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Health and Safety Representatives'
Contributions to Occupational Health and Safety:
Case Studies from New Zealand's
Metal Manufacturing Sector

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Abstract

This study focuses on the contributions that health and safety representatives make to occupational health and safety in New Zealand workplaces. It investigates how they and other organisational actors conceive the role purpose, how representatives interpret and enact their roles and how they impact on occupational health and safety.

The study comprises two business cases of organisations in the metal manufacturing sector. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with eight representatives and 23 other organisational actors known to influence the health and safety representatives' role, including the representatives' managers, co-workers, health and safety managers, senior managers and a union representative. The interview data was thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and triangulated to attain a more accurate picture of reality (Mathison, 1988). The Danish National Working Environment Authority's (2002) impact ladder was used in a novel way to systematically evaluate the representatives' impacts.

Consistent with overseas findings, health and safety representatives also contribute to the improvement of workplace health and safety in New Zealand. Yet, representatives have different interpretations of their purpose, which influences role enactment. To characterise these differences, a typology was developed that included a range of 'types' into which representatives can be grouped: administrators, workshop inspectors, problem solvers and craft experts.

Commonly, all types of health and safety representative foster positive labour relations, and nearly all in this study were perceived by workers to improve health and safety by providing a legitimate avenue of redress. Otherwise, contribution differed among the types; administrators contributed by implementing and maintaining health and safety management systems; workshop inspectors improved workers' attitudes towards health and safety; problem solvers facilitated improvements to production from a health and safety perspective; and craft experts influenced the development of standards and procedures for the management of hazards at the strategic level. Factors influencing health and safety representatives' role enactment and impact appeared to relate to how the purpose of the role is defined and communicated at the workplace, the representatives' expert power bases and abilities, and the nature of their job role.

The study identifies the implications of these findings for health and safety policy, training and further research. Finally, it highlights the value of a cross-perceptual approach to enrich understanding of the multifaceted nature of representatives' contributions to workplace health and safety.

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Glossary of acronyms

ACC	Accident Compensation Corporation
ACOSH	Advisory Committee for Occupational Safety and Health
BusNZ	Business New Zealand
ECA	Employment Contracts Act 1991
EMA	Employers and Manufacturers Association
EPMU	Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union
ERA	Employment Relations Act 2000
HSE Act	Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992
HSE Amendment Act	Health and Safety in Employment Amendment Act 2002
HSE Amendment Bill	Health and Safety in Employment Amendment Bill
HS representative	Health and safety representative
NZCTU	New Zealand Council of Trade Unions
OHS	Occupational health and safety
OHS committee	Occupational health and safety committee
OSH Bill	Occupational Safety and Health Bill
PPE	Personal protective equipment
WERS	Workplace Employment Relations Survey
WIRS	Workplace Industrial Relations Survey
WSMP	Workplace Safety Management Practices programme