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The association between the meaning of working and musculoskeletal discomfort

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Abstract

This exploratory study was conducted to see if there was an association between the meaning of working and musculoskeletal discomfort and if that association was predictive of the severity of discomfort. Each of 170 telecommunication personnel at two sites completed a Meaning of Working Survey form and a Musculoskeletal Discomfort Questionnaire. Seven component composites of the meaning of working (work centrality, obligation, entitlement, comfort, promotion/power, expressive, and social support) were entered into a linear multiple regression model. The results suggested that there was a moderate, significant association ($R^2 = 0.19, p = 0.0002$) between overall musculoskeletal discomfort and promotion/power as well as the control variables age, gender, job satisfaction, average hours worked, and site. A logistic linear regression found that these composites, along with social support, could accurately identify who was in a none/mild discomfort category or a moderate/severe discomfort category 72% of the time. The overall pattern suggested that females who worked longer hours, valued promotion and power and disliked social support were most likely to develop moderate to severe musculoskeletal discomfort. This study provides a preliminary exploration of the association between meaning and MSD in the workplace and provides one hypothesis why meaning may be associated with MSD.

Relevance to industry

The causes of musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) in the workplace are diverse and poorly understood. The meaning that working has to an individual may help to explain why certain psychosocial factors are associated with musculoskeletal discomfort and may eventually provide one way to intervene to reduce MSD.

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1. Introduction

In the past 20 years there has been a steady increase in musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) in the work place. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) recently attempted to

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pass an ergonomic standard that focused on reducing the biomechanical and work practice hazards that have been associated with MSD in the workplace (OSHA, 1999). However, concurrent with the development of the OSHA standards has been the development of a body of evidence that biomechanical hazards alone cannot completely explain the development of MSD. Reviews of the research on the association between biomechanical factors and MSD have suggested that the research in this area is flawed and often poorly designed (Baker, 1999; Vender et al., 1995). Many researchers have suggested that the etiology of MSD is complex, poorly understood, and involves not only the physical work environment, but also psychosocial job factors (Bongers et al., 1993). Recent studies on the etiology of MSD have suggested that it may be more of a mind/body phenomenon than previously described (Moon and Sauter, 1996).

Psychosocial job factors are a complex interplay between the work set-up, the social climate, and the culture of the work environment. The connection between psychosocial variables and stress-related musculoskeletal problems, such as MSD, has been studied extensively in the literature (see Bongers et al., 1993; Smith, 1997 for literature reviews). Many different psychosocial factors have been significantly associated with MSD. However, no one psychosocial factor has consistently been associated with MSD in all studies. There seems to be a missing link between the presence of potentially adverse psychosocial job conditions and the presence of MSD. This piece could be the framework used to appraise job conditions as stressful. As psychosocial factors are assumed to have some unique psychological meaning to each individual (Sauter and Swansen, 1996) it is possible that meaning of working may be the interpretive element that shapes an individual's appraisal of the job environment, dictating whether the psychosocial environment will influence the development of MSD.

1.1. The meaning of working

The meaning of working (MOW), is the generalized significance of the role of working (Meaning

of Working International Research Team, 1987; Trombly, 1995). This significance relates to the perception that participation in that role will meet individual beliefs and achieve valued outcomes (Jackson et al., 1998; Meaning of Working International Research Team, 1987). MOW, therefore, provides an individualized method of structuring job performance by providing a framework for ranking, selecting, and implementing tasks and activities. MOW governs an individual's interpretation of the relevance of features of the job to the beliefs and values associated with the worker role. If a job feature is perceived to be inconsistent with the beliefs and valued outcomes associated with the role of working this may cause stress. However, identifying the meaning of working of an individual can be difficult as there are many potential beliefs and valued outcomes associated with working.

1.2. Measuring the meaning of working (MOW)

The Meaning of Working International Research Team (Meaning of Working International Research Team, 1987) has developed one successful method of researching the MOW of populations. The Meaning of Working International Research Team considers MOW to be a stable personal attribute, one that remains relatively constant. They use three separate, but intertwined elements to understand and study MOW: (1) work centrality; (2) societal norms about working; and (3) valued work outcomes.

1.2.1. Work centrality and beliefs about working

Work centrality is the degree of general importance that working has in the life of an individual at any given point in time (Meaning of Working International Research Team, 1987). The construct of work centrality, therefore, provides the overall measurement of the significance of working. This significance depends upon the beliefs and valued outcomes associated with it. Societal norms about working are beliefs and expectations concerning specific rights and duties attached to working. (Ruiz-Quintanilla and Wilpert, 1991, p. 94). These beliefs are related to the idea of reciprocity. Workers have an obligation to

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