Commentary III
Monitoring the changing organization of work: a commentary

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The paper by Sauter and Murphy (2003), set in the context of a changing organisation of work, offers a useful overview of current developments in the monitoring of work design and management hazards in the United States. In doing so, it provides a commentary on the intellectual and practical challenges that must be addressed in developing and using such systems and in interpreting the data harvested through them. The paper concludes, in part, by describing the way forward. In the course of this discussion, the authors briefly review the nature and use of somewhat similar systems in Europe and elsewhere; systems that have either been deliberately designed to monitor hazards related to work design and management or those that do so as part of some wider purpose. This paper is a useful addition to what is a relatively scant general literature on hazard monitoring. This is especially so as it addresses itself to the contemporary issues of work design and management and goes beyond the traditional and narrower focus on the more tangible and physical hazards of work.

The authors of this commentary find little in what Sauter & Murphy (2004) have written with which they might take exception. Rather they would expand several points in the discussion. They raise five inter-related sets of issues; the need to: (i) set hazard monitoring in its wider context; (ii) make clear its purpose and for this to be reflected inter alia in the definition of what is acceptable as evidence; (iii) critically examine the utility of structural theories in providing an *a priori* taxonomy of hazard monitoring; (iv) develop a framework for transforming and integrating the data from different hazard monitoring systems; and, finally, (v) develop, from discussions such as these, good practice guidelines for hazard monitoring.

The notion that changes in the nature of work and working life threaten the safety and health of working people is not new (Cox 2003). Furthermore, it is widely recognised that the changes we are currently experiencing are quite fundamental and are producing a new profile of work hazards focused on work design and management, and a new pattern of work-related illness. These pose a major challenge to occupational health and safety as a discipline, both intellectually and in practice. Our ways of monitoring work hazards have to change and are changing as the paper by Sauter and Murphy (2003) makes clear.

The purpose of hazard monitoring is to trigger and inform other processes by which hazards might be removed, reduced or avoided or working people otherwise protected or treated. Hazard monitoring is usually a first step in the wider processes of risk assessment and risk management. Any discussion on the nature and development of hazard monitoring systems is most usefully set in this wider context of what is essentially a problem solving "control" cycle.

After an initial period of intellectual resistance, the idea that you can monitor and manage the hazards associated with work design and management is gaining acceptance both in the United States and in Europe. There is now a literature on such a risk assessment – risk management approach and its usefulness in application (see, for example, Cox et al. 2000; Griffiths et al. 2002). In practice, such an approach makes use of both employee and organisational level data.

The initial intellectual debate appeared to confuse the nature and requirements of applied research with those of risk assessment. Without reworking the arguments (see Cox et al. 2003), it is clear that the purpose of a piece of applied

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research is quite different from that of a workplace risk assessment, and, each has to be fit for purpose. The purposes being different, then it is not surprising that the methods adopted, the evidence used and the way it is used, are also different. These points are important and should be taken into account in the design of hazard monitoring systems, in the definition of what are acceptable data and in the way that those data are interpreted and used.

Sauter and Murphy (2003) note that several hazard monitoring systems that focus on work design and management make use of taxonomies derived from Karasek's job demands – job control theory (Karasek & Theorell 1990). Without passing comment on the validity of this specific theory, it is worth questioning the use of *any* structural theory in framing a hazard monitoring system. The alternative is to make such a system principle- or process-based and to treat the architecture of the hazard data derived as an empirical question. The difficulties with any theory are inherent in the political and emotional environments that develop around them. At a particular stage in their development, theories and their protagonists often tend to resist further evolution while, at the same time, those theories become dated. There are few universal and timeless truths in this area of concern. Sauter and Murphy (2003) make clear in their review that there are different hazard monitoring systems in existence focussed, at least in part, on work design and management. This is obviously a good situation in that the competition between the systems and their managers should assure their quality and further development. However, implicit in this situation is the potential for "added value" in bringing those systems together in some way. There are several strategies available for facilitating integration among different systems: total standardisation of systems, the use of the same hazard taxonomy, and usable transforms for the data output. Here, the authors argue against standardisation or the use of structural theories as a basis for common taxonomies. They feel that integration should be at the output level supported by appropriate data transforms and meta-analyses. Of course, this is *the* real world option in terms of likelihood of occurrence. This approach to integration would be greatly enhanced if there was critical discussion of good practice associated with the development of guidelines on a process framework for hazard monitoring.

Undoubtedly there are other ways of taking the Sauter and Murphy (2003) paper forward as a way of stimulating the discussion and development of hazard monitoring in relation to work design and management. Here, the current authors have tried to advance the discussion through a commentary that builds on their work in relation to risk management for work-related stress.

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