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Assessing the inputs and outputs of partnership arrangements for health and safety management

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ABSTRACT

Partnerships have the potential to create significant benefits for all participants provided that there is a mutual understanding of and respect for the inputs required and the outputs sought from the arrangements by each party. The aim of this study was to explore the inputs required and the outputs achieved by partners as a function of the level of involvement required within the partnership arrangement. The study has investigated the extent to which the input criteria defined by the DTI and the output criteria defined by Kantar, within three health and safety initiatives involving home worker-employer, employee-employer, and contractor-employer partnerships varied, as a function of the level of partnership defined by Thompson and Sanders. The examination of the partnership arrangements within the three case studies demonstrated that the inputs were very similar whether the arrangements were classified as co-operation, collaboration or coalescence, although the extent of the output criteria was greatest in the case of the coalescence partnership. The results illustrated the level of inputs required within a range of partnership arrangements in the context of health and safety management and the range of outputs that might be anticipated.

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Introduction

Partnerships, which include working arrangements, such as joint working, coordinated working, collaboration, coalition and alliances (Taket and White, 2000), have become widespread in a range of industrial sectors. Kantar (1994, p. 96) commented: "Alliances between companies, whether they are from different sides of the world or different ends of the supply chain, are a fact of life in business today". The net result of these partnerships is that: "Strategic alliances and closer relationships with suppliers and contractors tend to blur the boundaries of the enterprise" (OECD, 2000).

Whilst partnering has often been discussed in the context of inter-organisational relationships, it has been recognised that the principles of partnering are equally applicable between other parties, such as intra-company groups of employees and managers. For example, the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2000) advocated within its "Partnerships with People" initiative that, because everyone was capable of contributing to the goals of an organisation, the implementation of partnering approaches could improve the competitiveness of UK industry.

Partnerships, however, are not limited to the private sector; within the public sector, partnerships may involve alliances at international, national, regional and local levels in order to achieve strategic, tactical and operational objectives (Taket and White, 2000). For example, Cooney (2002) discussed the interdependencies of a government, union and employer tripartite partnership in Australia aimed at addressing national limitations in employee training. As a result of rapid changes in economic activity, developments in technology and

globalisation, organisations began to downsize and concentrate their resources on core activities.

In this environment, the use of partnerships, at the organisational level, came to the fore (Doz and Hamel, 1998). As organisations concentrated their resources on core activities, they placed a greater reliance on contractors to provide and maintain the level and quality of the ancillary support services. Increases in the levels of out-sourcing of non-core activities, however, prompted questions amongst organisations about the reliability, competence and overall business philosophies of contractors and whether they could deliver the level and quality of services required. More recently, the focus of effective partnership arrangements has moved towards establishing a commitment and a level of trust between the partners that enabled each partner to achieve common and complementary objectives (Bresnen and Marshall, 2000). As partnering groups move towards a more trusting relationship in which, for example, they share information, they may become more open to mistreatment by each other. Zand (1972), however, reported that trust could be established and reinforced provided this vulnerability produced benefits for both parties.

Cultural alignment is considered to be important in partnerships because it generates mutual understanding and co-operation between the partners and because significant differences between the partners' cultures could create conflicts and barriers to co-operative methods of working. Based on a study of over 1,000 partnership arrangements within the engineering and construction industry, Thompson and Sanders (1998, p. 74) commented: "The benefits of partnering dramatically increase as the relationship is unified and

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developed". Thompson and Sanders (1998), therefore, proposed a partnering continuum for the engineering and construction industry that illustrated the different levels of involvement that are possible within partnerships and which they referred to as competition, cooperation, collaboration and coalescence. Competition represented the situation in which there was no alignment of objectives between partners and each group strove to maximise their own benefits, whereas cooperation, collaboration and coalescence were synonymous with increasing alignment of objectives and increasing levels of trust between partners. For example, in a cooperative partnership, both parties would achieve agreement on processes through compromises and, in a collaborative partnership, process improvements would be achieved through teamwork. In a coalescing partnership, the partners would jointly reengineer the process to achieve the optimum solution so that the specific objectives of the individual partners become equivalent. However, it is important that, whichever partnership arrangement is adopted, it suits the particular organisational setting and operational circumstances. Fuller and Vassie (2002) have presented a model for measuring cultural alignment and assessing the potential level of partnership that could be achieved amongst organisations.

Partnership arrangements can be considered within the broad framework of systems theory (Freemont and Rosenzweig, 1972). According to systems theory, an organisational system has four main components: inputs, a transformation process, outputs and a feedback loop (Bartol and Martin, 1998). The transformation processes provide the managerial and technical abilities that convert available inputs to desired outputs. A partnership arrangement may, therefore, be considered as a transformation process, which, in this case, converts individual resources into collective benefits. The effectiveness of the overall partnership process is dependent upon the quality of the inputs, the nature of the partnership arrangement and the feedback on the outputs achieved. Based on the results of the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) (Cully et al., 1999), the DTI advocated that the key pathways (inputs) should be established to create a successful partnership: shared goals, shared culture, shared learning, shared effort and shared information. Kanter (1994) identified that the best partnerships would demonstrate eight criteria (outputs): individual excellence, importance, interdependence, investment, information, integration, institutionalisation and integrity.

In the context of health and safety management, effective partnerships between stakeholders have long been recognised as a key contributory factor in good safety performance. Lord Robens (1972), for example, considered that the effective management of health and safety required a four-way partnership between government, employers, unions and employees and this was subsequently embodied in UK legislation through the formation of the Health and Safety Commission. However, a number of sectoral approaches to partnership have been developed in the UK chemical, food and drink, offshore and paper and board industries that go far beyond the basic legal requirements for consultation in health and safety matters. Recently, further emphasis has been placed on the establishment of intra-company partnerships by the UK Government's long-term strategy for health and safety (Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000). The main aim of this paper was to explore the inputs and outputs of three successful bipartite health and safety successful

bipartite health and safety initiatives involving homemaker-employer, employee-employer, and contractor-employer partnerships. All of the partnership arrangements discussed extended beyond minimum legal requirements or normal industry agreements in the context of health and safety management. The objectives of this process were to assess whether the results obtained supported the criteria defined by the DTI (2000) and Kanter (1994) respectively within the context of health and safety management, and whether the inputs and outputs varied within the type of partnership arrangement implemented.

Methodology

The data analysed and presented in this paper were gathered from three independent projects, which were carried out by the authors in order to assess a range of health and safety management issues within the organisational settings described. The details of the design and implementation of these studies have been reported previously (Fuller and Vassie, 2001; Vassie, 1998, 2000). The information used included quantitative data such as audit reports and responses to questionnaires, and qualitative data such as observation reports, interview responses and documents analyses. Subsequently, secondary analyses were undertaken of relevant data obtained from these studies in order to provide some insights into the inputs and outputs, as defined by the DTI (2000) and Kanter (1994) respectively, and to identify the level and type of partnership, as defined by Thompson and Sanders (1998), in the context of health and safety management.

Organisational Setting A

Organisational setting A was the corporate headquarters of a UK high-street bank employing 850 people in a range of corporate banking functions, including debt collection. The organisation adopted a health and safety management system largely based on the Health and Safety Executive's (2000) guidelines for good management. The organisation was concerned about the employees' wellbeing due to pressures caused by workload, lengthy commuting times and the need for parents to coordinate child care arrangements within school and work hours. Due to high operational demands within the organisation's debt collection department, the need arose to increase the number of staff working at the corporate headquarters; however, these premises were already full to capacity. Given the concerns over the employees' wellbeing, the organisation was interested, therefore, in exploring flexible work arrangements for employees. Following discussions at team meetings, volunteers were recruited by the bank from this group of employees in order to take part in a pilot home working project, which represented a departure from standard bank management practices.

Organisational Setting B

Organisational setting B was the UK division of a multinational consumer product company employing around 1,000 people on site. The organisation had well-developed physical and management controls, which were based on the Health and Safety Executive's (2000) guidelines for good management and included systems for employee consultation and cooperation on health and safety issues. They had achieved a good safety performance, in terms of the reportable accident rate, compared to the sector average performance (Vassie, 1998). However, the organisation wanted to achieve further improvements in its safety performance and, in particular, wanted to involve employees in the continuous improvement approach to health

and safety management that had been adopted by the organisation. Following a number of discussion meetings between all grades of employees and management, a decision was reached to pursue an intervention programme involving employees and managers in order to develop a process for promoting and monitoring safe work practices.

Organisational setting C was the UK offshore exploration and production division of an international oil company, operating in the North Sea (Fuller and Vassie, 2001). Although the total numbers of employees and contractors varied with time, it was estimated that around 800 people worked at the facilities at the time of the study. The company's well-established health and safety management system was based on the Health and Safety Executive's (2000) guidelines for good management and included systems for employee and contractor consultation and cooperation on health and safety issues. The organisation had a strong corporate health and safety function, which provided support to the organisation's worldwide oil interests. In the high-risk offshore Organisational setting C was the UK offshore exploration and production division of an international oil company, operating in the North Sea (Fuller and Vassie, 2001). Although the total numbers of employees and contractors varied with time, it was estimated that around 800 people worked at the facilities at the time of the study. The company's well-established health and safety management system was based on the Health and Safety Executive's (2000) guidelines for good management and included systems for employee and contractor consultation and cooperation on health and safety issues. The organisation had a strong corporate health and safety function, which provided support to the organisation's worldwide oil interests. In the high-risk offshore environment, competition between the various contracting organisations to manage the organisation's non-core activities was considered to be an unacceptable source of risk because in a competitive environment, contracting organisations might focus purely on costs and this could lead to a conflict with safety. The Piper Alpha oil rig disaster in 1988 had clearly shown the impact of a failure to manage conflicts of safety and production (Cullen, 1990). The organisation therefore established long-term partnerships with a number of contractor groups that provided agreed financial returns and common working procedures for company employees and contractors' employees.

Result

Organisational setting A

Four employees from the debt collection department were recruited to take part in a home working pilot project on the understanding that if at the end of the pilot project they did not wish to continue with home working they would be able to return to work at the corporate headquarters. The bank provided the home workers with all their work equipment, which was of an equivalent standard to that used at head office. Communication with head office was provided for the home workers through telephone, e-mail and intranet access. Prior to commencing and approximately one month after starting the pilot project, risk assessments of the home work environment were carried out using proforma checklists. The initial assessments were undertaken by the home workers but the follow up assessments were completed by the company's health and safety manager. Thereafter, quarterly visits were undertaken by the departmental health and safety representative to each home worker in order to monitor the health, safety and

wellbeing of the employees. In addition to the remote communications access to the office, the home worker's supervisor visited the employee on a monthly basis and the home workers attended the head office on a bi-monthly basis. During the home visits, the supervisor provided training and guidance in relevant health and safety matters. Home workers received additional remuneration in order to compensate them for their additional expenditure on heating and lighting costs while working at home.

The key benefits of the new working arrangement for the home workers were reduced travel time, increased morale and edibility over working hours, whereas the organisation benefited from an increased output and a continuation of the staff expansion programme. The feedback from the pilot project enabled a person specification for potential home workers to be developed, which the organisation adopted for future recruitment of home workers.

Organisational Setting B

The intervention programme was facilitated by a steering group, which reflected the full range of job functions within the site, and comprised four key implementation phases. During the first phase, data on the safety cultures within the employee and management groups, the safety management system and the safety performance were used to provide qualitative indications of the benchmark position of the organisation prior to the intervention. Phase two involved the definition of the implementation plan with milestones, tasks and measurement and feedback criteria. The definition of goals in phase two enabled individuals to see how they attend into the programme, whilst the definition of group tasks provided an opportunity for people to work together and the definition of feedback mechanisms provided people with information on their progress towards the goals. Phase three involved the provision of training in a range of techniques for the steering group. Employees were divided into natural work teams based on the areas in which they worked: within each team there was a programme advisor, who was a member of the steering group and who had responsibilities for overseeing the progress of the team. Each team was trained in order to provide them with the skills needed to achieve the goals that were specified in phase two of the programme. The rest three phases of the programme developed mutual understanding and co-operation within the work groups. Phase four developed a range of standards, including the definition of individuals' roles and responsibilities, programme targets and communication of information, in order to consolidate the new process into the existing safety management system. This phase enabled the continual development of the partnership and the continuous improvement approach in safety management to be achieved.

The introduction of the process facilitated a greater involvement and responsibility of employees and line managers for health and safety performance. In particular, there was an increased understanding amongst both groups of each other's needs. For example, the managers gained a greater understanding of the operational difficulties faced by employees and the employees gained a greater understanding of why perceived operational difficulties could not always be remedied by managers as quickly as they felt they should be. The partnership process led to the development of a measurement tool for recording and monitoring safe practices, which facilitated the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the organisation's health and safety management system.

Organisational Setting C

The company perceived that a wide range of constantly changing contractor agreements made it difficult to establish the environment that was required to support a strong health and safety culture together with high standards of performance. The company, therefore, viewed partnering as a possible solution to the cost versus health and safety standards dilemma. Within the established partnership arrangements the company published a policy that required employees and contractors, who were operating within joint ventures and alliance agreements, to implement health and safety management systems that were aligned with those of the organisation. In order to fulfil this expectation, the company assessed the capabilities and competencies of its contractors to perform work on behalf of the company and, as appropriate, worked with the contracting organisations to ensure cultural alignment. Subsequently, it developed partnership agreements with ten partners and around thirty subsidiary supporting contractors that covered operational, maintenance and support service activities.

The company and the contracting organisations had aligned objectives, which aimed to maximise the combined utilities of the participating groups. This resulted in the employees of both organisations working alongside each other to common performance standards and deliverables, which had been developed and agreed through a joint learning process. In effect, there was a seamless interface between the two groups and this resulted in the development of common norms and standards of operation. As a result of the partnering approach, the company and contractors were able to develop a reliable, well-trained and stable workforce that minimised the number of conflicts and gained stability of contracts for both groups. Both employees and contractors, within these partnerships, recorded very low accident rates, even though they were working within a high-risk environment. Senior managers within the company maintained a high safety profile to employees and contractors and also to the public through the company's annual reports and published literature.

Discussion

Partnerships have the potential to create significant benefits for all participants provided that there is a mutual understanding of and respect for the inputs required and the outputs sought from the arrangements by each party. Failure to achieve this understanding will result in limited success for a partnership. This was clearly demonstrated by Cooney (2002) in an assessment of the tripartite arrangement between the Australian Government, manufacturing unions and employers for improving national training standards. The government sought to establish the tripartite partnership in order to establish training policies and programmes. The unions, however, aimed to reform industrial relations and to re-establish union influence within the workplace. The unions, therefore, sought to work with the government to establish a favourable training policy and with businesses to regulate the implementation process. Businesses, on the other hand, envisaged the partnerships as a means to decentralise workplace regulation, which would lead to the development of voluntary partnerships between employers and employees. The three parties therefore embarked on the partnership arrangement with quite different views about the required inputs and anticipated outcomes. Although partnership arrangement used in the Australian Training Reform Agenda undoubtedly achieved some of its objectives, such as accredited vocational training, it also foundered because the individual

partners were intent on achieving their own short-term objectives rather than the longer-term national objectives. For example, many businesses preferred to pay only for employees' skills that were actually used within the job rather than to pay for the total package of employee skills that had been acquired through the partnership education and training programmes (Cooney, 2002).

Within the organisational setting A, although the home workers and the organisation established a number of shared inputs (DTI, 2000), there were some different inputs. For example, the organisation required greater staff resources and employees wished to reduce the time spent travelling to and from the workplace or to reduce the costs of childcare. An element of trust, which was considered important for the partnership (Zand, 1972) was engendered by the agreement at the outset of the project whereby staff were fully aware that they would be able to return to their previous roles in the event that they were not satisfied with the home working arrangement. The various visits to and by the home workers ensured that there was a positive two-way communication between the groups and that the home workers received social contact with the organisation. In establishing the partnership, effort and information were shared amongst line management, the health and safety professional and employees in order to facilitate an effective and mutually acceptable home working arrangement. The parties' willingness to participate in the arrangement was rewarded by the establishment of a number of successful outputs (Kanter, 1994) from the project.

The partnership demonstrated that both parties contributed in a positive manner (excellence), achieved long-term goals (importance), were dependent on each other (interdependence), communicated effectively (information), shared information on operating procedures (integration) and developed mutual trust (integrity). The arrangement was developed in response to the bank's staff expansion programme and, therefore, partnerships such as this, which are developed to deal with a single issue or problem, represented a co-operative partnership arrangement that could not be copied to a new situation (Thompson and Sanders, 1998).

Whilst the partnership arrangement in organisational setting A was specifically established to deal with a unique issue, the partnership arrangement within organisational setting B was developed to deal with a wider range of health and safety issues. The success of this intervention programme was dependent on the shared goal of improved health and safety performance, which would achieve the different needs of the employees and management. Shared culture, learning, effort and information were established through the team members working together. Furthermore, the project advisers were drawn from the full range of disciplines and grades within the organisation thereby sharing authority and leadership across management and employees. The partnership demonstrated several of the outputs identified by Kanter (1994). For example, management and employees had positive contributions to make to the relationship dependent process (individual excellence) and both groups desired an improvement in health and safety performance that required each other's inputs for the improvement (importance and interdependence). Also, as management and employees worked together sharing knowledge, experience and ideas they became teachers and learners (information and integration) and developed mutual respect for each other's role (integrity). This partnership would

be described as a collaborative arrangement under the Thompson and Sanders (1998) partnership framework because it had relationship dependent goals and required teamwork to achieve them. Thompson and Sanders (1998) recognised that once a collaborative partnership was established it provided the opportunity for continuous improvement to be achieved. In this case the fourth phase of the intervention programme provided the basis for this further development in safety performance.

Within organisational setting C, employees from the international oil company and the contractors' employees worked alongside each other with common objectives for all aspects of the work including health and safety, environment, productivity and quality. The partnership arrangement therefore covered a broader range of issues than those addressed in organisational settings A and B and this was dependent on the common goal of a transparent interface and common culture between the groups. Shared learning, effort and information were all inputs to the partnership that was established through the employees and contractors working together.

The eight output criteria identified by Kanter (1994) are clearly evident within this partnership:

- (1) Both the company and the contracting organisations had valuable contributions to make to the relationship and were therefore motivated to enter in to the arrangement (individual excellence);
- (2) The development of the partnership with the long term business goals of both parties (importance);
- (3) Each party had complementary skill sets and their combined skills were needed for the optimum solution (interdependence);
- (4) Both parties invested resources in developing the relationship (investment);
- (5) Both parties shared information in order to develop aligned objectives (information);
- (6) Shared and common standards of operation were developed (integration);
- (7) The partnerships were formalised through partnership agreements (institutionalisation); and
- (8) The relationship was founded on mutual trust (integrity).

While several of these criteria were present in cooperative and collaboration partnerships the extent of these criteria was greatest within this organisational setting. This partnership would be described as a coalescent arrangement within the Thompson and Sanders (1998) partnership framework because it sought the optimum solution in which both parties' objectives were aligned.

Thompson and Sanders (1998) also reported that a coalescing partnership could produce increased worker morale as the workers gained increased participation in the development of policy and procedures. Although worker morale was not directly measured within this organisational setting, the approach sought to minimise conflicts that could lead to low morale, and to achieve competency, reliability and stability of the workforce that could be considered as characteristics of a contented workforce.

It is important to be aware of the pitfalls that can arise in partnership arrangements if the required inputs and desired outputs are not openly discussed, understood and agreed by all parties (Cooney, 2002). However, provided full consideration is given to the objectives and the resources required, the potential benefits of a partnership arrangement should justify the investment of resources. In considering the three partnership arrangements presented in this paper, it is evident that each

arrangement had been developed to full the requirements of a particular problem or set of circumstances. This reinforces the findings of Thompson and Sanders (1998), who claimed that the level and objectives of a partnership must be developed at the outset in order to address the particular problem. In addition, although Thompson and Sanders (1998) discussed a progression along the partnering continuum from cooperation through to coalescence in order to maximise the benefits of partnering, these case studies illustrate that the optimum level of partnering is dependent on the particular circumstances and it may not be necessary to progress to a coalescing partnership in order to achieve the partnership's objectives.

Conclusion

The examination of partnership arrangements within the three case studies demonstrated that the inputs required for successful partnerships were very similar whether the arrangements were classified as co-operation, collaboration or coalescence. In a successful cooperative partnership, however, there was little necessity for the goals of the individual groups to be the same, as long as both parties were able to achieve their own objectives. The inputs for success from each party are therefore similar irrespective of the position of the arrangement on the partnership continuum. This conclusion emphasises, therefore, that the adoption of a cooperative partnership does not represent an easier option than a coalescent partnership but rather that it may represent the best approach for achieving the goals of the various groups involved in the particular partnership arrangement.

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