

Understanding Participation in Occupational Health and Safety in Small

Businesses: A Preliminary Study

Author(s)

Bikram R. Pandey, MSc, PhD Candidate, Centre for Ergonomics, Occupational Health and Safety, Department of Management, College of Business, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. B.R.Pandey@massey.ac.nz.

Ian S. Laird, PhD, Senior Lecturer, Centre for Ergonomics, Occupational Health and Safety, Department of Management, College of Business, Massey University, Palmerston North. I.S.Laird@massey.ac.nz.

Stephen J. Legg, Professor, Centre for Ergonomics, Occupational Health and Safety, Department of Management, College of Business, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. S.J.Legg@massey.ac.nz.

Abstract

Employee participation, initiatives allowing employees to have greater voice in organizational issues, improves employee job performance and firm productivity (Zwick, 2004). Participatory practice, a broader concept of participation, allowing joint management-employee decisions and actions in workplaces - significantly improves ergonomic design (Rivilis et al., 2008) and new product design decisions (Demirbilek & Demirkan, 2004). These have been evidenced largely in large businesses. Very little is known about participation in occupational health and safety (OHS) practices in small businesses (SBs). However, one might expect some of the characteristics of SBs - simple organizational structures, close employee-manager relationship and short channels of communication - to be conducive to practices of participation (Itani et al., 2006). This paper therefore describes a study designed to develop an initial understanding of participation in OHS practices in SBs in a multiple case study of independently operated restaurants and cafés, employing 6-19 employee count (EC) in New Zealand, using semi structured interviews. Interview responses were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Three emergent themes were evident - initiate participation, entice participation and induce participation. These corresponded to the three emergent themes on getting knowledge on OHS risks in SBs- experiential learning, formal learning and peer learning respectively.

Key words

Participatory practices, OHS knowledge, small enterprises, social actors

Introduction

Participation defined as “the act of sharing in the activities of a group or the condition of sharing in common with others” (“The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language,” 2003) has been part of human society for millennia. As we know it today, the concept originated in the 16th century and may be understood as a means of applying common effort by members of a social group to achieve certain goals (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009). Participation by employees in organizational activities in business and organizations, generally entails individuals or groups at a lower level in an organization having a greater voice in one or more areas of organizational issues (Glew, O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Fleet, 1995). This has been conventionally termed “Employee participation (EP)” and has been long experimented, debated and researched. The forms, contents and outcomes are the three dimensions of participation researched and experimented. Direct or indirect employee participation (Cabrera, Ortega, & Cabrera, 2002; Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988), consultative or delegative participation and representative participation (Cotton et al., 1988; Frick & Wren, 2000) which can be informal, enforced, voluntary, contractual or formal participation (Cotton et al., 1988; Dachler & Wilpert, 1978; Seibold & Shea, 2001) are the suggested forms that employee participation.

Employees having no say in the organizational issues or having consulted for information, views and opinions (Cabrera et al., 2002; Geary, 1999; Gill & Krieger, 1999) or having delegated some authority to take some decisions (Cabrera et al., 2002; Geary, 1999; Gill & Krieger, 1999) or management-employees taking joint ownership of decisions (Black & Gregersen, 1997; Seibold & Shea, 2001; Walters & Frick, 2000) have been suggested as the elements of the content of participation.. Participation in goal setting or making decision or solving problem or making changes are the other set of content of participation being suggested (Sashkin, 1986).

Irrespective of the suggested forms and the content, participation has been found to impart positive improvement on employee job performance and firm productivity (Zwick, 2004), improved work behaviours and job satisfaction (Hodson, 2002), enhanced economic performance (EPOC, 1997; Gollan, 2005; Gollan, Poutsma, & Veersma, 2006) and delivery of competitive edge (Cabrera et al., 2002). In recent years, employee participation has been broadened in concept and practice as the articulation of diverse interests and perspectives on work related issues by organizational members that extends beyond the traditional rights and responsibilities necessary and sufficient to accomplish work goals (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). This has been conceptualised as participatory

practice and defined as the process of affording the involvement of people in planning and controlling a significant amount of their work activities to influence both processes and outcomes (Wilson, 2001) in order to achieve desirable goals (Black & Gregersen, 1997; Rivilis et al., 2008; Sashkin, 1984; Wilson, 2001). In relation to occupational health and safety (OHS) activities Holmes et al. (1998) concluded that any action on prevention of risk in small businesses resides in the interaction between employers and employees in the understanding of OHS risks and how to prevent them. Jensen (2002) has defined employers and employees as the social actors of work environment and such interactions as OHS participatory practices. Participatory practices in business operations are widely applied in ergonomics (Carrivick, Lee, Yau, & Stevenson, 2005; Kuorinka & Patry, 1995; Pehkonena et al., 2008; Rivilis et al., 2008; Wilson, 2001) and have been found to significantly improve ergonomic design (Rivilis et al., 2008) and new product design decisions (Demirbilek & Demirkan, 2004). However, these findings have largely been observed in large business operations.

Large businesses generally have more formal structures and well defined communication channels than small businesses (SBs). These characteristics, together with a lack of resource constraints, have been associated with easy adoption of the practice of employee participation in workplace issues including occupational health and safety (OHS) in large businesses. In contrast, small businesses are characterised as having a number of positive characteristics including simple organizational structures, closer employee-manager relationships and shorter channels of communications relating to OHS practices (Laird, Olsen, Harris, Legg, & Perry, 2009), and have been shown to be conducive to participatory practices in OHS (Itani et al., 2006). However, it has been argued that lack of resources to access external information to build in-house OHS competence largely hinders employee participation in OHS practices (Walters, 2002). Additionally, differences in the perception of risks and attribution of the causes of risks between employers and employees deter OHS practices and employee participation in OHS practices (Gardner, Cross, Fonteyn, Carlopio, & Shikdar, 1999; Hasle, Kines, & Andersen, 2008). Nevertheless, a recent study, that included

managers of small businesses employing less than 50 employees as the study respondents, suggested that effective OHS participatory practices can help small businesses achieve better performance in controlling OHS risks and carrying out preventive activities (Champoux & Brun, 2003).

The management of OHS in small businesses has been under extensive review in recent years (Champoux & Brun, 2003; Eakin, Lamm, & Limborg, 2000; Laird et al., 2009; Legg et al., 2009b; Olsen et al., 2009). However, very little is known about the way small businesses get knowledge on OHS risks and preventive actions; the way employers and employees in SBs develop an understanding of OHS risks; and participation that occurs in transforming knowledge on OHS risks into preventive actions. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring employee-employer participation in developing an understanding of OHS risks and how OHS knowledge is transformed into action in small businesses. More specifically, since the overall goal is to develop an understanding of participation in OHS practices in SBs, two main research questions are addressed. The first is: ‘How does participation in OHS practices in small businesses occur?’ This question is in turn broken down into three specific sub-questions: a) How do employees and employers become knowledgeable about the OHS risks and possible preventive actions in their workplace?, b) How is a common understanding of the OHS risks and possible preventive actions developed?, and c) How is the knowledge and understanding of risks transformed into OHS actions? The second main research question is: ‘Why does participation in OHS practices occur in small businesses?’ This question is in turn broken down into two specific sub-questions: a) What motivates participation in OHS practices? and b) What influences participation in OHS practices?

Methods

Industry sector and business size

Restaurants and cafes combine elements of simultaneous production and service in their operations with customers as active participants in the process. On one hand, meeting the needs and expectations of customers require the combination of a wide range of activities with a high degree

of coordination. On the other, often long and 'unsocial' hours of work increase fatigue and possible degradation of health condition of people working in this sector. All these add diversity to occupational OHS problems and an increased risk of injuries and accidents. Therefore, given the high propensity of OHS risks but advantages associated with smallness make restaurants and cafes an important and interesting sector to study participation in OHS practices.

For small businesses, the initial three years are crucial years for survival as well as for development of long term strategic plans. In terms of size and structure, as the size of SB grows in terms of employee counts, the business develops from an informal structure to more formal structure. Arguably a SB tends to become more formal in operation as the number of employees tend to grow more than 12 EC (Massey, 2005).

For the reasons discussed above, the present study was conducted as a pilot investigation in two restaurant and cafes of small business sectors in the central and lower north region of New Zealand. The first was a function centre offering restaurant services and venues for events, which has been in operation for more than twenty five years. It employed 18 staff of which 10 are permanent and 8 are part time. The second was a privately owned restaurant and café which has been in operation for seven years. It employed 10 employees, all part time. The two cases were purposively selected on the following criteria: 1) employing 6-19 employees count (EC), 2) independently owned, 3) in operation for three or more years. These criteria allowed a degree of homogeneity in selecting business cases for the study providing a balance in the breadth and depth of area of enquiry.

Qualitative interviews

Five separate interviews were conducted: one with each of the owners and each of the managers of the two SBs, and one with an employee. All the interviews were semi-structured face-to-face interviews guided by a pre-developed interview schedule. The interview schedule consisted of four areas of enquiry – knowledge in OHS, developing common understanding on OHS risks and preventive actions, participation in transforming knowledge on OHS risks into preventive actions

and factors influencing participation in OHS actions. The types of questions included in the interview guide were: what are the hazards and OHS problems in the workplace? How do the social actors get knowledge on such hazards and OHS problems in the workplace? What are the possible causes and effects of these problems? How are these OHS problems identified? What makes incidents and OHS problems a concern? Who is involved in addressing the OHS problems? What motivates people to get involved in addressing OHS problems? What is usually done to address the OHS problems? And what has been the outcome of such involvement in addressing OHS problems? The interviews lasted from 23 to 33 minutes and were held in the business premises at a time convenient for the respondents. The interviewee's responses were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed using an Olympus DSS Transcription Module.

Data analysis

The interview responses were subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis is a systematic process accomplished in six stages as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description
1. Familiarizing with data	Transcribe data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential themes
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic map of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definition of the names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis, Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis to the research question And literature, producing a scholarly report of analysis.

Thus the analysis involved repeated reading of the textual data of all of the interview transcriptions in order to identify “common threads” of texts and comments in the responses. While reading through, comments and responses from each individual interviewee were noted down separately and a list of common threads of comments developed. Taking one research question at a time, all the common threads of comments pertaining to or responding to a specific research question were gathered together as one set. These sets of comments were then reorganized to group together the similar or connected thread of comments. Categories of comments were developed from the reorganized group of threads of comments. From these categories, relevant “Themes” were developed for the specific research question under examination. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

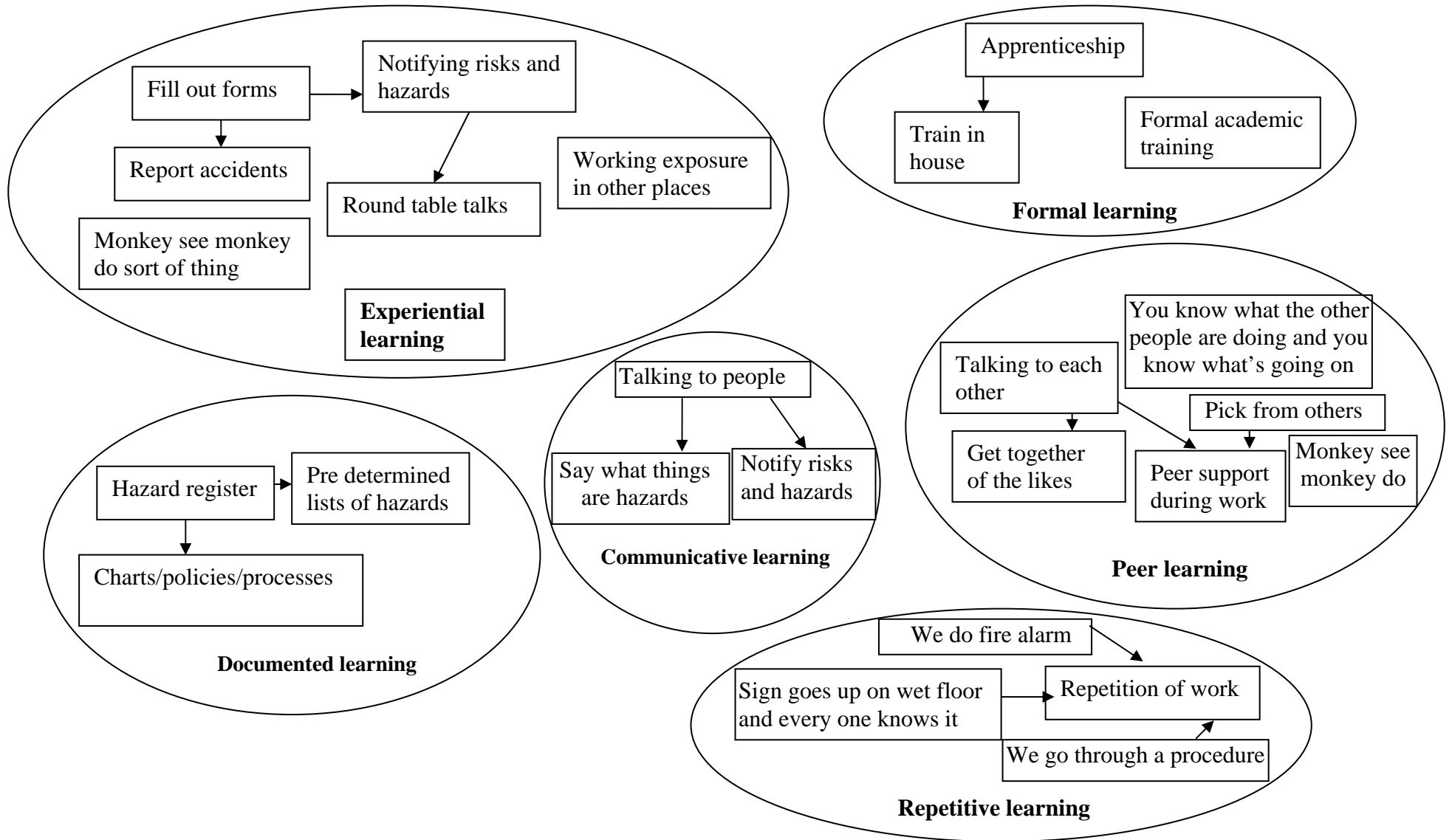
In relation to how employees and employers acquire knowledge on OHS risks and preventive actions, six emergent themes were found. They included formal learning, documented learning, peer learning, experiential learning, communicative learning and learning through repetition (Table 1).

Table 1: Emergent themes on knowledge on OHS risks

Categories	Themes		
	Owners	Managers	Employees
Major certificates, qualifications, in-premise or off-premise training	Formal learning	Formal learning	
List of hazards, chemical charts, policies, process, hazard register or accident register	Documented learning	Documented learning	
Smallness of business allows working closely along side, know what other people are doing, and pick up from each other	Peer learning	Peer learning	Peer learning
Working in different work environment, accident investigation and share experiences	Experiential learning	Experiential learning	Experiential learning
Talking to people, notifying hazards	Communicative learning	Communicative learning	
Going through a procedure which is a repetition afterwards		Learning through repetition	Learning through repetition

Figure 1 shows the thematic map of the responses from the interviews on getting knowledge on OHS risks.

Figure 1: Thematic map - getting knowledge on OHS risks



In relation to how employers and employees (the social actors) develop a common understanding of OHS risks and possible preventive actions, six emergent themes were evident. These were: documentation, formal communication, informal communication, communicating suggestions upward, communicating instructions downward and information feed-in (Table 2).

Table 2: Emergent themes on developing common understanding on OHS risks

Categories	Themes		
	Owners	Managers	Employees
Accident register, hazard register and related forms	Documentation	Documentation	Documentation
Get together of the likes and round table talk once in a while	Formal communication	Formal communication	
Senior guys and fleet members talk on a daily basis, just talking to people and changing their mind set	Informal communication	Informal communication	
Open to ideas, suggestions and things brought up,	Communicate suggestions upward		Communicate suggestions upward
Tell people, say what is done right and what is done wrong	Instructional communication downward		
Information to and from staff – notifying hazards		Information feed in	

Figure 2 shows the thematic map of the responses from the interviews on developing common understanding on OHS risks. **Figure 3** shows the thematic map of the responses from the interviews on common perception of OHS risks among the social actors.

Figure 2: Thematic map: developing common understanding on OHS risks

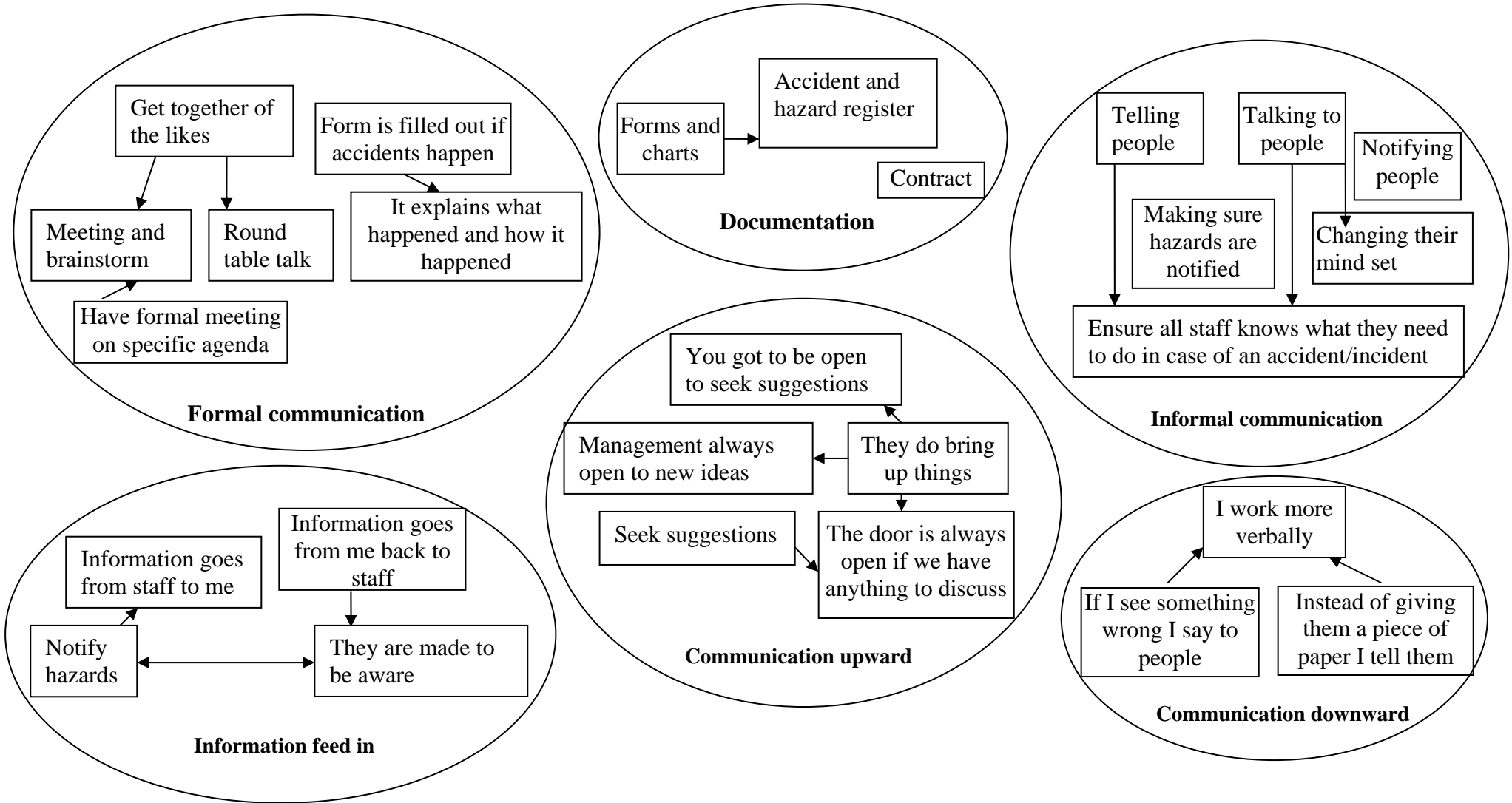
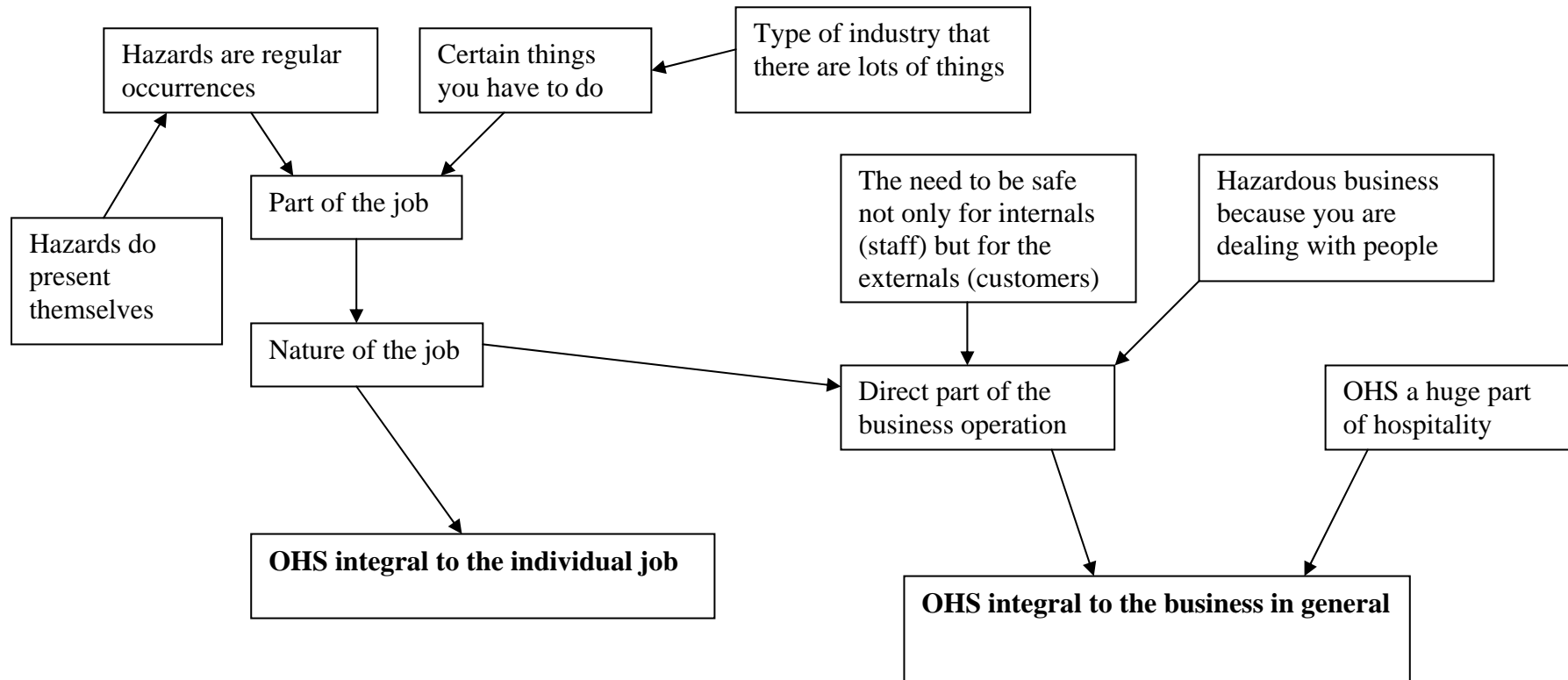


Figure 3: Common perception of OHS hazards and risks



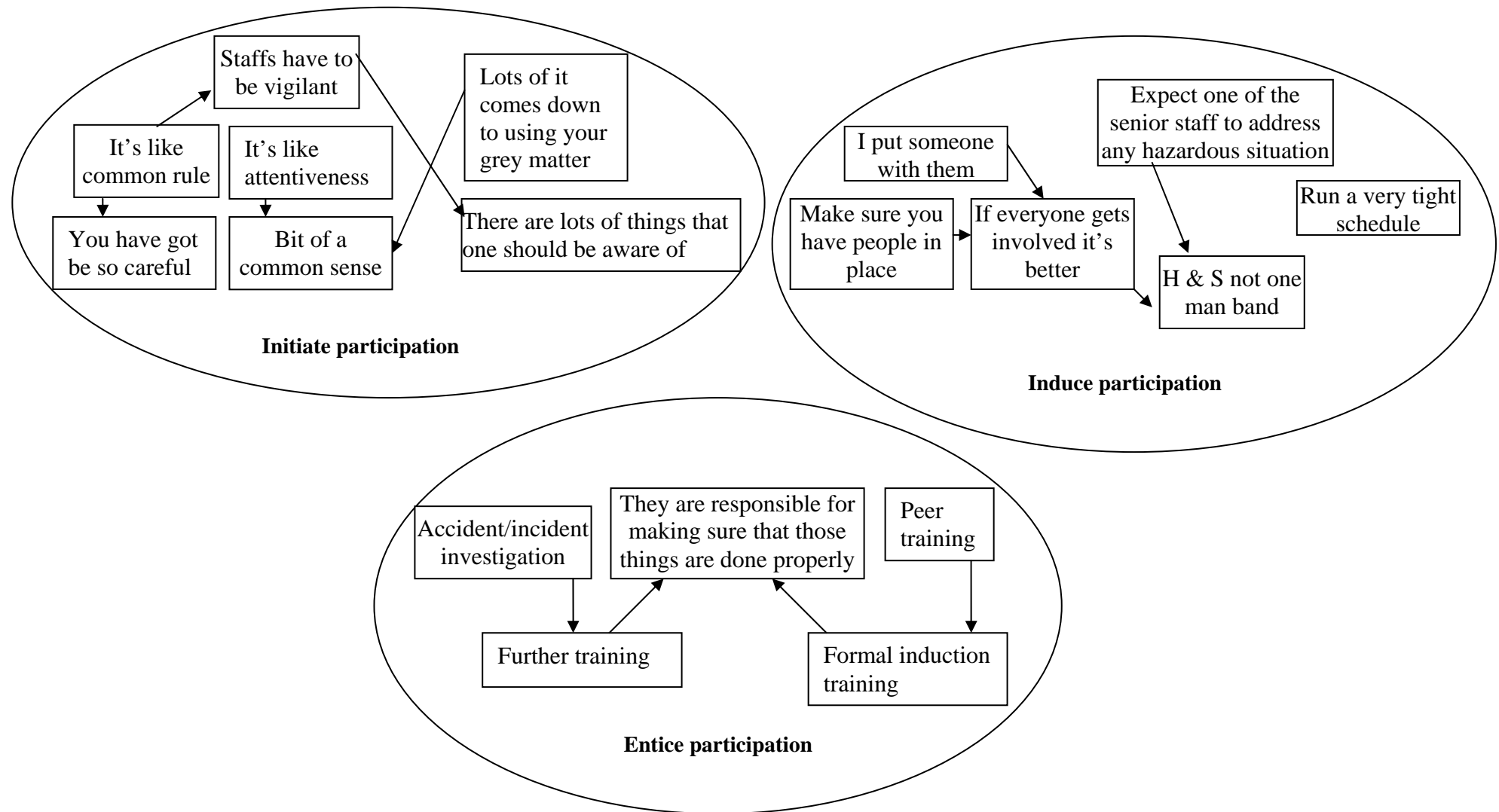
In relation to how participation in transforming knowledge on OHS risks into preventive actions occur, three emergent themes were evident. These were: induce participation, initiate participation and entice participation (Table 3).

Table 3: Emergent theme on participation in transforming knowledge on OHS risks into preventive action.

Categories	Themes		
	Owners	Managers	Employees
Accident investigation, training need and peer support	Induce participation		
Take common sense approach, being mindful and careful	Initiate participation	Initiate participation	Initiate participation
Have someone in place to get people together as H&S is not a one man band		Entice participation	Entice participation

Figure 4 shows the thematic map of the responses from the interviews on participation in transforming knowledge on OHS risks into preventive actions.

Figure 4: Thematic map - participation in transforming knowledge in OHS risks into preventive action



In relation to what motivates participation in OHS practices, six emergent themes were evident. These were: performance, business operation, efficiency, safety, ensuring effectiveness of action and doing the right things (Table 4).

Table 4: Emergent themes – motivation for participation in OHS practices

Categories	Themes		
	Owners	Managers	Employees
Poor job performance and higher risks are associated thus H&S and performance target are tied together	Performance motive		
H&S has core relation with business operation as we need make sure that we are not providing shoddy products and bad services based on uncleanliness and accident hazards, overall it actually adds growth to business	Business motive	Business motive	
Hazards and accidents add extra paper work and time, extra pressure on other members and add downtime	Efficiency motive		
The liability to provide safe workplace for the staff and customers and the want to be in a safe workplace	Safety motive	Safety motive	Safety motive
They need to be aware that hazards if present are dealt with, prevent recurrence			
Implementation of change, know what is required to be done in case of accidents or hazards		Ensure effectiveness of action	
Make the place run smoothly			Do the right things

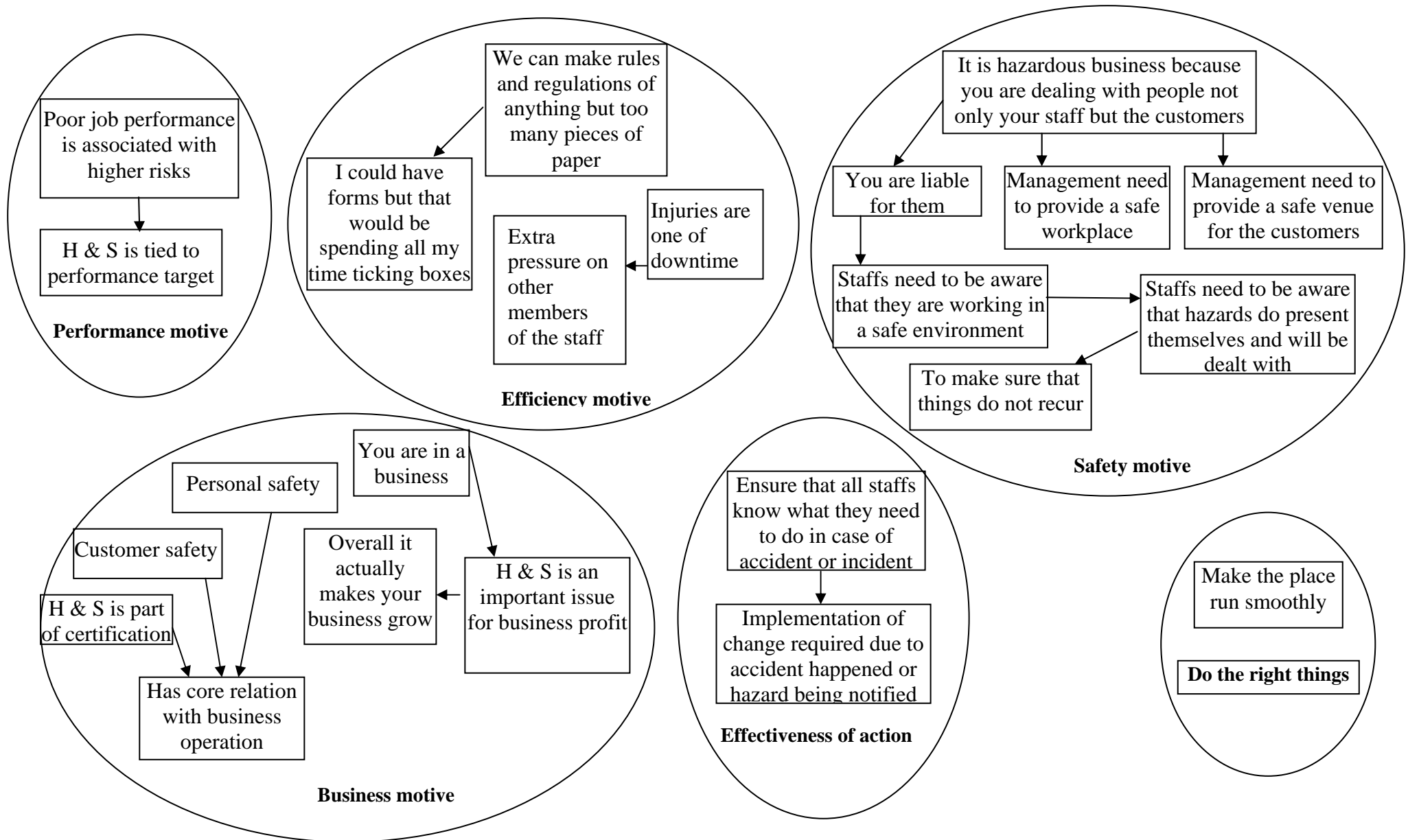
Figure 5 shows thematic map of the responses from the interviews on motivation for participation in OHS practices.

In relation to what influences participation in OHS practices, two emergent themes were evident. These were: Staff turn over and resource consumption (Table 5).

Table 5: Emergent themes - influences on participation on OHS practices

Categories	Themes		
	Owners	Managers	Employees
We don't have lots of moving of the staff so they know what's expected of them	Staff turn over		
Filling up forms consumes time	Resource consumption		
Rules and regulations add paper work			

Figure 5: Thematic map - motivation for participation



Discussion

Knowledge of OHS risks and preventive actions

The study found peer learning and experiential learning to be the commonly accepted forms of getting knowledge on OHS risks and preventive actions among social actors. Closely related to experiential learning is learning through repetition which the employees think provides ample opportunity for them to become knowledgeable of the risks and preventive actions in the work environment due to the repetitive nature of the job they perform.

Peer learning is facilitated by smallness of the work environment that enables people “to know what the other people are doing and what’s going on and that all those things had been done..”. Peer support and “picking up from each other” form important elements of peer learning. As put forth by one of the owners “.. each one of the member staff bring their own special characteristics with them and overall it actually makes your business grow because you take those things on and all you doing is you stepping up”.

Experiential learning occurs when the social actors become knowledgeable of occupational health and safety risks and preventive actions in their workplaces either through direct working exposure with risks and hazards or through sharing the experience of hazards and risks. As put forth by an employee “ everyone seems to have sound knowledge of health and safety in workplace like this because all of us have done it before and you know somewhere else usually”.

The study also revealed that for owners and managers, documents on OHS risks and hazards and communication with employees are important contributors to getting knowledge on OHS risks and preventive actions. As exemplified by one of the owners “doing verbally and something like that, it goes in a lot quicker. It’s a funny way of teaching but it works”. Getting knowledge through communicative learning goes two ways as said by one of the managers “just notifying the right people and talking to them about making sure that hazards are notified”.

Developing common understanding on OHS risks and preventive actions

The study revealed that documentation such as accident register and hazard register take an important role in developing understanding of OHS risks and preventive actions for the social actors. In addition, for owners and managers, formal communication such as “get together of the likes”, as put forth by one of the managers, plays an important role in developing such understanding among them. However, documentation, communication of suggestions upward and information feed-in are vital for developing a common understanding on OHS risks and preventive actions among the social actors. Interestingly, both the information feed-in and communication of suggestions is found to be occurring at a very informal level. As illustrated by an employee “the door is always open if we have anything to discuss - anything that makes the place run smoothly”, which substantiated by what one of the managers said; “I am always open for opinions and feedback from and You got to be open to seek suggestions” and “instead of giving them a piece of paper, I tell them”.

Additionally, the study revealed that the social actors have two commonly accepted understanding of OHS risks (Figure 3). The first is that OHS risks are integral to the individual jobs as said by one of the employees that “.. it is the part and parcel of the job” and in the words of the manager “hazards are regular occurrences ... just the nature of the beast and how well you manage it”. The second common understanding is that OHS risks are integral to the business in general. This has been reinforced through the opinion of an employee that “.. OHS risks are direct part of the business operation as you are dealing with people..” and in the words of one of the managers “there is the need to be safe not only to the internals (staff) but also to the externals (the customers)”.

Participation in transforming OHS knowledge into preventive action

The study revealed that participation in transforming OHS knowledge into preventive actions in these small businesses takes three forms - initiate participation, entice participation and induce

participation. Initiate participation pertains to participation in OHS actions out of “common knowledge”, “common sense” or “employees being conscious of hazards and risks”. As exemplified by one of the managers “we all are involved and it is important the all the staff take a common sense approach”. Initiate participation is found to occur informally as put forth by one of the owners “staff having understood the work procedure” due to the “repetitive nature of the work, it becomes a second nature”.

Initiating participation is reinforced by “Entice Participation” and “Induce Participation”. Entice participation pertains to bringing about participation in OHS actions through increased knowledge and awareness. This is reflected by the opinion of one of the managers “to train staff to ensure that they know what good responsible practice is”. ‘Induce participation’ is related to prompting participation in OHS actions through peer induction. This is illustrated by a statement made by one of the owners “I put someone with them” or a statement made by a manager “Make sure you have people in place” as it is “monkey see monkey do sort of thing” or by an employee saying “we run a very tight schedule”.

Comparing the categories and emergent themes on “getting knowledge on OHS” and “participation in transforming OHS knowledge into preventive actions” shows that ‘entice participation’ is closely related to formal learning which involves getting knowledge from training and apprenticeship. ‘Induce participation’ is found to be closely related to peer learning. This is mainly because peer learning emerges from “picking up from each other” or “peer support during work” which resemble “I put someone with them” or “health and safety not one man band” from where induce participation is emerging. Additionally, though there is no clear resemblance of categories from where experiential learning and initiate participation are emerging, the two are found to be related to some extent. People getting common knowledgeable of OHS risks and preventive actions due to the repetitive nature of the work they perform which according to one of the owners becomes a

second nature which possibly lead to increase in initiate participation is a reason for the possible relation between experiential learning and initiate participation.

Influencers of Participation in transforming OHS knowledge into preventive action

Motivations for participation

The study found personal safety to be the primary motivation behind participation in OHS actions by the social actors. Owners and managers think that safety of people including staff and customers in the work environment is their liability as management need to provide safe workplace for the staff and a safe venue for the customers. Participation allows owners and managers to be assured that their liability of providing safe environment for internals and externals is met. Participation allows employees to be aware that they are working in a safe work environment and, as put by one of the managers, “to be aware that hazards do present themselves and will be dealt with”.

The study revealed that, closely related to personal safety is, the business motivation that motivates participation in OHS practices. As said by one of the managers “H & S is an important issue for business profit” or in the words of one of the owners “overall it actually makes your business grow”. The business motive for participation is augmented by the efficiency motive and performance motive. In the words of one of the owners “injuries are one of downtimes” and “add extra pressure on other members of the staff” and participation allows avoiding such inefficacies. This is further reinforced by the statement by one of the owners that poor job performance is associated with higher risks”.

Additionally, for employees an important motivation is to be able do the right things so that “the place is run smoothly”. The study also found that managers consider participation as a means for effective implementation of changes in workplace – in the words of one of the managers, by allowing “the staff to know what is needed to be done when OHS risks and hazards become apparent”.

Influences on participation in OHS practice

The study revealed that from the owners perspective staff turn-over has a big influence on participation on OHS practices. People staying longer in the same place enables more participation in OHS practice as they are more knowledgeable of the risks and hazards present and how they are dealt with. Avoidance of extra paper-work that require additional resources is another factor that is influencing participation. This is illustrated by one of the owners saying that “I could have forms but that would be spending all my time ticking boxes” or “we can make rules and regulations of anything but too many pieces of paper”.

Implications for future studies

This preliminary study has identified a number of implications for future studies. Firstly, as reported in earlier studies (Lamm, 2002; Legg et al., 2009), the present study found access to, and engagement of small businesses difficult. Secondly, the study methodology required the respondents to spend a considerable amount of time with the researcher. This posed an additional hindrance, especially for gaining access to the employees through approval of the owner/ manger. This was due to the fact that employees in the café/restaurant sector most commonly have limited hours of work in the premises have limited time to spare for research based interviews during work hours and are difficult to be contact out of business hours. Thirdly, any future study in the area of participation and OHS in SBs should understand and be aware of the intrinsic relationship between knowledge, participation and actions in OHS.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this preliminary study, it may be concluded that participation in OSH practices in SBs is closely governed by how knowledge of OHS risks is acquired by the social actors and how common understandings of OHS risks are developed. The most common relationship to develop common understanding of the risks and hazards appears to be acquiring knowledge of OHS risks informally through experience - based learning and shared through

informal communication. This in turn seems to be associated with participation in OHS practices being initiated out of common knowledge at individual employee level.

Word count: 4485

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