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*Arbeit und Gesundheit*

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## ***Improve Working Conditions - and Raise Productivity!***

# **Swaziland: a Lesson to Learn**

Von C.P.N. Shilla

*Experience has shown that small and medium-sized enterprises are faced with several similar problems in their endeavour to improve working conditions, to enhance productivity, to increase efficiency and to raise the quality of products. Problems encountered are lack of adequate financial resources, lack of specialized staff, lack of the right skills, shortage of raw materials, and inadequate working space which leads to poor work organisation. Owing to these and other difficulties, such enterprises find themselves struggling for survival. Spending money and time for improving working conditions appears to these enterprises to be a waste of time and resources.*

In many small and medium-sized enterprises, even allocation of time for someone to attend a course or a seminar on safety and health seems virtually impossible because the entire staff is always fully occupied with being productive. It is not usually realized that such training opportunities, will help the staff in the long run, to be more efficient in their day-to-day activities, will improve the quality of products and will raise productivity.

Safety and health matters are taken as an afterthought, and are specially remembered only when an accident has occurred. At such time, small and medium-sized enterprises start looking for assistance, which comes too late because at least one worker has been injured or may even have died, damage to products and property has occurred, time has been lost and productivity has fallen. The whole business of the enterprise is severely affected. Therefore, in terms of reality, it should be understood that there is a very vital link between improving working conditions, enhancing productivity and raising the quality of products.

## **Positive approach brings results**

Enforcement of legislation without careful assistance from the advisory capacity of the Factory Inspectors will not yield favourable good results. It is not good if the Factory Inspectors act more or less as policemen. The outcome will only be a hostile environment and animosity between the inspectors and the employers or workplace owners. As such, an inspector is seen especially by small and medium-sized enterprises as a bother every time he/she visits them for the purpose of conducting an inspection.

In Swaziland, a positive approach was recently used in trying to solve this problem. A pilot course was conducted by the ILO in collaboration with the Department of Labour. The participants included representatives of workers and employers in small and medium-sized enterprises, and government officials. The objectives of the course were: first, to identify simple, effective, low-cost and immediate measures to be taken to improve working conditions and, in turn, to enhance productivity; secondly, to illustrate in practice the vital link existing between the improvement of working conditions and the enhancement of productivity.

Assisted by international experts, representatives of workers and entrepreneurs worked together with government officials for two weeks to devise action plans for improving working conditions and enhancing productivity. At the end of the course, an evaluation exercise took place to assess what had been achieved during the course. The sectors represented on the course were the textile industry, motor vehicle repairs, printing, electrical works, woodworking and general engineering.

After the course, an evaluation workshop was held. Those present were the course participants and several other interested parties who were invited to attend. The evaluation workshop brought together experts involved in the improvements of working conditions and productivity, such as safety officers, policy-makers, representatives of technical and training institutions, journalists and representatives of organisations helping to promote small enterprises. The improvements realised during the course were presented and discussed. It was evident that the improvements had been achieved at low cost and were effective. It was thus learnt that improvements need not always mean spending a lot of money. Most improvements can be made at low cost.

Here are some of the improvements that were implemented as a result of the course:

- guarding of dangerous parts of machinery
- safekeeping of gas cylinders by securely chaining them in order to prevent them from falling and injuring workers
- provision of fire-fighting equipment
- provision of tool racks
- provision of a trolley for easy movement of materials, thus cutting time losses and eliminating some manual lifting which can strain workers
- improved lighting, both natural and artificial
- improved housekeeping in general, making it easier and safer to move around the workplace when working;
- provision of personal protective equipment where necessary
- improved welfare facilities, such as provision of a small canteen where workers can eat instead of eating at the workplace, and improved drinking water facilities.

Entrepreneurs and workers alike were better motivated to be more involved in safety and health activities. These were tangible improvements, of the kind that will be continued. Other workplaces will be encouraged to learn from those who participated in this course, and to

improve their working conditions otherwise as well. To many entrepreneurs, the course was an eye-opener.

The course yielded practical results which in the long run will contribute much to improving workers' safety and health and to raising productivity. The results were appreciated by all the social partners, as indicated by their evaluation comments. Participating entrepreneurs from the Small Enterprises Development Corporation (SEDCO) have already formed an interim committee that will serve as a forum to discuss what has been achieved and how these achievements can be shared with others. It will also be discussed how factory inspectors and other labour officials could be involved in helping them to carry out additional improvements at their workplaces.

## Evaluation by participating entrepreneurs

During the evaluation exercise, the entrepreneurs who participated in the course said that they had benefited greatly. When they were first approached to attend the course, they were reluctant because of their production commitments. But soon after the course, they say they realised that they were now wiser because of the course, and that they had become aware of the true meaning of how working conditions can effectively be improved at low cost, something they had never thought about. Previously, talk about improvement of working conditions to them meant direct expenditure; considerable expenditure which they wanted to avoid. They also said that they now realised how improvement of working conditions is directly linked with productivity.

Simple things, such as improving housekeeping by rearranging things, providing clear walkways, providing tool racks and arranging tools in such a way that they can be found easily when needed, reorganising the work stations, improving lighting etc. do not cost much but mean a lot, both to workers and to entrepreneurs, because less time is wasted, the quality of work is improved, productivity is raised and workers' well-being is improved.

The course has also changed the participating entrepreneurs' perception of factory inspectors and other labour officials. They now realise that, apart from them being law enforcers, they are in fact there to be of assistance and to offer advice on how to improve working conditions and raise productivity. To the participating entrepreneurs, this had been an important course.

## ...and participating workers

Workers who had had the opportunity to participate in the course said that they found the course interesting, stimulating and rewarding in that it led to practical results. They said they had learnt a great deal, and promised to utilise this knowledge in collaboration with their employers to bring about additional positive changes.

Better working conditions will always improve workers' safety and health and, in turn, will raise productivity and improve product quality. Both workers and employers benefit from such improvements. This should always be the goal at every workplace.

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