OHS specialists: position and interaction through the company

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Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) specialists are now well-established actors in many companies. Although their practices and profession are increasingly being studied, the relationship between headquarters safety professionals and site safety professionals is not studied.
To explore this topic, this research is grounded in the tradition of activity, organisational sociology and safety science research. In this study, I follow an empirical, ethnographic approach in a high-risk company. This company has decentralised part of its safety department to operational divisions while safety was historically centralised to its headquarters. The aim is to reconnect safety with operational activities. Through interviews and observations of the company's diversity of actors, I intend to understand the safety issues they face daily and how they interact with each other. I intend in the article to share some preliminary outcomes.
One of them concerns the OHS specialists who have moved from a position of prescribing (headquarters) to a more grounded presence in the field (industrial sites), are seeing a gradual redefinition of their job/profession and the decentralization of the prevention policy. Secondly, the management of operational divisions now incorporates a decentralised safety dimension. Interviews and observations show that it can generates some contradictory discourses and, consequently, misunderstandings in operational sites. Finally, with the separation of the safety department into the company's three divisions, each one seems to be moving towards greater autonomy, which distances them from the previous unified safety policy and the loss of some of their power.
This empirical work invites a situated approach of OHS specialists within the company for a better understanding of their daily practices, with greater sensitivity to different categories and positions of safety professionals.

Keywords: OHS specialists ; sociology ; ergonomics ; safety science ; grounded ; ethnographic approach ; high-rick organization ; decentralization ; bureaucracy ; power

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the interactions of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) specialists in high-risk industries, in particular the interactions between head office division and industrial sites. It operates in a work analysis of their activity in an organizational perspective, and more specifically, to query the organization that governs how function their operations and relations with actors at headquarters and industrial sites within the company.

This link does not seem to be present in the literature despite the fact that companies, especially high-risk ones, are looking for the best ways to articulate the central component of their risk prevention system (headquarters) with the more decentralized part, on production sites and throughout the infrastructure or network (Hopkins 2019 ; Le Coze 2024), where managers in charge of prevention and safety, as well as local OHS specialists, are located. More precisely, it is at the headquarters level that norms and prescriptions are drawn up, and translated into systems linked, for example, to national regulations and/or specific apparatus created by OHS specialists to meet an internal need. These apparatuses are then deployed and applied, and their results monitored.

As companies seek to improve the articulation of these two elements (Ughetto 2011), they often move cyclically between centralizing and decentralizing their risk prevention systems. The aim of this work is to gain a better understanding of how centralized or decentralized prevention and security systems operate, and to study the interactions between actors on headquarters and on the industrial sites.

Consequently, this work is based on a recognition of the centrality of the "bureaucratic phenomenon" in high-risk industries (which can find in the role of the prescription and its

appartuses, which I briefly mentioned earlier). A part of literature is now devoted to the phenomenon of bureaucratization in safety, questioning the practices involved in the production of rules, and their concrete implementation by those involved in prevention (Dekker 2014, Rae and Provan 2018, Le Coze 2024). This work needs to be complemented by empirical insights into the relationship between headquarters and sites.

To answer this question, I am conducting an ethnographic study in a high-risk company which has just reorganized its risk prevention system by decentralizing it. The decision to decentralize the system was, in part, justified by the company's management on the grounds that the OHS specialists, who created the prescribed system, would be too far removed from the work situations encountered in the field, resulting in instructions or prescriptions that were sometimes inadequate to certain environments and/or operational issues encountered by operators.

I am therefore interested in the way in which the reorganization of the company observed is contributing to an ongoing reconfiguration of interactions between the various actors (and their activities), with a particular focus on the actors involved in prevention between headquarters and sites, on the one hand, and their professional identity, on the other. This paper is of an exploratory nature, which will enable to orientate the investigation in the later phases of this study, in order to shed light on the relationships between headquarters and sites.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *OHS specialist in his or her organization*

OHS specialists work in an increasingly bureaucratic environment, and this is particularly relevant in high-risk industries. This working environment has long been regulated, and developments in the field of risk and the environment are still ongoing. I use the term "bureaucracy" both as an organizational rationalization structure and as a reflection on bureaucratic organizations.

In the study company, OHS specialists were perceived as being detached from the field, too much in the prescribed. This argument justified change in the positioning of some of them in the company structure on the occasion of the

reorganization. This configuration enables an exploration of the question that mobilizes this work: to what extent does the change in organizational configuration affect the activity of OHS specialists in this relationship between headquarters and sites, and how? How do OHS specialists reconstruct their professional practices and interaction networks? To my knowledge, this issue has never been tackled from this angle. I shall attempt here to propose some preliminary elements for an answer, through a detailed and open investigation, made possible by the nature of ethnographic approach (Dumez 2016).

2.2 *Who are the OHS specialists in this study?*

The OHS specialists covered in this article are the company's in-house OHS specialists. They are recruited by their employer, who has assigned them a place in the organization and gave them tasks (Brun and Loiselle 2001).

In the company of this study, two safeties with their own issues and systems coexist, with varying degrees of connection. In France, there is industrial safety, governed by the environmental code, and personal health and safety, governed by the labor code. In this conference paper, I will only present the part relating to OHS specialists specializing in personal health and safety.

French and international literature is sparse when it comes to characterizing OHS specialists, although their practices are increasingly studied (Blondé 2015, Audiffren et al. 2013, Guennoc 2019).

At this stage of the study, I use a typology extracted from a study by the Institut National de Recherche et de Sécurité (INRS), which still seems relevant. The typology distinguishes six profiles of OHS specialists, enabling us to better understand and identify this population. These are: expert preventionist (class 1), field preventionists (class 2), manager-preventionists (class 3), delegate preventionists (class 4), base coordinator preventionists (class 5) and a-structured preventionists (class 6) (Garrigou and Peissel-Cottenaz 2004).

The majority of the field company's OHS specialists are class 3, followed by class 2. The class 2 profile concerns "field preventionists", who start their career in a domain other than prevention, with the status of supervisor. Class 3 refers to "manager-preventionist", who either have professional experience in a field other than

prevention or are generalist prevention managers who have worked in other companies, with executive status. In the population of the study, type 3 preventionists had no prior experience in prevention. In field company which will be presented in more detail in 3.2., OHS specialists whether class 2 or 3 form the same population within the organization. They are in all divisions. They are referred to as "QSE" (Quality, Safety, Environment) and are often presented as "FOH" (Organizational and Human Factors) experts.

2.3 *A three-pronged approach to the study*

This work lies at the intersection of three approaches and perspectives from social sciences.

1) Ergonomics. In particular, I am referring to "activity ergonomics", also known as "French-speaking tradition ergonomics". It supports this study to understand real work (*vs.* prescribed work) using data collection tools and to capture actors' interactions through the prism of work activity.

2) Sociology. It provides analytical tools through three of its specialties: the sociology of organizations, to understand the system of actors, the relationships between them, the logics carried by each of these groups of actors; the sociology of professions, insofar as, without constituting a profession in the strongest sense of the term (Madsen, Hasle, and Limborg 2019), OHS specialists claim an expertise and skills that constitute for them an identity and a framework; and the sociology of work and organizations, which pays close attention to practices and activity (*"sociologie de l'activité"* in France (Ughetto 2018), "practice-based studies" on an international scale (Gherardi 2019)).

3) Safety science. It gives a complementary view of socio-technical systems and the issues associated with their operation for society, which are approached in a multidisciplinary manner while mobilizing the ergonomic and sociological framework constituting the methodological and conceptual basis of my approach indicated in the two previous points (Le Coze 2016, Dupré and Le Coze 2021). It offers a systemic perspective to better understand the safety and prevention issues at the heart of high-risk companies.

This triptych is made possible by an approach based on fieldwork investigation with the populations concerned, to understand their individual and collective logics of action to achieve goals through their activity (it is also an opportunity to test the articulation of the concept of activity in ergonomics and the concept of activity in sociology). It's a methodology that can be used in all these fields and provides an interesting articulation.

3. Methodology

This conference paper is presented in the context of my thesis work. It is based on nine months' work including reading and initial data collection at the time this paper is submitted.

3.1 *An ethnographic approach*

This work is based on an ethnographic approach. My regular presence within the company enables to familiarize myself with its actors and the company operating characteristics, while at the same time normalizing my presence. I can also gain access to the day-to-day work of the target population. It's a form of qualitative research which enables to build up an understanding of the pre- and post-reorganization period, based on a focus on actors, activities and interactions. The aim is to be able to apprehend the company *"as a single prism"* (Dupré and Le Coze 2021, p.14).

This work is based on twenty-two semi-structured interviews, lasting from thirty-five minutes to one hour and forty minutes. This represents over twenty hours of interviews. The interview population consisted of OHS specialists, industrial safety preventionists, managers from the company's main divisions, operations managers and team leaders. The aim of these interviews is to understand, in this exploratory phase, their perception of safety and prevention, as well as the impact that the reorganization has had (or not) on their daily work.

I also began observing the work of OHS specialists (awareness-workshop, information session, prevention plans, etc.), managers (managerial visits) and operators. These observations were also an opportunity to familiarize myself with the company's vocabulary, tools, technologies and infrastructures. Observations of videoconferencing sessions identified as forums for exchange on safety or prevention issues also took place. All in all, these observations

represented ninety-one hours of observation. These "formal" observations were supplemented by more informal moments, such as meals, carpooling or train journeys.

The overall aim of these interviews and observations is to gain both a detailed and wide-ranging understanding of how the company operates, and of as many of the interactions between the actors as possible, as well as between and within the three divisions. In addition, asking the same questions of two data collection methods allows triangulation to limit biases (Yin 2018).

3.2 *The field company and its challenges*

The field company has a rich historical background, which I will briefly review. Once a public service company with a monopoly status, in the early 2000s the company underwent an organizational upheaval in a European context of competition in the energy market. Specialized subsidiaries were created. The field company of this study is one of the subsidiaries of this major energy company.

Today, the field company has several thousand employees, divided almost equally into three divisions: administrative, operational and asset management.
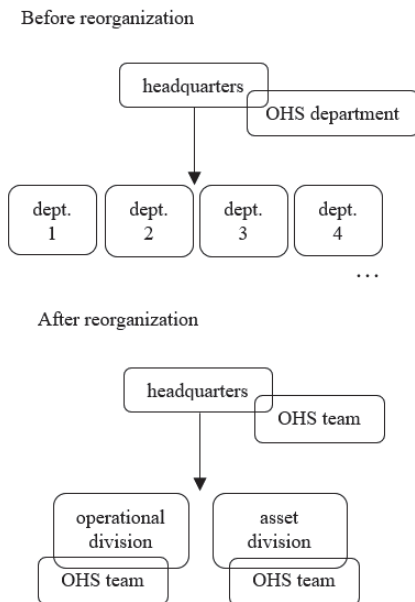

Fig. 1. Representing organizational change in the company

One of the aims of the company's reorganization was to decentralize the activities of its OHS specialists. They were attached to the administrative department (linked to the headquarters) and the new organization has placed some of them in their two other divisions, linked to the industrial sites.

When I say that OHS specialists are linked to a site-related division, this does not mean that their office is physically located on an industrial site. It's a question of an administrative separation between the headquarters division, where the OHS specialists team produces the prescription, and the two site-related divisions, where the two OHS specialists teams are tasked with being closer to the field during visits to industrial sites or company's infrastructure. Within the company, there are dozens of industrial sites, sometimes with only small teams of operators.

It is in this context of reorganization that this company has become the field of this study. It expects this thesis work to feed a reflexivity brought by an external viewpoint and a wider reflection on issues of organizational reliability or professionalism.

4. Results

I present here the initial interpretations and hypotheses arising from this exploratory work. These are elements which seem to testify to the effects induced by the company's organizational transformation, and which call into question the figure of the OHS specialist and his or her margin of decision-making autonomy. In the time frame of this thesis work, this is an initial phase of clarification of the changes encountered and produced by the preventive workers between before and after the reorganization, which will determine choices for the second phase of the thesis, still strongly inductive, but more targeted, in order to question and understand headquarters-site relations.

4.1 *Same profession, different practices*

Through interviews and observations, some OHS specialists who have shifted to a more field approach admit in retrospect that they may sometimes have had an (unconscious) distance from the field: "*some things I understand better than I used to*". More sustained meetings with operators and site managers made their work, in

their words, *"more concrete"*. As a result, they quickly integrated this previously less sought-after aspect into their practice.

While the aim of improving the interaction of prevention teams with sites seems to have been achieved, at the present stage this may be accompanied by a feeling of less comfort in carrying out their work on the part of OHS specialists, at least in certain aspects of their activity. The decrease of exchanges between OHS specialists, who used to work as part of the same team and the same department and were accustomed to working in thematic pairs or trios, can make them feel isolated. OHS specialists who have left headquarters still have their own specialties but work on their own. Many are on the move or isolated in a given territory Moreover, there seems to be a growing autonomy among the OHS specialists in each division in their safety practices. A theme can therefore be worked on in two (or three divisions) without the OHS specialists realizing it: *"sometimes there are three of us working on the same subject without necessarily doing it at the same time. So if we find the same thing, it's obvious; if we don't find the same thing, well... [silence]."*. This seems to be linked to the lack of opportunities for sharing and pooling between the three divisions' OHS specialists. During a presentation in which I briefly outlined the study I was going to carry out, one of the OHS specialist said that the OHS specialists from the three divisions needed a forum where they could get together, agree and refocus, but that she didn't feel she could make herself heard.

The way in which OHS specialists work has thus undergone a significant transformation, from a job of creating prescriptions to a more field-oriented position. Throughout the thesis work, it will be interesting to follow this evolution and characterize its effects on activity, interactions, professional identity and safety.

4.2. *The emergence of new prevention profiles and actors*

Since the reorganization, the company has seen the gradual arrival of new OHS specialists. These are different from the type 2 (field preventionist) and type 3 (manager-preventionist) foremen presented earlier. They are also unique in that they do not come from within the company or the Group. These are OHS specialists who, like

Garrigou can be described as experts: (often) young OHS specialists with a degree directly related to prevention (Garrigou and Peissel-Cottenaz 2004). This new profile (expert preventionist - class 1) is distinguished by its education (they studied risk prevention at school), but also by the fact that he or she does not know his or her OHS colleagues in the other division.

While this demographic dimension concerns the company's divisions, one of these three divisions also decided to reorganize itself. A reorganization within a reorganization. This involves moving from a hierarchical structural organization to a matrix organization (project-based management).

In the area of personal safety and prevention, this division has obtained six OHS specialists to form their "PHS" team (Prevention Health Security), which supports the industrial risk management unit. The division has also set up a community of "safety relays" to strengthen communication with operators. These are managers (operations managers, team leaders, etc.) in charge of informing and raising the awareness of teams in the field about the company's safety campaigns (e.g.: driving, biological risks). Their role is to report any questions or problems arising in the field, and to provide input for the unit and division's indicators. A project manager centralizes and coordinates all these activities, and communication and exchange forums have been set up.

Safety relays are therefore a new face in prevention and safety. As managers, they already answered certain safety-related questions, and their new role has given them greater legitimacy with their teams. The opportunities for exchange, particularly the videoconference discussion forums, enable them to deepen their knowledge and learn what messages they need to convey to their teams.

4.3 *For OHS specialists, the challenge of rebuilding a position and power after a major organizational change*

One incident I observed illustrates the extent to which coordination practices have yet to be developed, and the organizational learning process that has, to date, only just begun. It also reveals the potential professional destabilization of OHS specialists and the challenges of rebuilding role and

practices. During an observation of a safety awareness event designed to answer questions from operational teams, a safety relay and an OHS specialist gave an opposite answer to an operator's request. Faced with the incomprehension of all those present (themselves included), the two protagonists looked for the information on their respective laptops. The safety relay justified himself by referring to an internal communication visual, which was not a communication produced by of the OHS specialists. In this case, an error had been made. The OHS specialist justified himself by referring to the prescribed procedure. This incident created a brief malaise for all those present and shows that communication around prevention and safety has in partly escaped the OHS specialists, even though they are still considered the most qualified to deal with safety issues, whereas previously they were the only ones able to produce safety-related documents within the company.

Historically, OHS specialists were grouped together in a single autonomous department with a direct link to headquarters, close to the executive management (cf. 3.2). Following the reorganization, most of them remained within the headquarters division, where the prescription is built, but attached to a division of the human resources department, while ten of them were split between the assets division and the operations division. These OHS specialists, autonomous and in a fairly favorable position to make their point of view and issues heard, have seen a redistribution of power within their organization (Antonsen and Almklov in Le Coze 2019). To sum up, before, OHS specialists could easily make decisions; nowadays, they have to defend their point of view in front of their hierarchy. In an interview, one of the interviewees expressed his concern: "*Before, when there was a problem [on a work zone] I'd call and the work would stop. Now I suppose I have to convince my manager, who in turn has to convince his manager*". This element can be put in resonance with the exploratory work carried out by Madigan and his reflections based on a statistical analysis of 145 managers and 385 preventionists (Madigan et al. 2022) indicates the importance of influence and the interpersonal relationship between preventionists and managers.

5. Conclusion

This initial work tends to show that a company which decides to reorganize its OHS

prevention apparatus by transforming the positioning of its actors can induce major changes. In some division, OHS specialists have moved from a prescriptive stance to a more sustained presence in the site and/or field, with a gradual redefinition of their profession and the decentralization of prevention policy.

In the wake of decentralization, a new category of OHS specialists has been recruited. In parallel, one department has chosen to set up safety relays to consolidate its safety policy. With the arrival of this new safety actors, the embodiment of prevention is no longer the sole responsibility of OHS specialists.

The reorganization has changed the position of some of the OHS specialists in the non-administrative divisions, not only in terms of their activity but also in terms of their position in the company hierarchy, resulting in a loss of autonomy and power in their practice.

It is important to point once again, however, that the elements presented are exploratory only.

6. Prospects and continuity of the study

In the continuity of this initial thesis work, other avenues are to be explored and may feed into the reflection I have just proposed, in order to better grasp the renewed headquarters-site articulations in the reorganization. For example:

- The articulation of activities between prevention specialists dedicated to personal safety and prevention specialists dedicated to industrial safety;
- Interactions OHS specialists and other professionals involved in safety and prevention (trade union, occupational medicine) within the company.
- The way they work with peers or service providers who can intervene on an *ad hoc* basis within their structure.
- The company was keen to have OHS specialists close to the field, but what does this mean in this specific structure, and how was this questioned?
- In this ethnographic approach, how do I approach and follow the evolution of the relationship between the site and its actors? With what consequences/transformation?

In pursuing this work it will also be interesting to determine whether the reorganization will lead to the creation and/or

evolution of inter- or intradivision exchange forums, or whether OHS specialists, with a new position in the organization, will attempt to influence norms (Gherardi 2019).

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