

Activity of organization: effect on health construction and on performance development - Case of SOHO

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Developing the concept of “the activity of organization” helping us to work out how people respond to organization. This paper presents a research to approach health at work from a new angle: what works well in companies. To meet the demand of the French government wishing to improve well-being at work, our group (see below) decided to lead a research in companies where there were no obvious health or performance problems. The companies all had under 19 employees. The research theoretical framework was based on the two following concepts: the “work of organization” and the “activity of organization”. Both concepts articulate around health and performance. We grounded our study in the observation of activity and simultaneous interviews taking place both at management and operational level. All our work was guided by the research on links between health and organization.

Practitioner Summary: prior to presenting the context of the study and the theoretical approach in order to define the frame of the present article, we will develop the method and the main results. The aim is to discuss the interest and the relevance of the concept of activity of organization for both ergonomic practice and research.

Keywords: Activity of organization, work of organization, health, organization, performance

INTRODUCTION

Following major work related health issues in the French work place, the government needed to take substantial measures to curb escalation¹. One of government schemes has been concretized by a project called STOP. STOP stands for “Santé Travail et Organisation dans les Petites entreprises” i.e “health, work and organization in small companies”. Studies were carried out by the IRT² with financial support from the DIRECCTE³. The studies were based on the theoretical axes of the CERTOP⁴. Instead of analyzing what’s going wrong in big companies at operational level, the STOP project looks into what’s going right in small companies at operational and management levels. Our objective was to create links between well-being at

¹ <http://www.travailler-mieux.gouv.fr/> Site du gouvernement français Plan santé travail 2010-2014

² IRT : Regional institute of work

³ DIRECCTE : Direction regional of companies, of competition, of consumption, of work and of employment

⁴ CERTOP : Centre of study and research on work, organization and power

work and organization. We did this in order to understand the process at work around work organization for both managers and operators. A substantial body of literature has demonstrated solid links between work organization and health issues highlighting the importance of activity (Carayon & Smith, 2000; Clot, 2008; Derriennic & Vézina, 2001; Dejours, 2005; Detchessahar, 2011; Falzon, 2014; Montmollin, de, 1995). From this literature and the concept of work of organization (De Terssac, 2011), we develop the concept of “activity of organization” (Gaillard and De Terssac, 2013, Lefrancois, 2013). We used this concept to analyze processes such as adjustment and tweaking around work organization (actions, communications and interpretation) that permitted company stakeholders to construct a work situation, foster well-being and health at work. This concept is a way to encompass regulations between both work activity and work organization. This study aims to explore the contribution of the “activity of organization” on health construction, on performance development and on new commonly established rules at both operational and management levels.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study about health mechanisms at work that we lead focused on the work of organization theory (De Terssac, 2012). The theory analyzed the way that organization is produced by normalization established by real practice in the field. This is producing the work of organization. In this way, the organization is not a fact, it's a construction (Mintzberg, 1983 ed 2003; Montmollin, 2001) which works like a homeostatic system between work level and activity level. The organization is an ensemble of common rules shared and accepted by all. That theory is partially based on the social regulation theory of Jean Daniel Reynaud (De Terssac, 2003). In that perspective, as an ergonomist, we will focus our attention more on regulations during activity and work, than on social regulations. In fact, we will consider that health at work is built during working activity by numerous regulations that engage individual activity in all the components of work situations. This concept of health refers to the model of activity of work situations called “5 square plan” formalized by J. Leplat and X. Cuny (1974), Leplat (2000), which lies at the base of constructive ergonomics (Falzon, 2014). In that field, we considered that a part of health at work is played in the way that workers interact to work organization (real work, values). The response is vectored by the activity of organization allowing them to adjust to organizational impacts (shared rules, new organization). Thus workers carve out means leading to well-being at work. When however those regulations processes are hampered or ineffective, health may be endangered. To synthesize, please refer to figure 1.

Given those considerations, employee activity is as much involved as management decision in the process. Company heads provide the means and determine the work situation and that's why both levels have to be listened to.

METHOD

OVERALL RESEARCH APPROACH

Based on the above mentioned school of thought, the research organization studied ten companies identified by experts (works doctor, members of the research follower group). These companies were considered as companies working well in terms of quality of life at work. The criteria used lead to us selecting companies with less than 19 employees regardless of production sector (painting, services, bicycles, veterinary office, etc.). We chose this field because SOHO is a “blind spot” of work conditions and because employees have a direct contact with both director and the product. All the operational

modalities (workload, work organization, work value, socio-economic conditions, collective modality, physical environment, etc.) are defined in a smaller space, thus more reachable.

For each of the ten companies, director and employee work was analyzed following recorded interviews with directors (from 1h30 to 3h) and with employees (from 30m to 1h) during 2014. For some of them, observations of work situations were made (painting and wood working). The interviews aimed at requesting director and employee to voice their views and comment on pleasurable and satisfying experience in the work place. Also we approached unpleasant work experiences and work dissatisfaction in an open way. Conflict resolutions, problem solving, etc. were easily tackled. Indeed, our point was not to consider that well-being at work is based purely on situations without conflict and tension, but more based on situations where people find the way and resources to handle and overcome difficulties, when they occur. We considered work situation samples taken are at pertinent level for analysis: work situations is the level where working conditions are engaged but also the meaning of job.

WORKS SITUATION ANALYSES

For the sake of concision, here is an extract of the research based on a monograph of a painting company (for more details, please consult the report Gaillard, 2015). This example will illustrate the activity of organization and most of the conclusions of the whole study.

The observation of activity aimed at seeing (during real activity) regulations and adjustments made regarding organization and rules. That's why we looked at the activity carried out and characterized it's status: planned or unplanned through simultaneous explanations of the operator (Montmollin, 1995). Through this method, we tried to reach the way that operators deal with rules they have to respect and how they re-design them. In other words, motives those push people to act in a certain way and their reactions in front of unexpected events.

The painting company (founded 18 years ago) had 11 employees. We interviewed the director and creator of the company, and one of their employees. The employee has been working as a painter for 20 years and for 5 years in this present company. We observed his activity for 3 days. The work project was to freshen up an apartment occupied for 10 years by the same tenant. Windows, kitchen bar, cupboards and the whole bathroom had to be repainted.

RESULTS: MONOGRAPH ON PAINTING COMPANY CASE

APPROACHING HOW COMPANY MANAGER BEHAVES REGARDING ORGANIZATION

The interview with director and employee allow us to reach organizational elements of their own work, both that of the director and the employee. For the director of the painting company, the work is not really subject to discussion, the rules are here to be respected.

We notice there are rules on different subjects and different levels that concerned: work project, quotes, employment frame, schedules, period, work group and cleanliness.

WORK PROJECT AND QUOTE

First of all, let's talk about the work project and the cost estimate. It's up to the manager to decide who is assigned to the sites. He builds this choice through his knowledge of employee skills never putting his employee in a failure situation. His first objective is client satisfaction, especially through quality. It is

important to note that the director is the one having all interaction with the client, as employees can't negotiate by themselves. He will however, always tell employees when a client is satisfied with the work and this contributes to recognition of a job well done. The manager also gives a form of empowerment to his employees making them responsible for the job and gives them the total freedom to organize their work on the site.

EMPLOYMENT FRAME

The manager took the decision to consolidate the framework so as to offset the demands of work and creating long term jobs for employees. This ensures the workforce will stay as salaries are always 10 % above market wages under standards full term contracts.

SCHEDULES AND PERIOD

The schedules were set up bearing in mind real work and environment needs (traffic jams, schedules catering to children, etc.). The manager accepted modifications and by so doing empowered his employee through a commitment to work by saying: "No matter how you organize your 8 hours, just make sure that it's profitable and good for the company". Moreover, by concentrating on employee skills, the manager allows employees to renegotiate the way work is carried out as well as the organization and the planning of the project. They can choose the way they prefer as long as the period is in line with economic viability regarding the quote. The painter has free rein to work as he will when within this frame. Here, we see some space for debate and negotiation between the different levels (activity/work and manager/employees).

WORK GROUP

In this type of structure, the group and the organization have an important impact on group work. In fact, they will reject members who don't fit in with the frame, for who rules or conditions aren't convenient. These principles contribute to the efficiency of the system but act as a selective process: "if you are not happy with this, just leave".

CLEANLINESS

Finally, cleanliness is another important point for the manager. The painters have to make sure they leave everything clean at the end of the shift. They themselves, have to be dressed in "town cloths" when they arrive at the work place. There change cloths once on site: this all contributes to taking pride in their work.

IDENTIFICATION OF ACTIVITY OF ORGANIZATION DURING INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

OBSERVATIONS

Actions analyzed during the 3 days of observation show a gap between what the employee expresses as planned actions, unplanned actions and real activity (figure 2). This shows a form of debate and negotiation within work and organization.

CRISSCROSS ACTIONS

We notice that planned and unplanned actions crisscross regularly to favor the merging of tasks in the same sequence of actions (clean and tidy up all the equipment at the same time). This contributes to the performance of the system (pertinence, efficacy and efficiency). So, the workman will lay the glass wool at the same time rather than doing it zone by zone as he said orally or as stipulated in the quote. He is really

self-governing in strategic organization and in the planning of his actions: he is developing new rules thought his own activity of organization. This contributes to the realization of interesting cognitive work and empowerment which in turn develops health.

LEARNING FROM SITUATION

Also, we observed that the employee learned from the situation and modified his actions as a result. Indeed, when he painted the windows, he realized that the following sequence: interior/frame/exterior is not effective in terms of quality, health and performance. Beginning by the interior, he limited his postures to be able to do the exterior, which made it more difficult to dip the paintbrush and visually check what he was doing. Moreover, he is reliant on fresh paint so the painter gets dirty and he has to repaint existing areas. Integrating this experience, for the next window, he will begin with the exterior which has for effect a faster execution, a postural comfort and a satisfaction of the job well-done. The organization of activity he develops allows him to reach his objectives in terms of quality and performance which contribute to his health.

OTHER PERSON ACTIVITY INTEGRATION

One day three after lunch break, an important event occurred. The painter is informed that due to an emergency, he would have to leave the uncompleted job that evening, even though the job was far from completion. This event will modify completely his activity. So, instead of continuing to link up similar tasks, he will focus on the clarification of the site and the limitation of the co-activity. In doing this, he is trying to make it easier for the next painter to understand the “as job” up to job completion. Also, he wanted to facilitate the interactions with the people planning to lay a new floor in the living room. This explains why he will finish all the work in the living room (windows and the woodwork) and why he totally abandons the bathroom. Here, we are at the heart of the negotiation space between activity and work for the workers.

To conclude, his organization of activity is built on his skills, allowing him to produce new rules which were based on the work of organization set up by the company director. This form of adjustment born out of experience and hand gesture leads to enhanced health through a number of factors including the quality of work, the performance, the coherence with professional and personal values. The results of the observations show employee ability to regulate and adapt to the organization, through the activity promoting health development and system performance.

DISCUSSION

In this monograph, the roles of director and of painter are clearly defined: for the director, cost effectiveness and customers relations; for the painter, the carrying out of the job in a given time-frame in line with the quality expected.

Here we don't have a forum of discussion between directional and operational levels, but we do have a space for debate at an operational level. Relations between director and employee are not purely based on daily get together. Relations are based rather on a cross roads of each person's role, where the work rules

at the work organization director level, are stable, clear and accepted. Together, they build a work system, a value system that suits the director, the employee and the type of activity (Duc, 2002). The director allows the employee activity of organization to modify his organization of work at employee level which is done through his activity of organization.

Indeed, the employee is organized to produce, in view to high quality results, efficiency and efficacy. He is developing his work space, planning his activity (Guérin & Laville, Daniellou, Duraffourg & Kerguelen, 2007), giving a meaning to his action (Schwartz, 2000, named by Petit, Dugué & Daniellou, 2011), making choices and taking decisions regarding situations (Montmollin, 1995). During his activity, the painter had to make arbitration, mobilize and develop skills and knowledge to respect the timeframe, the work and the quality expected by both him and the company. The mobilization of those elements is favorable because they enhance and protect from monotony whilst allowing development of skills. This shows that his activity of organization protects and constructs his health (Pastré, 2005; Samurçay & Rabardel, 2004, named by Mollo & Nascimento, 2013; Falzon, 2013). These results show that when activity of organization is developed at individual level, it serves individual health and local performance. To synthesize, please refer to figure 3.

The difficulty with this kind of research is that we intervene at a given moment in the life of the company, without bearing in mind background and company culture. Thus, even though there is no mention of director/employee exchange or debate, this doesn't mean that exchange didn't or doesn't take place. Even if this is a simple "snapshot", the research still demonstrates adjustment between activity and work levels. We see tweaking between operational and directional levels through the consideration of painter's skills when the director chooses assignments looking for efficiency, quality and effectiveness. There is indeed an activity of organization which contributes to health development by the mobilization of empowerment, recognition of knowledge and development of skill (Gaillard & De Terssac, 2013; Fournier, Ghram, Bencheikroun, & Six, 2009; Canguilhem, 1966; Clot, 2008; Petit, Dugué & Daniellou, 2011; Falzon & Mas, 2007; Dejours, 2005; Rochefort & Guérin, 2000; Falzon, 2013).

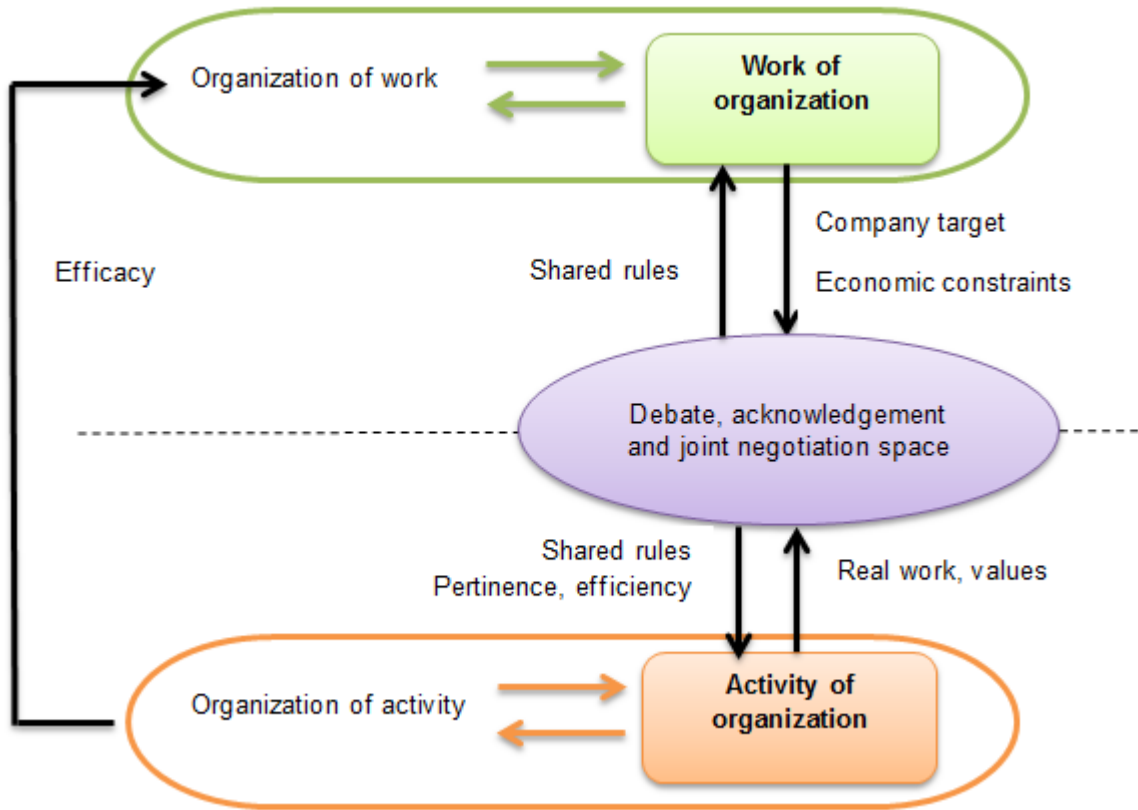


Figure 1. Activity of organization theoretical synthesis.

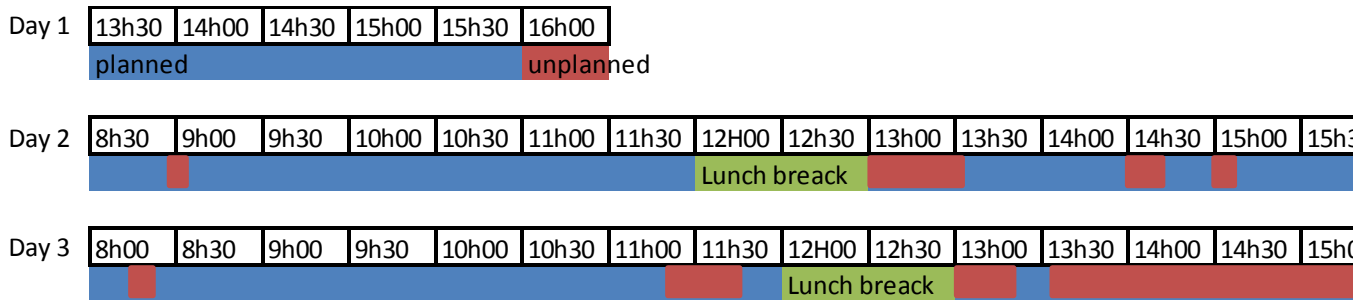


Figure 2. Activity chronogram.

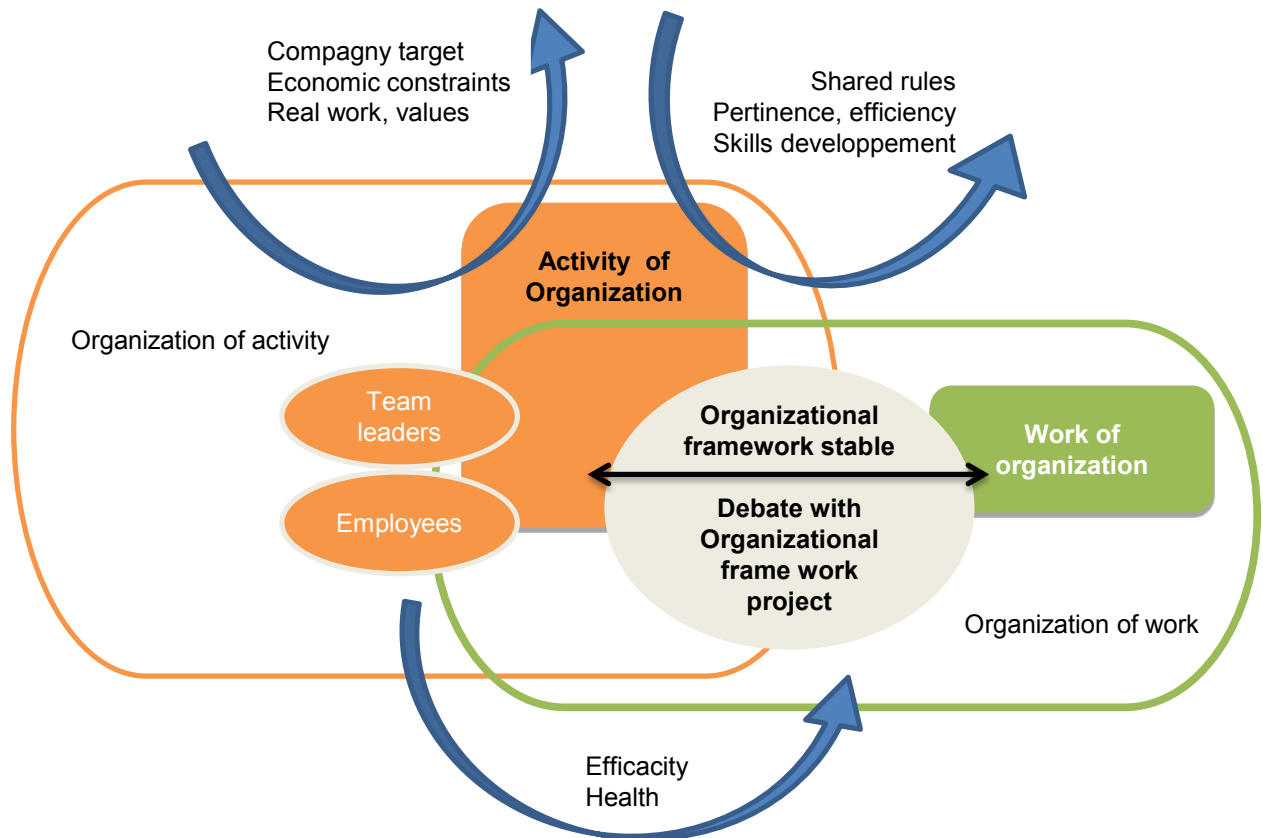


Figure 3. Synthesis from research results.

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