

Teamwork

opportunity or threat for workers?

One of the results of plant-level restructuring in the petroleum sector has been a decrease in job and task divisions.

Before, jobs were narrowly divided between different employees and departments. Now they are being integrated in more broadly defined jobs. For example, before, a separate department of planners and programmers would do process control planning; The process control department would monitor the chemical process. Now planning and programming is being joined into the process control jobs.

We found that this was driven, to some extent, by new technology - specifically the introduction of information technology into process control. It is also a deliberate management strategy to integrate tasks.

The integration of tasks can be seen in the petroleum sector in:

- the establishment of formal work teams;
- the introduction of informal multi-tasking;
- the restructuring of grading systems to allow for multi-skilling.

Petroleum companies are looking to move away from having a large amount of workers with narrow job descriptions performing relatively unskilled work.

They want to move to a situation where, to quote one managing director, 'we employ fewer people with higher

Gary Phillips examines workers' responses to teamwork in different companies.

competencies (skills), even if we have a higher wage bill'.

CWIU policy on teams

The Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU, which merged with PPWAWU to form CEPPWAWU) has traditionally opposed the introduction of teams saying that:

- there is increased stress on workers;
- team members have to cover for absent workers and this leads to increased work loads;
- they undermine the union's position by dealing with issues that shopsteward committees and formal negotiations should deal with;
- they can increase the amount and pressure of work, and threaten workers' working conditions and health and safety;
- they take workers' suggestions and ideas without offering benefits in return;
- they break down solidarity by making workers compete against each other;
- they require workers to discipline or supervise one another.

Implementing teamwork

The CEPPWAWU/TURP Petroleum Industrial Restructuring Audit (PIRA) found evidence which confirmed these positions. However, the PIRA also found evidence of positive examples of teamwork.

There was very little consistency in the implementation of teams - this makes the issue all the more complex. The main problems that shopstewards raised with teamwork were that teams on the shopfloor were not the 'self-managed, self-motivated and well-rewarded' teams that management claimed they were. Also, workers were not rewarded for the increased workload that informal multi-tasking brought on.

Understanding the integration of tasks

The integration of tasks is seen to hold advantages for companies because workers can assist each other and thereby avoid delays in production. The integration of tasks can occur through multi-skilling, multi-tasking and joint or teamwork.

Multi-skilling involves the training of employees in jobs related to their own job. For example, lubricant filling machine operators were being trained in machine maintenance to assist fitters in repairing broken machines.

This training made the operators skilled in more than one job.

Multi-tasking involves workers conducting additional tasks outside of their job. Training does not accompany multi-tasking.

If it does it is simple on-the-job training and is used by companies to cut down on idle time. For example, a filling machine operator may be expected to assist in the loading of product containers if the filling is running smoothly and the worker is considered to be idle.

The 'power team'

One company, a lubricants manufacturer, had piloted the team concept through the 'power team'.

The team was large in size (up to 40 members). It had members in different departments (from the buying department, which arranged orders from suppliers, to the blending, filling, sealing and packing departments).

According to management at the plant, the teams were introduced to:

- put an end to isolated departments;
- broaden job descriptions and end 'ownership of particular production functions';
- make team members 'multi-functional' (that is, build in multi-tasking);
- make team members 'multi-skilled' (for example, machine operators in the filling section were given training in maintenance to assist the fitters with repairing machines);
- improve problem-solving (weekly 'indaba' meetings were planned between the relevant supervisor, team leader and team members and a further short daily meeting was planned between team leader and members).

In spite of the team leaders being selected by management and the fact that management had made them responsible for discipline, the workers were not unhappy with the teams.

A fitter in the power team had the following to say about why he enjoyed teamwork:

- 'We solve problems together.'
- 'We aren't working harder. All that has changed in my job is that instead of being called onto the shopfloor by operators, I now stick around and assist them.'
- 'I always keep myself busy now. When I am not repairing machinery, I am doing



The research findings will reopen debate on union policy on teamwork.

something else with one of the operators.'

- 'We are empowered through teamwork because we now make the decisions in our production team meetings.'
- 'Management makes suggestions but they don't come to the shopfloor to see how things really work. We can reject what they say and offer different options - we have done this in the past.'

Management tool

The positive example, however, was not shared at other companies. Even at companies where managers claimed that teams were 'self-controlled and have decision-making power', workers

expressed frustration with teamwork.

The shopstewards at one refinery complained that 'workers don't recognise the teams. Team leaders operate like supervisors and workers are passive in decision-making - only receiving instructions.'

Management appoints the team leaders and workers are left with little influence in how the teams operate. Further, teamwork means job rotation and multi-tasking but this is not written into our job descriptions.'

Another lubricants company had introduced small 'natural' teams (located around machine operators - the 'natural' team leaders). The introduction of the teams did not result in training

opportunities and the team members were merely multi-tasking. Workers, called 'plant assistants', performed unskilled work around the operators.

This company's plant manager stated that the function of the teams was to 'assist each other in production, to communicate'.

The filling section operates five oil lines with four operators (lines are run on demand and not all at once). As a result the workers often have to perform tasks outside of their job description, especially if all five lines are running. The blending and filling operations have separate teams that collaborate with each other and assist each other.

The shopstewards pointed out that plant assistants were not rewarded for multi-tasking. They weren't upskilled through the teamwork since they were performing relatively unskilled work. Any training that did occur, the shopstewards said, was on-the-job training conducted by senior plant assistants.

Workers at the company's distribution depot shared a similar experience. With the introduction of new loading machinery at the depot, the drivers were trained and upskilled to load road tankers. However, the plant assistants who assist in loading, filling, changing of lines and dipping of tanks, did not experience any upskilling. The depot shopsteward expressed a concern that experienced plant assistants were responsible for on-the-job training of new plant assistants, but this was not recognised or rewarded.

Confusion over roles

Another refinery had introduced teams to 'integrate functions and end the situation where operations and manufacturing are always separate'.

A problem arose where the teams included maintenance contractors not

employed by the company. There was confusion around roles and lines of communication. Refinery employees did not want to report to, or carry out instructions from, contractors.

The refinery's management said the teams were introduced to:

- develop shared team skills;
- improve response times to problems;
- improve the reliability of maintenance;
- keep better control over expenses.

However, the problems experienced prevented these improvements from being realised. This refinery admitted that they did not aim for the teams to be self-controlled but hoped 'that they operate as participatory structures'.

Control

It was clear from the research that teamwork was being introduced as a 'best practice' measure which could lower costs and improve performance in the companies. It was also clear that teamwork did not always hold benefits for workers.

The benefits, where they were seen to exist, seemed to be around increased technical control of work; that is, more decision-making power, more say in problem-solving, multi-skilling and more training (in some cases) and so on. However, it was clear that management was retaining political control in the teams through measures such as:

- selecting or appointing team leaders themselves;
- giving team leaders disciplining responsibilities;
- only appointing senior employees, such as production superintendents, as team leaders or retaining supervisors to oversee team leaders. ★

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