Trade unions : strategic participants – the role of industry federations

This paper is being presented to help identify the role that industry federations can have in standards development ; the opportunities and challenges that exist for trade unions to have a strategic partnership with industry federations to develop participatory design ; and some ideas to promote discussion on how to develop the opportunities in the future.

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Ensuring the health and safety at work of employees is a key legal and moral duty for all employers across the European Union. With the enlargement of the Union, it is critical that common standards of prevention and protection should apply consistently across all Member States. The protection of workers is a key issue for trade unions and it is an issue for many industry federations.

Within standards development, it is recognised that involving users in the design of equipment can assist in improving the safety features and efficiency of new equipment. As the work done within the TUTB – SALTSA participatory design project has shown several examples of this, there needs to be consideration of how trade unions can more directly influence the design of new equipment.

The following are the key reasons why businesses need to have good managerial controls on health and safety at work standards :

- Employer insurance premiums are likely to increase in the short- to medium-term.
- Damage to corporate identity in the event of a publicised or prosecuted health and safety failure.
- Changes in health and safety legislation, coupled to enforcing authority activity and criminal prosecution.
- Future developments around corporate manslaughter.
- Employee expectation.
- Trade union pressure.
- Pressure groups.
- Standards developments.
- Ethical trading standards.
- Tighter health and safety requirements related to the use of contractor's lists, particularly in construction.

While these pressures are facing many employers across Member States, various organisations involved with health and safety at work are looking more critically at reducing accidents and ill-health. Industry federations are often in a position to be able to co-ordinate the activity of industries at a national and European level, and some will also operate at international level.

It is not simply accidents that employers are looking at. Issues such as stress, hours of work and violence to staff are becoming increasingly important issues to address. With the changes in employment patterns, some employers and employer organisations are becoming more sympathetic to getting more involved in the design process. While the TUTB – SALTSA report identifies different ways that organisations have influenced the design process – bringing users more directly into influencing new designs – this paper sets out to identify what role trade unions can have with employer industry federations to exercise an influence on new design.

Employer industry federations

The key roles that many industry federations have can be summarised as :

- Promoting the interests of their particular sector to political bodies, media, the public, and within the business world.
- Lobbying on behalf of their member companies to seek improvements or resist developments that may - in their view - harm the sector.
- Providing information and services to member companies that assist them in running their business.

Many Industry Federations may also have industrial relations agreements with trade unions and be a "regulating" influence on wages and conditions. While the extent of services provided by Industry Federations may vary, many will get involved in health and safety issues. The key reasons are :

- Providing a consistent approach so that all member companies - and the sector as a whole - operate to the same standards.
- For several industries, a poor health and safety record could seriously damage their public profile. Examples would include the chemical industry and the public transport companies. So, setting health and safety standards is an important issue for them.
- To provide a mechanism for the industry to influence health and safety standards with organisations, such as CEN or the enforcing authorities.

Again, individual employer federations may be involved to a greater or lesser degree depending

on how important health and safety issues are to the respective industries. The key point in looking at how such federations can assist trade unions in influencing designs is how influential the industry federations are in themselves. Some, like those that cover the farming industry, are powerful lobbyists. However, the health and safety of agricultural workers may be poor.

The chemical industry is a powerful lobbyist in Europe and is very influential in developing a variety of standards. Trade unions can have a significant influence with the federation. Yet there will be differences between what the employers' organisation may identify as an acceptable standard and what the trade unions think is an acceptable standard. However, between the trade unions in an industry and the companies, there is a vast amount of practical knowledge about problem-solving. It is identifying this knowledge ; communicating it within industries ; and directing it into the design process that provides both an opportunity and a challenge for the future.

To look at the potential, one of the examples is taken from the TUTB – SALTSA report. This case study is summarised and then the ways that end-users can influence new design is discussed.

Case study : needle guards

The project

In 1996, William Baird – a major clothing manufacturer in the UK – set up a project in one of their factories that had a high number of needle-in-finger injuries. A team of GMB machinists, an engineer and supervisor were given the task of trying to design an effective guard. After a few months of trying different designs, a Perspex encapsulating guard proved the most successful. This was put on a number of machines and offered significantly improved protection over the traditional guard.

William Baird then contracted an engineering company to manufacture the guard, which was designed to be used on specific types of sewing machine. Since then, adaptations to the original guard design mean that it can be used on most of the commonly-used sewing machines in the sector. Where the guards have been fitted, needle-in-finger injuries have virtually been eliminated.

The results

In 1998, the GMB launched its "Stitchy Finger" campaign to draw attention to the guard and support its use. However, machinery manufacturers did not want to incorporate the new design into new machines unless it was required by standard. The GMB and the Health and Safety Executive then supported the company in getting the concept of an encapsulating guard as the European Standard.

In 1996 William Baird challenged the existing guarding standard for needles on sewing machines, which had remained unchanged since 1918. By targeting their efforts and consulting with the people who use the machines – GMB members – they developed an effective guarding solution. This was an effective example of "participatory ergonomics". It allowed the users of equipment to be directly involved in the new design of a more effective guard on the sewing machines.

In the year prior to the introduction of the guards, the Company paid around €190,000 for needle-in-finger compensation claims. 18 months after the introduction of the first guard, the claims were down to €30,000. The guard is effective, and sewing machine operators throughout the European Union will be better protected. Where the guard was fitted to machines, not one first aid treated injury was recorded.

The GMB supported the company in extending the use of the guard. Within the UK, the British Clothing Industry Association had most of the big clothing manufacturers as members. As the Association also had an agreement with the GMB over pay and conditions for BCIA member companies, a National Joint Health and Safety Committee had been established for many years. In this Committee were health and safety specialists from the companies and the Health and Safety Executive – the UK's main enforcing authority.

Here it was agreed that the principles of an encapsulating guard should be applied across BCIA member companies. As these were competitor companies, other designs were developed. William Baird's Risk Manager also approached the main machinery manufacturers. However, none would be the first to offer an encapsulating guard. It then became clear that they needed to influence the CEN standards organisation.

The GMB and the Health and Safety Executive then supported the company in getting the concept of an encapsulating guard as the European Standard. After some lobbying and pressure from the UK delegates to the CEN Technical Committee dealing with industrial sewing machines, changes were accepted. Instead of variations of a wire guard being accepted, the standard was changed to set out the dimensions of an encapsulating guard. This was adopted in EN ISO 10821 *Industrial sewing machines Safety requirements for sewing machines, units and systems.*

The BCIA were influential in promoting the concept of an encapsulating guard to member companies. While some machines in UK clothing companies may not yet have this type of guard fitted, many companies have already adopted the guard in advance of the European Standard.

Key points

This example raises the following key points :

- Involving the people who operate the machinery gives them an opportunity to improve the safety performance of the equipment that is likely to be bought in, making it more likely to be accepted by the workforce generally.
- The improvements - both in financial terms and the virtual elimination of needle-in-finger injuries - meant that William Baird management were more likely to involve the workforce in "designing out" hazards from equipment and processes.
- Getting the industry federation (BCIA) involved enabled them to put pressure on member companies to adopt this standard. It allowed the BCIA to show that they were genuinely interested in improving standards, not just accepting existing standards.
- Both William Baird and the BCIA supported a campaign by the GMB in the clothing industry to increase the use of the guard on industrial sewing machines in advance of CEN's standard development work.
- The GMB, William Baird, the BCIA and the Health and Safety Executive all using the Machinery Directive principles and specific parts of EN 292 on Safeguarding of Machinery were effective in changing a draft standard which – in their view – offered a lower standard of protection for the operator.

How can Industry Federations assist in participatory ergonomics ?

It has to be accepted straight away that industry federations will vary in their interest and the resources that they devote to health and safety. However, the trade unions can help to put a focus on the practical steps that can be taken jointly. Many are already involved to some extent with the standards process. Many industry federations will have targeted Technical Committees and comment upon drafts. The challenge to the trade unions is to get them to take a step further.

The drafting of standards is highly technical, can take many years to develop, and can take up a great deal of an individual's time to participate in. However, trade unions can work with industry federations to influence new standards for work equipment. How can this be achieved ?

Some industry federations are already closely involved with standards development. The main approach is to either comment upon a proposed draft standard or try to promote an amendment to existing standards. The structure of standards organisations in Member States allows them to participate in the consultation process. While the TUTB - SALTSA report shows examples of end-users being involved in influencing the design of new equipment, this is not common. The authors of the report also indicated that case studies were difficult to find.

The following are suggested as possible ways for trade unions to work with industry federations to develop a more proactive approach to participatory design of work equipment.

Target equipment

Within industry sectors, equipment that is associated with a high number of accidents can often be identified. When the Machinery Directive was being developed, woodworking and agricultural machinery were identified as particular problems from Member States' accident records. Using accident statistics within a sector can help to identify particular equipment that could benefit from improvements in design. However, ill-health must also be considered.

Within CEN/TC 153 on Food Processing equipment, the Federation of Bakers, the Health and Safety Executive and the Bakers' Food and Allied Workers' Union concentrated on the hazards associated with flour dust to develop improvements in dust control in bread mixers. This was to help reduce exposure to flour and other bread ingredients that could cause asthma. There will be many examples where health issues need to be addressed, not just safety.

Standards development

Many industry federations are already involved with standards development. Trade unions could promote participatory design for particular standards when drafts are at an early stage. Instead of just offering comments, industry federations could be asked to help organise a project with member companies to get the end users looking at the draft standard and actively promote their involvement.

In the TUTB - SALTSA report, there was some suggestion of amending the Framework Directive to allow safety representatives to be formally involved in the development of standards. While this is a useful aim, there needs to be a whole supporting mechanism in place to make this meaningful for the representative. The trade unions working with an industry federation may be able focus effort so that safety representatives are clear about how they can be involved. The case study with William Baird was initiated by a single company ; however, the industry federation was able to convince other companies to develop an encapsulating guard.

Lobbying

The European Commission is particularly keen to develop social partnership. At both national and European level, if the trade unions and industry federations have an agreed approach, this can be quite powerful when arguing for change. This is clearly demonstrated through the formal process that the European Commission has with the social partners in developing health and safety directives.

However, when considering standards, if the trade unions and relevant industry federations have an

agreed position, this can be a powerful lever in lobbying for change. Again, with the William Baird example, it was shown that the new guard offered better protection than the types of guard that met the existing standard at the time. By using the basic principles laid down in EN 292 *Safety of machinery – Basic concepts, general principles for design*, it was demonstrated that the encapsulating guard could almost eliminate needle-in-finger injuries.

Reviewing existing standards

At workplace level, machinery can be modified for a variety of reasons. This may result in improved safety designs which are not communicated elsewhere. Industry federations may be able to encourage companies to discuss improvements to particular machines by asking for between-company comparisons of guarding devices on a specific machine. Clearly, some companies may feel they have a competitive edge with some guarding solutions. This is where a co-operative effort with trade unions can help. If the industry federation and the trade unions are making the same approach to individual companies, results are more likely to be positive.

Political influence

In the TUTB - SALTSA report, some participants suggested that various changes should be made to specific directives so that it is easier to get the direct involvement of trade union representatives in the standards development process. While that has been discussed, if industry federations and trade unions lobby the Commission and relevant Commissioners and national Ministers jointly, they are more likely to be successful than by doing so separately.

Possible action

The following is suggested as action to improve the effectiveness of industry federations in participatory design.

- Guidance note

Key points from the workshop should be incorporated into a guide for trade unions on the opportunities that exist in industry federations to improve participatory design initiatives. The key aim would be to assist unions to target their efforts and use examples from the TUTB – SALTSA report to be more proactive.

- Promote success

The ETUC could be asked to seek funding from the European Commission to promote the opportunities that exist within industry federations at Member State and European level. This would provide an opportunity at national level for unions to discuss participatory design with industry federations directly. It would assist in directing the efforts of joint working. Included in such seminars, for example, would be the successful case studies presented in the TUTB – SALTSA report.

- European Health and Safety Agency

The Agency could be approached to develop part of its website to promote the advantages of participatory design. Industry federations could be targeted and asked to provide further examples.

- CEN

The European standards organisation CEN could be asked to host a conference where trade union and industry federation representatives from the Member States could be invited to promote participatory design. While it may be difficult, industry federations could be asked to identify an action plan for taking a proactive stance on participatory design.

- European Parliament

The European Parliament could be asked to host promotional events to make MEPs aware of the participatory design initiative and ask them to help promote the results with industry federations at national and European level.

Conclusion

While these opportunities do exist, it is recognised that there are barriers and these were identified earlier in the paper. However, a number of the examples in the TUTB – SALTSA report show that significant improvements in health and safety and in the efficiency of equipment can be made by getting end-users directly involved with the design process.

Industry federations offer support in promoting joint approaches to improve proactive participatory design. ■