What do French Health and Safety Committees talk about?

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1. Introduction

In French companies, the Health and Safety Committees called CHSCT create a unique opportunity to debate about working condition related issues. However, the worker representatives have sometimes difficulties to talk about the employees work and activity (Dugué, Petit & Pinatel, 2012; Gaillard & Terssac (de), 2013; Granaux 2010; Terssac (de), Dufour & Bouvier, 2010; Verkindt, 2013). Starting from the hypothesis that they seldom present the reality of work situations when dealing with these working condition issues, our presentation will show how they actually address them. If they do not use the reality of work situations, what arguments do they mobilize while addressing those issues?

To answer this question, our communication will rely on an analysis of 28 inspections conducted by four different CHSCT of the same company. Starting from a quantitative analysis of these inspections, we will then further our understanding by analysing one of them in more detail. It will allow us to understand the current practices of the worker representatives and the difficulties mentioned earlier.

2. Method

We first analysed the different material at our disposal (our own observations of inspections and meetings; the written accounts of those events made by the worker representatives) and listed the subjects identified by the worker representatives. We found 318 different subjects. Then, to identify and classify the criteria used by the worker representatives to define a specific subject, we applied to each subject the five square diagram from Leplat and Cuny (1974), each square giving us a different criteria (task characteristics, workers characteristics, activity at the work place, effects on the workers and results on the productivity). To further our understanding, we conducted then a qualitative analysis of one of the inspection. We used the same methodology as above and conducted also different interviews and email analysis.

3. Results

Our quantitative analysis showed us that the subjects are seldom defined by more than one criterion. 60 % of them are described through only one type of critiria and only 20 % mobilise 3 or more. Furthermore, if we look at the type of critiria mobilised, we see that subjects are mostly defined by task characteristics (69 %); only 20 % by the activity in the work place. This illustrates the way most worker representatives approach working condition issues: “good” working conditions are mostly a question of applying standards and rules. Therefore, they see the role of the CHSCT as to ensure that the workers and managers are applying them.

The qualitative analysis of an inspection showed us that the worker representatives filter the subjects presented by the workers. We analysed the number of subjects listed during the inspection, in the written report that followed and during the meeting after. During the inspection, 8 different subjects were found. The written report listed 5 of them. During the meeting, only 4 were presented. Furthermore, our analysis brought us to wonder about the place given to the workers in the construction of a diagnostic and a possible solution. In this case, both aspects were conducted without them, outside using the workers as a source of information. This is especially visible by the fact that none of the workers agreed to apply the propositions made by the CHSCT, stating that they “didn’t want to be instrumentalized by the CHSCT”.

4. Discussion

As we can see, the subjects are mostly defined by task characteristics and worker representatives seldom elaborate a diagnostic linking task characteristic, activity at the work place and effects on the worker. Therefore, they do not analyse the situations with an activity based view. They address these situations with standards to be applied to ensure good working conditions.
We also see a reduction in time of the number of subjects. As we have shown in a previous paper (Poley, 2014), worker representatives have sometimes difficulties formalizing their observations and interviews and the reduction in time could be explained by this aspect. The CHSCT also have multiple subjects to deal with at the same time and it isn’t possible to treat them all with the same level of implication. This brings the necessity to prioritize the subjects, to choose the “important ones”. Then, how, with whom and with what information are they prioritized?

In conclusion, in order to be able to analyse work situations in their different aspects AND to use those analysis in the CHSCT in a debate, the worker representatives need: (1) to be able to analyse differently the situations and (2) to be able to formalize those analysis. As Daniellou and Martin (2008) explained, they need “to acquire at the same time a skill to “do differently”, but they also need to be able to structure this new way of doing, to put words on it and to construct the tools (intermediary objects) to aid decision making”

Finally, it brings the question of the worker representatives training. This last interrogation isn’t new in ergonomics (as an example, see Laville & Teiger, 1991), it however brings us to question the place given to those worker representatives during an ergonomic intervention, in order to “promote a developmental dynamic during the intervention” (Falzon, 2013), making it a pedagogical act (Dugué, Petit & Daniellou, 2010).

Key words: employee consultative bodies, ergonomic analysis

References


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1 Translated by the authors.
2 Translated by the authors.