
Occupational Health and Safety and Sustainable Return to Work Management in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to describe, from a scoping review on studies on occupational health and safety (OHS) management in SME, the main strategic elements (resources, structures, activities) that could benefit from integrating practices of sustainable return to work in a SME context. The analysis highlights some OHS strategies and strategic elements (resources, structures, activities) used in SME, and discusses their commonalities with disability management practices and their potential to promote sustainable return to work in SMEs.

Keywords: Small and medium enterprise (SME), Occupational health and safety (OHS), Sustainable return to work

INTRODUCTION

The growing importance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) for our society and in the economy in general has been recognized and has led to an increase in the number of studies devoted to them. Over the last thirty years, such studies have addressed all sorts of subjects (competitiveness, total quality, technological innovation, environmental sustainability, etc.), either globally or in specific sectors of activity (construction, manufacturing, etc.). Studies on occupational health and safety (OHS) in SME show that management of such issues is quite different from large companies. One of the reasons is that SME employers perceive OHS as representing a substantial economic cost (Haslam et al. 2010). Since SMEs have fewer financial and human resources than large companies (Masi and Cagno 2015, Page, 2009), and being under more economic pressure, they are more reluctant to dedicate resources to solve exceptional problems such as OHS and disability management issues (MacEachen et al. 2010).

Sustainable return to work practices, which are an intrinsic part of OHS and disability management, pose particular challenges for SMEs, although studies have already established the main principles of disability management, which promote sustainable return to work after injury (Franche et al. 2005; MacEachen et al. 2006, IWH, 2010). Subsequent research has been

dedicated to putting these principles into practice and to describing the best practices for promoting sustainable return to work (RTW) (Cullen et al. 2018, Durand et al. 2017, Nastasia et al. 2017, Durand et al. 2014, Nastasia et al. 2014). However, the vast majority of these studies were conducted in large firms (Kristman et al. 2016, Main et al. 2016) and little is known about how these practices could be applied in SME. This paper highlights some preliminary results from a scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) conducted in order to describe the main OHS strategies, and envisage opportunities to integrate resources, structures, and activities related to disability management and return to work.

STRATEGIC ELEMENTS IN OHS MANAGEMENT

Overall, four main strategies for improving the OHS in SME are identified from the literature consulted. These strategies consist in the adaptation of OHS management to the context of SMEs (legislation, size, sector, risks, and unionization), the diffusion, dissemination, and exchange of information on OHS, the use of a collaborative or participative approach and the acquisition of OHS knowledge, skills and abilities. As can be seen in Table 1, different resources, structures and activities are each associated with one or more of these strategies and imply interactions between the different stakeholders involved within SME (initiator, intermediaries, and workplace) (Sinclair et al. 2013).

Strategies for improving OHS outcome in SME cannot simply be a copy and paste of what is recommended in terms of legislation or guidelines for actions in large companies. Therefore, it seems important to adapt OSH management and the regulations designed for large companies in a more informal way. This may result in the assignment of responsibilities for OHS in the company to different actors and the development of simpler procedures to identify OHS risks, leaving room to resolve problems when they arise (Barbeau et al. 2004).

In addition, the outreach of SMEs through the diffusion and dissemination of information on OHS issues also seems important. Means of diffusion and dissemination include postal letters, advertising, social networks (Parker et al. 2015; Sinclair et al. 2013), but the best way to reach SMEs seems to remain telephone contact or even meeting in person (Olsen, 2015). Moreover, SME owner-managers prefer OHS information and advice specific to their organization rather than general information (Mayhew, 2000; Nielsen, 2013).

Furthermore, SME owner-managers appreciate having easy access and support in assessing OHS risks and conducting simple, cost-benefit-ratio interventions (Parker et al. 2012, 2015). Even a minimalist approach could produce interesting results for improving OHS management in SME (Walker and Tait, 2014, Walaski, 2017). Particularly interesting in terms of resources in assessing OHS risks are the intermediaries (organizations providing goods or services to SMEs, associations, consultants, experts, accountants etc.), as distribution and exchange channels between initiating organizations

Table 1. Main strategic elements for improving OHS management in SMEs.

Strategies	Resources	Structures	Activities
Adapt OHS management to SMEs context (legislation, size, sector, risks, unionization) Disseminate and exchange information on OHS regulations, services, and interventions to and for SMEs Collaborative support for OSH assessment and intervention Acquisition of OHS knowledge, skills and abilities	<i>Initiators:</i> government, stakeholders organisations <i>Intermediaries:</i> Organisations/ associations of enterprises (same activity sector/ administrative region), chamber of commerce, business development centers Inspectors, consultants practitioners, experts (accounting, industrial hygiene, human resources, engineering, ergonomics, administration) <i>Workplace:</i> Employers, managers, supervisors, workers, union representatives	Legislation Regulations Guidelines Publications messages, guidelines Networks of companies with a similar profile Databases for sharing solutions OHS policy Organizational procedures with roles and responsibilities for all structures and actors Participative or collaborative structures: OHS committee/ representative Tools (checklist, methods of OHS risk evaluation, intervention support) Awareness Training	Investigation of causes of injury Recognition of OHS efforts in SMEs Financing the activities of intermediaries Technical support (advice, networking, information, maintenance of installation safety) Assessment of OHS risks and simple intervention Engagement of managers and workers Dialogue between managers, intermediaries workers Educational and training activities Mandatory/ voluntary courses

(often governmental, public health/safety organizations) and SMEs (Hasle and Refslund, 2018).

For OHS management within the company, a collaborative and participative approach seems effective in SMEs. According to Masi and Cagno (2015), the participatory approach corresponds to the search for the active participation of the company's internal actors in OHS management, and the collaborative approach corresponds to the involvement of actors from outside the company. If we focus on the participation of internal actors, three types of actors stand out: managers, workers, and personnel responsible for OHS issues (Masi and Cagno, 2015). However, not all companies have personnel specifically assigned to the management of OHS issues. In some companies, particularly the smallest ones, the owner or manager takes charge of OHS problems themselves (Champoux and Brun, 2003; Walker and Tait, 2014). There are therefore two aspects to the participatory approach. On the one hand, we find the importance of joint participation of managers

and workers in OHS management (Champoux and Brun, 2003; Nielsen, 2013; Torp, 2008). An open and constructive dialogue between managers and employees makes it possible to clarify and rectify possible disagreements (Kines et al. 2013; Nielsen, et al. 2013). Such exchanges also allow the creation of a positive culture within the company (Nielsen et al. 2013). In order to implement significant changes in the management of OHS in the company, workers' involvement is needed because their knowledge of the field is essential, and managers' involvement is equally important because they are responsible for allocating resources (Dale, 2016). The second aspect of the participatory approach is the importance of the involvement of all workers in the company. The inclusion of workers with different work experiences must be sought during the different stages of the process, whether it is the search for safety problems, the implementation of solutions, or the evaluation of their impact (Gravel et al. 2011). If all the workers in a company cannot be included at all stages of an OHS intervention for reasons of ease and effectiveness, the workers' representatives must nevertheless ensure that all of the company's workers are included at a given point in the process to ensure that the chosen measures are implemented (Gunnarsson, 2010). Management commitment is essential for the success of an OHS intervention, although it alone cannot guarantee success (Nielsen et al. 2013). Management commitment to improving OHS in the company is perceived positively by workers who see it as evidence of management support for their work (Torp, 2008).

To go further than simply informing SMEs, the acquisition of OHS knowledge, skills and abilities on OHS issues is essential. Educational and training activities, initiated by outside resources and addressed to managers/owners, have been found effective in developing better OHS management systems, and thus in improving employees' work environment (Torp, 2008). Coaching and workshop sessions organized to improve supervisors' skills in managing OHS issues and to favor workers' commitment have resulted in positive culture changes within the company (Nielsen et al. 2013). However the content should be simple, short, easy to follow, adapted to the work schedule and to the seasonal or economic fluctuations of activities (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2015; Gravel et al. 2011), as well inexpensive or with possibilities of subsidies (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2015; Farina et al. 2015). Finally, training activities initiated by an external resource and directed to third-party companies acting as intermediaries (e.g., accountants, local chambers of commerce) seem valuable for bringing OHS-related knowledge to the SMEs (Hasle and Refslund, 2018; Sinclair et al. 2013).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE RETURN TO WORK

Analyses from the scoping review led to the understanding that SMEs do not appear to distinguish practices specifically linked to RTW from other efforts in preventing OHS injuries. In fact, few strategic elements that touch on disability management and sustainable RTW practices were mentioned in the literature consulted. However, OHS strategical elements, presented in the previous section, share work disability management's foundational

principles for reducing the human and economic costs for both individuals and organizations. In Canada, the Institute for Work and Health (IWH) established seven principles for successful RTW: (1) strong workplace commitment to health and safety; (2) offering job modification; (3) supporting the returning worker without disadvantaging co-workers and supervisors; (4) training supervisors in work disability prevention and including them in return-to-work planning; (5) caring employer contact with injured or ill workers; (6) return-to-work coordination; and (7) communication between employers and workplace health care providers (IWH, 2010). Although such principles are now generally acknowledged by larger workplaces and professionals, practices observed in SMEs do not seem to reflect their application in a consistent or optimal manner (Nastasia et al. 2017, Audet et al. (in press)).

Challenges in the application of disability management and sustainable RTW practices in SMEs seem to be related to employers' beliefs that important costs will need to be put in place to make appropriate resources and structures available (Haslam et al. 2010). Focused primarily on production (Stave et al., 2008), employers and even employees may not perceive OHS and disability management issues as part of the core business in the same way as sales, planning, or finance (Olsen and Hasle, 2015). Consequently, any work time lost due to the disability management of an occupational injury may be seen as having a negative impact on the enterprise's productivity, which could entice the use of less optimal practices (Nastasia et al. 2017). Therefore, there is a risk of aggravating the injury or prolonging the work disability, in so doing essentially increasing the financial cost of an occupational injury in the mid to long term (Durand et al, 2014). Workplace practices, such as inquiring about accident causes and evaluating, planning, offering organizational and physical job modifications, could be integrated in OHS policies, procedures and strategies, and their scope could be increased by conducting educational and training activities. Less optimal practices also seem related to the scarcity of resources that SMEs are able to devote to disability management and to the absence of appropriate collaborative supportive structures. As a way to overcome the problem of resource scarcity, models of networking for reaching and consulting SMEs with OHS information and supporting services show promising results through the adoption of collaborative strategies (Cunningham and Sinclair 2015, Sinclair et al. 2013, Hasle and Refslund, 2018; Olsen and Hasle, 2015). Structures promoting OHS outcome, such as stakeholder's organizations or intermediaries (associations, experts, professionals, etc.) could help to disseminate guidelines and support disability management, and sustainable RTW.

Because of the emergence of advanced technologies, new societal values, changing demographics, and globalization, new business structures yield organizational opportunities and create levers for improving disability management and sustainable RTW in SMEs. Flexible work arrangements (e.g., temporary employment, remote work, virtual work) create opportunities for developing resource-efficient production (Ekberg et al. 2016) and solve the problem of lack of work force in several sectors of activity. Furthermore, the proximity between managers and employees in SMEs and the support of external intermediaries providing advisory and support services to

employers and employees in SMEs facilitate effective communication and collaboration between all stakeholders, and enhance realistic appropriate work arrangements (Ekberg et al. 2016).

CONCLUSION

The paper highlights some OHS strategies and strategic elements (resources, structures, activities) used in SME, and discusses their common foundational principles with disability and sustainable RTW management and their potential to promote sustainable RTW in SMEs. Future studies on workplace disability and RTW management should be designed in different contexts to reflect the multiple work patterns that currently exist across SMEs. In particular, flexible work arrangements (temporary employment, virtual work, etc.) should be explored in more detail as a possible mechanism for installing appropriate practice in SMEs. In addition, government laws, policies, and procedures need to be adapted to fit the needs of flexible work arrangements in SMEs.

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