

Buddies in Bad Times? The role of co-workers after a work-related injury

Introduction

There is clear evidence that co-worker support plays an important role in the return to work (RTW) process. A number of studies have found that when injured workers report having support from co-workers after injury they are more likely to return to work. Conversely, lack of support is associated with longer work absences and RTW problems (1)(2). With few exceptions (3, 4), studies have not examined factors that may increase co-worker support after work injury or lead to its deterioration. In this paper, based on a study of electrical workers, we examine some of the factors that facilitate the support of workers after injury and the conditions that may lead to fractured relationships and a lack of peer support.

Background

Returning workers to work following an illness or injury is recognized as a complex and multifaceted process influenced by social, psychological, biological, and economic factors (5)(6)(7)(8). Several studies have shown that characteristics of the work environment have a significant influence on RTW outcomes, independent of the underlying medical conditions and/or injury (9)(10)(2). Research has shown that RTW for injured workers is most successful when all the stakeholders coordinate their efforts (11)(12)(2).

Several studies suggest that the relationship between the injured worker and their supervisor has an important role in the success of RTW. Supervisors are usually in a position to implement and monitor modified work and to ensure that the work is meaningful to the injured worker (13). Supervisors can provide support to the injured worker and are in a unique position to understand any potential problematic social dynamics between the injured worker and other co-workers (14) (15).

Organizational research suggests that co-workers may take their cues from the organization's mission statements or directly from how the supervisor puts into practice the organizational climate (16). For example, Gillen et al. (17) found that construction workers who experienced their workplace as safer also perceived the level of management and co-worker support as being higher. The relationship between the supervisor and employees is of importance when considering the organization's culture of RTW and co-workers' general attitude towards RTW.

There is evidence that co-workers play an important role after injury and that problems with colleagues can delay recovery and RTW (18)(19). In one study examining social support as a factor in the RTW process after injury, injured workers described the type of support they wished to receive. This included moral support (listening, caring, being called at home); instrumental support (assistance with work tasks, getting help with paperwork); and emotional support (understanding the injured worker's situation, caring) (20). Injured workers have described feeling disillusioned and discouraged when co-workers did not accept their injuries as credible (21)(16).

Across jurisdictions RTW policies are based on the view that it is beneficial for most injured workers to rehabilitate in the workplace and that prolonged time away from work is anti-therapeutic. Often there are financial incentives for early RTW for the employer (for example, lower premiums) (22). Practically this means that co-workers may be working with injured workers who are returning to work with significant impairment and pain.

Research suggests that a colleague's RTW can be difficult for co-workers. One study (4) found that co-workers often knew little about the RTW process or an injured worker's circumstances but were put in the role of overseeing the new (modified) work arrangements. Other studies have found that co-workers can resent the injured worker if it means an increased workload for them or if the injured worker is provided with an "easier" job (23)(24). Despite usually working side-by-side with a returning colleague, co-workers typically receive no education or training on how to accommodate injured workers, or how to help them integrate socially back into the workplace (25)(3)(4).

Interestingly, studies examining the role co-workers can play after injury often appropriate the voice of the co-worker by narrating it through either the voices of the supervisor or the injured worker. With some exceptions (4), (3), current research has denied co-workers the opportunity to articulate their own experiences with the RTW process. In our study we have spoken directly to co-workers about their experiences of supporting injured colleagues' RTW. As stated above, research has emphasized

the importance of the social context at work. Yet, co-workers have been given comparatively less opportunity to present their perspective. Their influence on the RTW process is not well understood and the factors that facilitate co-worker support are not well known. Given the complex social relationships that exist in the workplace, in general, and among co-workers, in particular, there is an urgency to understand this seemingly integral piece of the multifaceted RTW puzzle.

The construction industry and electrical work in Ontario, Canada

This study focused on unionized electricians belonging to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the largest electrical union in the province. It represents approximately 7000 active and 1500 retired electricians in the Greater Toronto Area. The electrical sector, a part of the construction industry, employs approximately 29,000 workers in Ontario. (26)

Electricians work in many sectors, including the Industrial, Commercial and Institutional (ICI) sectors, Line & Power, Green Energy (wind farms & solar), Utility and Residential (new homes & high rises). The scope of work includes the installation, construction, operation, maintenance and repair of all electrical systems, including the inspection of electrical apparatus and devices in these facilities. Work can also involve high voltage installations, the construction and maintenance of traffic and street lighting systems and the maintenance and repair of telephone and data systems. Electrical sector work can take place outdoors, indoors and on large or small worksites. Until the late 1990s all union contractors were required to hire electricians from a hiring hall list, under a 100% job referral system. Electricians at the top of the out-of-work list were dispatched in order of their out-of-work date, a form of seniority for unemployed electricians. In 2000, the Ontario Progressive Conservative Government, through Bill 69, introduced a "50/50 name hire provision" which forced changes to the job referral system in the unionized construction and electrical construction industry (27). Currently a contractor must hire one electrician off the hiring hall list and the second hire can be a name hire electrician of their choosing. Contractors bid on jobs and in addition to their permanent work force, hire electricians through the union hiring hall to perform the work required which can be of variable duration depending on project size.

The traditional industrial relations concepts of job security and seniority do not exist in the unionized electrical construction sector in Ontario. Regardless of a workers' tenure with a contractor, electrical workers are only entitled to receive only one hour's notice prior to layoff (27). However, the construction industry has seen a counter-cyclical boom recently. Approximately 33,900 jobs have been gained over the last two years. Electrical workers' man hours have steadily increased and there has been a decrease in unemployment – currently sitting at about 5% (26).

Health and safety

Electrical work can be both physically and mentally taxing. It can include heavy lifting of materials, repetitive tasks, working in uncomfortable positions (crouching or with arms above the head, for example) or in areas where there is a great deal of debris (on construction sites, for example). Electricians working outdoors may work in wet, cold or hot conditions and around moving vehicles (in traffic or heavy equipment on construction sites). Workers risk electrocution and burns as a result of contact with energized systems and live circuits. The work of an electrician also often requires concentration, following complex instructions, communicating with other team members and documentation of detailed procedures (28)(29)(30)(31) (32)(33).

Recent years have seen a focus on improving safety of construction workers, including electricians. While the number of workers' compensation claims have decreased both in the construction sector and the electrical rate group in the last 6 years (34, 35), serious injuries are still relatively common. The construction total claim rate is the 4th highest among all sectors. While contusions, fractures and sprains and strains are the most common compensable injuries within the electrical rate group, there has also been a focus on decreasing the incidence of electrical injuries that are less common but can have very serious, even fatal, consequences (35).

In November 2010, the IBEW LU 353 in conjunction with the York University Institute for Social Research conducted an internal poll of its members on a range of issues. The survey uncovered a number of health and safety problems: 39% of workers reported working on live circuits, 69% worked off step ladders for long periods of time, 18% reported being shocked in the last year. Seventy-two percent of workers said that fear of layoffs caused electricians to tolerate health and safety violations.

Methods

A qualitative approach was well-suited to this study since our aim was to understand the role of co-workers in the RTW process. We did this by attending to the *experiences, beliefs and practices* of co-workers and injured workers. We used a modified grounded theory approach for the collection and analysis of data. Grounded theory is a methodology for developing concepts and for theorizing social action on the basis of empirical data. It is largely an inductive methodology that generates hypotheses and conceptual frameworks from the “bottom up” rather than from existing theory (36). Sampling is selective and theoretical, as opposed to statistically driven. This means that sampling proceeds on analytical grounds, based on emerging conceptual directions (37). Our focus groups and interviews were guided by the following over-arching questions:

- What is the role of co-workers after a work-related injury and during the RTW process?
- What factors facilitate and impede co-worker support after injury?

The IBEW LU 353 was interested in investigating and improving the experiences of workers after an injury and the role that co-workers play in this process. The Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario facilitated contact between the union and academic investigators to discuss an exploratory study. The project had two parts: 1) a qualitative study including two focus groups with injured electricians and union representatives and qualitative interviews with co-workers. 2) The development of a questionnaire related to the role of co-workers after injury. This paper reports on the first part of the study. The study went through ethics review at the University of Waterloo. All participants read and signed a consent form. Names that appear are pseudonyms and we have removed identifying details from quotes to protect participant anonymity.

Participants were mainly recruited through a representative from the union (two were recruited through a large contractor representative who was on the study advisory committee). Notices were sent to electricians about the study and they were invited to participate. The union representative spoke at a union meeting, at two continuing education facilities on multiple days and placed an advertisement in the union newsletter.

Those who were interested in participating provided their names and contact information. A group of these individuals was called by the researchers. They were given more information about the study and screened. Individuals were selected based on their experience with injured workers and in a manner that allowed for a representation of electrician from different sub-sectors. Two focus groups were conducted at the start of the study; one with union representatives (n=10) and one with injured workers (n=8). While we were interested in the experiences of co-workers from their own perspective, these focus groups helped us learn more about the nature of work in this sector, identify how other workplace parties viewed the role of co-workers in the RTW process and hear from injured workers about their experiences with co-workers. Focus groups helped us refine interview questions that were used during interviews with co-workers.

Seventeen in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with co-workers. Sixteen men and one woman were interviewed. All of the workers were unionized. Analysis was done simultaneously with data collection. The interview focus evolved as the analysis progressed and as specific topics or concepts emerged. During the data collection process we realized that co-workers sometimes changed roles a number of times in the course of their careers (a worker could be a foreman on one job and not the next). As a result we included three interviews with co-workers who had been working as foremen during the time that their colleague was injured or returned to work. The foremen were also part of the union. We recruited electricians working from different trade sectors and who worked on different sized teams. Further information about the sample can be found in Table A below. During our interviews and focus groups, we asked participants about their workplaces and hazards at work. We asked co-workers to recall their experiences of having an injured worker as part of their team, how that process unfolded and the role they played. Co-workers typically had several experiences of working with others who had both reported and unreported injuries and drew on those throughout the interview. Interview questions were open-ended and adaptive. Specialized interviewing techniques were used to clarify meaning and to ensure that certain general inquiry domains (related to experiences after a co-worker's injury) were covered without imposing conceptual structures on respondents (38). Focus groups and interviews were all recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcripts were then checked against the recording. Field notes were written after both focus groups

and interviews. These served as the basis for the initial creation of codes. Codes were then refined as data collection and analysis proceeded. Two interviews were coded by three researchers to ensure that codes were being applied consistently to the data. From that point as data were collected they were coded by a first and second coder and any discrepancies, new findings and over-arching themes, were discussed at regular team meetings. After each coded interview, the coder wrote notes that highlighted salient themes and findings. Once data collection and coding were complete, individual codes were analyzed. With the help of Ethnograph (a qualitative analysis program), individual code segments relating to a particular theme (for example, “Injury reporting”) were extracted across all interviews. These were analyzed and discussed in team meetings. The analysis considered common themes and concepts across codes, negative cases and contradictions.

Table A – Participant characteristics (N=35)

Co-worker interviews (N=17)

Age	Gender	Industry sector	Years in trade	Time w/ employer	Relationship with injured co-worker
20s (n=1) 30s (n= 5) 40s (n=7) 50s (n=3) 60+ (n=1)	Male (n=16) Female (n=1)	ICI indoor (n=8) ICI outdoor (n=4) Highrise (n=2) Residential (n=1) Utility/Communication (n=2)	< 5 (n=1) 6-11 (n=4) 12-17 (n=4) 18-23 (n=3) 24+ (n=5)	< 1 year (n=6) 1-5 years (n=4) 6-10 years (n=2) 11-20 years (n=4) 20+ years (n=1)	Horizontal (n=4) Vertical (n=13)

ICI = Industrial, Commercial, Institutional

Injured worker focus group (N=8)

Age	Gender	Industry sector	Years in trade	Time w/injury employer	Type of injury
40s (n=4) 50s (n=3) 60+ (n=1)	Male (n=8) Female (n=0)	ICI indoor (n=2) ICI outdoor (n=3) Lowrise (n=1) Utility/Comm. (n=1) missing (n=1)	12-17 (n=1) 18-23 (n=3) 24+ (n=4)	< 1 year (n=3) 1-5 years (n=3) 6-10 years (n=1) 11-20 years (n=1)	Knee (n=2) Back (n=3) Hand/wrist (n=2) missing (n=1)

Union steward focus group (N=10)

Age	Gender	Years in Role	Role	Key job tasks
20s (n=1) 30s (n=2) 40s (n= 3) 50s (n=2) 60+ (n=2)	Male (n= 10) Female (n=0)	< 5 (n=5) 6-11 (n=3) 12-17 (n=1) Missing (n=1)	Safety representative (n=2) Steward Construction (n=1) Steward Electrical (n=1) Steward ICI (n=5) Missing (n=1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide H & S information • Investigate accidents • Inspect working conditions • Handle disputes • Intermediary between worker and contractor

Findings

Our findings incorporate the perspectives of various actors – injured workers, co-workers, union representatives and foremen – to describe the experience of having an injury on an electrical worksite, returning to work and the role that co-workers can play in this process. Our findings reveal that while co-workers can provide some social and job task support, there are a number of factors and work conditions that counter this process. The structure of the electrical sector encourages competition and

facilitates the view that injured workers are a liability and detrimental to organizational success. There is little modified work in the sector and this can put a strain on co-workers whose workloads increase upon the return of an injured colleague. Finally, a poor system of communication means that co-workers rely on rumours and half-truths to determine the situation and needs of the injured worker. Ultimately, this is detrimental to the injured worker's re-integration into the workplace.

Co-worker support of injured workers

During interviews with co-workers we asked participants to describe their experience of working with someone who was injured and had come back to work. Co-worker support consisted of two main categories: psycho-social support and assistance with job tasks. Psycho-social support involved supporting the worker in reporting the injury, corroborating injury events, taking him¹ to the hospital, asking about the injured worker's health, calling him at home or visiting him while he was off work. Co-workers also helped injured workers on the job - by assisting them and offering to do heavier or more dangerous work. Co-workers said they were more likely to offer psycho-social support toward an injured worker in circumstances where they had a strong, long term, pre-existing relationship with that worker. A number of co-workers also noted that they were more likely to help out an older worker - someone well-respected who had "put in their time" in the industry. This applied to helping out both before and after an injury:

If the injured one is older, then the co-worker will be much more tolerant of it because he'd be used to carrying a bit more of a load anyway (Larry, interview)

He [injured worker] is well respected amongst everybody...he is closer to retirement and he's done his time, he's got a lot of background experience and he's well-respected (Richard, interview)

Better co-worker treatment was related to a worker's age at the time of the injury but also to how long a worker had been with a company, as Alex noted:

If it was a 20 year employee and it was the first time they hurt themselves, more than likely they would get treated good but if it was someone who has only been there for a year or a few months, or whatever, then it's different

The nature of the accident and the injury that resulted also seemed important to co-workers. For example, empathy and assistance were more forthcoming when the injury was severe, if the accident was dramatic and was witnessed by fellow co-workers. Injuries that were visible – a broken arm, a severe laceration - were accepted and accommodated by co-workers more easily than those that were not. When an injury was visible it was easier for co-workers to believe that the worker was genuinely hurt:

I'd have to say again the severity, number one the severity of the injury, and number two the character of the person who's doing the [claim] filing. Because you know, based on what I have been through, I want to give people the benefit of the doubt but if I know the guy is a scam artist or a pain in the neck then maybe my attitude sort of changes (Sam, interview).

As Sam alludes to above, having had an injury and gone through the process of filing a claim and returning to work also sensitized some workers to the needs and experiences of other injured workers. However, this also had its limits. A number of co-workers expressed differential support based on their perception of how the injury happened, where "true accidents" were perceived as being worthy of co-worker support rather than those caused by carelessness or "stupidity" on the part of the worker:

...You help out where you can and then after a while you just kind of go, you know what, you deserve it, I am sorry, whatever is happening, you deserve it for being so stupid {long pause} ...you kind of got yourself in the situation, you dug your own hole... (Richard, interview)

Co-workers also discussed their willingness to help injured workers who they considered to be putting in effort during the RTW process. This included doing any job task given to them, coming to work

¹ We use male pronouns in this paper since the sector is heavily male dominated and all but one of our participants was male.

straight from the hospital, working long hours and coming into work despite significant visible impairment (a broken arm in a cast, for example).

Bob described that the kind of worker he would support is someone who puts in a big effort despite being in pain:

You know them before [injury] or their past history ... if I have worked with a fellow for 10, 15 years and he gets hurt, you know what he is all about, you know if he is a tough hockey player and falls on the ice and cries and lays there until his coach comes and gets him or, you know, gets up and limps to the bench and rubs it off and can't wait to get out there again. Those people are far and few between.

The types of support described above had its limits and often waned when the recovery was prolonged, job security was threatened or a worker was re-injured. Repeated injury often cast doubt on the veracity of the injury from the co-workers' perspective.

Lack of support after injury

While some co-workers provided stories of supporting their colleagues after injury, few injured workers in this study described receiving meaningful support from their co-workers. With a few exceptions, they described co-worker responses to injury ranging from indifference to hostility. Co-workers at times stated that they preferred not to get involved in an injured co-worker's issues or felt they had no role to play in their reintegration into the workplace. Some seemed disinterested in their experiences, while others did not know how they could have helped. Injured workers often described experiencing overt hostility from their peers and at times co-workers themselves spoke of injured co-workers in derisive ways. Co-workers sometimes blamed injured workers for their injury by saying that the co-worker was being "stupid" or "horsing around" when he was injured. Injured workers were also sometimes distrusted and considered to be "milking the system" to get workers' compensation, time off work or cushy jobs (modified work in a warm office, for example).

This is how one injured worker described it:

You hate like hell going into work because you know, your co-worker is going to give you a rough time because 'oh, well you know, you're got a cushy job, oh it's cold out, oh it's muddy out so you've got a cushy job'...you're going to hear stuff like that all the time...(Colin, Injured worker focus group)

Injured workers described being alienated and excluded when they returned to work after an injury:

So, yeah they did alienate me a lot and I thought, you know what, I am the one that's injured, I am the one that is actually coming in every day hurting and they, no matter what I could do I never, never be able to impress them. [...] They wouldn't talk to me if I engaged, tried to engage in the conversation with them, they would ignore me or [give] one word answers (Carlo, interview)

Co-workers also recalled how some workers were treated when they came back to modified duties after an injury:

The harassment is indirect, it's exclusion is the best way to describe it. Suddenly the person is not part of the group anymore. (Larry, interview)

They will make jokes about it, right? They would probably make jokes about it behind his back, I would say, you know, a lot more than his face right? But then, then you know, it's like harassment right? (Eric, interview)

Structural factors impeding co-worker support

While individual characteristics, the nature of the injury and pre-existing relationships can affect how an injured worker is treated upon returning to work, we suggest that there are a number of structural

factors that set the stage for some of the negative interactions described by study participants. We found that the organization of work including a focus on cost saving, job insecurity, a fractured workforce, a lack of modified work and poor communication can all impede the development of supportive relationships between co-workers in the electrical sector. We also suggest that in this environment, management behaviours set the stage for how injured workers will be treated by their colleagues.

The organization of work in the electrical sector

“They want us to out-work one another”: Competition and the cost saving mantra

Many participants noted that their continued employment was dependent on the containment of costs and the success of the company. They stated that a “cost saving mantra” meant that companies valued being efficient above all else and competitiveness among workers was encouraged. The most productive and efficient workers were kept employed as a project came to an end and a “name hire” clause allowed companies to hand pick a number of preferred workers for the next job regardless of seniority or experience. This type of competition put a strain on relationships between workers, as Carlo explained:

They don't want us working as a team, they want us to out-work one another, so almost like ... “oh, well you know, there's only one position left when this is done, who is going to fight for it?”

Ignatius had a similar perspective:

It's that internal competitiveness, you know - hey look at me, I can do as good as this guy, keep me over him you know, that kind of a thing. It's unwritten, unsaid, but it's inferred through action.

Because it was understood that work injuries could slow down productivity and thereby affect costs, injured workers were sometimes viewed as a liability in this type of environment. According to Larry:

The success of the company is directly related to their success and everybody knows that. So there's a fear that the company will suffer from an injury as well.

When someone was off work with an injury, a work team was often left short staffed. When an injured worker returned, he was typically unable to work at the same capacity. Both scenarios meant that work was either slower to get done or other crew members had to increase their work pace to get the job completed on time. Participants said that only in rare cases did the company bring in a new worker for relief. As James notes, working alongside a crew member with limited capacity could lead to tensions on the worksite:

I have seen tensions fly because of that, I mean, you know, if the 3 guys...were, the three of them working together and then you know, now there is really only 2 guys working, the other guy is only limited to x number of hours a day, so he's got to leave and then these 2 got to stay. Well I have seen the other 2 guys end up ... tearing each other's heads off.

Some participants also believed that work injuries resulted in increased workers' compensation premiums for the company and that sometimes companies would have to show their health and safety record when competing for a contract. Under these conditions, injured workers were sometimes viewed as liabilities that could jeopardize the jobs of all workers.

Job insecurity

Interviewed workers described job insecurity as being an inherent part of the electrical industry. Many workers described the precariousness of their jobs and how expendable they felt:

I could walk in there tomorrow and they could hand me my layoff ... it doesn't matter if I have worked there 4 months, 4 years or 40 years, all they owe us is an hour's notice. (Sam, Interview)

As Luke noted, it was difficult to think of anyone as a co-worker when contracts were short term and tenuous in nature:

You can't really consider anyone your co-worker because when you're hired you may only be at a company for a couple of months before they let you go... (Luke, Interview)

Job insecurity seemed to contribute to a focus on individual, not co-worker, well-being. A number of workers, for example, discussed their reluctance to "get involved" when they saw someone get injured. Job insecurity prevented workers from sticking up for each other both at the time of the injury and when an injured worker returned to work. When injured workers are viewed as a liability, particularly by management, supporting them comes with potential risks, as described by Rick:

They want to help the guy out but then they don't want to say too much because then they feel like their job might be at jeopardy...

Similarly a focus group participant noted:

The guy falls off the ladder by accident, hurts himself, the boss doesn't believe him, I've seen it right? I am putting my job on the line because I know if I come forward I'm not getting my second cheque right, because I am going against the unwritten rule...

The perceived precariousness of work in the electrical sector meant that often self-preservation took precedence over providing support to co-workers who were injured.

Different "camps" in the electrical sector

Co-worker support was also stymied by perceptions of different "camps" in the electrical sector. Many workers talked about there being vast differences in the alliances and attitudes between those who were considered "steadies" and "hallies". Steadies were employees who had been employed by a company for an extended period of time. The view was that these workers were allied with the company and not with the union (or other workers). Steadies may have taken managerial roles in previous jobs and had a greater degree of job security (at least that was the perception). Hallies on the other hand, were described as workers who were with companies temporarily (until a job finished) and then went back on the union hall hiring list. Once at the top of the list again they went to a different job. Hallies did not typically have a long term relationship with any one employer.

P: There are two different kinds of guys as, as we call from the hall and the steadies... and that's going to make a big difference to them whether he (injured worker) is one of those two groups.

I: As in the steadies would help out other steadies?

P: Consistently, consistently kind of protect each other right? Not just with injuries but just in general you know?...They look after each other. (Chad, interview)

Workers also discussed alliances between those doing different types of electrical work, for instance, indoor and outdoor workers.

Working with the outside guys... there's a big difference....the personality, the camaraderie ... we take care of each other kind of thing, look out for each other and the guys inside just look out for themselves. (Darren, interview)

While there seemed to be more cohesion between groups of workers belonging to the same "camp", workplaces were diverse in that "hallies" and "steadies" worked on the same job along with different types of electricians and tradespeople. As Darren implies above, workers from different "camps" were less likely to help each other. Even if an injured worker had the support of some of his colleagues (those from the same "camp", for example), a number of injured workers explained that it only took one or two co-workers to make RTW a miserable experience.

Little modified work

Co-worker support was also hindered because modified work was difficult to find in the sector. Most injured workers are expected to RTW prior to full recovery and injured workers on construction sites

were no exception. Injured workers described being put back on their old work teams where they were essentially expected to do their pre-injury job but now with significant impairment. Other times, workers were sent away from the worksite or were completely isolated from their work team:

They put me in a room, it was a small little room and they gave me nothing. And they leave me in there, they left me in there for 3 weeks, they didn't, they didn't talk to me... (Eric, Interview)

Both scenarios presented difficulties. In the first scenario, injured workers could not keep up with the pace or physical demands of the work thereby frustrating their team mates who had to carry a heavier load. This became problematic when a worker's injury-related limitations persisted for a long period of time. As James describes, small companies in particular rarely brought in another (healthy) worker to lighten the load:

It's a harder thing on small jobs. I think on a bigger job you have more guys and it's easier to distribute that, a little bit easier, right? And being on a small job you can't really justify okay, let's go hire another guy you know... So, it's harder on the smaller jobs.

In the other scenario, injured workers were taken out of the worksite and sent to work elsewhere – in a separate, off-site office or the tool shed, for example. In such instances, injured workers went back to work with different co-workers who did not know them or their situation. Injured workers described sensing contempt from co-workers who felt that they were now doing “cushy” work instead of “real” electrical work.

I know it really burned a lot of people...I mean just knowing that he is sitting there not doing anything for 8 hours, you know, and you've got to pick up that slack. (James, interview)

The removal of injured workers from the worksite and their team members also led to the injured workers' feeling isolated, forgotten and ignored at a time when they felt most vulnerable.

Poor (official) communication among workplace parties

An injured workers' RTW was also made more difficult by a lack of official information about the workers' situation, abilities and limitations. Co-workers described only knowing about the worker's injury and RTW accommodations from informal talk amongst crew members, speculation and workplace gossip. Few workers recalled being told by a supervisor about the type of assistance or support their injured colleague would require once he returned to work. Thus, when an injured person went back to work the circumstances surrounding his injury and RTW arrangements were a source of speculation and gossip. This type of informal communication – consisting of half-truths and once removed knowledge - seemed to incite mistrust about the veracity of a worker's injury and as such stymied social support.

The workers are the lowest common denominator in this pyramid of power and structure and the people above us make a determination whether we are privy to certain information or not....and then if they think you're not privy, you don't know. So, you hear, you overhear, you know ... hearing has no borders right, it's whatever you can absorb. So, you hear and you start to make conclusions... (Frank, interview)

Further, because co-workers rarely knew the full (or accurate) story of a person's injury or physical limitations, the assistance they provided with job tasks was also often inappropriate.

Summary

In our study, we found that the organization of electrical work shaped co-worker relationships and the support that injured workers were likely to receive. While pre-existing relationships and perceptions of the injured worker's personality had a bearing on co-workers' willingness to provide assistance - competitiveness, job insecurity, difficulty finding modified work and poor communication hindered the development of supportive relationships.

Management sets the stage

Other research has identified management as playing a key role in workplace culture (17) and the RTW process (2). In this study we found that management shaped workers' views of the nature of electrical work and their behaviour provided a model for how injured workers were to be treated. For example, participants gave many examples of how management highlighted the precariousness of their jobs.

That's the threat that they always give you, they say to you things like "this place will be a revolving door, there's tons of guys at the union hall that we can get to replace you by the end of the day" (Carlo, interview)

Similarly, the mantra of cost cutting and the need to work faster, even at the expense of safety was reinforced by management, in this case, by their actions. While workers were told to report every injury and not to take chances with safety, many felt that they were then chastised (or let go) if they worked too slowly or got hurt. Darren talks about being laughed at when he reported an injury:

So, I ended up cutting my hand on a stud, when I, I think it was like second year apprentice. So, I went to my foreman he started laughing at me you know, come on you're a big baby. I am like I am not a big baby, you told me I have to report all accidents so I am doing what I am supposed to do. Are you going to fill out the report or you're not going to fill out the report? Oh, you're a big baby, so I am kind of, I am left there - what do I do right?

Participants also gave examples of foremen denigrating injured workers behind their backs and blaming workers for their injuries:

I have heard them say about other people oh that, you know, that fucking guy and that asshole got injured you know, and I was like, I remember being on a site one time thinking you know, it wasn't his fault the apprentice dropped the pipe on his hand (Carlo, interview)

The isolation of injured workers, as described earlier, was also a management decision and some workers noted that it was understood that management did not want other workers to talk to injured workers.

They should inquire and speak to you, you don't have to be fearful but then again, as I said much earlier on in this interview, that this is stymied by the employer who when they come through the door hey, what are you talking to him for, they don't say it but the eye contact you know, that invisible silent talk is sometimes very powerful and they walk away (Ignatius, interview)

One focus group participant even went so far as to say that workers who harassed injured workers were then rewarded:

If a guy's worked for a company and he's really giving it to (the injured worker)...he made it so bad that this guy quit when he was injured, well the company is going to say...hey come on, I've got a job for you.

Management can model acceptable and not acceptable behaviours for their workforce. Some of the behaviours described above – victim blaming, harassment, isolation - create a hostile environment for injured workers.

Discussion

There are a number of factors that can shape a worker's experience after a work-related injury. Research has often focussed on the rehabilitation process (5), interactions with the compensation system (39), or the availability of modified work (11). Our research examined the role co-workers play after injury and some of the factors that facilitated or hindered the creation of supportive co-worker relationships. This was a small study of one sector with some unique attributes – a highly trained, male-dominated workforce, physically and mentally taxing work, high levels of perceived job insecurity. In workplaces where other structures prevail, injured workers may develop radically different relationships with their colleagues. For example, in a study of a unionized, public sector workplace

with high job security, Tjulin et al. (40) found that co-workers offered great support to their injured colleagues and helped them manage the RTW process. Thus, we suggest that co-worker support will be context dependent and future research should examine which work arrangements or contexts promote or hinder the development of supportive, even therapeutic relationships.

In most jurisdictions, workers' compensation schemes encourage early RTW. Prolonged work absence can be costly for employers because premiums are typically based on experience rating and increase when there are lost time injuries in a workplace (22). There is also ample evidence to suggest that long periods of unemployment are detrimental to worker physical and mental health (41); (42); (43). However, early RTW at a time when a worker still has significant impairment may play a role in damaging social relations in the workplace. In this study injured workers, some who were in considerable pain, went back to workplaces where there was little meaningful modified work and little formal communication about the workers' condition. Their presence frustrated other co-workers and was difficult for the injured worker who now was not only coping with the injury but also with the disdain of other workers. Workers' compensation administrators must consider carefully the unintended consequences of early RTW policies and ensure that safe, modified and meaningful work is available in the workplace. Injured workers who are still in considerable pain and taking strong medications need time to recover before returning back to work.

In their study on the role of co-workers in the work reintegration process, Dunstan and MacEachen (4) report that an environment where workers have some collective identity created a more supportive atmosphere for injured workers. Although all the participants in our study were part of the same union the perception that there were different "camps" in the sector – inside and outside workers, steadies and hallies - lead to fractured relationships. We feel that it would be in the interest of the union and workers in this sector to create opportunities for team building between electricians working in different areas and between those working as steadies and hallies. A more cohesive collective identity could lead to increased support of co-workers in the sector. The perception that jobs in the sector were very precarious also contributed to an "every man for himself" attitude. Despite the fact that the industry has seen a steady increase in work hours, for some workers, job loss *could* mean long term unemployment. The name hire clause described at the start of this paper means that from job to job, half the workers hired will be at the discretion of the employer. While any worker in the sector can be laid off given only one hour's notice, those who speak out against health & safety violations, support injured colleagues or challenge poor work reintegration practices may be least likely to be name hired by companies and most likely to be terminated as a project draws to an end. This would send them to the bottom of the hiring hall list and possibly result in lengthy unemployment. Future research should investigate the consequences of the name hire system on job security and occupational health & safety.

Others have noted that the "discourse of abuse" (24) plays a damaging role in the lives of injured workers. Those receiving workers' compensation are often viewed as malingering and the veracity of their injuries is constantly questioned (39) (44). In this study, co-workers frequently raised the possibility that some injured workers were "milking the system" and/or benefiting in some way from their injuries. This was a barrier to the creation of supportive relationships between injured workers and their colleagues. Again, there is some evidence that management can either work to dispel the discourse of abuse or give it credence by discounting an injury, isolating workers who have been injured, and stifling open communication after RTW. It may be possible that union health & safety representatives could play a role in ensuring that, with the injured worker's consent, there is improved communication about an individual's condition, recovery and physical limitations after RTW.

Conclusion

This qualitative study has pointed to some workplace and policy-related factors that can have a bearing on co-worker support after injury. The support of co-workers can play an important role after a work-related injury. Our findings point to how certain workplace characteristics can undermine the creation of supportive relationships and can potentially make returning to work after injury more difficult. In jurisdictions where early RTW is encouraged through financial incentives, injured workers may be coming back to work with considerable impairment – a particularly challenging situation in industries where little modified work exists. The good will of co-workers toward injured colleagues can be strained in these circumstances. The effects of workplace structure and RTW policies on both injured workers and their co-workers should be considered in future research.

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