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EFFECT OF TRAINING COURSES ON COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

For the profession of works councils, skills and knowledge are generally important for performing the daily work and its prevailing competition. These capabilities are directly related to enhanced coping strategies. This article examines the trade-off between recent coping strategies and training courses of the trade union IG Metal Germany for work councils. It is assumed that, based on the results of this and following researches, developments of adaptive training course approaches are more purposeful than the current implementation.

Key Words: Coping, training courses, trade union officers, social dialogue

Topic Group: Human resources management, Business strategy

INTRODUCTION

In order to compete in a global economy with rapid social and technological changes, skills and knowledge become more and more important. These changes do also have far reaching implications for the work environment and the labour market. Companies, employees and employers are affected, so there are increasing demands for „high-skilled“ employees and decreasing demands for less qualified labour. In addition, less qualified employees face greater job insecurity (ILO, 1998). As the link between employers and employees in industrial relations, work councils have to manage the worker´s interests against the interests of the employer. Tietel defines the specific role structure of this lobbyist group as ‘triadic relationships’ (2006:25).

This role of representing employees' interest is associated with mental strength, competence and control, while helplessness and failure are perceived as disadvantageous. Due to this particular constellation of pressures, Minssen et al. (2005) as well as Tietel (2006) see an increased risk of the emergence of stress. In literature there are many studies dealing with the role of work councils. This study, however, refers to the topic of coping strategies related to training courses and trade union education, which has remained largely unstudied both in the German-speaking countries and internationally. There are strong indications that the significant predictors arise in the development of stress in daily operations (Minssen et al., 2005).

This research is about the role trade union training courses play for the coping strategies of work councils.

THEORY

Work-councils as the employees' representative have to deal in a "triadic relationships" (Tietel, 2006) and have to improve strategies for coping with both, employees and employers demands. Considering demands for coping strategies with occupational stress the explanation of stress is related to the work-councils' resources.

The model of resource conservation by Hobfoll forms takes into account the resources of the individual and the community that are "necessary and healthy lifestyle while preventing the loss of resources, the preservation of existing resources and gaining the necessary resources" (Hobfoll et al. 2004: 91). In contrast to self-regulating and transactional stress-models (Lazarus 1966; McGrath 1970; Bodenmann 1995; Zapf 2004), objective and subjective environmental factors are included in the coping process. These models determine stress as an individually perceived difference between one's own coping capacity and environmental requirements, and define the subjective perception of the discrepancy as important. The individual considers both individual variations and the consequences as important. Environmental variables have been assigned a secondary importance, because perceptions and evaluations of defining stress and coping are primary.

The main focus of the theory of resource conservation is the assumption that the circumstances are such that the individuals protect and support their "own integrity, but also their family and their nation" (Hobfoll et al. 2004: 93, Hobfoll 1998). Therefore, the actions of individuals are always seen within the context of their social environment, given the act of preserving and protecting their social relationships and the "establishment in the social context" (Hobfoll et al. 2004:93). The COR theory considered reactions to environmental events which have an impact on the individual resources. Hence psychological distress is defined as a reaction to the environment, where

- 1) Loss of resources is threatening
- 2) Loss of resources occurs
- 3) The appropriate resources-profit for a resource-investment fails.

The threat or actual loss of resources is perceived as particularly stressful because this leads to lower resource endowments and hence to a lower capacity to deal with future challenges. If resource-investment does not generate an adequate resource-profit, this also causes stress because the failed investment has consequences for the actual loss of resources. Due

to this, the COR theory defines resources as the only necessary element for the assessment of stress.

Hobfoll distinguishes between the following resources:

- Objects that are valued for their physical condition and / or provide a status. As an example, a small economical car has a benefit but a luxury car is an additional status symbol.
- Personal resources such as optimism are useful for someone's coping strategies.
- Conditions are defined as valuable and worthy resources, examples here are marriage or an office.
- Energy such as money, time or knowledge are useful in the acquisition of further resources

He points out that the resources are interdependent, so that a change in a resource-category can have effects on other resources. Another substantial core statement is that resource changes are not necessarily viewed negatively. Although the loss of resources leads to stress, gaining resources can act as a buffer for resource losses and is therefore associated with different experiences of individuals (Hobfoll et al. 2004):

- The loss of resources has a stronger effect than resource gains
- Resources have to be invested to obtain resources
- Resources have to be invested to prevent the deprivation of resources

People who have inherently lower resource endowments are more vulnerable to the experience of loss spirals, as a failed resource investment restricts future investment. In contrast, people with rich resource endowments invest more and thus gain more resources.

According to Zapf et al. (2004), stress research assumes that stress marks an imbalance of the relationship between a human being and the situation and can be attributed to two basic assumptions:

- According to Selye (1981), any imbalance leads to stress. Here he differentiates between positive and negative stress.
- According to Lazarus (1961, 1981), during the development of stress the quality of imbalance is significant. Stress only arises from unpleasant imbalance.

Taking the perspective of resources, the model of resource conservation proposed by S.E. Hobfoll (1989, 1998, 2001) summarizes the results of previous stress research. The key message is that the losses of resources are central to the emergence of stress. Hobfoll advocates the results of life event research which assumes that adverse events have negative impacts on health (Thoits 1983; 2010) and interpreted the undesirability with resource loss. This model implicates that people strive for the construction and preservation of this treasured resource, which is to be seen as synonymous with health and well being.

The risk of loss is threatening and leads to stress. Accordingly, stress is defined as an environmental reaction where

- a) There is the risk of resource loss
- b) Existing resources disappear
- c) Pareto-optimal allocation of resources exists, so an investment does not necessarily generate the expected profit.

The differentiation between resources is seen as

- a) Objects (things from the physical environment), living conditions (professional status, partnership), personal characteristics (optimism) and energy (money, information and knowledge)
- b) Means to reach these resources.

As is evident from this distinction of both subjective and universal criteria, normative values exist concerning who has the resources, both in terms of objective and subjective components. According to Frieling et al. (1999, 2007) it is assumed that stress develops only from loss of resources – resource-gaining stress does not occur. Basically, this model assumes that people compensate feared or actual loss of resources through the investment of other available resources, such as money or time, and strive to replace or compensate losses by equivalent resources.

Hobfoll defines this as "proactive coping" (2001, p. 13) and differentiates between the behavioural level (for example, loss management) and the cognitive level (for example, the relativization of the threatened or lost resource). It has to be said that cognitive coping is only possible to a restricted extent, so that self and world-view of the person is not at risk (Hobfoll 1989).

According to Hobfoll, compliancy of resources and requirements is essential for stress management. Larger available resources (at a personal, social and cultural level) enable a higher investment than fewer available resources. While people with lots of resources can easily compensate for a loss, poorer people can only make limited investments given their need to keep an emergency reserve (Hobfoll, 2001). This leads to the situation that relevant groups such as the poor, elderly, sick and underprivileged social groups are characterized by a defensive strategy, as the lack of resources is missing for a proactive approach.

Furthermore, Hobfoll defines an interaction of certain key resources. They are, for example, high self-efficacy and good availability of social support. He calls these "resource caravans" (2001, p. 34) and also indicates a reciprocal mode of action.

Concerning the weighting between resource gain and loss, Hobfoll (1989,1998) indicates that the loss of essential resources is more problematic than a corresponding gain of resources, unless this can compensate the suffered loss. Interestingly, a profit or loss spiral exists, because the growth of resources leads to further growth and losses to other losses. It is essential here that the loss spirals are stronger and grow faster than the gain spirals.

HYPOTHESES

The current research about the impact of trade union training courses on coping strategies is a less explored area at its present stage. To reveal influences or relationships of possible causal sequences, additional investigations have to be performed. In order to provide further

information of this topic, our cross-sectional study focuses on the relationship of soft and hard skills trainings courses of the trade union IG Metal for works councils. According to Vegchel et al. (2005) and Kristensen (1996) we suppose that disadvantageous mental stress situations lead to increased strain and complaints. Therefore, regarding the common theories by Karasek (1990), Siegrist (1996) and Vegchel et al. (2005) we have formulated the following hypotheses:

(a) Hypotheses

To analyse the relationship between the correlation of soft and hard skills training courses and coping strategies of work councils, we formulate two hypotheses:

- (i) According to Kompier et al. (2011) periodical participation of trade union training courses has a positive effect on work council's subjective perceived health and stress management skills.
- (ii) According to Hasselhorn et al. (2007) work councils who participate regularly in trade union training sessions have higher scores concerning life satisfaction and well-being than work councils participating in training courses irregularly.

METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

Data collection was conducted via e-mail and personal stating the purpose of the survey. Questionnaires were sent to 13 German companies engaged mostly in IT services and metal industries. 40 usable responses were returned. Due to the fact that this study is intend to be a pilot study for further investigations, the number of participants and the number of addressed companies is not to be representative for work councils in Germany.

The study-design was selected as a cross-sectional analysis. The methodological approach was chosen as deductive-nomological model. This means that 'a specific statement is derived from a general theory. The resulting prediction or explanation is to be checked by empirical evaluations' (Bortz, Döring; 2006). For data collection the written questionnaire was chosen by using validated test instruments and a self-designed questionnaire to collect quantitative primary data. Every full-time or volunteer work council came into question as participants of this study.

Participation in the survey was voluntary.

The Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQoL), the degree of psychological stress and stress at work, data for training courses and human resource development by the trade union IG Metal and socio-demographic data were chosen as dependent variables.

The Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQoL) should be operationalized by using the following validated test instruments:

- German version of Short Form 36 Health Survey Questionnaire (SF 36) – questionnaire for state of health (Bullinger & Kirchberger 1998).
- German version of Nottingham Health Profiles (NHP)
- Psychological stress and stress at work should be evaluated by using the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ)

Before beginning the statistical data analysis, the distribution of the metric variables have to be checked for normal distribution:

If there is a normal distribution the bivariate relationships are analysed using the correlation of Pearson. Relationships. Between ordinal variables or variables where the normal distribution is not given, verification must be carried out using the rank correlation of Spearman-Rho.

Furthermore, the influence of education and training courses on the health-related quality of life (HRQoL) and the degree of psychological stress and strain are examined.

RESULTS

To prove the hypotheses they were tested by investigating correlation coefficient between the rate of individually-assessed state of health and completed training courses. Of 40 participants responding to the questionnaire, 32 (82.5%) were male and 7 (17.5%) were female. The vast majority (57.5% [23/40]) indicates being employed by a company with over 2.000 staff members, 20% (8/40) in a company with about 500-1000 employees, 15% (6/40) in a company with about 100-500 employees and the remaining 7.5% (3/40) are employed by a company with less than 100 employees. 62.5% (25/40) stated they were mostly mentally active while the remaining 37.5% (15/40) indicated being both mentally and physically active. Only 5% (2/40) of the participants are employed part-time, with 95% (38/40) in full-time employment.

By analysing the distribution of participants' birth years, the median is 1964 and the middle 50% were born between 1960 and 1969.

The relationship between attended training courses of IG Metal (or congeneric) and scales of Nottingham Health Profile (NHP) are not significant. The directions of relationships between scales of "Emotional Reaction", "Energy" and "Physical Mobility" were negative and thus conform to the hypothesis. It is to say that the strength of relationship is consistently very weak.

In addition, no significant positive relationship could be found between the numbers of attended training courses of IG Metal (or congeneric) and the index of the quality-of-life instrument EuroQuol 5d. The direction of the relationship is to be declared conform to the hypothesis, but also to be estimated as being very weak. In analysing the relationship between the numbers of attended training courses of IG Metal (or congeneric) and the scales of Short Form 36 Health Survey Questionnaire (SF-36), no significant relations could be determined. Only the scale "ROH SF-36 health change" shows a weak relationship, whilst the rest indicates a very weak relation. Moreover, the direction is not consistent and thus in some parts not hypothesis-compliant.

The relationship between the numbers of attended training courses of IG Metal (or congeneric) and the scales of screening-instrument for assessing mental strain and stress at work (COPSOQ) is shown in Table 1. Here significant relations between attended training courses of IG Metal and six scales of COPSOQ are determined:

Table 1: Relationship between numbers of attended training courses of IG Metal (or congeneric) and scales of screening-instrument for assessing mental strain and stress at work (COPSOQ)

| | | Number of attended training courses IG Metal (or congeneric) |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| Emotional demands | Correlation coefficient | 0,276 |
| | Sig. (1-sided) | 0,042* |
| | N | 40 |
| Demands for hiding emotions | Correlation coefficient | 0,362 |
| | Sig. (1-sided) | 0,011* |
| | N | 40 |
| Commitment to the workplace | Correlation coefficient | 0,321* |
| | Sig. (1-sided) | 0,022 |
| | N | 40 |
| Influence and development: short scale 10 Items | Correlation coefficient | 0,318* |
| | Sig. (1-sided) | 0,023 |
| | N | 40 |
| Predictability | Correlation coefficient | 0,350* |
| | Sig. (1-sided) | 0,013 |
| | N | 40 |
| Social relations and leadership: short scale 10 items | Correlation coefficient | 0,340* |
| | Sig. (1-sided) | 0,017 |
| | N | 39 |

Between the numbers of attended training courses and the scale "Emotional demands", a significant positive association can be determined, while the strength of this relationship can be described as weak. This implicates that frequent attendance of training courses of IG Metal enables participants to deal with higher emotional demands.

In addition, a significant positive correlation between the number of training courses and the scale "Demands for hiding emotions" can be determined. This relationship is also of low intensity. Visiting several educational seminars thus leads to an increase in ability to hide emotions.

The variable 'Commitment to the work place' is significantly correlated positively with the number of training seminars attended by IG Metall. This relationship can be described as weak. Thus, frequent attendance of training courses is associated with a high affinity to the workplace.

The number of training courses by IG Metal is significantly positively correlated with the scale "Influence and development". The strength of the relationship can be described as weak, meaning that frequent attendance of educational seminars leads to an expanding influence and opportunities to develop.

In addition, a significant positive relationship between the numbers of training seminars attended by IG Metal with the scale of predictability COPSOQ was determined. The relationship can be described as weak. Frequent attendance of educational seminars is thus combined with increased predictability.

DISCUSSION

It is the aim of this study to investigate relationships of coping strategies of work-related stress, such as physical and psychological, and trade union training courses. As a result of the statistical analysis, SF 36 and experience of NHP were not significantly associated with coping strategies. Thus, analysing COPSQ reveals significant correlations of relationships between coping strategies and training courses.

As stated in the hypotheses, it was expected that works councils who attend to training courses more often would show higher psychosocial demands indicated by COPSQ compared to less attended works councils. The results, however, only partially supported our hypothesis. By analysing the outcomes there was no general trend indicating significant relationship between health-related quality of life and training courses, whereas certain scales of COPSQ are significantly associated with higher attendance of training courses, and this could lead to better coping strategies.

Our hypothesis regarding coping strategies was based on one theoretical perspective. Due to Hobfoll's theory (2004) it was an assumption that increasing numbers of training courses would lead to higher resources for works councils and also increase coping strategies.

This explanatory model thus explains resources as a kind of training course for the importance of improving coping strategies. However, concerning the extent to which correlation between COPSQ and training courses indicating a positive meaning, this study was not able to affirm the identification of specific courses.

Interestingly, demands regarding emotions and social relationships are significant.

It could be one reason that works councils, having a strong relationship and commitment to their workplace, perceive their working situation as more meaningful. Compared to employees feeling less involved or less committed to the workplace, they feel themselves more important in working life and thus attend to more training courses in order to gain a higher level of experience. In particular, there may be an influence accentuating the specific occupational group of employees' representatives, works councils. Due to their work tasks they are responsible for employee's needs, problems and wishes and feel strongly related to their colleagues.

For analysing the „commitment to the work-place“ and „meaning of work“ the identically named scale vales were used. Assessing commitment values the relevant items are comparable to the scale „affective organizational commitment“ by of Meyer et al. (1993). Both indicate relations between employees, this also includes works councils and the work place. Analysing the scale „meaning of work“ both aim on the relationship between employees and the daily work. Taking the reflections on the concept of works councils in the introduction into account, there are quite similar meanings in these scales. The scale „emotional demands“ indicates correlation to the number of attended training courses and seems to confirm the hypotheses.

The outcomes of this research is a starting point for further investigations adding the knowledge on recent training courses of trade union IG Metal, coping strategies of works councils and organizational commitment.

To gain detailed information of coping strategies, an examination of both temporal distance and the contents of a work council could lead to the following conclusion:

- There are training courses which have a significant influence on coping strategies of work councils
- A temporal sequence and organization of training courses can be seen to best develop coping strategies for new work councils
- Based on these theories, but not forced upon them, the COPSQ enables more options for the examination of coping theories. To clarify these relationships, further studies are necessary.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

The instruments used to analyse Health-Related Quality of Life by SF 36 and NHP contains no significant information concerning the underlying presumption of training course attendance being related to physical and psychological health. It can be considered a weakness of our research that at this present stage we are unable to identify more specific types of questionnaires that are sensitive to measure a relation between psychosocial demands and training courses. We think that using the coping questionnaire SVF 78 by Jahnke et al. (2002) could be an improvement to measure Health-Related Quality of Life.

Either way, taking the limited quality of research into account, the results of the relationship between coping strategies and training courses by COPSQ. As a second weakness of our research we have to consider we were not able providing evidence of the association between SF36, NHP and training courses should be considered primary.

Due to the fact that this preliminary study is based on a survey collected from work councils of 14 German companies the results do not attempt to be representative for all employees' representatives. Additionally we did an anonymous research and so we could not measure numbers of non-respondents. Taking the number and the setting of this study into account we do not claim validity of the results for the entire group of work councils in the branch of the trade union IG Metal.

However, we do not expect that results of non-attended work councils differ significantly from our outcomes. We suggest that the general tendencies would stand in the same line and underline the results and it would be important for further investigations to be based on a larger data-setting to gain more credibility. In addition it could be useful to adjust the questionnaire with further instruments, such as SVF 78.

CONCLUSION

This cross-sectional study is, to the author's knowledge, the first scientific approach investigating a trade-off between psychosocial stress and strain of work councils and training courses held by the trade union IG Metal. Mainly we analysed different screening instruments to identify psychosocial stress and strain for further investigations on this specific group. We used the German version of Short form 36 Health Survey Questionnaire, COPSQ and Nottingham Health Profiles. As one implication we identified only COPSQ as being sensitive enough to measure psychosocial workload. Furthermore we found out that, due to the complex role as the employee's representative, work councils could answer some

of the questions from different point of views, the employee's and the work council's view. Thus the instrument can be used with minor restrictions.

We expected that employees as work councils with frequent training courses would have better coping strategies than employees with infrequent training courses.

However, the results show that infrequent training courses are associated with lower correlation of 5 important sectors evaluated by COPSQ. Confirming the hypotheses it seems that frequent training courses do have a positive, meaning a protective effect, when compared with low levels. It has to be said that this cross-sectional study is not sufficient for further explanations but is set to be the basis for a bigger cross-sectional and longitudinal study in 2011 and 2012 on work councils investigating the trade-off between training courses and coping strategies.

By analysing the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire, significant correlations between attended training courses and coping strategies can be found. Especially emotional-related demands increase by attending training courses. These relationships are especially fostered by the model of resource conservation (COR-theory) by Hobfoll. Attending training courses leads to higher resources of coping strategies and personal skills. Higher resources mean higher coping strategies. The economic outcome of this study is the assumption that it is possible to create a training program helping young work councils to cope the specific daily stress and strain more successfully than the current situation. For this is a longitudinal study needed which will start in 2012, based on the outcome of the current study. More likely the results of the following investigations will be transferable as a template for researches on management qualification and prevention of psychosocial stress.

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