

Commentary IV

Italian practices in monitoring the changing organisation of work

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S.L. Slauter and L.R. Murphy (2003) in their exhaustive report indicate the need for new data sources for investigating the relationships among health, safety and work organisation.

In Italy, ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2001) gives a general picture of changes in working conditions and labour market with data on unemployment, workforce age and gender, and enterprise characteristics. Therefore, it currently produces useful data on labour and market trends, but not enough related to occupational health aspects.

The occupational accident and disease statistics collected by INAIL (Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro), the Italian public body in charge of work accident and occupational disease compensation, is nevertheless the main Italian database on Occupational Health and Safety (INAIL 2002).

It gives also some information on work organisation trends. The incidence of accidents is lower than the European mean value, despite the fact that their consequences appear to be more severe than in Europe, and is increasing as enterprise size becomes smaller. This could indicate that the Italian small enterprises under report the less severe injuries (60% of the labour force works in enterprises with less than 20 employees). Moreover CENSIS (Fondazione Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali 2003) estimated incidence of unrecorded employees, the core of an even more widespread grey area of quasi-legal work, accounts for 34% of enterprises in the South, 20% in the Centre and 13% in the North of Italy. Finally, transportation vehicles cause around 50% of all fatal accidents, which also seems to be a result of new organisation strategies.

An important study designed by the Region of Piedmont some years ago, co-ordinated by Cardano (1999), used INAIL's accident statistics to identify a sample of enterprises.

Similar in terms of production and size, their incidence of accidents was nevertheless different, probably due to work organisation and prevention policy characteristics. Five questionnaires were developed to interview managers, health and safety worker representatives and others on organisational topics. Unfortunately, only 26 interviews in six enterprises were conducted (to test the tool), due to strong employer opposition to the initiative. Despite this, an exhaustive bibliographic review and a concrete methodology were elaborated.

Some indicative information was collected. Two models for enterprises were identified. The first for corporations and large industries, safety functions were already established before the new legislation was transposed. The second for small, very small and artisans enterprises, internal relationships were almost informal and roles, although different, were often overlapping. Nevertheless, overall safety performance was not necessarily better in the former model, because higher formalisation and bureaucracy sometimes seemed to reduce the efficacy of safety policies.

Based also on the enterprise and employee "culture" characteristics, contradictions among management roles (production vs safety) were found, because dialectic was inherent in their definition or because resources (on decision, information and budget) were not well balanced in each role to correctly reach the different goals. Worker representatives at times seemed subordinated and integrated, while others were autonomous and conflictive or collaborative. However, their resources on time and information were very often too limited to allow acting satisfactorily. Management seemed less aware than workers' representatives of the existing relationship between pace, time pressure, increasing working time and health issues.

Italian legislation, particularly after the transposition of European directives in the 1990s, provides rules for a systematic participatory approach to occupational health and safety in enterprises and is aimed at a healthy work organisation.

Enforcement of European legislation nevertheless appears difficult because these regulations, designed in the early 1980s, are often not suitable for the current situation in Italy, where enterprises are very small and often very close-minded to innovative organisation.

The role of workers is still partially based on the right workers conquered in 1972 to investigate and act to protect their health (Law 300/72). The action of worker representatives is crucial, even though difficulties arise in enterprises with less than 15 employees and for contingent workers (not covered by the law 300/72). In fact, Trade Unions have not always reach agreements with the employer organisations to build sectoral bipartite bodies in charge of training, information and "Safety territorial worker representatives" as suggested by new legislation and national agreements for smaller enterprises.

European surveys show that typical risks still exist, but stronger new demands are appearing against musculoskeletal disorders, psychosocial risks and reduction of autonomy, which are often also related with work organisation. Participation in decisions related to working conditions is called for as well.

The Italian Surveillance Authority for Occupational Health and Safety is the network of Local Public Health Agencies (ASLs, Aziende Sanitarie Locali), also in charge of health care for the general population. Despite being in close contact with work sites, their initiatives against new risks are still limited and isolated.

A national survey co-ordinated by Magelli (2003) with questionnaires filled in by the local public health agencies recently evaluated the occupational health and safety management systems enforced in 8135 enterprises of different sizes and sectors in 13 regions. It was the first time that organisational aspects, implemented from legislation transposing the European "framework directive", were analysed on such a large scale. Around half of the sample was not entirely in compliance with organisational legislation requirements, 30% of the enterprises were judged sufficient and only 21% were evaluated as satisfactory. Higher conformity was found

on health surveillance; furthermore, preventive service and risk assessment were, at least formally, implemented in the majority of firms. Nevertheless, mainly in SMEs with under 50 employees, but also in some large enterprises, training, safety procedures, worker representative participation, management involvement, resulted to be poorly enforced. Locally, ASLs will link these aspects with risk exposure data in specific sectors and enterprises.

Castellino (2002) recently collected several reports presented at a workshop on health protection in "atypical work" involving telecommuting, interim, call centres, seasonal workers, and showed that universities, INAIL and ASLs are starting to act on these subjects. Data were collected to describe phenomena size, qualitative risk estimations and accident incidence in local areas. The difficulties arising when dealing with atypical worker protection, i.e., exposure assessment, medical and epidemiological surveillance, information and training, ask the ASLs for new specific monitoring plans (Sgarrella 2002).

INAIL is developing more and more data usability for prevention strategies. It has designed a specific software (INAIL 2002) and it is creating a network, in co-operation with the Regions and ISPESL (Istituto Superiore per la Prevenzione e la Sicurezza sul Lavoro), to collect and disseminate data on accidents and occupational diseases. This, expanded to also collect data on risk exposure, should become the basic source of information on Health and Safety monitoring by the national network of ASLs.

Thus national surveys on working conditions, also covering some organisational aspects, more close up on-site actions and an information network among different public authorities for collecting and integrating data collection as well as local distribution of this data make up the current Italian model of surveillance.

Improving integration of traditional occupational health and safety disciplines with psychosocial sciences, collecting and disseminating successful national and international case studies and organisational risk exposure data, as well as a stronger social demand and a weaker employer resistance seem to be the requirements for implementing public monitoring of organisational factors in Italy.

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