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The experience of first-line managers to the test of work intensification. The example of an airline company

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Abstract

This research takes place in an airline company and focuses on the regulations deployed by local managers to design "sustainable" work situations, e.g. that preserve the health of subordinates through the development of skills. The research takes place in a context of increasing health problems among the airline's ground staff, sales agents and baggage handlers. Our objective was to understand how and under what conditions their managers manage to reduce the physical and temporal constraints on their subordinates, particularly when they draw up their work schedules. Managers' work is described in the literature as being intense and subject to high time pressures, in a context where their work is constantly changing. The managers discussed here are so-called 'informal' managers in that they carry out managerial tasks and assignments without having hierarchical status. During their planning tasks, they solve problems caused by the variability of the airline industry and the personnel they supervise. In order to identify regulations favorable to the preservation of subordinates' health and to target the conditions conducive to their deployment, we mobilized several methodologies: exploratory interviews (n=29), systematic observations centred on the management of problems in the planning task (n=29), and self-confrontation interviews with the traces of the activity (n=6). 1,540 problem management situations were collected and subjected to qualitative (analysis of the decision-making processes at work in the managers' regulations) and quantitative (effect of time pressure on the managers' regulations) processing. The results thus show complex decision-making processes involved in problem solving, particularly when these concern the health of subordinates. These regulations are based more particularly on a fine and situated experience of managers that is neither formalized nor recognised by stakeholders. A second result shows how time pressure and work intensity of managers modify the decision-making processes, by simplifying the criteria (sacrifice of health issues in favor of production issues) and by reducing the temporal field (urgency of production issues to the detriment of long-term professional wear and tear). Finally, these regulations are also impacted by the transformation of the work and career paths of managers, who neglect real work and their experience. These results open up prospects for improving the working conditions and careers of managers. In particular, the transmission of this informal knowledge to newcomers and its development over the course of their professional lives should be encouraged.

Keywords

First level manager, experience, health and performance, intensification.

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Context

This paper focuses on the prevention practices of proximity managers in a context of persistent work intensification (Parent-Thirion & al., 2016). Work intensification refers to the increase in a variety of temporal constraints and an acceleration of technical and organizational transformations (Gollac & Volkoff, 1996). It leads to health problems (Mauroux & al., 2021) which particularly affect service employees and workers (Bèque & al., 2017). Managers are then caught between the different missions that fall to them: one consisting of leading and implementing increasingly frequent technical and organizational transformations (Wolff & al., 2015), and the other aiming to protect the employees they supervise from work-related risks (Durand-Moreau & Lasfargues, 2022). The aim here is to identify the preventive practices of managers and to target the conditions conducive to their deployment.

The research presented here takes place in an airline company. In order to remain competitive, the airline has deployed multiple technical and organizational transformations (digitalization of the service relationship, subcontracting, multi-skilling, downsizing, etc.), in a context of a markedly ageing workforce. These transformations are leading to an intensification of the work of ground staff - sales agents (in charge of welcoming and checking in passengers in the terminal) and baggage handlers (loading and unloading baggage) - with a consequent increase in health problems among the latter (Reboul & al., 2020). At the same time, decision-makers note the increasing difficulties of the ground staff's local managers, especially as they have to plan production tasks. This task is carried out in real time and continuously (from 5 a.m. to midnight, 365 days a year) in order to adapt the organization to the strong variability of the airline sector and to unforeseen events (aircraft or customer delays, flight advance or cancellation, reorganization following an abandoned baggage item, customer flow management, etc.). These managers are thus in direct and permanent contact with the agents to make frequent readjustments to their schedules. Despite their role and their missions, these managers are not their superiors, insofar as they have no decision-making power. They therefore carry out "informal" management. The difficulties reported by the decision-makers refer to regular requests from staff to informal managers, particularly concerning the choice of schedules, and leading to relational tensions. One solution envisaged by the company is to move managers away from production areas in order, among other things, to keep them away from agents' demands.

Objectives

Like employees, managers deploy regulations (Leplat, 2007), understood as forms of compromise and arbitration carried out in order to take into account the variability of work situations and their own characteristics in health and experience. For managers, these regulations take the form of articulation between multiple and sometimes contradictory objectives (Gotteland-Agostini & al., 2016), which relate to: service quality, quantity, deadlines, employee health and safety, not to mention the preservation of the health of the managers themselves. These regulations are necessary for the functioning of socio-technical systems. They develop and are refined with professional experience (Volkoff & Gaudart, 2015; Piney & al., 2015). But the possibility of mobilizing them also depends on the margins of maneuver available to managers (Tengblad, 2017). Several studies of managers' work describe intense work due to high time pressure, numerous tasks and assignments, frequent interruptions and the management of complex problems (Rogalski & Langa, 1997, Piney & al., 2015, Nivet & al., 2021). These characteristics make it difficult to assess what managers actually do (Briner & al., 2012). This is reinforced by the frequent changes in their employment and working conditions (training, career development, missions and means at their disposal, status).

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Our purpose here is to identify, on the one hand, the regulations of managers (here without a formal hierarchical link), when these explicitly relate to the health and skills of the agents they supervise (including issues of quality of life at work, preservation of physical and psychological health, skills, safety, reconciliation of professional and personal life, work group, etc.). On the other hand, we intend to understand how and why the intensity of managers' work can affect these regulations. Our research questions are the following:

- What are the regulations implemented by informal managers? What are their effects on employee health and the performance of the socio-technical system? What is the role of experience in the development of these?

- How does the intensity of work impact the regulations implemented by informal managers and their experience? Intensity is studied here from the angle of time pressure (number of elements to be managed during the planning task) and transformations in managers' working conditions (change of location, procedures, criteria for career development, etc.).

Methods

The analyses are based on three methods: interviews, systematic observations and self-confrontation interviews. They were conducted with 29 managers working in the Customer (sales agents) and Aircraft (baggage handlers) sectors. In this paper, we will present some global results from the analyses conducted on all managers and from the case analyses conducted on the activity of aircraft managers. The interviews dealt with themes relating to the appreciation of an observed work day (difficulties, hazards, etc.) and biographical elements (career, health, experience). They were transcribed and the content was processed, using an inductive approach, in order to retain the following elements :

- appreciation of the workday: perceived workload, events disrupting work, resources available to cope with difficulties, etc.

- biographical elements: date of entry into the company, different positions held, elements related to past and present health, future projections, past or current transformations, etc.

This initial exploratory analysis made it possible to define indicators of managers' activity in a second stage with a view to carrying out systematic observations (Guérin & al., 2007). The analysis is based on the management of 'problems' by managers, as recommended by several authors (Briner & al., 2012; Mintzberg, 1973). The problems identified here relate to events that disrupt the initial planning and require the manager to take actions and/or decisions to resolve them. During the planning task, 1540 problems were collected from 29 managers and were modelled according to the following criteria:

- whether or not the problem is detected by the manager himself;

- whether the problem explicitly relates to the health and skills of an employee or whether it is production-related;

- how the problem was resolved, including the duration and number of modified schedules.

The self-confrontation interviews with the traces of the activity (Mollo & Falzon, 2004) made it possible to identify more precisely the different goals pursued by the managers in the management of the problems and the short- and long-term impacts on health and production of these scheduling decisions.

One hypothesis was that the regulations at work in problem solving depended in particular on time pressure. To this end, we constructed an indicator of time pressure based on the density of problems to be managed. This is estimated on the basis of the number of problems occurring in

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the work of managers per time slot. Three modes of density between which the problems are equally distributed are defined:

- Moderate: at most one problem every 4 minutes;
- Medium: maximum one problem every 3 minutes;
- High: maximum one problem every 2 minutes.

These 1540 problems were processed in two ways: clinical analyses of problem solving, showing the complexity of the reasoning at work (multiplicity of goals, perceived immediate and delayed effects of planning choices on health and performance, diversity of strategies for articulating goals) and quantitative analyses using statistical software (descriptive and cross-sectional statistics of problem solving modes).

Finally, we examined the effect of two transformations on the possibilities of deploying regulations and/or developing new ones. These transformations concern, on the one hand, the relocation of managers to another building and, on the other hand, the implementation of a 'mobility' program in the career development of managers (managers must be able to manage all ground staff jobs - sales agents and baggage handlers - in all sites in France for a maximum of four years).

Main results

These results show how essential experience is for the implementation of regulations aimed at anticipating and resolving problems, particularly when they concern the health of workers. They also show that these regulations are impacted by work intensification and transformations of work conditions.

1) The role of experience in managers' regulations

From a situation of management of a problem of "health" origin detected at the initiative of the manager, we will draw several findings concerning all managers. In this situation, the manager identifies a health problem in an agent even though this problem is not specified by the software. To do this, he relies on his knowledge of this agent, whose state of health he knows, as well as his knowledge of the arduousness of the tasks: he thus modifies numerous schedules to ensure that the agent in question does not end up performing a task whose arduousness could aggravate his state of health and render him incapable of acting. In these situations, the arduousness of the tasks is not a formal fact (e.g. linked to a standard) but constructed in the professional experience: for example, it is necessary to know that such and such a flight involves specific baggage (which varies according to the weight, the type of baggage, the type of customers) and that it involves manual aids or not. This level of detail is difficult to standardize in planning software and requires detailed knowledge, which is situated and updated according to the situation and the specific nature of the flights.

For all the managers, we were able to make the following observations:

- In order to draw up a schedule, the managers rely on multiple indicators relating to health in the broad sense, covering the psychological, cognitive, physical and social spheres. They link these criteria to production issues (providing a quality service on time) and assess the short and long-term effects of these task combinations on health and performance.
- The problems detected take longer on average to deal with than the problems experienced and are associated with more schedule changes. This indicates a search for quality in task combinations, to take into account criteria related to the sequencing of tasks on the schedules (not having strenuous tasks one after the other, positioning break times, not making workers run

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between two tasks, etc.), to the collective (building teams in which members enjoy working together), to fairness between employees (allocating the same number of tasks to employees), to load distribution (ensuring that the team is large enough to take on flights identified as strenuous), etc.

- Managers rely on agents to construct problems (agents are a source of information), i.e. to give them a meaning that guides the choice of solutions to be implemented.
- The indicators constructed by the managers are located both in the technical tools provided for the planning of tasks and in their direct working environment (the comings and goings of agents between the premises and the field, the behavior of agents, direct visibility of the aircraft). These indicators are also rooted in the experience of supervised work situations, since all the managers have been agents in the past.

2) The effects of time pressure on regulations: a more reactive activity

The quantitative analyses carried out on the basis of the 1540 problems and the qualitative analyses carried out on the basis of a problem management situation in a busy period make it possible to identify changes in problem-solving methods according to the density of the problems to be managed. These results partly explain the presence of tensions within the departments

In particular, we can note that :

- In the case of a problem-dense situation, we note that the manager accelerates his decision-making, formalizes his interactions with the agents, and faces up to the urgency by sacrificing certain criteria (such as the difficulties of the schedule and the challenges of the collective). The difficulty is not only linked to the acceleration of the pace, but also to a lack of agents available to carry out certain tasks.
- These observations are generalized since, according to the quantitative analyses, it can be seen that when the density increases, the number of problems detected decreases, the time taken to resolve problems is shorter and fewer schedules are modified. This suggests that managers are narrowing their time frame and simplifying their problem solving criteria, particularly to keep to flight time emergencies.

3) The effects of work transformations and managers' career paths on the possibility of mobilizing and developing their experience

Here we examine two changes in managers' working conditions that were underway at the time of the research: 1) the relocation of managers to a building far from the production site and 2) the mobility of managers. These two elements tend to distance managers from the production sites. However, this distance is partially compensated by regulations, which are nevertheless costly.

1) Moving managers to a building far from the production area was presented in part as a solution for them to work in peace and quiet, away from the demands of staff. This project was underway and a manager was nevertheless always present at the production site, in addition to the managers who planned remotely. We were able to observe here that, in the context of managing a hazard, the manager who works remotely tries to communicate permanently with the manager present on the baggage handlers' premises in order to have a representation of the agents' work (to know, for example, where the agents are).

2) The manager mobility program consists of formal managers being able to supervise any type of job and for a limited period of time (four years). The situation studied here is that of a 'formal' manager who had to supervise the schedules of baggage handlers. However, she was not trained in the planning system or in the rules and customs of the trade. As a result, she asked an 'informal' manager to replace her in the planning process, forcing the latter to abandon his initial mission

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(checking the baggage handlers' skills). This situation is not isolated, as the 'formal' managers of the baggage handlers are mostly not from the trade and thus delegate decision-making to the informal managers, without any recognition of this in terms of status and workload.

Discussion/perspectives

These results contribute to the established knowledge on the complexity of the trade-offs elaborated by managers (Gotteland-Agostini & al., 2016), by examining more specifically here the contribution of their work to the health of subordinates. They corroborate the knowledge on the effects of time pressure on decision-making (Liu & Wickens, 1994), in particular by showing that the regulations at work in problem-solving are reduced to short-term and production objectives when the density of problems increases. Moreover, the permanent transformations to which the work and career paths of managers are subject entail the need to readapt the regulations developed with experience to new situations. Also, when these transformations, in this case managerial and architectural, do not take into account the real work of managers and the relationships developed with agents, they can weaken the performance of the socio-technical system as a whole, including managers. In this case, the resulting difficulties are partly compensated for by discretionary regulations, which are costly for health and performance.

In perspective, these results could be used to improve the working conditions of managers and to design training for them (Delgoulet, 2020). These results could be debated within a group of managers in order to pool the regulations of each and to encourage collective reflection in order to improve the conditions of their deployment by acting on the working conditions. This pooling could also be passed on to new managers who most often start by learning on the job and in isolation, after training that is often theoretical and far removed from real work.

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