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COVID-19 workplace impacts - Irish OSH professionals experience and observations

Background

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on workers, arising from adaptations to control measures and consequent behaviour changes that minimise disease spread in the workplace. From an occupational safety & health (OSH) perspective, understanding how adaptations and behaviour changes have impacted workers is relevant to how organisations can preserve the health of their workers when adapting to future health emergencies.

Methods

Semi-structured qualitative focus groups were conducted during April/May 2021. Participants were Irish OSH practitioners. Participants volunteered from industrial sectors (public & private) as defined by the Central Statistics Office. Participants (n=60) partook in one of sixteen, two-hour focus groups (4-6 participants per focus group) with each comprising four themes for discussion: organisational preparedness; organisational impacts; worker impacts; and the future of OSH. Thematic analyses were performed using NVivo.

Results

Most participants started developing adaptation measures in February/March 2020. Organisations with an international presence started developing adaptation measures earlier. As OSH professionals, most participants felt personally prepared for the challenges induced by the pandemic but did not anticipate the impact it had on their workload. Nearly all participants indicated that isolation, loneliness, fear, and anxiety had a negative impact on their co-workers' mental health. Many OSH practitioners indicated that their co-workers had responded well to the pandemic, and that positive behaviour changes and new adaptation measures had been sustained from the first wave through the third wave of the pandemic in Ireland.

Conclusion

Workplace mental health evaluations and worker wellbeing initiatives must be prioritised post-pandemic. OSH will need to re-evaluate its relationship with organisational human resources in the future.

Short Statements

Irish OSH practitioners responded well to the challenge presented by COVID-19 to protect their co-workers and maintain organisational continuity.

COVID-19 has had a negative impact on the mental health of Irish workers as they respond to preserve their organisation's operations. This will need to be addressed by organisations post-pandemic.