NEW DIRECTIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN AUSTRALIA IN THE 1990S
THE HUMAN-ORGANIZATIONAL INTERFACE

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Abstract

This paper reviews the major developments in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) issues in Australia in the 1980s, and outlines possible directions for further development in the 1990s. It looks in particular at the development of standards through the tripartite process, in Worksafe Australia and its State counterparts, and makes two suggestions for improving the process: a 'compliance adjustment period' allowing firms time to respond to new standards, and a system for breaking deadlocks. The current National Review of OHS is referred to, and its priority issues debated. The regulatory proposals of the recent Niland Green paper are discussed. Key issues for the 1990s are reviewed, and in particular the prospects for controlling RSI are canvassed, in terms that link its prevention to the elimination of neo-Taylorist design of computerised work systems. This leads to the final theme, which seeks to forge a link between OHS matters and restructuring, through the argument that a healthy workplace is productive, and a productive workplace is necessarily a healthy place if its productivity is to be sustained. Notions of productivity, health and democracy are thereby combined in the composite notion of the desirable workplace.
Introduction

The invitation from IFAP to deliver this keynote address is timely. After a decade of intensive reform of Occupational Health and Safety in Australia, there is a mood of evaluation, of taking stock. For example, at this moment the Federal and State governments are finalising a national review of the effectiveness of OHS preventive strategies, and developing an agenda for further developments in the 1990s. A report is expected from the Ministers of Labor, prepared by Worksafe Australia and the Department of Industrial Relations, before the end of this year. In a broader perspective, the current round of intense restructuring of Australian industry, at sector, enterprise and workplace level, is throwing up a series of challenges and opportunities that must not be missed by OHS practitioners. The scope for integrating the concerns of OHS with the broader issues of productivity and efficiency enhancement, in a common framework of democratisation, is compelling. It is to these questions that I shall turn my attention today.

We have come a long way in the ten years since OHS issues came to public prominence in Australia. It was in 1980 that the ACTU decided to direct resources to a new preventive strategy that unions could pursue in negotiation with employers, opening up a series of new industrial fronts whose ramifications are still unfolding. There have been major changes in the legislative framework within which OHS matters are treated; in the development of standards through a tripartite process; in the establishment of a national OHS forum, Worksafe Australia; in the administrative arrangements covering prevention, rehabilitation and compensation; but above all in the shift towards direct workplace negotiation of structures and processes designed to safeguard more effectively workers' health and safety.
The reform of protective legislation is striking. One State after another has adopted Robens-style legislation, based more or less on the UK Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, starting with New South Wales in 1983, Western Australia in 1984, Victoria in 1985, South Australia in 1986, and the ACT in 1989 (with less substantial reforms being enacted in the Northern Territory in 1986, and Queensland in 1989, with Tasmania having initiated the changes, albeit partially, in 1977). This body of legislation has shifted the burden of responsibility for protecting workers' health and safety substantially away from norms developed by professional practitioners and enforced by factory inspectorates, to practices involving employers and employees themselves, through such institutional arrangements as health and safety representatives, joint health and safety workplace committees, and State-level tripartite OHS Commissions. Despite the professed fears of the employers, who of course remain ultimately obliged under law to provide a healthy and safe place of work, these arrangements have proved to be eminently practicable; in the specific cases of Victoria, South Australia and the ACT, where the rights of health and safety representatives were extended to being empowered to stop unsafe work, there has been broad acceptance that these rights have been used sparingly and wisely, with no recorded cases of abuse. Under these arrangements, the role of professionals, as occupational physicians, hygienists and ergonomists, has if anything increased, despite their fears of being bypassed by the new consultative arrangements. And the consultative arrangements pioneered in the field of OHS have now spread in Australian workplaces to the negotiation of technological and organizational changes, and to restructuring more generally. We shall have more to say about this below.

At the Commonwealth level there has also been some progress. After lengthy deliberations, involving an Interim Commission, a National OHS Commission was finally established in December 1985, to provide a national focus for OHS matters in Australia, and specifically to develop national standards and strategies in the field of OHS. This was a long overdue reform in Australia, bringing the country into line with most advanced industrial nations who have similar national bodies. At the time, the opportunity was not taken to give the national body any powers, despite urgings from the ACTU to this effect. However this situation has recently changed, with the development of a National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme (NICNAS).

The legislation enacting the NICNAS scheme obliges Worksafe Australia to assess all new industrial chemicals for toxicity prior to their introduction into commercial usage, and to assess the hazards of existing industrial chemicals according to a schedule of priorities. Worksafe has
established a tripartite committee to oversee this scheme, thus bringing the consultative process into a major area of implementation which has hitherto been the province of supplier firms' and professional toxicological prerogative. The NICNAS scheme represents the first test of the regulatory powers of tripartism.

In particular, it will place the spotlight firmly on the question of information dissemination and its role in underpinning the tripartite process. The success of NICNAS in practice will depend on the extent to which employers and workers are actually able to use the documents produced by the new assessment scheme. Outcomes of assessments are to be gazetted, which will place the scheme under a desirable level of public scrutiny. It is understood that Worksafe is also compiling a national repository of company-supplied Material Safety Data Sheets, which will retrievable on-line. Such public access to the results of assessment, and to company data, are essential. If the process is allowed to lapse into secrecy, then no-one will know about it, and no-one will come forward to defend it when it is threatened. This then is a vital test of the capacity of Worksafe to take its message and its authority to the widest possible constituency.

Major developments in the 1980s

The development of standards for OHS in the first five years of Worksafe Australia's existence, has been a frustrating experience. The major achievement has been the NICNAS, itself debated and reviewed for seven or eight years prior to its recent passage in federal legislation. National standards have been issued on such matters as RSI (Occupational Overuse Syndrome), asbestos, timber preservatives, and workplace injuries and disease recording. But on major topics such as manual handling, noise or synthetic mineral fibres, an agreed position has only recently been reached or is still in doubt. In the case of manual handling, the process has been underway for six years, and control of noise has similarly taken an unconscionably long time. For the control of lead, there is still no agreed position after over four years of debate (the issue turning, incredibly, on the exclusion of women from the industry).

It must be stated clearly that delays of this order in issuing standards will in the end fatally undermine the integrity and credibility of the national organization, and of tripartism more generally. Delay feeds on delay and results in regulatory paralysis - which translates into a miscellany of standards being reached through bilateral
deals and negotiations. I have two suggestions to make which might contribute to expediting the standard-setting process.

Firstly, there needs to be a way of offering existing industries and firms a period of grace before having to comply with a new standard. On topic after topic, it is complaints from firms about having to change installed technologies and procedures to meet a new standard, that holds up proceedings. A way around this would be for Worksafe to adopt as a general procedure a four or five year ‘compliance adjustment period’ for any new standard, allowing it to bite immediately only in the case of new processes where it can properly be factored in as a cost in investment decisions. Such an adjustment period will relieve firms of having to make costly immediate adjustments, and plan their investments to bring their future processes into line with the new standard. The advantage of this approach lies in its making a clear distinction between what constitutes a good standard for a future industry, and transitional arrangements involved in adjusting to that standard. The draft Noise Standard developed through Worksafe adopts this approach, in its concept of a phase-in period allowing firms time to adjust.

Such a strategy is an example of a more generally applicable approach to social change, which seeks to achieve change through the ‘leading edge’. In this case it is new firms and firms introducing new processes which will be able to meet the requirements of the new standard, and will show by their example its feasibility and practibility. In this way the standard will be adopted voluntarily by more and more firms, as part of their investment and strategic planning decisions; after the expiry of the ‘compliance adjustment period’, it can be expected that only a few laggard firms will have to be subject to regulatory pressure. Such a ‘leading edge’ principle of social change is widely applicable in many fields, such as company law and taxation, and is much more effective than change decreed by fiat and enforced across the board.

Secondly there needs to be a way of breaking deadlocks or regulatory logjams. Worksafe has already taken some action on this matter, by abolishing a deadlocked series of tripartite Working Parties, and replacing them with a series of ‘technical’ Working Parties and a single tripartite Standards Development Standing Committee. Provided the tripartite committee is given details of options considered by the technical working parties, and is allowed to set general criteria for the acceptance or rejection of options, this is a workable system; in fact it parallels very closely the ‘two-stage’ process of standard-setting that I outlined in my OHS text. (Mathews, 1985) But the deadlocks will still occur, even with this reform and even if a ‘leading edge’ approach is taken, because of obstinacy on one side or the
other. I would suggest that an appropriate mechanism to break such jams would be for Worksafe to adopt, again as a general rule, that tripartite committees would have a maximum period, say one year, in which to come up with a draft standard - and another maximum period, say one year, to reach an agreed position following the issuing of the draft standard. If an agreed position is not reached within the stipulated time, then the committee would be disbanded, and could not be reformed before an appropriate 'latent period' had elapsed, say two years. This mechanism would place pressure on the parties to reach a uniform position, the penalty for failure being an open campaign in the field to achieve a particular standard through direct workplace negotiation. Such an approach would force unions to show which issues they were serious about (by the resources and energy they committed to campaigns) and force employers to show how serious they are in their demands for uniformity by seeking resolution of differences within the tripartite process.

This strategy too is an example of a more generally applicable approach that I have called elsewhere the 'conditional principle'. It is based on the premise that change is less threatening if a number of conditions are specified in advance. Such an approach is universal in the physical world and the world of engineering (eg trip mechanisms, decision diamonds in flow charts) and is widely used in the world of finance (eg takeover bids that are conditional on 51% acceptances). The development of OHS standards is an obvious area where such a 'conditional principle' could be fruitfully introduced.

The National Review

The federal government commissioned a major review of OHS in 1989, through the Department of Industrial Relations and Worksafe Australia, in consultation with State governments, employer organizations and unions, and other interested parties. The then Minister, Peter Morris, issued a Discussion Paper in December 1989, reviewing the achievements of the 1980s and placing on record a number of issues to be tackled in the 1990s. Now that submissions have been received, the Review Steering Committee is finalising the report which will be tabled by the Minister at the Australian Labour Ministers Conference before the end of this year. The report is likely to address the means of improving the impact of government activity in such matters as uniformity of standards and legislation, training and education, delivery of information, and research. It will place OHS administrative reform in the context of microeconomic adjustment, and of emerging developments in the relationship between State and federal governments (in
the wake of the Prime Minister’s call for a ‘new federalism’ in a speech in June).

The National Review of OHS delivery in Australia, currently underway, is focusing its attention on four major areas:
* statutory provisions
* information
* training and education
* research and statistics.
I should like to make a comment on each of these topics in turn.

Under statutory provisions, the Review is investigating the scope for greater consistency of OHS legislation, the extent to which standards may be made uniform and adopted in legislation, and whether penalties may be given a greater deterrent effect. Provided uniformity is interpreted to mean minimum obligations, this can present no problems; if it is interpreted as setting maximum standards, thereby pulling back standards achieved in progressive states such as Victoria, then the path toward uniformity is likely to be difficult.

Under the heading of information provision, the Review is finally addressing the question of skimming something from the flow of workers’ compensation premiums to fund a national hazard and control service, which could supply information and advice to firms, with a renewed emphasis on ensuring that the information gets to the workplace. This is a long overdue reform in Australia, and one which the whole of industry would welcome. A scheme could be established here modelled more or less closely on the Swedish Work Environment Fund; I have discussed such measures elsewhere as ‘social funds’ designed to achieve desirable social goals such as advanced levels of training in industry, press diversity, and promotion of OHS research and information dissemination. (Mathews, 1989a) It is worth noting that the South Australian government has already established a comparable scheme, where funds from the flow of workers’ compensation are channelled to the provision of pre-ventive services for ‘problem’ firms. It is also worth noting that the NSW State government passed legislation establishing an OHS Education and Accident Prevention Fund in 1985 - but it has never been implemented! The Niland Green Paper on IR reform (discussed below) makes the welcome recommendation that this Fund should be activated in 1991 with a $2 million annual appropriation from workers’ compensation premiums administered by the Workcover Authority in New South Wales.

On training and education, the current effectiveness of safety representatives and management training programs will be reviewed, and the feasibility of extending the scope of joint training will be investigated. While employers can always be relied on to call for an end to separate training
of trade union safety representatives, in favour of joint training, the case for an initial induction of representatives by their union is overwhelming. If representatives are to be truly effective in raising issues and keeping employers on their toes, which is after all in the employer's own interest and certainly in the public interest, then they must be given the confidence that they can call for assistance when faced with a difficult choice or decision. This is what their union can provide them with - but it takes time to explain how this can be done and what the major issues are. Safety representatives not so inducted are likely to be totally acquiescent (and therefore useless) or prone to chase the latest fad (and thereby become a nuisance). A properly inducted safety representative can attend as many joint courses as the employer cares to pay for, and they can be expected to offer maximum cooperation - but from a separate and independent position, rather than a position of total dependence on the employer. This is how democracy works in the nation's Parliament, and it is how democracy should work in the nation's workplaces.

Finally, on research and statistics, the review will focus on the remaining obstacles that may exist to the collection of unit record data in the National Data Set for Compensation-Based Statistics, in addition to its present access to Coroners' reports and to the output of the Australian Injuries Surveillance Program. It seems to me that this is a somewhat narrow view of collection of occupational injury and disease data. It is widely known that the compensation system captures only a very biased sample of cases. The preventive arm of OHS in Australia should be placing maximum effort on highlighting the occupational origin of many diseases, particularly cancer, allergies, heart disease, ulcers, birth deformities and other reproductive abnormalities and many more conditions. This means developing methodologies in conjunction with cancer registries, perinatal statistics units and other agencies, to develop better occupational history recording in relation to both morbidity and mortality. Opportunities exist to move in this direction, in the collection of data for the present Health and Vital Statistics program, while the new National Skin Disorders network established by Worksafe, encouraging dermatologists to link skin problems with potential occupational origins, takes this process one step further.

Niland Green Paper

The most recent airing of OHS regulatory issues has been in Volume Two of the Green Paper 'Transforming Industrial Relations in New South Wales', prepared for the NSW State government by Professor John Niland. (Niland, 1990) This contains an important chapter on OHS issues, subjecting them
to the most sustained review in that State since the report of the Williams Inquiry established in 1979. The Niland Green paper noted the major State developments, such as passage of the Robens-style legislation in 1983; the establishment of the tripartite Occupational Health, Safety and Rehabilitation Council in 1984; the regulation authorising government safety inspectors to issue Prohibition and Improvement Notices in 1988; and the formation of an integrated administration bringing together OHS, rehabilitation and compensation as the Workcover Authority, in 1989. Because of these developments, the Green paper focused more particularly on the existing workplace structures and their adequacy in providing for protection of workers' OHS, and on the links between OHS and other IR issues. Consistent with its devolutionary IR approach, the Green Paper favoured the establishment and efficient operation of workplace consultative committees in the field of OHS.

Paradoxically, given this devolutionary approach, the Green Paper remains blind, in both its discussion and its recommendations (particularly recommendation 147 on workplace OHS committees) to the difference between the concepts of OHS worker representatives, and OHS workplace committees. This was a difference emphasised by Robens himself, in 1972, and repeated over and over again during the debates on the Victorian OHS legislation in 1983, 1984 and 1985. The difference is this. A worker OHS representative, like any other delegate, is appointed to act as a collective voice of the group of workers represented; he or she is present at all times in the workplace, and can raise a matter on behalf of one of his or her constituents, at any time. A workplace OHS committee, on the other hand, is a quasi-legislative body that can meet from time to time to establish standards, procedures, and review events, such as incidents, accidents and disputes. The difference between a representative and a committee is as fundamental as the difference between the executive and legislative arms of government. (Mathews, 1985, p 575) The failure of the Green Paper to recognise this point, and to take the opportunity to rectify such a major divergence between the NSW legislation and the safety-representative-recognising legislation in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, is a serious shortcoming of its otherwise excellent presentation.

The Green Paper breaks new ground on OHS issues in its recommendation that rights to prosecute should be extended to all workers, rather than being restricted, as is presently the case, to the Workcover Authority. The mechanism proposed is that workers (or more generally, persons) would be given rights to take a grievance to the applicable IR tribunal, which would then consider whether to allow access to the courts on the basis of the seriousness
of the grievance. How the courts would view such a development, if it is introduced by the Greiner government, of course remains to be seen. The other major innovation is the call to establish an Industrial Disputes Committee under the Workcover Administration Act, the members of which should be constituted as an OHS Conciliation Committee under the proposed Industrial Relations Act. This would provide a direct linkage between the OHS authority and IR Commission. These twin recommendations seem to be inspired by the need to find an institutional counterpart to the more straightforward provision of the Victorian legislation, that OHS representatives have the right to stop an unsafe job. In reality there have been so few disputes recorded under this provision in Victoria, that elaborate reforms of prosecution and disputes settling procedures seem hardly to be warranted - although it is worth noting that unions in Victoria, through the VTHC, have also called for an extension of prosecution powers under the Victorian OHS legislation.

Key issues of the 1990s

What then are likely to be the major issues of the 1990s? In terms of numbers of workers afflicted, back injuries and occupational deafness will continue to be issues of key concern. And both are eminently susceptible to sustained preventive action, because they are caused by badly designed processes and equipment. There is no excuse for noisy machinery; modern engineering methods can identify all the relevant sources, and they can be silenced at source, or as an intermediate step, silenced by insulation. Similarly back injuries are caused overwhelmingly by poor design of product handling systems, requiring workers to make awkward or repetitive movements that place too much strain on back ligaments. These are both areas where substantial progress could be expected merely by the enunciation of an intention to set standards by a certain date, and then to proceed to set standards in the 'leading edge' and 'conditional' fashion outlined above.

Other conditions that will continue to be of major concern, associated largely with toxic chemicals, are allergies (such as contact dermatitis and asthma), systemic diseases, cancers and reproductive disorders. Asbestos and synthetic mineral fibres will continue to be major lung hazards. In the 1990s biological hazards will come to increasing public prominence, led by AIDS as an occupational issue, particularly for health workers. Developing preventive strategies for these conditions is fraught with difficulties in that they must pay due regard to the rights of disease sufferers as well as to the protection of those who care for them (as recognized by Worksafe in its present guidelines on AIDS).
I cannot resist saying a word about RSI. I have observed the debate over this condition unfold in Australia, sometimes with horror, sometimes with amusement. I can draw some satisfaction from the fact that the condition is now definitely on the retreat, at least within large employers like Telecom and the Australian Tax Office, having been rampant in the mid-1980s.

First, the name itself. I can speak with some authority here, since it was myself, along with Nick Calabrese, who actually coined the term ‘Repetitive Strain Injury’. We introduced this term to the public debate in Australia in the ACTU OHS Bulletin in August 1982, as a generic term standing for a constellation of conditions known variously as tenosynovitis, tendonitis, epicondylitis, tension neck syndrome, bursitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, cervicobrachial syndrome, and less clinically, as tennis elbow, golfer’s arm, and process worker’s arm. The term RSI was thus an intervention by the unions at the basic level of the naming and identification of a syndrome; it was a term which stuck, and which has spread all around the world. And precisely because RSI was a union-nominated term, it has been fought bitterly right through the 1980s; Worksafe Australia has now adopted the alternative formulation Occupational Overuse Syndrome. What’s in a name?—Obviously, a lot.

Secondly, on the causes and the status of the condition. Collectively, the occupational medical community should hang its head in shame over the nonsense that has been peddled on this issue. Paper after paper has been published, purporting to demonstrate that RSI is ‘all in the mind’. The latest intervention of this kind has come from no less a personage than Paddy McGuinness, writing in his column in The Australian, that RSI was a peculiarly Australian condition of ‘mass hysteria’.(McGuinness, 1990) It was no such thing. Of course the condition became ‘fashionable’, and no doubt there were more than a few malingerers amongst those sporting ‘RSI wrist bandages’ in the mid-1980s - but beneath this surface froth there was a deep and serious structural cause. This cause was neo-Taylorist design of computerised work systems. In job after job, hapless workers were required to perform mind-numbing and tendon-shattering repetitive keyboard work, in tasks that were fragmented to a maniacal degree, and under frequently highly stressful conditions of detailed computer surveillance (with machines recording each pause, each error, and dutifully compiling reports on them every hour, every week). And why has the epidemic of RSI gone into retreat? Because neo-Taylorist design of such work systems is itself in retreat; more human-centred and user-friendly systems are taking the place of these first-generation computer monstrosities.

Take the case of the Australian Tax Office. This workplace was notorious in the early 1980s as a source of RSI. New
computer systems were installed, requiring banks of Data Processing Operators (DPOs) to enter data from people's tax returns into the computer system. The division of labour was so extreme that in some cases DPOs were not even allowed to correct their own mistakes; this was a separate function performed by a separate bank of operators. Electronic surveillance of the operators' performance was rife, and extremely high hourly keystroke rates were set and enforced through individual bonus systems tied to the keystroke rate. This was the extreme form of neo-Taylorism common in clerical computer systems throughout the world at that time - and it was confronted first in Australia, by the unions, in their identification and combatting of RSI as an expression of the physiological limits of neo-Taylorism.

Following big battles in the mid-1980s, involving some very nasty court skirmishes over compensation, the ATO management decided, to their credit, to introduce a radically new direction in their program of technological change. In place of the banks of DPOs there would be specially designed tax officers' computerised work stations, allowing clerks to perform all the duties associated with computerised records - entering data, retrieving data, making amendments to files, answering queries and issuing reports. The new program has been adopted as the Tax Office Modernisation program; it is being negotiated at every stage with the relevant unions and strategic milestones identified in an enabling agreement in advance; the equipment is being designed and ergonomically tested in Australia; and the whole process is being linked with industrial relations reform and job reclassification through Award Restructuring. From being one of worst offenders, the ATO is now one of the best examples of how to introduce computerisation without RSI. The RSI has disappeared at the ATO because management has taken the initiative to eliminate narrow keyboarding tasks, punitive surveillance, and individual bonus systems of payment; in their place it has introduced broad and responsible job classifications, self-managing work teams and participative technology design.

If Paddy McGuinness is serious when he claims that we 'still do not know what really caused RSI', then let him look at the Tax Office to understand what caused it and what cured it. Considerations of 'mass hysteria' are utterly irrelevant and mischievously misleading as purported explanations.

**OHS and work restructuring**

And this observation brings me to my final and most important theme, which is the emergent connection between OHS issues and restructuring. The Tax Office case shows clearly that OHS considerations can play a dynamic role in fostering a new approach to the design of jobs which in turn leads to more productive and efficient work. This is a point
that is seldom brought out clearly, even when a connection between OHS and restructuring is posed.

The 1989 Worksafe National Discussion Paper 'Safer Workplaces' skirts around this question, alluding only in passing to the need for improvements in OHS as a means of enhancing competitiveness and productivity through lowering labour costs and 'making better and more productive use of the labour force'. (DIR/Worksafe, 1989; p 1)

The same issue is touched on in passing by the Minister in his Foreword, in the following terms:

'...the consideration of OHS issues is intrinsic to the award restructuring process of major job redesign and changes to work patterns. It is imperative that unions and employers take into account the OHS implications of any changes they plan'.

With these cautious remarks, the then Minister was seeking to open up a discussion which few have ventured to join. Let me make up for this coyness on the part of my colleagues by taking the discussion further today.

The case for a safe and healthy workplace is usually put in the following terms. Despite the reforms of the 1980s, occupational injuries and diseases continue to exact a fearsome toll, causing pain and suffering to affected workers, and imposing substantial public costs through provision of hospital and other health and treatment services. The costs to the economy generally in productive days lost is enormous, estimated to be at least 12 times the number of days lost through industrial disputes. The costs to employers are felt indirectly through these days lost and the need to train new workers, and directly in the form of workers' compensation premiums. Claims totalled $4.76 billion in Australia in the 1989/90 financial year, amounting to 1.34% of Gross Domestic product, or 2.62% of labour costs. (Worksafe, 1990) It was in these terms that the new Minister for Industrial Relations, Senator Peter Cook, put his case for specific attention being paid to OHS issues during his tenure of the portfolio, at his first speech in his new capacity delivered in June. (Cook, 1990)

These are time-honoured arguments, and they are sound - up to a point. The point is, however, that they are essentially defensive and negative in tone. The protection of workers' health and safety has always been discussed in such a tone, using negative criteria of risk and injury. This was of course entirely appropriate in an era when machinery and work processes were designed with barely a thought given to the needs and safety of the people who would be required to operate them. Such defensive criteria trace their origins to the first stipulations to fence dangerous moving machinery
in the Factories Act passed by the British House of Commons in 1844, and ever since they have been developed in terms of limits, constraints and negative injunctions.

Given that OHS matters are seen now to be part of the negotiated process of Industrial Relations, what is the impact on OHS of the dramatic shift in IR procedures away from a focus on disputes and their resolution, to a newfound basis of industrial cooperation? The roots of this shift go deep, to perceived common problems of survival of whole industries, and to an emergent awareness of a new industrial framework or 'technoeconomic paradigm' that is coming to public attention in all OECD countries. (OECD, 1988) Australia in the 1990s is going through a profound industrial transformation. This encompasses restructuring at sector, enterprise and workplace level, guided by a new framework or set of values that emphasises quality of production (of goods or services), market responsiveness, reliance on skill and responsibility of workers, and new cooperative relations between management and workforce. Through the spectacular developments in award restructuring, in which issues such as multi-skilling, job broadbarding, competency-based training and productivity-linked wages are coming to the fore, the climate and structures of industrial relations are changing from an obstacle to change to a facilitator of transformation. (Mathews, 1989b) In the words of the recent Pappas Carter report to the tripartite Australian Manufacturing Council, on the future of Australian manufacturing, what is emerging is nothing less than a 'new workplace culture'. (Pappas Carter Evans Koop, 1990)

I have been visiting many workplaces recently, and I have found a striking correlation between attention paid to OHS questions, and the seriousness with which restructuring is being tackled as a participative process. At one domestic appliance plant, the management freely offered the view that they expected their new restructuring consultative committees to make early suggestions almost exclusively on OHS and work environment matters - and that the speed with which they responded to such concerns would determine how quickly the committees would get down to substantive efficiency questions. In this workplace, they found that the 'lag period' was only 6 months - six months of OHS issues followed by sustained interest in making the work more productive and efficient. Since then at this plant, a stream of suggestions has been received, relating to changes in work layout, work processes and work practices - and all take OHS issues into account as a matter of course. This means in practice developing a positive ergonomics, capable of generating not just negative criteria governing limits to physical and mental exhaustion, but positive criteria for making work more interesting, lively, and healthy.
This seems to me to be the way to raise, and solve, OHS questions in the future. By linking them directly with questions of productivity and efficiency, but in a trusted participative framework, the traditional 'tradeoff mentality' between OHS and productivity is, if not eliminated, at least controlled.

It is my submission that OHS practitioners have been too meek and retiring in forging the connection between OHS issues and restructuring. If we simply make the connection in terms that people should not 'forget' OHS issues - which is the gist of the Minister's remarks cited above - then OHS will be fatally marginalised. In the new context, I would argue, OHS issues can become part of the same trends towards job enlargement and worker responsibility, with OHS becoming another of the important matters which responsible and skilled workers will look after for themselves - along with quality of their output, maintenance of their equipment, and the scheduling and organization of their tasks. There is thus presented the challenge to find a way to express OHS issues in terms of positive criteria, by which I mean criteria that can be used to define and describe the 'healthy workplace'. This is a very different kind of activity from that traditionally followed, where criteria are developed to define the 'unhealthy' and 'unsafe' workplace.

Just what is meant by the notion of a 'healthy workplace'? What I have in mind is a workplace where work is organized in such a way that work satisfaction is maximised, where physical conditions are optimal, and where psychological well-being is actively promoted and pursued. Such a workplace can only be highly productive; it can only be organized on the basis of high levels of skill and quality of work. It can only be a self-managing and participative workplace, in which workers are called on to exercise responsibility and discretion, in regard not just to the products or processes they work with but to their own selves as well, and in which they are given the resources and powers needed to exercise those responsibilities. It is what I would describe as a democratic workplace.

What I am claiming is that in the future world of work, the previously separate notions of productivity, democracy and health, will become integrated into a single notion of the desirable workplace.

This then is the line I would like to see argued in the report of the National Review of OHS in Australia. It should advance OHS, not as a marginal consideration or afterthought, but as a driving influence to create a better workplace. It can do so through the proposition that a healthy workplace is a productive workplace, and conversely, a productive and efficient workplace necessarily strives to
be a healthy workplace if its productivity is to be sustained. It is by integrating OHS considerations within the discourse of productivity, that the issues will be given maximum influence, and proper safeguards will be taken.

Australia is already developing a distinctive approach to restructuring, utilising its characteristic institutions such as the Industrial Relations Commission in novel and flexible ways. While much remains to be done, it needs to be acknowledged that much has already been achieved. Now Australia has an opportunity to lead the world, by integrating OHS concerns with other related impulses to reform workplaces. This is a challenge of enormous magnitude. But what an exciting prospect if we can make headway. It is what I see as the major direction for OHS in Australia in the 1990s.

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