

Rationalization measures are the main cause of poor work environment

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Managers in the private and public sectors must consider work environment when rationalising production to obtain sustainable systems. A research study published in the journal *Applied Ergonomics* reveals that rationalisation measures often have a major negative impact on both the physical and psychosocial work environment. "However, the review also presents scientific evidence on how to reduce this problem," says one of the researchers, at the University of Gothenburg.

"Considerable resources all over the world have been invested in dealing with work-related disorders. But research from the past twenty years has been unable to prove that these investments have led to any general long-term improvement of the physical and psychosocial work environment" says Jørgen Winkel, at the Department of Work Science at the University of Gothenburg, who together with Professor Rolf Westgaard at the University of Trondheim has scrutinized about 10,000 scientific papers. The analyses and results are published in the recent issue of the scientific journal *Applied Ergonomics*.

No long-term effect

Their conclusion is that a dialogue-based leadership that includes the employees is essential when rationalisation measures are introduced. Some of the main findings of the study:

- Physical exercise, stress management, ergonomic improvements in chairs, desks, keyboards, tools and other efforts for the individual have not had any demonstrable long-term effect on employee health despite several decades of extensive research within the field.
- Rationalisation measures that lack any preventive focus on [work environment](#) most often lead to negative effects for the employees in the form of widespread stress, increased time pressure and unreasonable demands. This may cause poor mental and physical health, for example in the form of anxiety, fatigue and depression and musculo-skeletal disorders.
- It is possible to reduce or even avoid the negative effects of rationalisation measures. This requires a management that prioritises the following issues as an integrated part of the rationalisation processes:

Active involvement

- Active employee involvement in the rationalisation and production processes.
- A dialogue-based leadership including all employees.
- Sufficient information for the employees about the rationalisation processes and anticipated results.
- Organisational and social support at the workplace and fair treatment of employees throughout the process.

"Proper consideration of these issues allow a development towards

sustainable production systems" says Jørgen Winkel. A 'Sustainable production system' is here defined as the joint consideration of competitive performance and working conditions in a long term perspective.

In the study, rationalisation measures are described as being positive and absolutely essential in order to maintain competitive edge on the global market, and thus resources for good working conditions. At the same time, the results do not suggest that we should stop implementing traditional ergonomic measures aimed at individual employees.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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