

Constructivism, moral relativism and the economic and social dimensions of occupational health and safety: A challenge for industrialised countries

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By 1850 in the West, the industrial revolution could safely be said to have arrived. In the century and a half since then, the OH&S business ethic has progressed from one of complete indifference to the health dimensions of work, to a recognition that industry profits should not come at the expense of lost health, life, or habitat. Unfortunately, there is a wide variation in the practice of this recognition. While most of the defining changes in OH&S behaviour in business have had their origins in concerns about the social dimensions of work, they have been called into existence through law. But once legislated for, these changes have been operationalised through an economic dimension in which large firms have interpreted OH&S strategy as a form of non-price productivity strategy aimed at leveraging health and productivity from the market. Educators, scientists, human resource managers, quality assurance and control workers, and OH&S professionals have been agents in this process.

However the advent of sustainable development, and the central role of OH&S within it, has provided new challenges for the profession. Sustainable development is, *inter alia*, an experiment in poverty reduction aimed at removing inequalities of the kind mentioned earlier. Sustainable development is to be very much a business-led development. What is more important is that sustainable development calls for action and effort are predominantly social dimension calls which somehow must find their way into economic activity. Other forces besides sustainable development inform these calls: September 11 trickle-down, social and responsible business itself, the safe and civil society movement, and evolution in thinking about profit taking. Many of these social calls are new to industrialised country business which logically must first address and internalise them before transmitting them to developing countries as required under sustainable development. Even when such new social calls are enshrined in legislation, they can only be practiced to the extent (a) that they can be afforded, and (b) that they can be accepted. Of these difficulties, acceptance is the most troublesome. Non acceptance of change may frustrate goal achievement.

Acceptance of new ideas can only be achieved through concept change and development. Whereas economic and technical change can occur relatively quickly, social change is more difficult and may take longer – decades, centuries or it may even fail viable acceptance. Two forces in postmodern society work against social change: (1) constructivism in education, (2) moral relativism in ethics. Under constructivism there are no truths, simply strong and weak construction which individuals validate on an if-it-works-use-it basis. Under moral relativism there are few, if any, universal unifying benchmarks to use to differentiate between social (values) constructs. Herein lies a major challenge for industrialised countries. How can business in such countries change sufficiently to meet the expectations sustainable development places upon it to help close the health and safety gap between rich and poor countries? Value chain activity, design for health, safety and environment, and a value approach to OH&S education may be starting points.