Workforce Sustainability in the forestry sector: The Chilean case

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1. Introduction

This research examines the sustainability of the human resource in the Chilean logging sector, under the umbrella of sustainability principles. Previous studies in other countries mention the existence of elements that threaten this “resource”, in terms of the quantity and quality of the resource, such as the increasing average age of the population working in this sector, incremental occupational health (OH) problems and lack of interest in working in the sector.

A positive aspect is that today the social side of sustainability, especially as it relates to the sustainability of the worker, is gaining more significance in organizations’ sustainability model. In the specific case of the forestry sector it follows the same trends as in other sectors, related with the social aspect - low awareness in the past and increasing consideration in recent years (Panwar, 2008; Petereit, 2008; Vidal & Kozak, 2008).

The objective of this study is to examine workforce sustainability in the Chilean forestry sector in logging operations through understanding the relationship between workers’ capacities and system demand in forestry companies. Therefore, this paper is focused on the social issue of sustainability in the forestry sector, specifically in respect of topics related to the workforce and the roots of occupational health problems, which at the same time could be related to the lack of interest in working in this sector, since working conditions have a strong link to the attractiveness of laboring in the forestry sector (Lobb & McNeill, 2002).

This research seeks to contribute to achieving this balance. In the particular case of the Chilean forestry sector and its workforce this element is vital for the continued development of the forestry sector (Raga, 2009) and plays such a key role in the sector that incremental problems in the workforce could have an important impact from both an economic and social point of view (Apud et al., 1999).

2. Practice innovation

This research will contribute to improving the approach that forestry companies take concerning OH, to improve the sustainability and wellbeing of the workforce. A part of that is to create a process for the improvement of work experiences, in order to further boost both productivity and quality of working life, and to protect society from the increasing costs of absenteeism, early retirement, burnout and sick leave (Kira & Van Eijnatten, 2008). This research will provide more information about the reality of OH problems in the Chilean forestry sector and the need to develop and prioritise effective interventions to improve the health of forestry workers (Alamgir, Martinez-Pachon, Cooper, & Levin, 2014). Understanding the relationship between workers’ capacity and system demand, the factors that are affecting this relationship, the reason for these, and the comparison with their intervention, will be very useful for the Chilean forestry sector, considering the OH statistics in that sector.

This study identifies a number of gaps between the sustainability strategies that organisations have adopted as they relate to the workers. The first of these strategies is protection of the most vulnerable classes of workers: in that sense, forestry workers working for forestry contractor companies are considered to be a vulnerable class compared to those who work directly for the main forestry companies. The second strategy relates to health and safety policies: policies related to health and safety are subject to a limited focus, mainly regarding compliance with the laws. These have serious limitations related to OH issues and are not always helpful in improving workers’ conditions. The third strategy relates to the weakness of business instruments. The introduction of sustainability policies, particular those related to work, clearly have some limitations and do not solve all matters related to the working demand.
3. Sources of information

The results are based on the information from those people that are workers, supervisors and managers of both Chilean Forestry Companies and Chilean Forestry Contractor Companies.

4. Findings/Discussion

The findings indicate that factors may exist that could not only affect the health of the workers but also the perceived attractiveness of working in this sector. These factors include working long hours, the travel time required, exposure to the weather, the dangerous nature of the work, the job being physically hard, lack of feedback on performance, the lack of opportunity for promotion, the physical fatigue and discomfort and the inadequate pay. These are linked with the capacity of the sector to attract, recruit, motivate, and retain employees (Lobb & McNeill, 2002).

Both elements of occupational health problems and the lack of market attractiveness could threaten the sustainability of the sector, in terms of the workforce. In that sense, the Chilean Forestry Company and Chilean forestry contractors companies have undoubtedly improved the working conditions in recent years. However, the progress that has been made is not enough to achieve the sustainability of workforce in this sector. As noted by Bolis et al. (2014) and Savaneviciene and Stankeviciute (2014), assuring a sustainable workforce requires the sector to first, attract and retain talent; secondly, maintain employee health and safety; and thirdly, invest in the skills of the workforce.

References


