

Suicide and Work: Challenges for HRM

Angelo Soares, Université du Québec à Montréal

The World Health Organization estimates that more than 800,000 people commit suicide worldwide. This represents one death every 40 seconds. In several countries, the number of suicides and suicide attempts in the workplace has increased. Several letters left to the family or union representatives mention bullying, work overload, management through fear as causes for this irreparable act. In France, between 2006 and 2010, more than 60 workers committed suicide at France Telecom, and it was only after all these deaths that the organization decided to take measures to intervene in the organizational changes identified as the reason for these suicides.

Certainly, suicide is a complex gesture, related to a set of also complex causes, evoking a psychic pain, suffering and despair. Work is not the only cause, but it can constitute one of the causes of a suicide and even be its main cause. Research on suicide and work is still incipient. For the most part, it is only a question of recognizing the professions or sectors where there is a higher prevalence of suicides, without analyzing the causes of this prevalence. Many prevention programs, even today, do not consider work as a possible cause of suicide. Our research indicates, however, that the organization of work can play a preponderant and significant role in the suicidal ideations.

Our objective will be to present the results of our research in Quebec with six ($n = 6$) different occupational groups (1- engineers, 2- blue collars, 3- education workers, 4- professionals in the education sector, 5- office workers and 6- health workers), where we analyzed the possible relationships between suicidal ideation and nine organizational variables: workload, autonomy, organizational justice, team cohesion, value coherence, recognition, supervision, communication and skills development, which compose the Areas of Working Life developed by Maslach & Leiter (1997).

The ideation of suicide is a mental representation that is translated by thoughts about the intention or desire to kill oneself, putting an end to a psychic pain. Of course, not all people who think about committing this irreparable act will do so. However, suicidal ideation is always present before an attempt to commit suicide or suicide (Mishara & Tousignant, 2004).

In this way, the choice of the concept of suicide ideation rests on a primary prevention logic, because if we can identify and understand the dynamics of organizational variables that can be the source of these thoughts, we can work on prevention and intervention to eliminate the problem at its roots rather than intervening after the drama has already occurred or acting only on the symptoms, without eliminating its causes.

Using logistic regressions, we established the predictive variables of suicide ideations for each of the six occupational groups studied. Our results indicate that work overload, lack of team cohesion and bullying are unavoidable dimensions in all groups studied to understand the dynamics of suicidal ideation. From these results, we will analyze the fundamental role of HRM in the prevention and intervention of work-related suicides, especially in organizational contexts where for decades we have tried to do more with less and divide to reign.

References

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