Low-cost solution to improving Philippine working conditions: is it wise?

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Introduction

Occupational safety and health (OSH) is now recognized as an important factor in business development, health being a key aspect in the promotion of a productive workforce. In the Philippines, this dimension is receiving special attention in the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because of their particular relevance to the country’s economy. According to the Department of Trade and Industry data, SMEs make up over 99 per cent of all manufacturing establishments and account for over 55 per cent of the jobs in the Philippines. They also contribute 28.1 per cent of the value-added in production. Improving productivity in this sector could, therefore, result in a tremendous boost to the economy of the country.

Among small and medium-sized enterprise owners and managers in the Philippines, an important programme to promote the realization of the value of OSH in improving productivity is being made through a training programme for entrepreneurs called WISE or Work Improvement in Small Enterprise. WISE was introduced and implemented through the labour inspectorate of the Department of Labour and Employment, with technical assistance from the International Labour Organization (ILO). It is a programme which aims to improve the working conditions of SMEs in eight technical areas, namely: materials storage and handling, work station design, preventive machine safety, control of hazardous substances, lighting, work premises, welfare facilities and work organization. The programme promotes the idea that good OSH practices improve the productivity of the enterprise. The programme also contributes to the development of a new advisory role for labour inspectors to supplement their traditional role of enforcing regulations.

This paper examines some of the common OSH problems found in enterprises that participated in the WISE programme and some of the improvements done through it.

The WISE concept

WISE is a training approach for entrepreneurs and managers of small enterprises which promotes the goals of enterprise productivity and improvement of working conditions through practical and low-cost measures. It was adopted from the International Labour Organization’s concept of “Higher productivity and a better place to work”, which is a very systematic and action-oriented programme. WISE concentrates on providing practical advice, locally sourced ideas, and productivity or quality-enhancing solutions. Its effectiveness as an approach depends very much on its ability to let entrepreneurs think about what they are doing and to encourage them to identify, assess and control the problems in their workplaces. Especially notable in this approach are the immediate and actual application of improvements and follow-up actions which provide long-term benefits.

The WISE concept utilizes the following basic principles:
• build on local practice;
• focus on achievements;
• link working conditions with other management goals;
• use learning-by-doing methods;
• encourage exchange of experience;
• promote workers’ involvement.

The approach is pragmatic as it seeks to find low-cost solutions to common but usually ignored issues in the workplace. Such low-cost solutions have a great appeal for most SME owners and managers, who tend to think that compliance to OSH standards is always costly.

Case 1

In the quality control section of a garment factory in Region IV (Southern Tagalog Region), the conventional way of measuring finished products during end-of-line inspection is through the use of a tape measure. When not being used, the tape measure is hung around the worker’s neck. The different parts of the finished garment (e.g. neckline, armhole, sleeves, etc.) are individually measured. However, this method is time-consuming and can lead to errors. The WISE programme introduced a new method of measuring, using adjustable measuring tools that can be precisely positioned at the appropriate location. This method is more efficient and reduces the risk of errors. The workers were also trained to use the measuring tools effectively, which further improved the accuracy of measurements.
measured according to the prescribed measurements for small, medium and large sizes. Sometimes, adhesive tapes are used to fix the product temporarily on the working table. The workers consider this process rather tedious although quite simple.

To increase efficiency, the manager, with the help of the workers, implemented a change. This consisted of laying out, parallel to one another, three lengths of three-inch wide packaging tapes across the length of the table about eight to ten inches from the edge of the table where the worker was usually positioned. The tapes functioned as measuring guides and marked the dimensions of the different garment sizes. The tapes were used to indicate, for example, the measurement for the armhole of a medium-sized blouse. In this way, the task of measurement was simplified and the end-of-line inspection was made easier. The arm movements of the workers have been reduced and also the change resulted in the speedy sorting out of products which are not in accordance with the required specifications.

Case 2
Work processes involved in the production of capiz (a popular variety of shell found in the Philippines) and shell decors are strenuous because of the difficulty of handling the tiny pieces. A particularly difficult step in the process is the design and cutting of small pieces of capiz with the aid of a metal sheet cutter, which is a tool, shaped like a shear and used to cut metal sheets. A worker handling this process needs some physical effort to hold the heavy cutter steady. This process also produces plenty of waste on the work table.

To improve the situation, the owner of the firm installed a permanent support and handle for the cutter at the edge of the work table and also attached a used sack at the edge of the table to collect the waste material. Installing the cutter in a semi-permanent position made cutting a lot easier since the workers did not need to support the weight of the cutter. The problem of disposing of waste materials properly was also solved.

Case 3
In a motor shop engaged in motor rewinding and repair in Region IV, the workers were provided with chairs with no backrests. The height of the chairs was also not adjustable. Workers, therefore, often complained of lower back pain because of their bent position.

The owner designed some low chairs made of empty wooden wire spools. These chairs could be adjusted at two levels to accommodate the differences in workers’ height. The chairs also had low backrests to support the lumbar region. The result was a remarkable increase in the workers’ output. The time that workers used to stretch their backs was reduced and they also stopped complaining of back pain.

Lessons drawn
Clearly, SME owners and managers could appreciate the value of improving working conditions and the need for solving problems related to them. The WISE method of low-cost solutions is acceptable because it does not impose too much on the finances of the enterprise. The strategies of supporting local practices and the reliance on the experiences of the owner and workers have led to a greater degree of acceptance of changes introduced.

A deliberate effort to raise the OSH awareness of business owners is necessary to catalyze them into action. The discussions on the technical areas, which include inputs on ergonomic principles and other OSH principles during the training, deepen the knowledge of the owners on such matters.

Comment
The WISE project demonstrates how often the considerable ingenuity and experience within an individual enterprise could be tapped to provide low-cost and effective ideas for the enhancement of productivity and the improvement of health. More such examples are contained in a monograph, Low-cost Ways of Improving Working Conditions: 100 Examples from Asia by K. Kogi, W. O. Phoon and J. E. Thurman, published by ILO, Geneva in 1988.