

**Working Paper 17**

**Regulating the Psychosocial Issues in Changing Work Situations**

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## **Regulating the Psychosocial Issues in Changing Work Situations**

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The 19th was the centenary of the Authority for the protection of workers in Sweden. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the main focus area of workers' protection has been the physical risks encountered in the workplace. During the 70's, for example, the issues with chemicals received a lot of attention.

In 1978 the authority for the protection of workers was greatly reformed and received the new title *The Swedish Work Environment Act*. The Act was expanded to include several paragraphs concerning the psychological aspects of the work environment. In addition to this the term "employee protection issues" was changed to "work environment issues". The most important paragraph states that "work shall be adapted to the mental and physical capabilities of the employee". It is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that this is carried out. Two years later the pamphlet "social and psychological aspects in the work environment" was published. However the pamphlet was advisory and was not part of any new legislation, although it is worth adding that it has been the best selling of all the publications of the Work Environment Authority. Included in it are issues such as: work organisation with possibility to influence, possibility to survey the contributions to the finished product, variations in work methods, influence on the amount of work and when it is to be carried out, and opportunity for social contact.

Most of our districts were not at all prepared for this reform. The board of the district where I was working at the time took an interest in these new issues and employed an inspector who was qualified in social sciences. I have had the privilege to be included in the enormous advances which have been made in this area. In the beginning of the 80's when this development work was taking place there were neither approved methods nor any really suitable material available. Within our district we compiled a list of demands and measures which could be applied by an inspector when issuing psychosocial requirements to an employer.

In 1987 the central Authority started a project aimed at developing supervision methods . A colleague from the central authority and myself were responsible for a five-week course for specialist inspectors (one from each district). For many years I was also involved in a one-week course for new inspectors which dealt with psychosocial topics. During this time the project had been working on the development of procedures concerning the paper work which is required following inspections where psychosocial issues are taken up. There were several situations to consider, for example mental strain, social support, issues of violence and menaces and solitary isolation.

In 1991 the work environment legislation was rewritten so it could more clearly interpreted "technology, work organisation and job content shall be structured in

such a way that the employee is not subjected to the physical or mental strains which can lead to ill health or accidents... Closely controlled or restricted work shall be avoided ... furthermore efforts shall be made to ensure that working conditions provide opportunities for personal and vocational development ...".

A good working environment is dependent on the employer's ability to be able to prioritise effectively the various aspects of the work content, for example, job satisfaction, personal development, social contact and task variation. A further clarification dealt with the employees' rights to be involved in any changes that take place which would affect their jobs. This was the first time that employers were required by law to have an internal checking system which ensured that the working environment met the required standards. A paragraph was also included to cover rehabilitation and the adaptability of the work situation according to employees' needs.

It was during the 90's that our department began to work with the questions that were being brought up in the area of psychosocial supervision; and now the recruitment of at least one inspector qualified in social sciences was normal practice in all districts.

From the beginning of the 90's the government, in their annual written assignments to the Work Environment Authority, have requested that the following areas be given more detailed attention and influence of supervision: mental strain in the work place; the work content and issues concerning the organisation of the work place. The Work Environment Authority's reoccurring three-year plan of action has, since 1997 prioritised psychosocial issues as one of the specific areas of focus.

Psychosocial work environment problems which have been on the increase in recent years can be traced back to economic cutbacks, reorganisation programs and other employment reforms which have dominated the job market during the 90's. The introduction of computers into the work place has also caused great changes.

The pace of work has increased, which has led to a much tougher climate at work as people feel increasingly worse when made to work under the constant threat of dismissal. The high unemployment figures which were a growing threat to those employed is also part of the picture of the working environment of the 90's. This led to a situation where employers did not have to prioritise a good working environment in order to attract employees as there was a large available work force, and those who were employed were reluctant to question or criticise any work related issue as they felt their own jobs were at risk. This led to the build up of a negative atmosphere among those who had jobs since they were not voicing any constructive criticisms aimed at working conditions or the work environment.

Towards the end of the 90's the employment market underwent another shift. This time it was due to a reduction in the number of people who were out of work. In the same time there was an increase in sickness absence. The number of reported

psychosocial injuries increased three times in size between 1997 and 2003. Sickness absence in Sweden has seen a dramatic increase since the end of the 90's. The majority of the diagnoses have been ergonomic complaints, but stress and burnout diagnoses have also escalated. We have also received an increase of reports of abusive treatment in the work place. Despite great efforts from the National Social Insurance Department and work environment inspectors it is very difficult to reinstate these sick absentees back into full time employment. Due to the large cutbacks during the 90's and new attitudes in society fewer people are now expected to carry larger workloads. Now other professional groups became exposed to these health risks and there was increased sickness absence in: healthcare staff, (including doctors) principles and teachers, police and supervisors in production industries.

We saw this trend developing towards the end of '97. Many of the inspectors were reporting changes in the work place. Stress levels had increased resulting in sickness absence caused by burn out. Diagnoses were also fatigue, depression and other mental stress related disorders. These diagnoses are now widespread throughout the entire workforce but the clear majority can be found in the public sector.

At this point our district became aware that we didn't have any effective procedures to deal with these problems. The older inspection methods were not always applicable in the new situations and it was essential that our inspection methods remained credible. We received a grant from a research institute and were able to work with a consultant who helped us formulate a theory and also develop a procedure which we could follow when making an evaluation of these work environment problems. The results of this work can be found in two publications "Changes in Working Life" and "The Focus Method". The new method has been evaluated on two separate occasions.

The work with this method was carried on with four inspectors and myself as well as one of the assistant managers, who is also a social scientist. We were developing this new method from the beginning of '98 until 2000. The method is based on group discussions in which two of us from the work environment authority are present as co-ordinators. The groups are made up of six people, are homogeneous according to job category and usually meet for an hour and a half. Notes are made during the meeting on a flip-chart which are then used when we present our findings to the management. We can then approach the employer with a list of demands based on the outcome of the meetings and presentations. The demands can be, for example,. an evaluation of the work place, management training courses, time for reflection, assessment of consequences of changes in work, assessment talks and social support.

Since last autumn we have been holding courses in this new method for our colleagues in other districts. During this time we have also been receiving guidance from our own consultant in the formulation of suitable demands based on our experiences. As we are constantly discovering new problems, this has lead to a new publication which discusses frustration in the work place. It takes up feelings of resignation; not being respected; not having the possibility to speak out about organisational issues; not being heard; not being noticed by management etc.

Because of the large numbers of long term sick absentees our authority received a budget increase in 2000. The districts were able to employ 140 new inspectors (twelve for our district) most of them being qualified in social sciences. This has lead to increased work in the area of the development of new methods. All older inspectors now attend a three-week course in psychosocial issues.

Now the inspectors employed are no longer technicians or chemists, but have backgrounds in social work, psychology, health care, occupational therapy, human resources or teaching. Half of the 41 inspectors in our district are non-technicians as well as two of the three managers being social scientists.