

Knowledge Activism and Workplace Mental Health

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Knowledge Activism (KA) in OHS

Worker Representatives who strategically collect and employ workplace information and scientific/medical/engineering knowledge to promote and achieve improvements in workplace health and safety

Research Sources:

Hall, A., A. Forrest, A. Sears and N. Carlan (2006) Knowledge Activism and the Workplace Politics of Occupational Health. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 61(3), 408-436.

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Hall, A. (2022) Worker Representation in the Regulation of Occupational Health: Explaining the Shift to Knowledge Activism. *Social and Legal Studies*. Volume 32(2), 273-293.

Hall, A. and E. Tucker. (2022) Worker Representation in the Time of Covid. *Labour/Le Travail*. 90(4), Autumn, 9-40.

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KA – Key Operational Characteristics (1)

- Build knowledge and understanding, and use them to strategically and tactically make hazard claims, challenge management positions, present solutions and build trust/legitimacy/influence
- Work within and outside committee context
- Recognize and understand political demands of representation
- Educate, Involve and Organize Workers
- Educate and persuade managers and supervisors
- Assertive and Persistent, short and long-term strategy
- Provide solutions

KA – Key Operational Characteristics (2)

- Recognize political value of inspections, meetings, etc. but do not define role in these terms and are aware of management efforts to confine them to these technical and bureaucratic boxes
- Recognize limits of OHS law and Ministry enforcement but learn how to use what leverage they offer
- Seek formal management and union support for more dedicated paid off time to perform rep. duties or other negotiated rights

KA, Stress and Mental Health

Two Main Points:

- 1) Knowledge activism can and does play an important role in addressing workplace stress and mental health
- 2) Worker reps. are themselves subject to considerable stress and Labour organizations need to help to reduce rep. stress

Overall Argument: The impact of KA on workplace stress (and OHS in general) is at least partly contingent on whether labour organizations do a better job supporting the mental health of worker representatives.

KA and Advocacy on Stress and MH

- 2013-16 survey research found that KAs were more likely to be pushing for changes to address violence and harassment
- Intensive interviews suggested greater awareness of stress and mental health as important OHS issues
- Also more likely to report efforts to challenge management on these issues
- 2021-22 research found KAs more likely to recognize the stress associated with covid and push for action.
- Greater capacity to address workplace stress as crucial OHS issue given their orientation to innovation, new information and knowledge, and their sources of power, political strategies and tactics; best positioned to use research on stress to persuade managers and workers to recognize and address an expanded vision of stress causation and reduction (going beyond the issue of violence and harassment)

The Stress of Representation

- General literature on political activism demonstrates that activists often lose their commitment or burnout due to stress (e.g. Gorski and Chen, 2015; Hope et al., 2018; Mannarini and Talo, 2011, Nah, 2021; Rodgers, 2010).
- Most OHS reps. in our studies acknowledge significant stress; some express worry about burning out; some report leaving or planning to leave because of stress.
- Major sources of stress – workload, management coercion and confrontation, backlash or conflicts with workers, failure to achieve changes or slow pace of change

Differences in Stress, Stress Responses and Stress Resources

- Some workplaces are less stressful for reps. often because managers are more cooperative/collaborative/committed
- Some of those differences reflect the consequences of KA strategies and tactics over time/some speak to different management orientations/histories, different economic contexts, etc.
- Some reps. avoid or manage stress more effectively (e.g. “don’t get too upset, sometimes things take time, need to keep getting along with boss...”)
- Some reps. report better emotional and social support from labour organizations, fellow workers, family, etc.; given the nature of KA, having access to information and knowledge sources like OHCOW is key

Critical Importance of Organizational Support

- Social justice activists rely on organizational supports, and when missing, they report more stress and are more likely to burnout/quit/dropout (e.g. Mannarini and Talo, 2011).
- During Covid (Hall and Tucker, 2022; 2023), the reps who reported more access to information, more direct communications from reps. (phone calls, emails) and offers of legal advice from their unions felt more confident about challenging management; reps who didn't hear from their union OHS staff, expressed insecurity and uncertainty about what to do; more likely to talk about feeling overwhelmed and ineffective.

What can labour organizations do for reps.?

- Open and maintain periodic and emergency two-way communications between union OHS staff and reps. Offer advice, information, emotional support, etc.
- Help reps. to build and maintain rep. networks within and between workplaces (on-line or in person places where reps. can communicate, meet, discuss, exchange ideas and experiences, etc.)
- Expand and strengthen rep. education programs which address rep. stress and MH
- Make professional MH/counselling services available to reps.
- Recognize and address their concerns and requests about workload, training and education, tools, etc. through funding, staffing, collective bargaining, etc.