

# WORK RE-ORGANIZATION

## A Hazard To Workers' Health And Safety

Workers and union health and safety representatives are increasingly listing issues such as downsizing/understaffing, mandatory overtime, push for production, cross-training/multi-tasking, and work overload as key factors causing or contributing to injuries, illness and stress in their workplaces. All of these issues are related to how work is organized and being restructured.

Work organization is about the control of work and the division of labor. It includes the tasks performed, who performs them and how they are performed in the process of making a product or providing a service. Many workplaces are undergoing massive changes in the ways in which work is organized, often made possible by innovations in information and communications technologies. New forms of work organization, such as combined jobs, multi-tasking, teams, telecommuting, electronic performance monitoring, use of temporary workers, contract workers and alternative work schedules, are being introduced with very little attention to their potential to hurt workers. However, we do know that these forms of work restructuring can increase workers' risk of injuries, illnesses and stress.

### Forms Of Work Organization

The organization of work includes many aspects, such as pace of work (speed of an assembly line, quotas), work load, number of people performing a job (staffing levels), hours and days on the job, length and number of rest breaks and days away from work, layout of the work, skill mix of those workers on the job, assignment of tasks and responsibilities, and training for the tasks being performed. When work is restructured, these aspects of work organization can be changed dramatically. Work is restructured by management to achieve the goals of standardization of the work, which in turn is used by management to increase their control over work.

Some common terms for work organization/reorganization include:

- *Lean Production:* An overall approach to work organization that focuses on elimination of any "waste" in the production/service delivery process. It often includes the following elements: "continuous improvement", "just-in-time production", and work teams.
- *Continuous Improvement:* A process for continually increasing productivity and efficiency, often relying on information provided by employee

involvement groups or teams. Generally involves standardizing the work process and eliminating micro-breaks or any “wasted” time spent not producing/serving.

- *Just-in-Time Production:* Limiting or eliminating inventories, including work-in-progress inventories, using single piece production techniques often linked with efforts to eliminate “waste” in the production process, including any activity that does not add value to the product.
- *Work Teams:* Work teams operate within a production or service delivery process, taking responsibility for completing whole segments of work product. Another type of team meets separately from the production process to “harvest” the knowledge of the workforce and generate, develop and implement ideas on how to improve quality, production, and efficiency.
- *Total Productive Maintenance:* Designed to eliminate all nonstandard, non-planned maintenance with the goal of eliminating unscheduled disruptions, simplifying (de-skilling) maintenance procedures, and reducing the need for “just-in-case” maintenance employees.
- *Outsourcing/Contracting Out:* Transfer of work formerly done by employees to outside organizations.

In many workplaces undergoing restructuring, worker knowledge about the production/service process is gathered through “employee involvement” and then used by management to “lean out” and standardize the work process, thereby reducing reliance on worker skill and creativity. This restructuring has resulted in job loss for some workers, while increasing the work load and work pace for those who remain on the job. The result of these changes in work organization is that it is no longer just machines that are wearing out – it is the workers themselves.

## **Occurrence Of Restructured Workplaces**

The vast majority of workplaces in the U.S. have gone through formal or informal restructuring of work. The introduction of computers in every sector of the economy has created changes in work processes that can negatively impact workers’ health and safety. One measure of change is in the number of hours that workers spend on their jobs. In the United States the number of hours worked annually has been steadily increasing over the past couple of decades to the point where American workers work more hours than workers in any other major industrialized country. Overtime hours, including mandatory overtime, have also risen in the United States.

## **Hazards Of Work Organization/Work Re-structuring**

Recent research on the impact of new forms of work organization documents negative impacts on health and safety, and is cause for concern. The organization of work itself can influence the level of psychological stress that workers experience and can increase exposure to physical hazards, both which can lead to injuries or illnesses. New forms of work organization can result in the intensification of work, leading to working faster and harder. This work intensification may be increasing stress on the job, with low worker control over the work, often coupled with higher job demands.

Changes in work organization systems have been linked to the development of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in health care, automobile manufacturing, meatpacking, telecommunications, and contingent work. Work-related MSDs associated with work organization changes have been linked to exposure to physical hazards and psychologically stressful conditions resulting from machine-paced work, inadequate work-rest cycles, wage incentives, time pressure, low job control, low social support, electronic performance monitoring, and repetitive work.

In the health care industry, organizational changes associated with understaffing among nurses and high patient-to-nurse staffing ratios have been linked to increases in needlestick injuries, nurse burnout, and greater surgical patient mortality.

Studies have shown that work stress can have serious impact on workers' cardiovascular system. High job strain (jobs with low job control and high work demands) is associated with increases in blood pressure and increased risk of dying from heart attacks.

Long hours of work also appear to be hazardous to the cardiovascular system. Overtime work has been shown to increase blood pressure and increase the risk of experiencing a heart attack. Long work hours increase the risk of having a workplace injury, with the risk going up significantly beyond the ninth hour of work. Increased levels of fatigue and greater exposure to physical hazards are thought to play a major role in the increased injury rates in workers who work long hours.

## **Protecting Workers From Work Organization Hazards**

Workers are experiencing increased injuries, illness and stress from downsizing/understaffing, mandatory overtime, 12-hour shifts, outsourcing, lack of training for added job duties, increased work load, and increased work pace. To hide this increase in work-related injuries and illnesses, many employers are implementing "blame-the-worker" approaches to safety and health which

discourage workers from reporting injuries, illnesses and hazards. These programs, policies and practices blame workers who have (or report) an injury for committing “unsafe acts” and engaging in “unsafe behaviors”. “Blame-the-worker” or behavioral safety approaches include such practices as “safety incentive” programs that offer rewards to workers who don’t report injuries; injury discipline policies that threaten and deliver discipline to workers who do report injuries; and behavioral observation programs that take the focus away from hazardous conditions, including work organization hazards such as production pressures, lack of staff, work overload, and long work hours – and blame workers for being inattentive or working carelessly if they suffer injuries. Workers and unions need to eliminate these blame-the-worker schemes and instead focus on identifying and eliminating the real hazards that are causing injuries and illnesses.

Addressing work organization hazards would include, for example, increasing staffing levels, providing job security, prohibitions or limits on mandatory overtime, shorter work shifts, job training, and reasonable workloads and pace of work. Solutions to these problems come from workers and unions having a greater say in how work is organized and restructured, how technology is used, and the policies and practices employers want to impose on the workforce.

Approaches that unions can use include:

#### Collective bargaining

Unions have successfully negotiated language in contracts to require minimum staffing levels, limited or prohibited mandatory overtime, reduced production quotas, put limits on the pace of work, mandated rest breaks, and developed safety and health programs that are focused on finding and fixing hazards rather than blaming workers.

The AFL-CIO has a fact sheet on its web site with examples of contract language that put some limits on the employer’s use of mandatory overtime:

<http://www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/issues/otexamples.cfm>

#### Mid-term bargaining campaigns

For unions with bargaining rights, the right to bargain is continuous (not just granted at contract expiration time). Employers are prohibited from making unilateral changes in wages, hours, or conditions of work (including health and safety) without notifying the union about the changes and giving the union an opportunity to bargain over those changes. Employers must also bargain over the impacts of changes they make if the changes impact working conditions.

Check the fact sheet linked below from the AFL-CIO web site that provides some additional information on mid-term bargaining:

[http://www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/issues/upload/injury\\_policies.pdf](http://www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/issues/upload/injury_policies.pdf)

### Training and education

Training and education of workers is critically important in building successful campaigns to address the hazards associated with work organization and workplace restructuring. An important first step is educating workers that the way in which work is organized and being restructured can be hazardous to their health and safety. The use of surveys, body mapping, and hazard mapping can then be used to help identify injuries, illnesses, and stresses suffered by workers in a particular department or workplace where work restructuring has caused or contributed to those problems. Once the work organization hazards have been found, the union can take steps to control exposure to those hazards.

### Legislative campaigns

Labor unions, particularly in the health care industry, have been successful in several states in passing legislation or regulations that places limits on mandatory overtime for nurses and health care workers – California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, and West Virginia. California also sets minimum nurse staffing levels in hospitals.

## **Further Reading And Resources**

The web sites listed below can provide additional health and safety information on work organization, long work hours, and workplace stress:

*AFL-CIO:*

[www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/issues/](http://www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/issues/)

*Job Stress Network:*

[www.workhealth.org](http://www.workhealth.org)

*NIOSH:*

[www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/workschedules](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/workschedules) (work schedules)

[www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress) (stress)

*Hazards Magazine:*

[www.hazards.org/bs](http://www.hazards.org/bs) (blame the worker programs)

[www.hazards.org/workedtodeath/index.htm](http://www.hazards.org/workedtodeath/index.htm) (overwork)

[www.hazards.org/getalife/index.htm](http://www.hazards.org/getalife/index.htm) (work-life balance)

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