The role and effectiveness of safety representatives in influencing workplace health and safety

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This study presents a review of the quantitative and qualitative evidence for the link between worker representation and consultation and effective health and safety management. Through a series of detailed case studies in two sectors of the economy, it examines the dynamics of representation and consultation in improving health and safety performance. Its review of previous studies and the evidence of the case studies detailed in the report support a conclusion that joint arrangements, through which workers are represented and consulted on their health and safety, are likely to have better outcomes than arrangements in which management acts without consultation. However, it suggests that arrangements for worker representation and consultation are dependent upon a number of preconditions for their effectiveness. These include a strong legislative steer, effective external inspection and control, demonstrable senior management commitment and capacity towards both health and safety and a participative approach, competent hazard/risk evaluation and control, effective autonomous worker representation at the workplace and external trade union support. Such preconditions were not present in the majority of the case studies and both they and the review of the wider literature suggest that changes in the structure and organisation of work mean that achieving them present considerable challenges. Nevertheless, the study found a number of examples of ways in which these challenges had been successfully addressed. It suggests therefore that there are important messages presented by these examples for regulators, trade unions and employers alike if worker representation and consultation is to be supported in realising its potential to contribute to improved health and safety outcomes.

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CONTENTS

THE ROLE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES IN INFLUENCING WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY ..................................................... 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ III

CONTENTS .................................................................................................................................. V

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ........................................................................................................... VIII

1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... viii

2 The background ............................................................................................................................. viii

3 Studies of quantitative relationships ........................................................................................... ix

4 What works and why? ...................................................................................................................... ix

5 The experience of representation and consultation in chemicals and construction .................... x

6 Conclusions ....................................................................................................................................... xii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .............................................................................. 1

1.1 The remit of the study ................................................................................................................... 2

1.2 Study context ............................................................................................................................... 3

1.3 Report outline ............................................................................................................................ 5

PART 1: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE OF THE ROLE OF WORKER REPRESENTATION AND CONSULTATION IN HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK. ........................................................................... 7

CHAPTER 2: THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORKER REPRESENTATION AND CONSULTATION IN HEALTH AND SAFETY AND SOME CONSIDERATIONS OF ITS EFFECTIVENESS ...................................................... 9

2.1 Questions of definition ................................................................................................................ 9

2.2 The legislative framework on worker representation and consultation on health and safety in the UK ................................................................................................................................. 13

2.3 The effectiveness of representative worker participation .......................................................... 17

INDEX

INDEX
CHAPTER 3: ARRANGEMENTS FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY AND INJURY RATES – REVISITING THE EVIDENCE ................................................................. 23

3.1 Trade unions, joint arrangements and the WIRS/WERS data sets ........................................ 23

3.2 The influence of the study of Reilly et al ........................................................................... 23

3.3 Replicating Reilly et al ........................................................................................................ 25

3.4 Modifying the analysis ........................................................................................................ 27

3.5 Analysis of the relationship between joint arrangements for health and safety and injuries in a sample of establishments from private manufacturing in WERS 98 ........................................ 28

3.6 Ways forward for future investigation of quantitative indicators of the influence of joint arrangements on health and safety performance .................................................. 31

CHAPTER 4: WHAT MAKES WORKER PARTICIPATION EFFECTIVE? ...... 33

4.1 The prerequisites for effectiveness ....................................................................................... 33

4.2 Change and representation .................................................................................................. 43

4.3 Conclusions: prerequisites for effective participative arrangements ............................... 47

PART 2: REPRESENTATION AND CONSULTATION IN TWO INDUSTRIES: THE CASE STUDIES ......................................................................................... 49

CHAPTER 5: THE CHEMICALS INDUSTRY ........................................................................... 51

5.1 The chemicals industry ....................................................................................................... 51

5.2 The case studies .................................................................................................................. 56

5.3 Health and safety in the case studies ................................................................................. 61

5.4 Management, consultation and health and safety outcomes in the case studies .............. 65

CHAPTER 6: THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY ................................................................. 79

6.1 The industry ....................................................................................................................... 79

6.2 The case studies ................................................................................................................ 88

6.3 Management, consultation and health and safety in construction .................................... 91

6.4 Conclusions ....................................................................................................................... 107

PART 3: WHAT WORKS IN WORKER REPRESENTATION AND CONSULTATION IN HEALTH AND SAFETY? ................................................................. 111