

INTERVENTION FAILURES CAUSED BY EXTERNAL PRESSURE, MISAPPREHENSION AND MISTRUST

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Background: Research and evidence from companies confirm that a survey based mapping of a company's psychosocial work environment is one thing, improving it is something entirely different and much more complicated. There are a number of barriers for company interventions. Some companies manage to overcome these barriers and implement initiatives that lead to improvements. However, there is little knowledge about which initiatives work and which do not. The objective of the BEST study (Better psychosocial work Environment: a Study of workplace interventions) was to create a body of knowledge that companies can use to improve their psychosocial work environment.

Design: The study was carried out as a prospective study of 13 companies with approximately 3,000 employees. The companies committed themselves to undertake serious efforts to improve the psychological work environment. The project design included a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative study was based on the National Institute of Occupational Health's (NIOH) psychosocial questionnaire (Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire, COPSOQ). The baseline response rate was 72%. The qualitative study was based on interviews, workshops, and company documentation. Effect was assessed based on an initial survey with the COPSOQ and a two years' follow-up supplemented with the qualitative data.

Results: Out of the 13 participating companies, only two succeeded in improving the psychosocial working environment significantly. Half of the companies (7) did neither improve nor deteriorate. In three companies, several dimensions of the psychosocial working environment deteriorated during the study. One company went out of business. Companies with several business units typically did not show any improvements. However, improvements could be seen in some units but it was cancelled out by declining conditions in other units.

Discussion: Given the design, it appears surprising that only two companies improved. Three reasons are apparent. First, external change events removed focus. In several companies, major unrelated changes occurred during the intervention. Second, the COPSOQ maps the psychosocial working environment on 21 dimensions. It was hard for the company actors to relate the survey results to their daily practices. Third, companies with a large potential for improvement also scored low on trust and justice. The case studies showed that the intervention design was vulnerable to conflicts in the workplace. These issues call for a critical reflection concerning this type of research design. External changes seem to be a condition for longitudinal intervention designs. This calls for more dynamic interventions with possibilities for a continuous adaptation of interventions and for closer quantitative and qualitative tracking of changes. The second issue calls for a questioning of the value of scientifically based mapping of the working environment as a starting point for interventions. If it is not possible to make the research based findings intelligible to the company actors, the survey based mapping could be more harmful than helpful. The third issue points towards a conclusion that researchers should be careful not to initiate intervention projects in organizational environments with conflicts, and low trust or such issues should be directly addressed in the interventions.

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