Article

Working environment in small firms – responses from owner-managers

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Abstract
Little research has been done on owner-managers' response to the working environment (occupational health and safety). This should be understood in the light of the way owner-managers develop identity from their business, and a better understanding is needed to develop preventive programmes that fit the owner-managers' interpretation of the working environment. Qualitative interviews were carried out with the owner-managers or the managers responsible for the working environment in 23 small firms from the construction and metal industries. The interviews were analysed for attitudes on the working environment, understanding of risk, responsibility for the working environment, and attitudes towards regulation. The analysis revealed both a great heterogeneity of views on the working environment and groups of owners who share important characteristics. Most owner-managers take a positive approach to the working environment, but also try to talk risk down, criticize regulation as bureaucracy and push a part of the employer responsibility on to the employees. They try to follow what they experience as a generally acceptable standard for the working environment among the stakeholders in the sector, but some

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owner-managers also tend to neglect the working environment. The reason for the down-grading of risk and the push to share responsibility can be found in the close social relationships and the identity work processes of the owner-managers with their business. They try to act as decent people and thus avoid personal guilt and blame if employees should get injured.

Introduction

Research into small firms has expanded tremendously over recent years and a still deeper understanding of both the great heterogeneity and commonalities is emerging. But one field where insight is still limited is the working environment.[1] It is generally accepted that small firms are exposed to serious occupational hazards, and they have limited resources to control these hazards (Champoux and Brun, 2003; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Walters, 2001), but the literature tends to focus on small firms as a regulatory and compliance problem (Addison and Burgess, 2002; Baldock et al., 2006; Champoux and Brun, 2003; Fairman and Yapp, 2005; Fonteyn et al., 1997; Lamm, 1997; Schaller et al., 1998). At the same time regulation, control and campaigns aimed at improving the working environment in small firms had only limited effect (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Walters, 2001).

One reason for the meagre outcome relates to the limited understanding of the small firms and the reasoning about the working environment among owner-managers. This article argues that there is a need for a change of perspective from the problems experienced by people from *outside* trying to impose working environment regulations to the people *inside*: How do small firms – and especially the owner-managers as the absolutely key actors – understand the working environment? What kind of sense-making exercises do they undertake – influenced, as they are, by exposure to external pressure and information and to internal experience from social relationships with employees and from hazardous incidents?

The aim of this article is to study how owner-managers understand the working environment as an issue in the daily operation of their business and thereby provide a better understanding of the internal processes and resistance which can be used to design more efficient working environment interventions from the outside.

We commence with a discussion of what is known about the understanding of the role of the owner-managers and their attitudes to the working environment. This will be used to develop a theoretical platform for the empirical analysis later in the paper. This discussion is followed by a description of the methods used to study the understanding of the working environment inside the firms. The data is then used to examine the owner-managers' response to the working environment from various angles, illustrating that some of the common features behind the great heterogeneity of views are attempts to explain away risk and pass on employer responsibility to the employees. These characteristics are discussed in the final sections, which add to our understanding of the owner-managers' identity work processes by suggesting self-protection against the feeling of personal guilt and the maintenance of an image of themselves as decent people as major drivers behind the understanding of their working environment.

The literature on owner-managers and the working environment

Over the last two or three decades, the approach to much research on small firms has focused on the role of the owner-manager (Curran, 1986; Scase and Goffee, 1980, 1982; Storey, 1994). Furthermore the owner-managers are often described as entrepreneurs, thereby suggesting a growth