

Healthy Work Organization

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1 INTRODUCTION

Work organization refers to the way work processes are structured and managed, including scheduling, job design, interpersonal aspects, management style, organizational characteristics, and related topics. Healthy work organization is a logical outgrowth of work organization and represents the idea that (a) it should be possible to identify a set of job and organizational dimensions or factors that characterize the healthy organization, and (b) such workplaces should have safer, healthier, more productive workers, and superior profitability and market success. In most respects, the basic concept of healthy work organization falls within the scope of macroergonomics. Macroergonomics emphasizes a top-down sociotechnical systems approach to the overall design of organizations, work systems, jobs, and related human–environment interfaces (Hendrick 1991). Microergonomics, in contrast, focuses more on the immediate human–machine interface and the design of specific tasks, jobs, and workstations.

Part of the attractiveness of healthy work organization is that it represents the integration of research and practice in several areas, including human resources and organizational development, occupational stress, occupational safety and health management, and worksite health promotion. Each is discussed briefly below.

1.1 HUMAN RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Case studies of successful organizations suggest that healthy people and healthy relationships are at the very core of business, and that many business problems and failures to remain competitive can be traced to traditional, hierarchical forms of management and employee relations (Rosen and Berger 1991). From this perspective, creating healthy work organizations involves a redefinition of the relationships, expectations, obligations, and interactions between employees and organizations.

1.2 OCCUPATIONAL STRESS PERSPECTIVE

A number of prominent stress researchers have attempted to identify the job and organizational attributes or factors

which characterize healthy or low stress work environments. Almost without exception, these authors emphasize the importance of organizational or contextual factors in diagnosing and remedying the causes of stress within organizations. For example, Cooper and Cartwright, in their “front-end” approach to addressing organizational Stress (Cooper and Cartwright 1994) suggest a variety of organizational change interventions, in addition to the more traditional individual-oriented strategies typically used to manage job stress. Karasek and Theorell (1990) argue that a fundamental shift in the relative distribution of decision latitude or control is essential to creating healthy work organizations.

1.3 OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Three areas of occupational safety and health research, in particular, underscore the breadth of interest in organizational or contextual factors. First, research on safety and health climate or culture points to the importance of the broader organizational context in shaping employee behaviors. Second, recent research on human error, most notably Reason’s work on active and latent failures (Reason 1995), calls attention to the importance of organizational action or inaction in creating the substrate or backdrop for human error by frontline workers. And third, research on workplace self-protective behavior is consistent in highlighting organization-level factors as facilitating or hindering safe behavior in the workplace.

1.4 HEALTH PROMOTION PERSPECTIVE

Work in this area argues that worksite health promotion programs should be expanded to include interventions designed to improve organizational and environmental conditions. DeJoy and Southern (1993) have proposed an integrative model of workplace health promotion that features three interactive systems: job demands and worker characteristics, work environment, and extraorganizational influences. The basic architecture of this model suggests that attempts to preserve and enhance worker health should develop from a total work situation analysis.

1.5 CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Viewed together, the four perspectives reveal three cross-cutting themes:

- The increased salience of organizational or contextual factors in the work–health relationship.
- The importance of organization-level action in producing positive change.
- The need for modification of the traditional employer–employee relationship in terms of increased opportunities for employee involvement and input.

2 DIMENSIONS OF HEALTHY WORK ORGANIZATION

Reviews of the literature cited earlier suggest that a set of dimensions of healthy work organization can be compiled and conveniently organized into three categories or domains: (1) job-related factors, (2) organizational structure or climate, and (3) career development (Figure 1). Although it is impossible to argue that the dimensions listed in Figure 1 represent a perfect or all-inclusive list, there is sufficient consistency across the literature to make a persuasive case for the importance of each dimension.

2.1 JOB-RELATED FACTORS

The rather extensive literature on job stress provides much of the foundation for a general agreement on the job factors that are most important in preserving or enhancing worker health and well-being. These factors include



FIGURE 1 The three domains of healthy work organization.

workload, autonomy and control, role clarity, job content, work scheduling, and environmental conditions.

Workload consists of the daily demands of the work situation or job design. Workload is associated with job satisfaction and an assortment of psychological, physiological, and behavioral strain symptoms. However, workload per se may not necessarily be the defining factor in producing worker strain. Research on machine-paced and other externally controlled tasks indicates that strain may most likely occur when control is not commensurate with job demands.

Autonomy and control refers to the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out. Employees who perceive relatively high levels of control at work have been associated with higher levels of motivation, performance, job satisfaction, involvement, and commitment, as well as lower levels of absenteeism, turnover, emotional distress, and physical symptoms and conditions, including exhaustion, headaches, and cardiovascular disease.

Role clarity involves the extent to which an employee's work goals and responsibilities are clearly communicated, and the degree to which the individual understands the actions and processes required to achieve these goals. Role ambiguity, the opposite of role clarity, exists when there is a high level of uncertainty about job expectations. It can lead to burnout, increased stress, work dissatisfaction, and decreased productivity and occupational commitment.

Job content involves the meaning, value, and worth that employees attach to their jobs. Jobs which are fragmented, highly repetitious, and monotonous, or that otherwise provide little stimulation or skill utilization have been linked to job dissatisfaction, worker strain, and poor mental health. Work scheduling encompasses a variety of options: full-time or part-time, fixed schedules or rotating schedules, and day work versus shift work. Employees who work their preferred schedule have increased job satisfaction, work commitment, and positive work-related attitudes. Rotating shifts and permanent night work appear to be most problematic in terms of psychological, social, and physical well-being.

Environmental conditions cover a variety of physical conditions and work requirements. They can affect the employee's well-being through exposure to factors such as loud noise, inadequate ventilation, bad lighting, variable temperatures and/or smoke, toxic chemicals, and infectious diseases. Musculoskeletal symptoms and injuries have also been found in conjunction with various ergonomic hazards, such as highly repetitive tasks and frequent bending, twisting, and heavy lifting.

2.2 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND CLIMATE

The dimensions within this domain emphasize the way in which the workplace is organized, particularly in terms

of how it impacts interpersonal relations and the general social environment. They include organizational support, participation and worker involvement, and feedback and communication. Healthy work organizations should provide opportunities for meaningful interpersonal interaction and communication; this is because they give emotional support and they also give instrumental or tangible support in fulfilling job tasks and other assigned responsibilities.

Organizational support can be viewed as any action taken by the organization or its representatives that indicates a concern for the well-being of its employees. Employees' commitment to their organization and their job satisfaction, productivity, and morale are influenced by their perceptions of the organization's support and commitment to them. In addition, social support from supervisors and coworkers have significant effects on job stress and burnout.

Participation and worker involvement refer to situations in which employees have some meaningful input into job-related decision making. Considerable research indicates that increased levels of participation and worker involvement can increase job satisfaction, motivation, productivity, and mental health, and they can reduce job stress and role ambiguity.

Feedback and communication includes the degree to which employees receive direct, clear, and timely information about the effectiveness of their performance and the relative existence of ongoing and two-way communication within the organization. Having an effective two-way communication system may be one of the best methods to involve and empower employees, and it has shown positive effects on role ambiguity, job performance, job stress, worker satisfaction, safety and health program effectiveness, safety climate, and a variety of safety-related behaviors and outcomes.

2.3 CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The third category shifts attention from the attributes of specific jobs and the characteristics of the organizational social environment to job security and career development considerations. In healthy work organizations, employees should be clearly informed about opportunities for improving their job skills and career opportunities, as well as about the organizational and economic developments that may alter their employment situation. The dimensions in this category include job security advancement and learning opportunities, equitable pay and benefits, and flexible work arrangements.

Job security has been defined as an employee's perception of potential threat to continuity in his or her current job. Perceiving that one's job is secure has been consistently related to job satisfaction, work commitment, quality of life, and mental and physical health.

Advancement and continuous learning opportunities have assumed increasing importance in today's era of mergers, corporate downsizing, and rapid technological change. This dimension involves opportunities for employees to broaden their job skills and knowledge, and to increase their resources and ability to cope with organizational change.

Equitable pay and benefits is a fundamental issue for employees and the organization. There are two important issues: the actual distribution of rewards and the perceived fairness of the procedures used to decide this distribution. Decreased job satisfaction, leadership, and working relations have been associated with inadequacies in the pay system.

Flexible work arrangements involve the extent to which job requirements allow employees the opportunity to accomplish tasks such as arranging childcare, shopping, scheduling appointments, and meeting other personal obligations and responsibilities. Positive relationships have been found between flexible work arrangements and depression, anxiety, job satisfaction, and work–family conflict for both men and women.

3 MODEL OF HEALTHY WORK ORGANIZATION

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model of healthy work organization that builds upon the dimensions presented earlier. A key aspect is that organization-level action is critical to creating and maintaining the healthy organization. The dimensions of healthy work organization may genuinely be considered as effects more than as causes; that is, well-designed jobs, supportive organizational climates, and positive career development options exist largely as a result of the policies established and actions taken by the leaders of the organization. So, in developing a workable conceptual model, there needs to be some entity, some construct, or some set of constructs that enable these effects to occur. The research literature which support the model provides sample evidence that organization-level support and action is fundamental to organizational effectiveness in terms of employee well-being and financial performance.

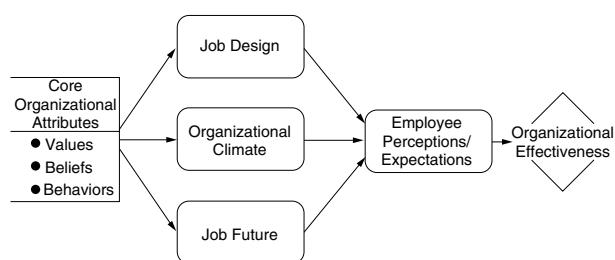


FIGURE 2 Conceptual model of healthy work organization.

The *core organizational attributes* in the model include organizational values, beliefs, and behaviors. These three variables delve into the leadership resources of the organization at three different levels. Organizational values are defined as relatively enduring beliefs about what kinds of behaviors or end-states are preferable to others. Recent studies of successful organizations indicate that success typically comes from paying attention to all stakeholders. In terms of organizational values, healthy organizations and successful organizations should both show good balance between production and employee orientations. Organizational beliefs involve how the organization views its commitment to and responsibility for employee health and well-being.

Of central importance is the idea that employees represent more than units of cost in the business equation. Organizational behaviors are managerial actions related to employee health and well-being, which essentially reflect how the organization's values and beliefs are translated into policies and programs. The inclusion of core organizational attributes in the model emphasizes the importance of organizational-level action as a leverage point for producing change in the workplace. The inclusion of the three levels (values, beliefs, and behaviors) is intended primarily to establish points of attachment for interventions designed to enable organizations to become healthier.

The job design, organizational climate, and job future components include many of the dimensions discussed earlier. The job design component refers to the dimensions related to job and task demands which consist of workload, control and autonomy, role clarity, job content, work scheduling, and environmental hazards.

The organizational climate component includes the dimensions of organizational support, coworker support, involvement, communication, and physical and psychological danger. Organizational support and coworker support are treated as separate variables in the model to reflect the importance of formal (organizational) and informal (coworker) social support in the workplace.

Feedback and communication are blended into one dimension, and as suggested by recent research on safety climate and culture, physical and psychological danger is included to represent the importance of personal safety and security on the job. The job future component consists of job security, equity, advancement and learning opportunities, and flexible work arrangements.

Figure 2 also features a component labeled *worker perceptions and expectations*. This component is defined as the beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and goals that employees have concerning the organization in which they work. It recognizes that the way in which workers perceive and evaluate events is important for understanding the impacts of various job and organizational factors. Four variables define this component of the model: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, empowerment and stress symptoms.

They may also be viewed as intermediate outcomes that are ultimately linked to organizational effectiveness. These particular variables are included because of their demonstrated relevancy to the various dimensions of healthy work organization, and because satisfied, committed, empowered, and low stress employees contribute to organizational effectiveness.

Finally, the *organizational effectiveness* component includes financial and health-related outcome measures. The key to healthy work organization is that it impacts the financial performance of the organization as well as employee health and well-being. Financial measures might include outcomes such as return on equity, sales growth, absenteeism, and turnover. Health and well-being measures might include health care costs, health risk behaviors, loss prevention results, and work-related injuries and illnesses.

4 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The idea of healthy work organization has come about largely as a logical extension of the interest in work organization within the field of occupational safety and health. Work organization sometimes, means different things to different people, but the basic theme is that in trying to make workplaces safer and healthier, it is important to examine contextual and organizational factors, particularly how work processes are structured and managed. Although its roots may be in occupational safety and health, the concept of healthy work organization also reflects a convergence of research and thinking in human resources and management, occupational stress, and worksite health promotion.

Review and synthesis of this literature suggest that a profile of healthy work organization can be derived in terms of a defined set of job and organizational characteristics or dimensions. The dimensions have each been linked to various health or behavioral outcomes in the workplace, and some of these outcomes, such as job satisfaction and absenteeism, have been linked to traditional indices of organizational effectiveness. Moreover, these dimensions can be organized into a conceptual framework that provides a workable blueprint for auditing workplaces and organizations and for designing healthier ones. This model makes a strong case for the criticality of organizational change in creating and maintaining healthy organizations.

However, in spite of progress in describing healthy work organization, the actual predictive or explanatory capacity of the healthy work organization model has not been comprehensively evaluated. The model is tentative in the sense that it remains to be determined whether the various elements are both necessary and sufficient to explain either health or financial outcomes in real-world organizations. The dual-benefits aspect of healthy work organization is also largely untested. Very few studies have examined worker well-being and organizational financial

performance simultaneously, even with respect to single variables or dimensions.

Using autonomy and control, one of the job dimensions in the model, as a case in point, a number of studies show that jobs characterized by low levels of worker control are associated with a variety of adverse health and behavioral consequences. Interventions designed to increase worker control also have demonstrated beneficial effects in terms of worker well-being. But shifting to the financial side, traditional research on organizational effectiveness has paid relatively little attention to control and autonomy as a variable of interest in examining outcomes related to productivity, efficiency, and financial performance. Even fewer attempts have been made to examine both worker well-being and financial outcomes in the same study.

Many researchers and workplace advocates would argue that positive behavioral and health outcomes alone provide sufficient justification for organizational redesign efforts, but the importance of testing the parallel-benefits hypothesis should not be diminished. Positive findings would provide significant and much needed impetus for

redesign efforts aimed at maximizing human capital and creating safer, healthier, and more fulfilling workplaces and organizations.

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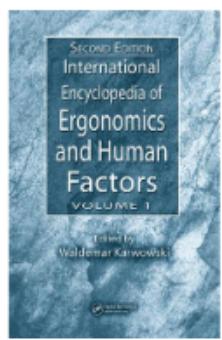
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