

The Changing World of Work and Occupational Health and Safety in New Zealand

Mark Wagstaffe

Project Manager

National Occupational Safety and Health Advisory Committee, New Zealand

In 2007 the National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee of New Zealand (NOHSAC) commissioned the Workplace Research Centre at Sydney University to report on the “Changing Work Environment and Implications for Occupational Health and Safety in New Zealand”.

This report considered most of the major subject areas commonly associated with understanding the changing contours of work and the labour market. The report included:

- changing occupational and industry structure(s)
- demographic trends, including changing age, gender and ethnic profile(s)
- hours of work and work-life conflict
- non-standard and precarious forms of employment
- technological change
- labour flows
- workforce representation.

The nature of work has never been fixed, but several significant and ongoing changes occurring over the last two decades are combining to contribute to a widespread identification of an historic structural shift in the regime of work. It is generally accepted that the nature of work in New Zealand is being affected by a range of mutually reinforcing factors, including the:

- globalisation of communication, commodity, finance and capital flows and competitive conditions more generally
- changing demographic characteristics of the labour force
- transformation of the technological conditions in which work is undertaken
- contractual conditions and patterns of labour as well as forms of work.

There are a number of fundamental drivers changing the world of work. These include major demographic shifts affecting labour supply and significant economic and technological changes affecting labour demand. There is significant interaction between these forces which are not autonomous or impervious to change. Policy, from retirement income to child-care and education, is shaping as well as responding to those changes. Similarly, the nature and patterns of work are adapting to, among other things, increased

participation rates by women and older workers and the blurring social and spatial boundaries between paid and unpaid work and the mainstreaming of what were previously thought to be non-standard forms and patterns of work.

The nature of the current changes are best characterised as involving the demise of the 'classic wage earner' or 'male breadwinner' model of employment and the emergence of more fragmented and dynamic (i.e. less stable) occupational and industry structures and patterns.

The Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) regulatory framework in New Zealand is largely designed to deal with the permanent workforce in large organisations, rather than those engaged in casual, temporary and precarious forms of employment.

As yet, the regulatory regime has not fully adapted to engage with new and emerging realities at work. In particular, many of the new occupational hazards are currently latent, and concentrated in areas where either formal compliance and inspection, or self-regulatory monitoring cannot easily cope.

These hazards are particularly associated with new hours of work arrangements, more intense output pressures on workplaces and individual workers, non-standard forms of employment and the demise of organisational forms of labour representation.

An analysis of the research indicates that workplace change and its effects on health must be approached in a broad fashion that recognizes complex interactions between risks before seeking to devise and implement specific interventions. In this way, remedies are more likely to address several related problems simultaneously. For example a campaign designed to better inform young workers of their OHS rights should recognise that most occupy temporary jobs).

The critical intersections between OHS and industrial relations should also be recognized and addressed. For example, it is more difficult to secure consultative processes with regard to OHS where the industrial relations and human resource management climate in a workplace is not conducive to consultation.

The challenge for regulators and policy makers will increasingly be not just to make the current workplace health and safety regulatory regime 'work better' – important as this is. Rather, a key emerging challenge is likely to develop around the identification of new ways of defining and responding to emerging risks.

The New Zealand workforce is ageing, works some of the longest hours in the OECD and there has been a long-term trend for increased female participation in the workforce. An increased demand for labour supply has forced the New Zealand government to consider how to increase labour force participation. Policy changes such as the abolition of compulsory retirement and the raising of the eligibility of superannuation to 65 appear to have worked for New Zealand, with an increase in people over the age of 55 remaining in employment.

Consequently more consideration should be given to ensuring work does not adversely affect the health and

well being of older workers. The changing age of workers pose new risks for injury and disease at the workplace. Ageing workers are more vulnerable to poor working conditions than young workers. Additionally, the failure in providing workers with lifelong learning opportunities increased the mental and emotional demands upon them, which may affect their health and increase the probability of work-related accidents” (OSHA, 2007).

Existing risk factors such as poor ergonomic design, poor work organisation and work/technology interfaces will be exacerbated as growing proportions of the workforce are in older age categories. Research on ageing and OHS risk is, however, suggesting that as the expectation of prolonged working life is becoming standardised, it is important to be careful about the ‘dosage’ exposures of workers across their working life to physical, biological and psychosocial risks.

Ageing is not necessarily a uniform or linear process in terms of functional decline. Some functions or skills may actually begin, or continue, to develop. The process of ‘ageing’ is affected by a number of factors, including physical activity, so that when we talk about aspects of ageing we are not necessarily able to generalise for all those in an age cohort. Thus, general conclusions about the risks posed by an ageing workforce are difficult to draw.

At the other extreme, it should also be noted that young and relatively inexperienced workers are often concentrated in temporary jobs. Industries with a high proportion of young people include work in private households, food retailing and accommodation, cafes and restaurants (NZ Statistics, 2006 unpublished Census data).

The risk to young people working in these industries with high levels of temporary, part-time, and casual employment, is that there is less likelihood of receiving adequate training in order for them to engage in safe working practices and less support for other preventative OH&S practices. Young workers, particularly those in casual or seasonal work, may be further disadvantaged with regard to health and safety through a weaker bargaining position brought about by precarious forms of employment.

Over the last decade there have been several changes in the working hours of the employed population in NZ at an aggregate level, including an increase in total working hours produced by a growth in total employment.

Average annual working hours did decrease (marginally) however from 1,830 hours in 2000 to 1,809 hours in 2005 (Swivel, 2008), which may reflect a decline in the proportion of the workforce working extended hours and a growth in work on a part-time and standard hours basis. While men may work longer in paid employment, women work longer unpaid hours, so that when the two are combined men and women work quite similar hours. The combination of paid and unpaid work can lead to long hours that may be otherwise overlooked. In terms of OHS risks, scrutiny of long hours should clearly examine the total load of paid and unpaid work.

In New Zealand, male and female workers have become more equally represented in the paid workforce.

This demographic change presents a challenge for those industries or occupations with strong gender profiles. Combined with the emergence of labour shortages, it is likely to lead to many male dominated industries and occupations re-evaluating a range of employment practices.

The growing workforce participation of women highlights several issues which should be recognized. These include the concentration of women in particular jobs (such as cleaning, retailing, hospitality and light manufacturing); the movement of women into 'higher-risk' jobs that were originally the preserve of males (such as security and the defense forces); changing patterns of violence in society and the over-representation of women as targets for sexual harassment at work; and the work-life conflict arising from work and family commitments (including issues of maternity leave and childcare).

Summary

In summary, growing recognition of the risks posed by altered work arrangements has only partly found its way into the activities of OHS regulators and related agencies (like those responsible for research/standard setting and workers' compensation). New models of Occupational Health and Safety regulation may be required to address the pressures that the multiple changes in the work are imposing on Occupational Health and Safety.