

Working in public health services in Brazil: The relationship between different rationalities

L.I. Sznelwar*, M.T. Silva, F.L. Mascia

Departamento de Engenharia de Produção da Escola Politécnica da Universidade de São Paulo, Av. Prof. Almeida Prado no. 531, Cidade Universitária, CEP 05508-900 São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Abstract

Success in a public health system is related to its ability to change its production process and to deal with general principles of the health system, such as universality and equity. The frameworks proposed by service marketing scholars have been developed primarily for private services; they focus on acceptance by the targeted client-users, and on the technical specifications of the new service delivery processes. Little attention has been given to the employees' point of view and their activities to maintain service operations modulated by innovation. In a public health system, workers make decisions in real time related to users' needs and the technical specifications of the process; therefore, it is very important to understand how the changes impact on employees' activities and on the quality delivered for citizens. This article discusses how changes implemented in Sao Paulo, Brazil impact the organizational parameters and working activities for front-line workers.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, studies developed by research teams in ergonomics and work organization in the Department of Production Engineering of the Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, have opened a dialogue in the public health arena. Studies have reviewed different private and public companies, especially service delivery organizations. Major emphasis has been on banks, call centers, hospitals, cleaning services, hospital archiving and bus transportation because of health problems and related sick leave absenteeism primarily due to repetitive motion injuries.

A combined approach was adopted to search for broader solutions regarding how companies make choices with respect to the content of tasks and the organization of work. This partnership allowed for in depth discussions related to the scope and coverage of each approach. In ergonomics, the theoretical and methodological principles

of the school of Ergonomics of Activity proposed by authors such as Wisner (1995), Daniellou (2005), Guerin (2001), and Hubault (2004) were adopted. For organizational analysis, the chosen approach was inspired by the work of sociotechnical authors, such as Cherns (1987), Gerwin and Kolodny (1992) and Sitter et al. (1997) and authors who examine service organizations, such as Gadrey (2001) and Zarifian (2001). Note that concepts from anthropotechnology and macroergonomics also help us understand how work organization relates to the design of tasks. Discussions have been further enriched by other points of view, such as the theory of complexity, the theory of organizational action, and especially the concept of psychodynamics of work. On several occasions, experts in psychodynamics of work participated in our research.

Recently, a new request came up to understand the possibility of evaluating and expanding public health services, especially regarding promotion, prevention and primary care. Unlike earlier studies where the breadth of our proposals was constrained, the federal health care managers were interested in learning about problems in greater depth and in developing guidelines to expand the

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: laertesz@usp.br (L.I. Sznelwar).

“*Programa Saúde da Família*” (Family Health Program–FHP). Introducing the concepts of ergonomics and an organizational approach was new for this sector: prior studies were more concerned with assessing health indicators for the overall population in order to get an epidemiological evaluation of health workers and with developing standards of comparison between care units. There were no studies of the work, either its content or difficulties, or the way production activities are organized in public health services.

2. Conceptual issues

The first conceptual issue is to explore work relations. Trying to discover all the viewpoints that people have about work was not our goal, but some fundamental assumptions are considered. For ergonomics, work is a human activity resulting from restrictions and affordances coming from the tasks to be accomplished and the properties of the human being. Thus, instead of putting people in situations of risk to their health, work should promote health and the development of competencies and professional know-how. To do so, work must be adaptable to people since a fundamental rule with respect to people is variability among individuals and within the same person over time.

From this perspective it is important that the tasks proposed to workers make sense. If they do not, then development is impeded (Sznelwar et al., 2006). As a result, suffering, complaints and illnesses frequently appear. The challenge with respect to the production project and work is avoiding operations that do not make sense, e.g., being in a situation where client problems cannot be resolved, and where the utility and impact of what one is doing cannot be recognized (Dejours, 2003).

For workers, meaning is also related to establishing rules and procedures that allow them to develop their own activities with this broader perspective, and to reconstruct the rules and modify their operations. In many situations success is not guaranteed by strictly following rules and procedures. Discussion and processes for redefining the rules and making explicit what really needs to be accomplished reduces covert rule violations.

A discussion about the relationship between work organization and ergonomics has brought conceptual advances so that the goal is to design and manage production systems that seek greater harmony among work systems and their sociotechnical characteristics (Hendrick, 2005). This approach is important in dealing with the uncertainties present in production systems. This is a counter position to the classical principles of organizational theories where variables are assumed to be stable and predictable. To achieve this, organizations should have a low level of formalization, high levels of professionalization and few levels of hierarchy.

In a similar manner, Cherns (1987) recommended several principles of a sociotechnical project, including the “minimum specifications’ criteria”, i.e. work organization should

establish only the essential regulations, leaving to the workers the job of responding to different situations they face. Cherns (1987) further adds the “principle of incompleteness”, arguing that work organization can never be complete since the environment and internal conditions change constantly, requiring adjustment and adaptation of the system.

In the context of this discussion of macroergonomics the authors propose the following principles:

- We need to use this approach to analyze and re-design existing production systems and create new production systems.
- We need to integrate data about the company’s internal and external environments, including information about technology and about the worker population.
- Adaptation and improvement need to be part of a continuous process.
- All actors (end users, workers, clients) should be involved in the design process.
- There should be opportunities for workers and organizations to learn.
- Discussions at different levels of the companies should be encouraged.

According to Kleiner (2006), the results of this type of analysis would result in the design of production or work systems centered on human beings that allow the workers to deal with variations in the processes.

This premise is also present in the work of Cherns (1987), Gerwin and Kolodny (1992) and Sitter et al. (1997) who argue that variations are intrinsic to every process and that the workers closest to the event should be responsible for their control.

Studies should also consider cultural differences, given that an increasing number of projects and companies involve people from different countries (Carayon, 2006). It is important to work together across geographical, cultural and temporal borders. This is related to the concepts and approaches of anthropotechnology (Wisner, 1991; Geslin, 2005).

All of these approaches emphasize that workers express their viewpoints regarding the problems they have to handle; in addition, solutions can be found with workers’ involvement since they are those who live with the problems and can become involved more easily if there is an attempt to solve problems (Imada, 2005). Kogi (2006) also proposes that the macroergonomics approach involves workers in the planning and control of a significant part of their work activities.

Therefore, as Wisner (1991) proposed with anthropotechnology, it is important to consider the following issues:

- Intellectual knowledge is not sufficient to develop a practical activity.
- Mental models are formed in several situations, such as family life, school, games, professional and social experience.

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