

Commentary V

Monitoring the changing organization of work: European traditions

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Sauter and Murphy (2003) and Paoli (2003) offer overviews of current developments in the monitoring of work organisation and health hazards in the United States and Europe. As Paoli points out, the organization of work is difficult to monitor through employee surveys. It is necessary to see the organizations themselves as a research subject. Most of the commented surveys are worker-oriented, not so much company-oriented. In this commentary, we would like to add some information about the early developments that lead to the current state of surveillance/surveys in Europe and stress the importance of organization level surveys.

The possible impact of work organization on workers health has been an issue in work and labour sociology since the studies of Karl Marx. But most of the conclusions of such research have been based on case studies or on surveys in which mainly opinions from managers on organisation were collected (Womack et al. 1990; Business Decisions Limited 1998). There remains an important need for valid information about organizational structures and change. Only with such information, the link between work organisation and changes on the shopfloor can be thoroughly researched. Certainly in Europe, this relationship is an important political issue. The European Commission published a "Green Paper" on partnership for a new organisation of work (1997) focussing on a better organisation of work at the workplace, based on high skills, high trust and high quality. Policy makers are urged to stimulate companies to adopt flexible organisational models. Only then, adverse health risks can be countered and opportunities for knowledge development can be exploited (Totterdill et al. 2002).

There are still few organization surveys in Europe. Four traditions are worth mentioning. The SOFI-institute (Germany: Horst Kern and Michael Schumann) has a big influence on

the development of company surveys (Huys et al. 1995; Christis 1998; Dhondt 2000). Kern and Schumann (1970) started a new tradition of work organizational research when they pointed out in the 1970s that the "worker mind" is shaped by the organisational forms of companies. Later, they corrected their previous pessimistic view by distinguishing within three important German sectors, new organisational forms which gave room to the initiative and intellect of the worker (1984). Their further research confirmed this development (Schumann et al. 1994). This research was built on considerable methodological work how to typify organisations and how to measure the required information at the company level. Their work has spurred other research groups to undertake "trend studies" in which major organisational developments within certain sectors were identified (for example: Dhondt & Peeters 1993; Ten Have 1993; Huys et al. 1995). One of the core discussions within these groups is how to measure and typify personnel policies and their impact on organisational structure at the company level (Van Hoogtem 2000).

In Sweden, there has been some separate work on company level surveys (Wikman 1991; Gustavson et al. 1996). The main reason for these studies was the need to collect the company experiences using the Working Life Fund subsidies. These subsidies were meant to be used for developing new work organisations. Most of these results have been documented by the Swedish National Institute for Working Life and NUTEK (1999).

In France, most of the research effort has been initiated by the central bureau of statistics (DARES: Michel Gollac). The result has been the most in depth study in Europe on organisational policies and structures. Also, great care has been taken to look at the relationship between organisational

level type of research and worker surveys. Several novel methodologies were applied (Favre et al. 1997; Greenan & Mairesse 1999).

Another approach to company surveys started in the wake of the MIT-studies on Lean Production (Womack et al. 1990). Cranfield University has been in the lead of such research in the United Kingdom (Cranfield Network 1996). Several other studies were undertaken to investigate the productivity differences between Japanese and European companies (MacDuffie 1995). These studies try to find the major organisational characteristics for the competitive advantage of Japanese automotive producers. Workers health, however, is rarely an issue in such studies.

Company surveys measuring organisational structures and change remains one of the major fields for further develop-

ment. Such company surveys oriented at measuring organisational structures and developments remain a rare species within our research field. Several issues are important to improve this situation. A first issue is more methodological research. The highly different methods make most of the results incomparable. A second issue is that such research is only possible with multidisciplinary research teams. Because of the complex nature of the topic (organisation structure and performance, health issues), the teams should cover all of these research fields. A last issue are the high costs of such surveys. These costs hinder the progress in this field of research. International cooperation could help to further this field of knowledge.

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