Employees’ and managers’ perception of a healthy workplace - interviews from three medium-sized companies

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1. Introduction

In a recent review by van der Noordt et al. (2014), aimed at systematically summarize the literature on the health effects of employment, strong evidence was found for a protective effect of employment as such on depression and general mental health. Another review by Lindberg & Vingård (2012), aimed at systematically review the scientific literature and search for indicators of healthy working environments, defined as working environments that not just have a lack of detrimental factors at work but also yield a positive return in the form of rich job content, job satisfaction, social participation and personal development (Swedish Work Environment Authority 2010). The authors found 23 studies that either investigated employee’s views of what constitute a healthy workplace or were guidelines for how to create such a workplace. The most pronounced factors, considered as important for a healthy workplace were: collaboration/teamwork; growth and development of the individual; recognition; employee involvement; positive, accessible and fair leadership; autonomy and empowerment; appropriate staffing; skilled communication; and safe physical work (Lindberg and Vingård 2012).

The knowledge in the field is still rather vague concerning what creates, promotes and sustains health and wellbeing at work among managers and employees and what factors might be the most important. In order to take action we need to further explore and understand these underlying factors, the “healthy work factors”. The aim of this study was therefore to explore how a sample of Swedish blue- and white collar workers describe healthy factors at work as well as understand the concept of wellbeing at work.

2. Method

Focus group interviews with employees and individual interviews with managers were conducted at three medium-sized companies within the water- and energy sector employing both white- and blue collar workers. Recruitment of participants to the focus groups was conducted in cooperation with the managers of those departments that were pointed out by the researchers. This selection was made from a strategic viewpoint in order to cover the broadest possible variety of different professions and working conditions. Respective manager were asked to recruit six employees with, as far as possible, different work function, gender, age, length of employment and ethnicity. Before the interviews all the participants were asked to answer a short questionnaire regarding demographic data. Three main topics were discussed during the interviews: 1) What is a healthy working environment for you? 2) What creates well-being at work for you? and 3) How do you perceive your current as well as earlier working environment? During the interviews, supplementary questions were asked by which participants were encouraged to elaborate more on their perceptions and descriptions when needed. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted by the first author, and during the focus groups assisted by the second author whose task was to take notes and to ask complementary questions.

3. Results

After 11 focus groups, consisting of 3-6 employees per group, and 10 individual interviews with managers, data saturation was considered to have been reached. In total 62 persons participated in all interviews. Demographical data showed that 84 % were male, which relatively well mirrors the sex distribution in the companies. 58 % were in the age range of 31-49 years and 42 % had been employed at the same company for 11 years or more. The analysis is still in progress. However, preliminary results show that the interviewees described the physical factors (such as facilities and equipment) as a fundamental foundation in the working environment. Furthermore, the interviewees also described that psychosocial factors (eg. good relationships with colleagues and job satisfaction)
and organizational factors at work (eg. communication, leadership and participation) to be of great importance to create a healthy working environment and support wellbeing at work. In almost all of the focus groups, a good relationship with colleagues was the single factor that spontaneously was mentioned first as a descriptor for a healthy working environment. The employees and managers perceived their own working environment as generally good, although with varying degrees of needs for improvements.

4. Discussion
This study indicates that psychosocial and organizational factors are of great importance for creating a healthy working environment and support wellbeing at work. The results can be used guiding both organizations that strive towards health promoting workplaces and future occupational research.

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References