Employee Participation on Work Environment in Food Processing Industry in Denmark & New Zealand

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This article examines both direct and representative participation by employees. The hypothesis is that effectiveness of employee participation correlates positively with work environment quality. Comparison between Denmark and New Zealand (NZ) might be instructive since the representative participative practices are greater and longer in the former. Food processing industry is critical to both the countries in terms of employment and export income. The qualitative and quantitative data for the two food processing plants case studies in each country was collected from relevant documents; three to six interviews in each plant including human resource managers, other senior mangers and employee representatives; and a questionnaire survey of a random sample of employees from each plant.

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Introduction

A body of evidence indicates the impact of the work environment on organisational effectiveness as well as economic and social benefits of employment practices which contribute to employee well-ness and well-being (Doucouliagos 1995, Katz, Kochan & Weber 1985, Kopelman, Brief & Guzzo 1990, Quinlan et al. 2001, Oxenburgh et al. 2004, Wright et al.2005, Theriou & Chatzoglou 2008). At the same time, substantial evidence over a long period suggests that employee participation and influence in decision-making in the workplace, impacts positively on the broader work environment (Arthur 1994, Delaney & Huselid 1996, Meyer & Topolnytsky 2000, Markey 2001). This in turn has an impact on labour turnover and absenteeism. Boxall et al. (2003) found that the propensity to leave a job was critically affected by the work environment and job satisfaction, and mitigated by feelings of empowerment and a sense that employee contributions are valued by employers.

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Representative employee participation has frequently been associated with positive quality of work environment. Referring specifically to occupational health and safety (OHS) committees, British and Australian studies (Walters 2004, Walters et al. 2005) have found that worker representation and consultation through committees produced better outcomes in OHS than management acting alone. Similar studies have also suggested that trade union presence has a positive impact on OHS outcomes (Fairbrother 1996, Bohle and Quinlan 2000, Saksvik & Quinlan 2003). However, the impact of OHS committees on OHS outcomes is also affected by a range of other factors, including 'strong legislative steer', management commitment, adequate training and information for employee representatives, and communication channels with fellow employees and management (Walters et al. 2005). In addition, the existence of a broader framework of participative practice through unions, or works councils as exist in European countries, is likely to impact on the effectiveness of OHS committees and their scope of operation (Harris 2004, Knudsen 2005).

Both direct and representative participation are examined in this article. Direct participation occurs through various mechanisms, such as semi autonomous teams, which empower employees to exert a degree of control over their immediate work environment, including the hours that they work. Representative employee participation may occur through trade unions and workplace committees of various kinds with employee representation.

Our hypothesis is that effectiveness of employee participation correlates positively with work environment quality. We also expect the correlation between these two variables to be stronger where the depth or range of employee participation is greater. The comparison between Denmark and New Zealand (NZ) might be instructive in this regard, since the embeddedness of representative participative practices is greater and longer established in the former. We have focused on the food processing industry because it is critical to the economy of both countries in terms of employment and export income.

Four case studies were chosen, two food processing plants in each country. Data was qualitative and quantitative in nature, collected from relevant documents; three to six interviews at each plant including human resource managers, other senior mangers and employee representatives; and a questionnaire survey of a random sample of employees from each plant. The remainder of the paper provides institutional and industrial background, reports on the results of the research and then draws appropriate conclusions.

Background

Union membership density varies significantly between the two countries. Danish union membership density is high, at about 70 per cent, excluding retired members, although this has declined from almost 80 per cent in 1998 (Lind 2009, Visser 2009). Union membership density in NZ declined more significantly from the 1980s, but has stabilised at over 21 per cent since 1999 (Feinburg-Danielli & Lafferty 2007).

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Legislation in most European countries and parts of Asia requires and defines the jurisdiction and powers of non-union workplace employee representation, usually in works councils. However, in both Denmark and New Zealand the only form of legislatively mandated non-union workplace employee representation occurs through OHS committees. Nevertheless, other forms of non-union workplace employee representation are well established in both countries.

Danish OHS representation was instigated by the Work Environment Act 1975, and in NZ by the Health and Safety in Employment Amendment Act 2002 (Knudsen 1995: 91-2, Harris 2004). The threshold for establishment of OHS committees is 20 employees in Denmark and 30 for committees or representatives in NZ, although Danish enterprises with 10 or more employees must have employee safety representatives and smaller NZ enterprises may have representatives if requested by employees or unions. The Danish committees' jurisdiction includes the 'planning of the enterprise', which could cover work processes, restructuring and technological change, although this only seems to occur in some enterprises and up to 25 per cent have not implemented OHS representation. The jurisdiction of NZ committees is more specifically limited to OHS and hazard prevention, although it is not known how widespread these committees are.

Danish cooperation committees also exist in enterprises of 35 or more employees by agreement between the employer federation (DA) and the main union federation (LO) since 1947. Cooperation committees are forums for consultation over working conditions, training, work organisation and especially technological and organisational change. Composed of equal numbers of employer and employee representatives, they cover less than a third of enterprises and may vary in effectiveness (Knudsen 1995: 82-90). In a recent NZ survey 40 per cent of employees reported coverage by similarly composed joint consultative committees (JCCs), although these are not subject to a general agreement, and hence, vary greatly in role and effectiveness, with employee representatives chosen by employers in over a quarter of instances (Boxall et al. 2007: 160-1).

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Food and beverage manufacturing is NZ's largest manufacturing sector by total output, producing roughly one-third of exported goods and services, and contributing just under 5 per cent of GDP (Food & Beverage Taskforce 2006 :2). Despite its economic importance, the food and beverage sector is not seen as a glamorous or even as an attractive career choice and has difficulty recruiting some of the skills it needs. To increase performance the food and beverage sector needs to have the right skills employed in productive, high quality workplaces: 'It has a way to go to achieve this. … much of the work is seasonal; much of it dirty and dangerous; accident rates are relatively high, pay rates relatively low and employment conditions are often sub-optimal' (Food & Beverage Taskforce 2006:.25; MIA/DOL 2009: 14-17).

The Danish food and drink industry employs about 16 per cent of the workforce in processing, and contributes 18 per cent to export earnings and 26 per cent of all industrial turnover. As with NZ, the sector's work environment is characterised by physical strains such as noise, bad working positions, heavy lifting, repetitive work, as well as relatively low pay and skill shortages (Festerling 2008: Fødevareindustrien 2008).

Organisational Analysis

Because of different institutional environments, the NZ and Danish companies are examined in turn.

Danish Workplaces: Both companies are relatively independent units of larger corporations, one manufacturing bread and the other confectionary. Both the factories are highly automated production lines where work consists of supervising, maintaining, and feeding the lines, and packaging of the product. Around half the workforce is skilled trade workers although their wages are not significantly higher than unskilled employees.

The first (bread) case, DkA, is situated in an area with a relatively high level of unemployment and almost all employees are men, partly due to the physically demanding character of the work. Production occurs for 24 hours, seven days a week, based on shifts. The DkB is situated closer to a larger city with low unemployment and half the workforce is women. Here the work is based on three shifts during five days, while only a little production is carried out during the weekend. In both cases more than half of the employees have been employed for more than five years. The rate of absenteeism due to sickness is low to average: 5 per cent in DkA, and 7 per cent in DkB, compared with the national sector average of 6-7 per cent (Knudsen, Busck & Lind 2009). Over 60 per cent of DkA employees and over 50 per cent of DkB employees had been employed for over five years, which indicates low labour turnover.

***New Zealand Workplaces*:** The NZ food processing companies studied here exhibited significant differences. NZA is a NZ owned confectionary manufacturer. The workforce of 65 is of diverse ethnic origin, including Asian, Maori and NZ European and Pasifika staff. NZB is a foreign owned subsidiary, which manufactures a range of quality food products. Around 1,900 people of various ethnicities are employed, of which approximately 350 are casual. For the employee survey 92 per cent of NZA respondents were females, whereas 88 per cent of NZB respondents were males.

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In both the NZ workplaces the surveys showed that employees are commonly asked to work overtime and feel worn out from work. However, NZA employees report these trends more frequently, as well as exhibit greater frequency of stress, being in emotionally distressing situations and high workloads, than respondents from NZB. Job satisfaction levels are not surprisingly lower at NZA. This might also be affected by the fact that NZA was changing shift patterns from5x8 hour shifts over a five day week to 4x12 hour shifts over four days. This change was unpopular, and might be expected to affect female employees in particular because of child-care responsibilities.

NZ food manufacturing organisations are characterised by comparatively low staff turnover rates of 20.5 per cent per annum, compared with 22.4 per cent for all industry for 2009 (Price, Clark & Lee 2010). Both the food manufacturing organisations had annual labour turnover well below this, 15 per cent for A and 11 per cent for B. Absenteeism is taken seriously in both the organisations because of its impact on production. At 3-4 per cent for both the organisations, absenteeism levels are average, and perhaps because of the impact of the recession, the level is falling.

Participation

Work in both Danish cases is organised in teams. In DkA teams are based on the division of work due to the specific shift and line the employees are working on; in DkB they are based on a newly implemented structure in which the employees are delegated functions and responsibilities. Lean production concepts have been implemented alongside this new team structure.

In both the Danish cases representative participation is well-structured at all levels. Safety representation is well organised with an adequate number of elected safety representatives, around four meetings of the OHS committee per year and updated workplace assessment reports as demanded by legislation. All workers are unionised and shop stewards elected in both the cases. Wages, working hours etc. are set by the national collective agree

ment, but in DkA a certain percentage is locally negotiated as the company exceeds the limits on the amounts of shift work prescribed by the agreement. Works councils are in place in both the companies and facilitate workers' participation, but leave problems of the work environment to the OHS committee.

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Some variations in employee perceptions, however, occurred between DkA and DkB regarding representative participation. DkA employees are more likely than DkB employees to consider that they have influence on working conditions through their safety representatives, and rate this their greatest source of influence in representative structures. DkB employees, however, are more likely to consider that they have influence through the union. Nevertheless, the vast majority in both cases consider that their influence through any of these means is only partial or to a low or very low degree, 75-96 per cent. The works council is considered least influential in both the cases: only 4-9 per cent consider that they have influence through it, but even in the case of the union, the highest proportion considering that they had significant influence through it was 26 per cent, at DkB. These responses indicate relatively weak confidence in influence through representative structures.

Representative employee participation varies at the two NZ workplaces.

Representative employee participation varies at the two NZ workplaces. At NZA there are no union members, and staff mainly work individually or in pairs rather than in larger teams. At NZB approximately 70 per cent of staff are union members, and a strong team structure operates in each department with compulsory team briefings for all staff. Apart from unions, employee representation at both the food manufacturing organisations occurred through OHS committees as well as social committees, cross-departmental exchange committees and customer oriented quality committees. OHS committees included management and employee representatives, the latter from different departments as a means of improving cross-plant communication, although at NZA the committee was numerically dominated by management. Management claimed that employee representatives were chosen primarily on the basis of job position rather than through election by employees. This tends to limit representativeness and accountability.

Due to its larger size, NZB has departmental committees as well as a site committee, which meet monthly. All OHS monthly results are fed back through team briefings as well as the notice boards. Communication between NZA OHS committee and staff is more top down, principally through newsletters. The primary focus of both the com-

mittees was hazard monitoring and OHS incidents, but they also confirmed management expectations in engaging strategically. Responsiveness and engagement of the OHS committees can in part be measured by the frequency of issues being taken to them and the length of time taken to resolve them. Only 31 per cent (n 4) of NZA survey respondents had raised an issue for the committee in the past, with half of these considering they had been dealt with satisfactorily and with an immediate resolution. At NZB 53 per cent of survey respondents had raised an issue for the committee in the past, with 67 per cent gaining resolution within a month.

As with the OHS committees, there is evidence that NZB participative practices were more structured and effective through JCCs. NZB has multiple JCCs at departmental level. Only half of NZA respondents recognised the existence of a JCC, and only half of those who had taken an issue to the JCC at NZA considered it had been dealt with satisfactorily, compared with 80 per cent at NZB. In both cases quality committees were more temporary because they were concerned with specific production issues.

Table 1 compares results between all the four workplaces for issues related to direct participation. Overall, the NZ responses are more positive, indicating a higher degree of effective direct participation than in the Danish workplaces, but the pattern is not entirely consistent. NZA employees are far more likely than any of the others to consider that they have influence on how much work they do and on how work is done, and to consider that they have opportunities to learn new things on the job. The high score of NZA for influence on work organisation is somewhat surprising because of the unpopular change in shift patterns. NZB respondents, however, are the most likely to consider that they gain information on important decisions. Of the Danish workplaces, DkB respondents are more likely to consider that they enjoy influence on how the work is done, to learn new things on the job, and to consider that their work is acknowledged and appreciated by management. However, DkB respondents are least likely to consider that they get information on important decisions on time. DkB and NZB respondents are most likely to consider that they should have more influence in the workplace.

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The contrasts with representative participation are counter-intuitive. The higher likelihood of NZA employees considering that they were influential on work organisation contrasts with their less systematic teamwork organisation, non-union status and the weaker effectiveness of the OHS committee and JCC. The lower levels of influence on work organisation reported by the Danish workplaces, compared with NZ, correlates with relatively low degrees of influence experienced through any representative structure. How

Table 1: Work & Direct Participation

Question	Always/often %	Sometimes %	Rarely/never %	No.
Do you have significant influence on how much work you have to do?				
DkA	22	25	53	64
DkB	23	30	47	53
NZA	55	18	27	11
NZB	29	41	29	17
Do you have significant influence on how your work is done?				
DkA	41	27	33	64
DkB	49	25	26	53
NZA	75	8	17	12
NZB	63	31	6	16
Question	**Very high/high degree %**	**Partly %**	**Low/ very low degree %**	**No.**
Do you have possibilities to learn new things in your job?				
DkA	21	42	36	66
DkB	53	30	17	53
NZA	69	23	8	13
NZB	35	53	6	17
Is your work acknowledged & appreciated by management?				
DkA	40	39	22	65
DkB	43	43	14	51
NZA	54	8	39	13
NZB	53	24	24	17
Do you get information on important decisions, changes & future plans in due time?				
DkA	29	47	24	66
DkB	13	42	45	53
NZA	31	23	46	13
NZB	47	35	18	17
Do you think you should have more influence at your workplace?				
DkA	30	49	21	65
DkB	60	25	15	52
NZA	42	50	8	12
NZB	65	24	12	17

ever, in NZ the workplace employees with the strongest teamwork and representative structures, B, are less likely to consider that they are influential in work organisation and most likely to consider that they should have more influence.

Quality of Work Environment

All the case studies reveal that management is seriously concerned with OHS and employee well-being. The physical working environment is optimised within a reasonable economic range. At the time of the case studies unemployment was low in both the countries and it was therefore important to create attractive workplaces.

Table 2. Physical Work Environment

Workplace	Satisfied with physical work environment		No.
	Yes	No	
DkA	70	30	66
DkB	65	35	53
NZA	58	42	12
NZB	75	25	16

Table 2 shows strong majorities of employees surveyesd in each organisation were satisfied with their physical work environment, with NZB showing the strongest result. This may reflect more structured and effective OHS representation at NZB, although it had a slightly higher accident rate than NZA, with 41 per cent of employees reporting a work related accident or injury in the past three years compared with 39 per cent at NZA. DkA performed more positively in Danish employees' ranking of their workplaces, despite physically more demanding work, a higher accident rate and more shift work. However, DkA employees did consider that they had a higher degree of influence through their OHS representative than did DkB employees.

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In Table 3 the most positive scores are the lower ones relating to workload and stress. DkA performed the most positively of all workplaces, in that its respondents were least likely to: consider that they had more work than they can accomplish, that they were put in emotionally distressing situations, that their work takes so much of their energy which affected their private life, and feel worn out and stressed. DkB and NZA were the worst performing workplaces across these responses, and given the changes in shift patterns this is not surprising at NZA.

Conclusions

The trends revealed in our case studies are complex, but provide substantial confirmation of our hypothesis. Table 4 summarises all results for QWE, direct participation and representative participation, absenteeism and turnover. Scores out of 40 were allocated for each component, and then an index created for

Table 3: Workload and Stress

Question		Always/often %	Sometimes %	Rarely/never %	No.
Do you have more work than you can accomplish?					
	DkA	9	31	51	64
	DkB	68	26	6	53
	NZA	69	23	8	13
	NZB	29	41	29	17
Does your work put you in emotionally distressing situations?					
	DkA	2	27	72	64
	DkB	21	42	38	53
	NZA	23	54	23	13
	NZB	6	59	35	17
Do you think your work takes so much of your energy it affects your private life?					
	DkA	6	22	72	65
	DkB	27	35	39	52
	NZA	23	39	39	13
	NZB	24	35	41	17
How often have you felt worn out?					
	DkA	9	23	67	64
	DkB	12	46	42	52
	NZA	62	39	0	13
	NZB	24	53	24	17
How often have you felt stressed?					
	DkA	2	20	79	65
	DkB	10	27	64	52
	NZA	39	39	23	13
	NZB	24	41	35	17

each of QWE, direct participation and representative participation.[1] This scoring system was not possible for absenteeism and turnover, which simply indicate relationship to industry trends (low, average), and corresponding workplace in each country (lower).

Table 4: Summary of results

Workplace	QWE score	Direct participation score	Representative participation score	absenteeism	turnover
DkA	26.3 (2)	18.5 (4)	23.6 (2)	low	lower
DkB	21.9 (3)	19.0 (3)	21.2 (3)	average	low
NZA	19.9 (4)	22.0 (1)	13.0 (4)	low	low
NZB	27.8 (1)	20.9 (2)	28.9 (1)	low	lower

Table 4 does indicate partial confirmation of our hypothesis that effectiveness of employee participation correlates positively with work environment quality. NZB scores the highest on QWE and representative participation, and second on direct participation. DkA scores second on QWE and representative participation, although lower on direct participation. DkB scores third across all dimensions, and NZA scores the lowest on QWE and representative participation, although first on direct participation.

The correlation between quality of work environment and effectiveness of representative employee participation is confirmed in these case studies. For direct participation the results are more mixed, although it is worth noting that the scores for this factor were quite close. Nor was our sub hypothesis confirmed regarding the likely greater impact of more embedded participative structures in Denmark, since the NZ workplaces were ranked first and last for QWE and representative participation. This suggests that workplace environments may be more important than national systems in determining the impact

1. A score out of 40 was measured for each workplace in each dimension. The score was calculated by allocating points out of 40 for each response multiplied by frequency and divided by total respondents. Higher scores indicated a more positive response. This follows the practice of the Danish National Research Institute for the Work Environment in a number of reports (Knudsen, Busck & Lind 2009). Questions with a five-point scale for responses had points allocated on the basis of 40, 30, 20, 10, and 0 from the most to least positive response. For the workload and stress questions the scoring was reversed because the most positive response was actually negative, i.e. 'never or almost never'. For questions with a choice of only two responses (yes/no), points were allocated on the basis of 35 for the positive response and 5 for the negative response. The scoring system for two and three-point response scales were meant to create equivalence with the greater range of scores used for a five-point scale. For direct participation an index was created by averaging the scores for the components indicated in Tables 1, and for QWE an index was created from a combination of scores for components in Tables 2 and 3. For representative participation an index was created from a combination of questions relating to effectiveness of OHS committees and JCCs/works councils, together with a score for degree of unionisation based on:
90-100 per cent density 40
70-80 per cent density 30
50-70 per cent density 20
<50 per cent density 10
0 per cent density 0.

Workplace environments may be more important than national systems in determining the impact of effectiveness of participation structures on QWE outcomes.

of effectiveness of participation structures on QWE outcomes. Finally, there seems to be confirmation for the correlation of QWE and representative participation on one hand, with absenteeism and labour turnover, as might be expected from the literature that suggests mitigation of turnover and absenteeism by QWE and a sense of employee empowerment. NZB and DkA, with the higher scores in both QWE and representative participation scales also have lower turnover rates, and in the case of DkA also a lower absenteeism rate. The correlations, and non -correlations, are sufficiently suggestive to warrant exploration in further case studies across a range of industries compared across different national industrial relations systems.

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