Out of sight and out of mind

Occupational safety and health for remote workers

Background
Remote workers work away from their main location at least some of the time, e.g. construction workers, teleworkers, drivers, engineers, roadworkers and maintenance workers.

Distributed or remote working poses a challenge for occupational health and safety (OSH) leadership as OSH practitioners and line managers have limited face-to-face contact with these workers. Current leadership models and frameworks are developed for face-to-face interaction.

Aim
To identify the leadership behaviours OSH practitioners and line managers may engage in to ensure distributed worker safety and well-being.

Method
The researchers, from the University of East Anglia and affinity health at work, conducted a qualitative semi-structured interview study of 42 OSH practitioners in 19 UK organisations from across industry.

They asked: Which leadership behaviours are important to ensure distributed workers' safety and health? They mapped interviews onto existing frameworks and identified additional leadership behaviours.

Results
The following leadership behaviours were reported to be effective in managing the safety and health of distributed workers.

- **Transformational leadership** (leaders formulate a clear vision, encourage independent decision-making and challenge existing mindsets, act as a role model and coach and mentor employees to reach their full potential)
  
  “They realise sometimes safety issues can actually have productivity effects as well. So it’s like trying to be positive about the issue rather than saying ‘no you can’t do that’. It’s almost like coming up with a way of saying ‘have you considering going at it from this angle?’”

- **Health and safety-specific leadership** (leaders involve employees in health and safety discussions and put health and safety on the agenda)
  
  “So he’ll have meetings with them and he’ll always speak about safety to them and he’ll know exactly what they are doing on safety.”

- **Transactional leadership** (leaders promote compliance and employee behaviour through reward. In exchange for rewards – monetary and recognition – employees conduct desired behaviours)
  
  “…then it is obviously monitoring just to see if there are those who haven’t been able to come forward, that we can pick up changes that means perhaps I should approach you and say ‘what can we do?’”

  “There is also the fact that the manager should be getting to know their team from just a purely humanistic point of view, they get to know the character as well and not just the person.”

In addition, we developed tailored items more focused on a trusting and close relationship with employees.

Conclusion
Existing leadership frameworks may be appropriate for examining OSH leadership and its outcomes among distributed workers. However, some adaptation of frameworks may be needed.

Next steps
The researchers are currently finalising a survey among 15 organisations worldwide which explores the cascade of OSH practitioner leadership to line managers’ behaviours and their effects on distributed workers’ safety and health.

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