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The role of intermediaries in delivering an occupational health and safety programme designed for small businesses – A case study of an insurance incentive programme in the agriculture sector

Kirsten Bendix Olsen ^{a,*}, Peter Hasle ^{b,1}^a Centre for Ergonomics, Occupational Safety and Health, School of Public Health, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand^b Centre for Industrial Production, Department of Business and Management, Aalborg University, Copenhagen, A.C. Meyers Vænge 15, 2450 Copenhagen SV, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Intermediaries play an important role in disseminating national Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) programmes to small businesses but not much is known about the factors that influence their role. The aim of this paper is to elucidate the factors that influence intermediaries' contribution to the transformation and dissemination of a national OHS programme for small business that built on an insurance incentive scheme – the New Zealand Workplace Safety Discount scheme.

It is a case study of this scheme implementation in the agriculture sector. Data was collected from scheme documentation and semi-structured interviews with the scheme owner, representatives from intermediary groups and the targeted small businesses. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed in relation to the scheme's programme theory.

The intermediaries introduced new programme mechanisms and recruitment strategies that were not considered in the design. These were shaped by the intermediaries' understanding of the target group and by their own business interest. To engage Non-Governmental Intermediaries the scheme owner had to establish a close relation to them and to link the aim of the scheme to the intermediaries' business goal. The scheme had different benefits for the various types of intermediaries and this determined their contributions. In that way they reached different parts of the target group. Even though the intermediaries played an active role, the outreach was still limited.

This highlights the importance of analysing the business interests of intermediaries and their client groups when identifying intermediaries to integrate into OHS schemes for small businesses.

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1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that national Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) intervention programmes have difficulties in reaching and being implemented in small businesses (SBs). Thus there is a need to design specific interventions that work in the context of SBs (Baldock et al., 2006; Champoux and Brun, 2003; Fairman and Yapp, 2005; Hasle et al., 2012a; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Legg et al., 2010; Olsen et al., 2010, 2012). Over the last 10–20 years, governmental agencies in many countries have started to design OHS intervention programmes specifically for SBs. Intervention programmes range, *inter alia*, from information material (Caple et al., 1997), internet based hazard management tools (Antonsson

and Alvarez, 2005) to free consultancy (Caple, 2006), insurance schemes (Department of Labour, 2006) and prevention packages (Hasle et al., 2012a). Many of these programmes have been criticised for not being designed with a proper understanding of the SB's context and for not being evaluated properly (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Legg et al., 2009, 2010; Walters, 2006). Only a few successful interventions have been identified (MacEachen et al., 2010).

Even well designed government OHS programmes have difficulties reaching out to a larger number of SBs. The main reasons are the high cost of delivering the programme through personal contact, which is preferred by SBs (Hasle et al., 2012a,b; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Olsen et al., 2010; Persson, 1991), and the fact that many SBs are reluctant to interact with OHS authorities (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Olsen et al., 2010). The SBs may not even be aware of their needs and seldom actively seek information about health and safety programmes. It has therefore been suggested that OHS

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 356 9099x2383.

E-mail addresses: K.B.Olsen@massey.ac.nz (K.B. Olsen), hasle@business.aau.dk (P. Hasle).¹ Tel.: +45 40 62 60 56.

programmes should be promoted and disseminated by existing trusted intermediaries in order to reach out to the community of SBs (Haslam et al., 1998; Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Lamm, 1997; Olsen et al., 2010; Tait and Walker, 2000; Walters, 2001). Many different actors (organisations or individuals) can function as intermediaries. However very little is known about how they fulfil their role and influence the dissemination and implementation of the programmes.

This paper focuses on the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) intermediaries and the possibilities that exist for developing programmes which work systematically with such intermediaries. An intermediary in this paper is defined as an organisation or person who does not have ownership of the programme or constitutes part of the target group for the programme but who conveys or potentially can convey the programme to the target group.

As NGO intermediaries are not funded by the Government agency, it is necessary to consider the relation between the agency and intermediaries as a social exchange where both parties develop an understanding and interest in a joint cause. For an employer or business association it can be a matter of representing the interest of the members, for example in discussions about new regulation or enforcement practices. Such organisations may also have certain informational services for their members but it cannot be expected that they have the resources for actually implementing a programme. That would normally require additional funding from the government, which may happen through direct grants or various incentives. It is often the lack of sustainable funding systems which cause many promising pilot projects aimed at SBs to fail (Hasle and Limborg, 2006). In this paper we provide an analysis of the role of intermediaries and the mechanisms which influence the way the programme works in a government OHS programme – the New Zealand Workplace Safety Discount (WSD) scheme. This scheme was chosen because it provided a basic funding of intermediaries' activities.

The analysis contributes to our knowledge about the factors that influence intermediaries and how they contribute to dissemination and implementation of OHS intervention programmes. The paper analyses how the mechanisms of the New Zealand WSD scheme are adjusted and how this adjustment is influenced by intermediaries through the implementation process. The analysis is based on a case study of the scheme in the agricultural sector. We show how a well-designed scheme depends on the activities of intermediaries who 'carry' the scheme to the farmers, how the intermediaries develop their own versions of the scheme depending on their experience, motivation and resources to support the scheme. Further, the influence of the relations between the government body responsible for the scheme, intermediaries and target group on the uptake of the scheme are considered. Finally, the infrastructure's ability to maintain the intermediary's interest in the scheme is discussed.

We commence by describing the present knowledge about the role of intermediaries in SB programmes and about OHS insurance programmes. It is followed by a presentation of the theoretical approach which is built on realist analysis. Then we present the research as a case study design, methods and materials, followed by what we found in relation to the revealed programme theory, how the scheme was implemented in the agriculture sector, the role of the intermediaries in relation to their incentives to engage in the programme and their transformational activities, and identified opportunities to engage other intermediaries. The discussion focuses on the role of intermediaries and their active transformation of the mechanism of the scheme into something they believe may be successful and useful for themselves and the SBs. Finally we point out implications of the study for further research and for practice.

2. Background

2.1. Reaching out to small business

Previous research has identified distinctive internal and external contextual factors that explain why small businesses have difficulties managing OHS (for a discussion see Hasle et al. (2012a)). This paper focusses on the intermediaries' role in reaching the SBs.

Use of intermediaries to support the outreach of OHS programmes for SBs has been discussed by several researchers. Some have mapped the SBs' use of intermediaries especially in relation to distribution of OHS information and advice (Antonsson et al., 2002; Eakin and Weir, 1995; Haslam et al., 1998; Hasle, 2000; James et al., 2004; Lamm, 1997; Walters, 2001). In these studies labour inspectors were identified as the most important provider of OHS information, and they can in this respect be considered as intermediaries, but they are also part of the governmental enforcement system and therefore often met with reservation (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Olsen et al., 2010). In this paper we focus on the NGO intermediaries which are not part of the enforcement system. Next to labour inspectors, the use of intermediaries depended on the national context. In some countries OHS advisory services were institutionalised and funded commonly in the form of occupational health services securing a basic service to SBs (Antonsson et al., 2002; Mizoue et al., 1999; Walters, 2001). However SB are reluctant to pay for such services, which therefore depend on some kind of external funding (Hasle and Limborg, 2006), that can be difficult to secure in many countries (For a discussion Cunningham et al., 2013). No matter whether OHS services are available or not, SBs are often not aware that they perform below compliance level and are in need of OHS advice (Olsen et al., 2010) and therefore rarely seek assistance on their own initiative. Thus OHS programmes need to be actively 'carried to' SBs.

In countries without institutionalised OHS services, SBs will depend on other types of intermediaries to provide information and assistance. It can be accountants (Hasle et al., 2010; Lamm, 1997), regional health and safety representatives (Frick and Walters, 1998) and a wide variety of NGOs (Hasle and Limborg, 2006; Walters, 2001) like employers and business associations, trade unions, suppliers of materials and equipment, training providers, and networks or local communities of owner-managers (Hasle et al., 2012b). With no specific services available these types of intermediaries are often included as key actors in national strategies (James et al., 2004; Legg et al., 2010). The strength of using such established intermediaries is that they are not part of government enforcement and that they have already developed trust and goodwill from the SB. However, it is not certain that the intermediary organisations have the interest and funds to serve SBs on occupational health and safety issues. It is therefore important to learn how NGO intermediaries can be engaged in OHS. It should happen in such a way that the interest can be sustained and funding secured without losing the SB's trust and goodwill. With one recent exception (Cunningham et al., 2013) the strategies to achieve such a goal is not discussed in the literature.

2.2. Insurance related schemes

A particular type of OHS intervention programme is insurance premium-related incentive schemes. They are implemented in many countries for larger firms (Clayton, 2012; Elsler et al., 2010) where the premium is graded according to claim experience. However, SBs have often been excluded from these programmes because the chance of an injury occurring in a particular SB has been considered as low, even though the risk of injuries is high (Elsler et al., 2010; Hasle et al., 2009). Another reason for excluding

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