

Research Report

Forum: Special conference

Issue: offer opportunities for safe, creative work that motivates people's development

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Introduction

Sustainable development implies that workers are protected and remain employable. It has to be taken on board at the highest political level, which means within social and economic development strategies. Economic conditions impact on workplace accidents and diseases and these have an impact on the economic prospects of workers, enterprises and society as a whole. They can't be treated separately by different institutions and policies. If the aim of any country is sustainable economic development then countries will have to factor in the high cost of occupational accidents and diseases in the quest for higher productivity as well as economic and social renewal. Development cooperation, in whatever priority area, also has to take it into account. Important organizations understand that their primary goal is to enhance the performance of their people. In a knowledge work economy, people are the engine that keeps companies growing, adapting, improving and innovating. Not surprisingly, thoughtful workplace design can be a powerful tool for supporting employee performance. And a collateral benefit is that what typically supports productivity also enhances employee health and wellness.

Given the nature of today's work processes, how can the workplace better support human performance? How can the workplace support all of the different activities involved with knowledge work – things like collaboration, creativity, innovation, deep thinking and mentorship? The first question for the developing countries is how to create quickly hundreds of millions of safe jobs for the poor with limited purchasing power and limited capital for investment.

General overview

One of the most effective ways to combat poverty among current and future generations is to maintain a full employment economy. The point should be straightforward: when the labour market is strong, or "tight," it offers increased employment opportunities for those at the bottom. Disadvantaged workers are not only more likely to find employment in a tight labour market; they are also in a better position to secure higher wages as employers are forced to compete for labour. This can allow millions of workers the opportunity to raise themselves and their families out of poverty. We got a chance to see this story in practice in the boom of the late 1990s, when the unemployment rate fell to its lowest levels in almost three decades, settling at a year-round average of four percent in 2000, the peak year of the boom. In this period, wages rose rapidly at all points

along the income distribution, with workers at the bottom of the ladder actually achieving the largest gains.

The same principle would apply today, with the gains of a tight labour market going disproportionately to the most disadvantaged. The unemployment rate for African-Americans is typically two to two-and-a-half times that of whites. This means if we can lower the unemployment rate for whites by one percentage point, it is likely that the unemployment rate for African-Americans will fall by two percentage points. For African-American teens, the ratio hovers near six to one, meaning that a one percentage point drop in the white unemployment rate is likely to be associated with a six percentage point drop in the unemployment rate for African-American teens.

PERFORMANCE = ABILITY x MOTIVATION x OPPORTUNITY

Performance is a function of the three factors acting together. Ability has to do with whether a person can do a task. Motivation is a measure of whether a person wants to do it. Opportunity is about accessibility; a person can't do a task if she is not given a chance or if she is denied access to necessary resources or amenities. This framework – looking at human performance as being influenced by multiple factors – reflects the difficult and variable nature of our work today. All of these factors must be supported by the work environment in order for people's best work to occur. So, how can the workplace help? According to Judith Heerwagen, a former scientist with the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory who is now a program expert with the General Services Administration, productivity and the workplace are related in these ways:

- “A building can positively affect **ability** by providing comfortable ambient conditions, by enabling individual control and adjustment of conditions, and by reducing health and safety risks. Negative impacts on ability to do work are associated with conditions that are uncomfortable, distracting, hazardous or noxious.
- “A building can positively affect **motivation** by providing conditions that promote positive affective functioning, psychological engagement and personal control. Moods create the ‘affective context’ for thought processes and behaviours and are directly tied to motivation
- “A building can affect **opportunity** by providing equitable access to conditions that reduce health and safety risks, equitable access to amenities and compensatory design options where inequities exist and are difficult to eliminate entirely.

For many workers in low-income countries, obtaining a safe job in a factory in the formal sector is a significant improvement. For example, Dao Thi Sen works in a garment factory in Vietnam owned by a Korean company. “I was a freelance seamstress before. But the work wasn't very stable and safe. This is better”. The search for a better job is often associated with significant migration. Cong Nguyen struggled to find a stable and safe job in his home province of Ha Tinh, in northern Vietnam. He moved more than 1,000 km to Cu Chi, near Ho Chi Minh City, and found work in a textile factory in their packaging department.

Possible solutions

There are a few ways to offer more safe work opportunities:

1. Proper Uniforms: This is a critical base for businesses such as construction, home improvement, the aforementioned packing and shipping corporations on down to fire-fighters and other areas that require overly-protective headgear and uniforms. Construction workers must be wearing hard hats at all times in specified zones of the job site. Fire-fighters must have the latest fire-retardant outfits to go along with sturdy helmets. Chemists must always be wearing safety goggles every second they are inside the laboratory. Putting up signs to reinforce the matter and educating the supervisors to stay on top of uniform regulations should be active from the moment the first employee clocks in to the last.

2. Designate Proper Emergency Exits: There's a reason we did three or four fire drill exercises as a kid each year in school. As annoying and (forgive the pun) alarming as they could be, it helped everyone in the building familiarize themselves with the exits. This same exercise should apply for every business. Not that every employee goes in a single-file order and move at the sound of an alarm, just that they are aware and have some document that outlines emergency procedures. This document should map out every exit doorway, ensure you have emergency exit signs posted in their assigned posts, detail up-to-date smoke detectors, signify water spouts to quench possible fires and assure you and your staff that each building code is covered front-to-back.

5. Proofing The Building: This falls in the category of getting the building inspected from time to time on down to subtle improvements around the building, stairways and exterior pathways. Little safety measures like adding ribbed, rubber padding along the ends of stairway steps, deicing the walkways leading up to the office, mats to stamp out slippery footing and other helpful precautions can give your employees as much peace of mind to know their well-being is being accounted for as much as possible.

6. Provide the key elements of knowledge, control and support: Employees use knowledge of their environment to understand what things are putting people in risky situations. Employees need control to make appropriate changes to the system. Finally, workers' ideas and suggestions need support from management to enable employees to feel they can truly make a difference in the lives of their co-workers.

7. Offer the necessary levels of education, training, resources, and authority so employees can take ownership of the safety process. It's a mistake to expect employees to take pride and be enthusiastically involved over the long term in order to simply conform to top-down management programs, and/or merely comply with OSHA regulations. The single most powerful source of motivation is employee ownership of the safety process.

