

Campaigns orchestrated by the social partners – can they reach the small enterprises?

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Abstract

Generally, the involved (owner-managed) SMEs with their simple organizational structures, diminutive administrative function, tight internal social relations, and scarcity of finances as well as time, are difficult to reach. Targeting and ‘customizing’ of the campaigns, outreaching and/or personal contact, easy accessible information about regulatory requirements and simple OHS guidelines as well as consistency and repetition seem to be important conditions for success. Furthermore, convenient timing of the campaign, e.g. simultaneously with the introduction of new legislation/regulatory demands seems to be of great importance. However, the study indicate that the organizations may be out of touch with the younger generations of owner-managers’ approach to OHS.

Key words

OHS campaigns, impact on SMEs, resistance/appliance, owner-manager – employee relations, working culture.

Introduction

The objective of this project is to generate understandings of the impact of OHS campaigns orchestrated by the social partners directed at Danish SMEs in the *construction industry* and among *metal manufacturers* respectively: How can the campaigns affect change in understandings and procedures of OHS (including risk assessment) in SMEs, and what are the conditions for improving OHS in the SMEs? We search for *common features* for successful sustainable and long term preventive activities for improvement of OHS in SMEs, and *specific features* concerning the two industrial areas, which have significance for the possibility of the campaigns reaching SMEs. The focus is thus on:

1. The *objectives/aims* and *content/activities* of the campaigns, and
2. The *impact* of the campaigns on the OHS performance in the SMEs

Approach and methods

Both of the above mentioned foci are investigated qualitatively and quantitatively:

Observations at campaign meetings in both industries, *interviews* with key persons of the social partners, 11 *company visits* to construction companies and 12 to metal companies as well as an evaluating *telephone survey* of both campaigns.

It is important to keep in mind that the two industries vary on a number of accounts: First, the size of a small SME in the construction industry is often less than 20 employees, whereas a small firm in the metal manufacturers is often up to 50 employees. This has had an effect on the number of telephone respondents available in the metal evaluation survey. Secondly, the construction industry is characterized by being in ever-changing locations, while the metal manufacturers often work in a workshop and therefore have a permanent base. This means that it has been easier to talk to both the

owner-manager and a representative of the staff in the metal cases, whereas in the construction cases all employees have often been out on a construction site and therefore not available for interviews on visits to the company address.

At the same time, the two campaigns analyzed also differ. The campaign in the construction industry was a series of 25 meetings held all over Denmark in 2007, especially directed at SMEs. The metal campaign only held approx. 10 meetings, which has however been repeated every year as an annual event since 2003. Furthermore, the meetings were directed towards the industry in general meaning that significantly fewer SMEs participated.

Qualitative interviews

In both industries 2-6 interviews were conducted with representatives of the employers' and employees' organisations respectively, as well as with representatives from the Branch Working Environment Councils¹.

In the construction industry 11 companies with less than 20 employees were visited. The companies were located all over Denmark: 2 in Jutland, 3 on Funen, 4 on Zealand and 2 in Copenhagen Area. No significant differences between the companies or their interview answers seem to be connected to the geographical location of the company. On most occasions, only the owner-manager was available for interview. However, in two cases only employees were interviewed (owner-manager not available) and in two cases the wife of the owner-manager were attending the meeting along with her husband as a part of the company.

Furthermore, 12 metal manufacturers with less than 50 employees were visited. As the management and employees were all working in the same location – the metal work shop – most interviews were conducted with the owner-manager as well as a representative for the employees. However, in 2 cases only the owner-manager was interviewed, and in another case two employees were interviewed. The 12 metal companies were likewise located all over Denmark: 4 in Jutland, 1 on Funen, 1 on Zealand and 5 in Copenhagen Area. As was the case in construction, no significant differences between the companies or their interview answers seemed to be connected to the geographical location of the company.

Survey data

The two campaigns were evaluated by a telephone survey to respectively 360 respondents from the construction campaign and 60 respondents from the metal industry. The relatively low number of respondents in the metal industry is due to the fact that only 25 % of the participants at the metal campaign were from companies with less than 50 employees, and only 16 % had less than 30 employees. In light of this information, the response rate of metal manufacturers with less than 30 employees that participated in a campaign meeting was 57, 5 %. In comparison the response rate for the construction campaign 56 % - both considered generally reasonable and relatively high the businesses taken into consideration.

Results

The results show that SMEs in the construction industry and in metal manufacturing *can* be reached if certain conditions are met.

¹ The 11 Branch Working Environment Councils register and map the different branches particular problems within OHS and assist the workplaces in solving these problems.

First, an *incentive* is required that can motivate the SMEs to adapt their behaviour. In the case of these two campaigns, the incentive was that the Labour Inspection was screening all Danish construction and metal manufacturing companies in order to evaluate the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS). If the OHS was found insufficient the penalty could be a large fine or closing of the company. The social partners viewed this situation not only as a part of their responsibility towards the SMEs to assist them, but also as an opportunity to spread knowledge of OHS to the SMEs.

Secondly, the *material* on OHS needs to be easily understood and usable with tick-of boxes and little text. Both industries are characterized by a primarily practical and hands-on attitude to work as opposed to a more theoretical approach, and paperwork on OHS is seen as a burden that is often handled as the last thing – after propositions, bills and accounts – and it affects the quality of the OHS-paperwork, the owner-managers admit.

Thirdly, the campaign directed at SMEs in construction was initiated by a written invitation that was followed up by a telephone call to over 8000 SMEs. The consequence of the telephone calls was that 30 % of the target group of small companies with less than 20 employees signed up for the campaign meetings as opposed to the only 10 % that reacted on the written invitation alone. The *personal contact* had a major effect, although it was a very expensive solution. The metal campaign did not use this strategy, meaning that only ¼ of the participants at the campaign meetings were SMEs.

However, fourthly, the metal campaign was an *annual event* with a number of meetings organized as a road show. The survey data shows that up to 80 % of the participants at the meetings were “regulars” who had participated for several years.

So, the optimal OHS-campaign setting would be: to have the right incentive, easily understood material, personal contact and to organize the campaign as an annual event that become a well-known networking event as well as a habit.

The 21 visits to companies who have had a representative at the meeting show that the meetings and the material handed out appealed to the majority of the companies. This is supported by the evaluating telephone survey that was conducted shortly after the meeting.

Short term impact in the construction industry: benefit of the campaign themes and materials

In the construction industry, almost 50 % of telephone interviewees reported to have benefitted much or very much from the meetings². The three most popular themes of the meeting (out of five) were a *description of the Labour Inspection screening* (51 % benefitted much or very much) and a *specification of the labour law within construction industry* and *information on mandatory machine manuals* (31 % benefitted much or very much on both). Only 25 % found that they benefitted from information on the *Safety Committee and required OHS-education*. This could be due to the fact that most of the SMEs in construction are below the size limit that according to the law requires a Safety Committee.

Finally the interest in a *course in risk assessment* was low (19 % benefitted much or very much). An owner-manager explains at one of the visits the lack of interest by that it is difficult for the smaller firms to send employees off on long courses, as the lack of hands makes it difficult to meet

² Evaluation scale in 5 steps: 1) very little, 2) little, 3) neither-nor, 4) much, and 5) very much.

the customers' needs. He encourages the social partners to offer shorter end-of-day courses to upgrade the employees.

At the meetings in the construction industry, four kinds of material were handed out. The telephone survey shows that the participants have mostly flipped through the material and not read it intensively. The *checklist for risk assessment* was the most accessible and has been read by and given new knowledge to 35 % of the participants, whereas 34 % has read in it but not systematically and without actual use³. Information sheets on *risk assessment and OHS in this particular industry* has been read by and given new knowledge to respectively 28 % and 24 % of the participants. Information sheets on *OHS-education for each trade group* has only been read and given new knowledge to 17 % of the participants. However 41-44 % of the participants has flipped through the information sheets and might have picked up on some of the information.

Approximately the same picture goes for the *visits* to construction companies. When asked about the materials, most remember seeing them and looking through them, even though the visits in some cases were conducted over a year after the meeting was held. But few have actually used the materials. There seems to be a barrier for the SMEs to transform information to applicable knowledge as well as to carry through the actual organizational changes. Most popular was the *checklist for risk assessment*, as it required a minimum of writing and adaption to accommodate the requirements of the Danish law.

Short term impact in metal manufacturing: benefit of the campaign themes and materials

The metal campaign as an annual event differs from the construction campaign as it was not directly associated with the Labour Inspection screenings, which - along with other factors - might have influenced that only 25 % of the participants (the year the research was conducted), came from SMEs. The metal industry was screened a year before the construction industry, and the campaign meeting held the same year as the screening had shown a more than 50 % increase in number of participants compared to later years.

As mentioned, companies in the metal industry are more geographically stable and larger than companies in the construction industry and they often have a more elaborate organisation of the OHS. A Safety Committee is a rarity in construction companies but quite usual among metal manufacturers, which might be the reason why more employee representatives attended the metal campaign meetings than was the case in the construction campaign meetings.

In metal manufacturing, the telephone survey shows that equally almost half (43 %) of the participants experienced a large or very large benefit⁴ from the campaign meeting. At the metal campaign meetings 3 subjects were discussed, the most popular being *sick-leave and risk assessment* according to meet mandatory legislation (47 % benefitted much or very much), the secondary being the Lean-inspired *5S systematisation tool* (41 % benefitted much or very much) and the least popular being *instruction, training, and screening* (25 % benefitted much or very much).

³ Evaluation scale in 5 steps: 1) not read, 2) read some of/flipped through, 3) read and achieved new knowledge, 4) read, achieved new knowledge, and used, 5) not read. In the text above the percentages for categories 3 and 4 has been added up.

⁴ Same evaluation scale as in footnote 1.

In general, the materials are being read through by the participants (only 2 % responds “not read” to all three types of material), but as was the case in construction it seems more difficult for them to actually use the material. 24 % respond that material on *sick-leave and risk assessment* has been used, 12 % have used the material on *5S systematisation tool* and only 2 % have used the material on *instruction, training, and screening*.

This confirms two impressions from the construction campaign: 1) For the metal manufacturers as well as for the construction industry the interest is mostly on hands-on instructions and easily used tools, whereas information on instruction and education seems less relevant. And 2) it is difficult for the SMEs in both industries to actually apply the ideas and information to their own companies and make it work as a part of their everyday routine.

Long term effects in construction and metal: are OHS procedures changed after the campaigns?

The material from the construction campaign allows a comparison between companies that *participated* in the campaign meeting, companies that had *signed up* for the meeting but was then hindered, and companies that did *not sign up/participate*. This opens the possibility of comparing the degree of actual changes in the OHS-work and thereby evaluate whether the campaign meetings have had a long term effect that would not have occurred anyway. In metal manufacturing, the same type of data is not accessible due to less elaborate initiatives of invitation and evaluation of the meetings on behalf of the organisations.

Data from construction shows that 65 % of the *participating* companies had implemented one or more improvements to prepare themselves for the Labour Inspection screening. Among the *signed-up* non-participants, 37 % had implemented an improvement, and only 21 % of the *non-participants* had done so. Data therefore strongly supports an effect of the meeting.

Even though the metal campaign does not offer the same possibility of comparison between participants and non-participants, the metal telephone survey shows that 2/3 of the respondents from SMEs (all participants) find that the meeting to a high or to some extend⁵ had influenced current changes in the OHS in the companies. Secondly, 97 % of the respondents declare that they plan to participate in the meeting again next year (in fact, 76 % were “regulars” who had attended the meetings previous years).

As was the case in construction, this respond testify that the metal campaign seems to have extended the “first impression”-state and also that it has had a more fundamental effect on the development of the work with occupational health and safety in the companies visited.

However, it must be taken into account that the participants in the two campaigns – and to some extend also the signed-up nonparticipants in the construction campaign – might represent the “better part” of the SMEs; that is, the mere willingness to participate in the campaign meeting testifies that openness towards OHS-issues is present. But the visits to the 23 construction and metal companies seem to add more perspectives to this impression. For instance, it seems that the future prospects of the company and the owner’s view on his own commitment to the company in the future has an effect on the attitude towards the OHS knowledge and improvements.

Is the campaign approach up to date with the changes in the target group?

⁵ Evaluation scale in 4 steps: 1) to a high extend, 2) to some extend, 3) to a limited extend and 4) not at all.

The meetings appear to have made a strong impression on the owner-managers (and in metal manufacturing also the employees) of the SMEs in both industries. The screenings by the Labour Inspection seems to have been shrouded in myths of the unreasonable and ruthless authority. This impression seems to last even after the actual screenings in the firms as an exception to confirm the rule.

The owner-managers relates in roughly two ways to the screenings. Overall they all agree that a safe work environment is important. However, they do not all agree that they *themselves* have to adjust their ways to accommodate to the rules and legislation. The owner-managers of 'modern' companies that hope for a prosperous future many years ahead seem to go head first into the issue of risk assessment, whereas the managers who do not expect their companies to endure for more than a couple of years seem to hope that their current way of organizing the OHS (which is rarely very elaborate) will last the time out. This division is of course related to the age of the owner-manager, and in companies with a generation change in progress a conflict between the two perspectives may occur – usually with the younger and more optimistic party as the “winner”.

The younger generation seems in general to approach the authorities differently than the older generation. They seem less orthodox, more debating, and having a tendency to view the Labour Inspection screenings as an opportunity for guidance rather than purely a control visit – which is also the strategy of the Labour Inspection.

However, at the campaign meetings (especially in construction) the attitude of the social partners on the issue of the Labour Inspection has been to strongly emphasize the power of the authority. The representative from the social partner Danish Construction (employer organisation) explains the strategy of “crying wolf”:

”It [the description of the Labour Inspection screenings] has to be pretty straight forward. Otherwise they [the owner-managers of SMEs] don't listen. It has to be spelled out. All this beating about the bush, what good does it do? There is no need for all this political nonsense.” (Head of the OHS-department in Danish Construction)

This strategy testifies to an approach to the SMEs where OHS is not taken serious unless the consequences are severe. And it might have been the right strategy. As a participant in the meeting comments when telephone interviewed:

”It was practically giving us a scare. But it was good information and it pushed me to do something.”

On the other hand, the strategy might have been misplaced in relation to the younger owner-managers who generally seem more informed of OHS and more willing to meet the legislation as well as cemented some of the myths mentioned earlier.

A new view of owner-managers on OHS

The following testimonies are from the company visits. The companies cited here are all relatively young and are expected to run for many years to come. The picture painted is one of concerned owner-managers who take an interest in the OHS and the well-being of their employees. They see them as an investment rather than exchangeable workforce.

”[You] have a different view upon people now than 15-20 maybe 30 years ago. Because as we see it today [we would ask] would *we* work here [under those conditions]? You can't allow yourself to let your

employees work under conditions that could damage their health. I believe that is the general opinion.” (Owner-manager, Metal case 9)

”I think that perhaps if you from the start have a totally negative attitude towards OHS and safe work environment being a waste of time and something invented to bother us, well, then I think it might be a good exercise to be forced to write down what it is actually about and talk to your people about it. Well, I feel we do that already.” (Owner-manager, Metal case 3)

”Before he [the older journeyman in his company] was used to being on a piecework and that was a battle. You really had to be careful with the safety as it is when you are hurrying that things go wrong.” (Owner-manager, Construction case 2)

”I care about the people who work here. We are a family and if one of them hurts himself I would feel terrible! So they have to know that they have to take care of themselves. When I myself was an apprentice I couldn’t care less [tells a story of a dangerous situation from his time as an apprentice] This is how I was trained: If you fall down and kill yourself then we’ll just find someone else to take over. I don’t myself want to be the kind of employer who only thinks about money and profit. If we don’t have fun I might as well leave it and become second-in-command in [a large construction firm].” (Owner-manager, Construction case 5)

The employee organisations out of touch?

In the employee organisations, OHS is still at large considered a conflict area where employees have to fight their employers to get the necessary safety equipment; even if the so-called “Danish Model” of consensus-seeking and collaboration between the social partners is well known (Due 1994). However, Limborg et al. (2003) argue that SMEs run by the owner are often structured as a patriarchal family with great concern and feeling of personal responsibility for the employees. The employees hence respond with a strong dedication to the workplace.

In this view it, is unlikely that the conflict approach is (the most) relevant in owner-managed SMEs, where the relational ties between employer and employees are often strong (Eakin & MacEachen 1998, Hasle & Kines 2009). These quotes support this argument:

”I am in the organisation of the master builders and there we of course discuss it [the work environment]. We also have a local division of the organisation of builders [employee organisation] which is a cross-functional. It is really an employee organisation but sometimes they bring up relevant issues.” (Owner-manager, Construction case 2)

”I really believe that the companies have realized that you get more out of cooperating than conflicting (...) you have to find the method, the spirit, that fits the employees you have, and the era in which you live”. (Owner-manager, Metal case 7).

The results of the current study further seems to indicate that the structure of the SMEs are developing into a more network-based structure where the owner-manager views himself more as a coordinator rather than a patriarchal father figure (Klyver 2005). This strengthens the argument that the conflict-approach to OHS is too simplistic for the future SMEs.

Additionally, the wife of the owner-manager used to be highly involved in the company according to the family structure model as the considered mother figure and has therefore been viewed by both employee and employer organisations as obvious target group for OHS knowledge. With the change of company structure that the network-model indicates – and the changes in society in general - the wife is no longer as involved as she used to be, if at all. And if she is part of the company she

usually claims an independent status such as book keeper, designer or similar and no longer accepts being the background person defined by her husband's status.

Towards a new approach to OHS in SMEs?

The study indicates that the attitude and approach to OHS in SMEs in construction and metal manufacturing seems to develop into a more proactive direction where good OHS is seen as a natural part of a well run company. The basis for this is a change of attitude towards the employees who to a larger extent is seen as an investment rather than a more anonymous and exchangeable work force. At the same time, the owner-managers' view of the company is changing. The young owner-managers no longer see themselves (exclusively) as a responsible father but to a larger extent view the employees as responsible adults/equals who can – and should – take care of themselves.

This requires an up-to-date view on the SME from the social partners. As it is now they still seem to be caught in the “family structure model” where the “parents” (owner-manager and wife) are the correct to approach and seem to continue an information strategy where the treat of the law is the main incentive to change behaviour rather than a more argumentative approach based on reasoning.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis we conclude that: yes, the SMEs can be reached through campaigns. However it requires a relevant incentive, funding that will support a personal approach method (ex. telephone calls to the potential participants) and material to hand out that is easily used and with limited text. The success of a campaign will most likely be bigger if the campaign is an annual event rather than a one-time experience and if the approach to the SME is more based on guidance and reasoning rather than a scare-off strategy – especially if the organisations wish to reach the younger generations of owner-managers and employees.

Word count: 3.819

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