



Working environment interventions – Bridging the gap between policy instruments and practice



Peter Hasle^{a,*}, Hans Jørgen Limborg^{b,1}, Klaus T. Nielsen^{c,2}

^a Centre for Industrial Production, Department of Business and Management, Aalborg University Copenhagen, A.C. Meyers Vænge 15, 2450 Copenhagen SV, Denmark

^b Teamworkinglife, Trekronergade 15, 2500 Valby, Denmark

^c Centre for Working Life Studies, Roskilde University, Roskilde University, Universitetsvej 1, Postboks 260, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

In spite of progress in intervention research, our understanding of the transformation of knowledge from the research into national working environment programmes is limited. Research in state regulation is mainly aimed at compliance and efficiency of public administration, while little attention is paid to why and how public and private organisations subsequently are to improve their working environment. This paper suggests a model which can bridge this gap. It is based on a combination of theories about basic policy instruments (regulation, incentives and information) with realistic analysis focusing on mechanisms and context, and finally institutional theory proposing coercive, normative and mimetic mechanisms as explanations for organisational behaviour.

The model is applied to an intervention aimed at reduction of the risk of musculoskeletal disorders among bricklayers in Denmark. Our analysis of the case shows how various actors, including the authorities, employers, unions and bi-partite committees, developed a programme combining the policy instruments over a considerable period of time and that all three institutional mechanisms affected the outcome. This integration of various actors and instruments, which was not necessarily planned from the beginning, proved to be an effective way of facilitating the implementation of new preventive measures in bricklaying. The analysis also indicates new intermediary mechanisms, such as programme development, as an iterative process, and the importance of joint messages from employers and unions. The model thus provides new insights into the relationship between policy instruments and workplace health and safety outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Evidence about risks in the working environment and the related health consequences has increased dramatically during the last decades. The knowledge about preventive measures and interventions have lacked behind among other due to methodological difficulties (Goldenhar et al., 2001) but the knowledge are in these years growing, among others supported by reviews (See examples in Bambra et al., 2007; Egan et al., 2007; Hale et al., 2010; Lehtola et al., 2008; Nielsen et al., 2010; Robson et al., 2007; Ruotsalainen et al., 2006; Tompa et al., 2007). However, knowing something does not necessarily imply that the knowledge is applied in practice, and the increased knowledge about risks and their prevention

does not seem to have caused any considerable improvement of the working environment (Hämäläinen et al., 2009; Milczarek et al., 2009; Schneider et al., 2010).

It is therefore up to stakeholders in the society to transform evidence from research to operational policy instruments and subsequently secure that these instruments are applied in practice in firms. This transformation has since the early industrialisation been almost synonymous with state-organised labour inspection. Originally, labour inspection had a fairly narrow focus on just a few safety-related issues: for many years, child labour, accidents, risks from boilers and power transmissions, exposure to lead and noise were the typical problems covered. But since the 1970s, the field has broadened to cover many other aspects of work that might have detrimental effects on health and safety and, in a similar vein, preventive activities have grown to include many different instruments in the effort to improve the working environment. Since the Robens Report (1972), legislation has prescribed a general responsibility on employers, requiring a reasonable safe

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 40 62 60 56.

E-mail addresses: hasle@business.aau.dk (P. Hasle), hjl@teamarbejdsliv.dk (H.J. Limborg), ktn@ruc.dk (K.T. Nielsen).

¹ Tel.: +45 3834 5034.

² Tel.: +45 4674 2000.

and sound working environment as a part of maintaining a general “license to operate”. At the same time a large number of state regulators, professional bodies and social partners are now involved in the working environment agenda and they all aim to influence the companies. Finally, employers – or at least the larger companies in many countries – now generally consider a reasonable working environment a prerequisite for legitimacy among the organisation’s stakeholders (Almqvist and Henningsson, 2009; Frick and Zwetsloot, 2007).

One track of research takes an interest in the function of societal policy instruments. This research is in particular looking at compliance with state regulation of the working environment. The point of departure is usually state enforcement of mainly prohibitive rules for employers, and a lot of the literature focuses on legal issues such as how to distinguish between compliance and non-compliance (Amodu, 2008; Hutter, 1997). Recently, regulation research has started to move towards an understanding of employer motivation for compliance (Parker et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2005), but the perspective is still on enforcement of the state’s rules for employers.

This development leaves one particular gap in our knowledge: there is surprisingly little known about how evidence from research can be transformed into working environment interventions at the societal level which lead to practical improvements in the workplace (See among the few examples Cox et al., 2008; Mischke et al., 2013). Apart from providing information for general dissemination about for instance certain risks – which is obviously important – research also has to provide adequate answers on how to transform knowledge from research into workplace practice.

In this paper, we probe into the knowledge gap between the specific interventions to improve the working environment and the broader policies that are applied to govern the field. We discuss a possible theoretical framework which can support such a venture, and suggest a model as a point of departure for further research into the relationship between policies and workplace practice.

As theoretical stepping stones, we use Vedung’s (1998) typology of policy instruments, the realistic understanding of mechanisms (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), and Scott’s (2001) neo-institutional theory with its focus on the legitimacy of organisations. The framework is subsequently applied to a practical example of reducing heavy lifting and awkward work postures in bricklaying in Denmark. We complete the paper by discussing the implications for research in the domain between working environment policies and their practical application at workplace level.

2. Background

Research in the working environment is dominated by a biomedical research paradigm shaped by concurrent developments in epidemiology and the testing of drugs. Randomized control trials (RCTs) are considered the golden standard, and systematic Cochrane reviews are thought of as the ideal methodology to identify useful evidence (Verbeek et al., 2002). As intervention research focusing on the prevention of occupational diseases and accidents has evolved, the biomedical paradigm has followed suit. While this paradigm is without question necessary for medical research and useful for the identification of causal factors in occupational health, it is more problematic when used in intervention studies (Pawson, 2006; Pedersen et al., 2012). Intervention in the working environment cannot be compared to the testing of medicine. There are several important reasons why not. First, RCTs are based on a double-blind intervention: neither the researcher nor the patients know whether the active medicine or a placebo is being provided, whereas that will always be known to all the actors involved in

working environment interventions. Second, most working environment interventions are aimed at organisational matters, such as particular work procedures, the use of technical equipment, the replacement of a certain technology or a chemical substance. None of these actions can be individually randomized. Third, working environment interventions take place in organisations in which the social actors react to the intervention and transform them to a greater or smaller extent depending on their interpretation of the intervention. Fourth, whereas the idea of RCTs is to control all confounding variables, working environment interventions take place in organisations which always exist in a unique context different from other organisations (see also Pawson (2006) for a broader discussion of RCT in social programmes).

This means that the rigorous methodological demands of Cochrane reviews make it difficult or in many cases almost impossible to identify organisational level interventions which work. The methodological demands will rule out most studies. In a review of 7522 studies of interventions for the prevention of injuries in construction, Lehtola et al. (2008) identified only five studies that met the Cochrane criteria (See also Pedersen et al., 2012). In a similar vein Mischke et al. (2013) could only include very few studies in their review of the effect of labour inspection. The point is that the Cochrane demands create an insurmountable barrier for useful research in preventive measures, because they cannot be randomized and contextual influence cannot be excluded. There is therefore a need for other kinds of intervention studies which can give the necessary evidence for preventive measures (Nilsen, 2007; Pedersen et al., 2012). We will come back to the discussion of such methods, but more importantly we will try to redirect research attention from the intervention *per se* and look at interventions as part of social programmes consisting of a number of different policies, regulations, enforcements and other attempts to change workplace practices.

As stated above, the regulation of the working environment has been seen as a matter for the state since the mid-nineteenth century. Rules have been issued and enforcement systems established to secure compliance. Evidence for the effect of the regulation system was traditionally not considered (See some of the few examples in Mischke et al., 2013; Viscusi, 1986). Working environment regulation was considered by the state as similar to any other regulative field. The regulation was put into place in order to secure social order, and if some risks seemed to get out of control, stricter rules and stronger enforcement would be the answer (Braithwaite and Drahos, 2000; Jacobsen, 2011).

Over the last thirty years, the development of society and the introduction of new public management (NPM) (Hood, 1995) have altered this picture. Nowadays, working environment regulation is increasingly subject to demands for accountability, transparency and efficiency just like any other public sector policy. This line of policy development focuses primarily on the efficient use of public resources and compliance and less on the actual effect on the working environment, even though that is the basic purpose of the enforcement strategies. One reason for this is the difficulty in establishing clear causal links between the authorities’ enforcement strategies and any possible effects on health and safety outcome. The consequence is that policy effectiveness in NPM terms is measured through output proxies such as the number of inspected workplaces, the number of improvement notices, and the number of cases won in court.

Several attempts have been carried out to understand how rules and inspection may lead to improved compliance and thus to a healthier and safer workplace. For a recent overview, see May and Winter (2012), which can be interpreted as fairly pessimistic in relation to how far it is possible to develop generalizable knowledge on the effect of enforcement styles. Nevertheless, there is a need to get a better understanding of the process that turns

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