based survey. The respondents had the opportunity to sit down and fill in the questionnaire and turn it in later during the day or at the end of the workday. Responses were received from 55 persons (73 percent). The main reason given for not participating was lack of time, either because they had to start work right away or because they had to hurry home at the end of the workday.

## ***Analysis/Processing***

The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed. The questionnaire was processed in the first stage descriptively. The interview material was searched for differences, similarities, themes and general and typological characteristics as regards the manner in which the interviewees described the work environment at the company. The key informants methodology was inspired by Poggie (33), Trembley (34), and USAID (35). In the analysis, the replies were categorised on the basis of (I) what specifically caused the prioritisation given to the work environment, (II) what the purpose of prioritising the work environment management was described to be and (III) the mode of procedure for conducting the work environment management.

The priority can implicitly be understood based on how it manifests itself in the work environment management that is being conducted, how the implementation is done and the specific manner of work that is chosen for it. Hence there are questions in the survey concerning how the work environment management was conducted at the workplace. In the reporting of the results, the work environment management is presented to the extent that it is deemed to provide an illustration of prioritisations. We asked the employees to rank a number of factors according to their opinions on how these were being prioritised at the workplace. The factors were the physical work environment, psychosocial work environment, productivity, efficiency, profitability as well as the alternative named "other". The questionnaire alternatives of the physical and the psychosocial work environment were combined as an illustration of the work environment, whereas profitability, productivity and efficiency were reckoned to illustrate "profitability". The intention was to see how these two aspects were perceived to be prioritised in relation to each other by operative employees at the company. Due to ethical reasons, the responses of the persons interviewed are identified with the designations IP1 (Interview Person no. 1), IP2, etc., and not with titles such as "Head of Safety" or "Head of Human Resources". The main reason for this was that the company was granted access to the results of the study, and providing the titles would have made it possible to identify the individual informants.

## **Results**

Table 1 summarises the findings of driving forces for the work environment management within the company. Table 1 also describes which objectives are intended to be achieved through the work environment management as well as strategies for this in accordance with the descriptions of key informants and employees.

Driving forces for prioritising the work environment	Would like to achieve/purpose	Strategy
Finances/efficiency	Benefits of maintaining good health of the employees	Risk prevention by information/awareness of work on the work environment at e.g. meetings The work on the work environment is included in the budget
	Fewer and shorter sick-leave periods	Return to work meetings
	Fewer work-related injuries/illnesses	Investment in ergonomic equipment/machinery, organisational work place conditions, e.g. rotating work schedules, shorter shifts per work station Work technology improvements Employee survey (however follow-up is lacking according to the respondents)
Reputation	Strong brand " <i>Customers should feel that the company takes great social responsibility, we shall be the leading company in terms of environmental thinking, we shall take good care of our personnel so that we can retain them</i> " (IP4).	Marketing environmental responsibility Marketing safety
Legislation	Adhere to the Work Environment Act legislation	Primarily measures to improve safety and good ergonomics
The attitude and actions of management		Please see strategies for finances <i>above</i>

**Table 1.** Driving forces, intentions and strategies for work environment according to the respondents (both employees and key informants) (n=62).

### ***Antecedents for prioritising the work environment***

All Interview Persons (IP) were of the view that finances affect the prioritisation of the work environment management. They were positive towards the work on the work environment being attributed a large part (not possible to quantify) of the budget, so that investments can be made. IP4 and IP1 stated that the company has a budget to maintain and that prioritisation of the work environment management already takes place when the budget is set. If the company fails to invest in the work environment it will not have any resources towards the end, neither in terms of money or employees, stated IP1. IP2 was of the opinion that the company definitely highly prioritises profitability as it is a profit-driven company, but also claimed that the company's profits should not be at the expense of employees health, and instead the profits should derive from "*the efforts of healthy employees*". That finances and earnings ranked highly among the priorities was also expressed by the employees.

Further, a relationship between ergonomic investments and earnings was also described. The efforts which had been undertaken for the work environment with the aim of increasing earnings was mainly of a physical nature intended to prevent work injuries and sickness absence. All IP believed that sick-leave is a large cost for the company. Examples of investments which IP mentioned include: procurement of a laminating machine and a pallet machine, vertically adjustable seats, better lighting in the offices and ergonomic keyboards, but also a rotating shift schedule and shorter shifts at the tills in order to reduce physical strain. Furthermore, there were plans to introduce self-service at the tills and packaging which would mean that the employees do not need to repackage pallets before they are transported to stores,

A majority responded that the factors which concern profitability i.e. earnings, productivity or efficiency, were ranked higher than the physical and psychosocial work environment. IP1 stated that if an accident were to occur it would have severe implications for the reputation of the company. It would be highlighted in the media and may eventually affect the company's sales and thereby result in reduced profits for the company.

All IP were of the opinion that systematic work environment management was essential for the company and that managers attitudes, viewpoints, and personal actions had a large impact for how the work environment management was carried out and prioritised. A quote from IP1 illustrates this; *"management at the company and viewpoints of the managers play a large part in prioritising the work on the work environment"*.

The viewpoints concerning the importance of prioritising the work environment management which was reflected throughout the interviews of the key informants were not in conformity with how employees responded to the question on interest in the environment management. The results illustrated that approximately one third (31%) of the respondents considered that it was correct to a great extent that the management displays an interest in changing and improving the work environment (table 3). The results in table 4 show that 60 per cent of the questionnaire respondents stated that work is actively being carried out to improve the work environment of the company. Ten per cent claimed that active efforts are being taken in terms of health care and the development of health at the company. Approximately half (55%) of the respondents to the questionnaire stated that it is correct to a great extent that there is a consensus that they will together try to achieve good health and well-being at work (table 3). Forty percent responded that it is correct to a great extent that communication with management functions well. Approximately one third of the respondents answered that it is correct to a great extent that they have employee talks with representatives of the employer. During the interview the safety delegate said; *"communication between management and employees suffers from deficiencies in several areas and can be improved"*. The safety delegate also expressed that many initiatives for the work environment management are undertaken without information being provided to the employees and that in turn this may lead to employees considering that no measures have been carried out by the management for the work environment.

All IP presented a uniform impression that the work environment management cannot be disregarded as it is a part of the Work Environment Act and therefore must be adhered to. *"It is not an option for management to chose to like or dislike the work on the work environment it is your duty as a manager to adhere to the Act and it is a part of your work tasks"*. (IP5)

	Work Environment		Profitability			
	Psychosocial work environment (%)	Physical Work Environment (%)	Earnings (%)	Productivity (%)	Efficiency (%)	Other (%)
Rank 1	2	4.5	17.5	30.5	<b>45.5</b>	2
Rank 2	-	6.5	32.5	<b>37</b>	22	2
Rank 3	11	2	<b>45.5</b>	24	19.5	-
Rank 4	17.5	<b>50</b>	4.5	8.5	2	13
Rank 5	<b>52</b>	30.5	-	-	11	9
Rank 6	17.5	6.5	-	-	-	74

**Table 2.** Ranking of factors from 1-6 in the order the employees considered that they were prioritised in their work place (n=55).

### ***Prioritising the work on the work environment based on how it is implemented (strategies)***

All IP considered that the company has a good work environment. There was no area which was pointed out as being assigned too little priority in the interviews with the key informants. A somewhat different description was described by the respondents of the questionnaire in which approximately half (54% and 49% respectively) stated that noise and climate were given too little priority and approximately one third stated that improvements in the design of the workplace were also assigned too little priority.

The key informants described a relationship between safety and the work environment. Safety, as described by the interviewees, was defined as a prevention of potential risks which in turn would lead to a prevention of accidents in the company. Among the employees 74% responded that work environment issues concerning accidents were prioritised to a sufficient extent and 65% answered that there were sufficient efforts with regard to risks at the workplace (table 3). According to the local safety delegate, the summary of questionnaires and interviews presents an accurate picture of the prioritisation of the work environment at the company. The safety delegate stated that the ergonomic initiatives undertaken at the company ensured a minimal risk of employees injuring themselves while working, and that the regulations of the company are adhered to and that designated equipment is used.

According to the key informants, the health of the employees is continuously discussed during the departmental meetings at the company taking place four times annually. The meetings include discussions on the causes of ill-health and the reasons for sickness absence as well as if the work environment is a contributory factor to this, according to IP1. Two fifths of the employees involved in the questionnaire were not aware of whether a work environment policy exists at the company (table 3). Almost half of the respondents were not aware of any procedures which describe the work environment management at the workplace. This generally includes the same respondents who answered "do not know" to these two questions. An employee survey is carried out every year in order to determine the well-being of the employees, which was described as a positive aspect by several IP. However, some employees stated that follow-ups of the survey were lacking. The company has taken initiatives to reduce sick-leave by return to work meetings. Checks have always taken place during both long and short periods of sickness absence claims IP3, this in order to show that the company

cares about the personnel. As a result of this sickness absence at the company has decreased, according to IP2.

Prioritised work environment areas based on interviews and answers of the questionnaire	Key informants (n=7)	Employees under the collective agreement (n=55)																															
Physical and psychosocial work environment including healthy employees	<p>All IP were of the opinion that the work on the work environment is of a good standard and, that <i>"they are good in that issue"</i></p> <p>Profits shall be derived through healthy employees</p>	<p><i>"Attention ought to be devoted to the staff canteen - The sound level, there is nowhere to wind down during breaks"</i></p> <p><i>"There are far too many people with wrong and monotonous jobs, in addition to a high level of stress, I know that this can be seen.... but is anything being done about it?"</i></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="759 757 1567 987"> <thead> <tr> <th>Prioritisation of the work environment</th> <th>To a sufficient extent (%)</th> <th>To a too little extent (%)</th> <th>Do not know (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Noise</td> <td>26</td> <td><b>54</b></td> <td>20</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Climate</td> <td>31.5</td> <td><b>49</b></td> <td>19.5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Design of work place</td> <td>51</td> <td><b>32.5</b></td> <td>16.5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Work organisation</td> <td>38.5</td> <td><b>20.5</b></td> <td>41</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>				Prioritisation of the work environment	To a sufficient extent (%)	To a too little extent (%)	Do not know (%)	Noise	26	<b>54</b>	20	Climate	31.5	<b>49</b>	19.5	Design of work place	51	<b>32.5</b>	16.5	Work organisation	38.5	<b>20.5</b>	41								
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Safety	<p>All IP touched on the issue of safety in the interviews, collectively our conclusion based on the statements made in the interviews is that safety for customers and employees is viewed as an important priority in the company.</p>	<table border="1" data-bbox="759 1032 1567 1093"> <tbody> <tr> <td>Accidents</td> <td>74</td> <td><b>8</b></td> <td>18</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Risks</td> <td>69</td> <td><b>19</b></td> <td>12</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>				Accidents	74	<b>8</b>	18	Risks	69	<b>19</b>	12																				
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**Table 3.** Attitudes as they were presented in interviews or answers of the poll. Note: Quotes are in italics.

### ***Perceived priorities and opportunities to have an impact***

Approximately half of the respondents in the questionnaire felt that they could influence their work environment at the company and a third were of the opinion that they could be a part of decision making at the company. The results also showed that 59% of the respondents would prefer to be able to influence the work environment to a greater extent than the opportunities available at the time of the questionnaire (table 4). In answer to the question of whether the respondents felt that there were clear instructions on “who shall do what” in managing the work environment at the company, a third of the respondents answered that the instructions for this were clear.

<b>Priorities and how the opportunities to have an impact are perceived</b>	<b>Is correct to a great extent</b>
Are there active efforts to improve the work environment at your work place?	<b>60%</b>
Do you feel that you can be a part of and influence your work environment at your work place?	<b>47%</b>
Can you as an employee take part in the decision making process concerning the work environment at your work?	<b>33%</b>
Do you feel that there are clear instructions on who shall do what in the work on the work environment at your work place?	<b>34%</b>
Do you feel that there are active efforts in terms of health care and the development of health at your work place?	<b>10%</b>
Would you prefer to be able to influence the work on the work environment to a greater extent at your work place?	<b>59% (yes)</b>

**Table 4.** Priorities and the influence in the work on the work environment at the company, employee survey result (n=55).

### ***Measures relating to the work environment which have not been prioritised at the company in recent years***

Respondents answered that measures relating to the work environment which ought to be implemented within the physical and psychosocial work environment. Respondents stated that actions should be taken in order to improve the climate at the company (air quality measurements, dry air and coldness at the pick-up bay for goods) as well as the noise level. A request for stress management was indirectly expressed by the respondents answering that stress reduction was not highly prioritised.

Employees also stated that aids were needed for mounting and unpacking as well as vertically adjustable seats and pallet lifters as means to decrease work load.

A respondent expressed dissatisfaction with the monotonous work combined with the high level of stress which prevailed at the company and wrote that the management was made aware of this, but that this was an unresolved problem.

# Discussion

All managers stated that they were actively pursuing the work environment management and that this was prioritised at the company. There was less conformity among the employees in their description on how the work environment management was being managed, their awareness of the work environment policy, and to what degree the management was committed to the work environment management. The safety delegate claimed that work environment management is being run with greater intensity than before. It would be desirable that the work environment management is communicated and made more concrete in order to provide the employee with an insight into the company's efforts to promote a good work environment. The managers and safety delegates play an important role in order to improve communication. Good internal communication within the company has proved to be crucial in earlier studies during organisational changes (36). The discrepancy between the descriptions of employees and key informants may exist as decisions on measures concerning the work environment are taken on a managerial level and therefore the key informants have greater knowledge of this. However, it may also be a result of deficient communication between the management and employees. An example which illustrates that there is a deficiency in the communication is that 40 % of the employees were not aware that a work environment policy was in place or procedures for the work environment management existed (45%). This was also highlighted by the safety delegate who mentioned that measures with regard to the work environment were implemented, however without the employees being informed. Considering that the key informants described work environment issues as being discussed at all meetings, it is interesting to reflect on the way in which this is communicated. There is reason to believe that the company can become clearer in their internal communication on work related issues. This is not something unique, in Westerlunds (27) case study which surveyed the work environment management at a hospital, deficiencies were found in the exchange of information, which indicates that communication on and information of the work environment appears to be deficient between management and the employees at several workplaces.

In the questionnaire the employees expressed that they wanted to be more involved in dealing with the work environment issues. One of the questions for the employees to answer was if they wanted to have a greater influence on the work environment management at the company than they have today, fifty-nine per cent answered that they wanted. Sixteen per cent of the respondents answered that they did not want to influence the work environment to a greater extent and the rest did not know. These answers indicated that, based on a so called participative perspective attempt, it would be possible to involve the employees in the work environment management to a greater extent than today. There are several studies which stress the importance of involving the employees in various changes at workplaces (e.g. 37, 38). Thus there are significant possibilities to, in the true meaning of the word, to accomplish joint work with the work environment, whereby the information gap could probably be reduced as a side-effect.

The key informants described a relationship between the work environment management and profitability. According to the interviews with the key informants earnings were a factor which was assigned high priority as the company is profit-driven. This was also a

finding from the questionnaire among the employees. A question was posed in the questionnaire to rank what they considered to be the order of priority between the physical work environment, psychosocial work environment, productivity, efficiency, earnings, and “other”, of which the first two relate to the work environment and the other indicate financial parameters. Our intention with the question was to obtain a picture of what the employees perceived was assigned a higher priority at the company, the work environment or financial factors. The results illustrate that 93.5 % of the employees ranked productivity, efficiency and earnings as the main factors. Similar priority has also been shown in previous studies (28, 39, 40) and thus not surprising.

Maybe a traditional supposition, that perceptions of OHS always will differ between managers and workers, because of the level of decision-making authority and power, might be verified by the results of this study. Nevertheless, the differences in perception might vary due to OHS regulations and laws in different countries. If there is a consensus in perceptions of how to prioritize and implement a good work environment, regardless of organisational role, then there is reason to believe that it is a greater chance to succeed in improving work-related health at work.

### ***Methodological considerations***

The quantitative method of data collection means that we could reach out to more persons within the company. The advantage of combining a quantitative and qualitative study is that with a quantitative approach you can generalise about the opinions within the investigated population and by adding qualitative data to this it is possible to get a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena. The choice of posing different questions concerning the priority to the key informants and the employees can be viewed as a disadvantage of the study as it would have been easier to compare the results of the two separate studies for analytical purposes if the same question had been posed. It would however be difficult to formulate questions in such a way that the key informants and the employees can answer them on equal terms as the key informants have different insight into the ongoing work environment management. The question concerning the priority of the factors within different areas of the work environment was solely asked to the employees at the company which may be a weakness of the study as it would have been interesting to carry out a comparison of this question. The reason was that the interview questions were open-ended in order to let the respondents themselves describe the priorities in the company rather than being influenced by the interviewer’s pre-made alternatives.

That the employees were asked to answer the questionnaire at the start or at the end of the workday, may have led to a greater drop-out (frequency of answers 73%) compared to if it had been possible to conduct the questionnaire within usual working hours. The feeling of anonymity was also assessed as being positive in the context.

The management, the safety representative and employees gave discrepant descriptions on how the management of the work environment is carried out in their company. What does this tell us? Despite that cooperation between employer and employees on the management of the work environment is stated in the Work Environment Act, put in force in 1977 (22), this study indicates that this has still not penetrated working life. The reasons for this, as well as ways to bridge the gap between law and reality need to be researched.

However, there are reasons to be hopeful and believe that will be visible improvements during this decade since the authority is very concerned about the implementation of the provisions on Systematic Work Environment Management, According to these provisions, put in force in 2001 (23), “systematic work environment management shall be included as a natural part of day-to-day activities” and that the employer shall give the employees the possibility of participating in systematic work environment management.

There are probably a lot to win to fulfil the intentions of the Work Environment Act on cooperation around the work environment, not only for a better work environment. The empowerment of the employees by cooperating with the management on issues of mutual interest will also enhance the wellbeing of both the employees and the workplace (Grawitch 41). To achieve this it is necessary to have a skilled communication within the company. A communication that goes in both directions, from the management down and from the employees up, will be needed in order for the management to understand the needs of the employees and their daily work situation and for the employees to understand what is expected and what actions are actually done (41).

This study also points out what for experienced occupational health staff as well researchers is well-established knowledge: to get the true picture of work environmental conditions you have to interview different parties at the workplace, as there is a tendency for a political agenda for all of them.

## **Conclusion**

The study has shown that there is a discrepancy between how the key informants and employees describe the work environment and its priorities at the companies where they are employed. This is particularly evident in issues concerning information, communication regarding the work environment and the interest of safety issues. Our study indicates that finances, legislation, the reputation of the surroundings, i.e., the brand and the managers' attitudes appear to be important driving forces for how the work environment management is conducted at the company. It is shown that the employees would like to be more engaged in the work environment management at the company. Here there is a potential to achieve, in the true meaning of the word, a common work environment, which would probably result in the added bonus of reducing the information gap.

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