

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Health and Safety in Canadian Workplaces, By Jason Foster and Bob Barnetson (2016) Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 280 pages. ISBN: 978-1-7719-9183-4

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Volume 72, numéro 3, été 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041104ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041104ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Pérusse, M. (2017). Compte rendu de [*Health and Safety in Canadian Workplaces*, By Jason Foster and Bob Barnetson (2016) Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 280 pages. ISBN: 978-1-7719-9183-4]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 72(3), 609–610. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041104ar>

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Health and Safety in Canadian Workplaces

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"On Monday, April 23, 2012, the Lakeland sawmill exploded and then burned [...]. The explosion and subsequent fire killed Alan Little, 43, and Glenn Roche, 46, and injured more than twenty other workers". Many books in the field of occupational health and safety (OHS) begin with the story of a dramatic event in order to impress on the reader the importance of the topics that are going to be presented. This one is no exception.

A very interesting feature of this book is that it has clearly been conceived by teachers who intended it for teaching purposes. Each chapter has the same structure. It starts with between 4 and 6 learning objectives. Then, a vignette (as they call it) presents a brief case story to introduce and illustrate the topic of the chapter. Through the text, a series of 2 to 7 inserts in the form of shaded boxes present additional material or examples to support the main text. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions and exercises, as well as notes and bibliographical references of course.

The introduction in Chapter 1 presents some basic concepts and definitions; there is a long list of "Key Terms" definitions at the end of the book. The legislative framework is the subject of Chapter 2. Then Chapter 3 discusses the heart of the prevention process, namely hazard recognition, assessment and control. Chapters 4 to 6 cover the broad categories of risk factors related to hazards (4- physical, including

ergonomic; 5- biological and chemical; 6- psycho-social). Various health effects of employment are presented in Chapter 7. Chapters 8 and 9 cover two important facets of prevention, i.e. training and injury prevention programs, and incident investigation. Disability management and return to work is the subject of Chapter 10. Finally, indications on "How to get things done" are presented in Chapter 11 on the practice of health and safety.

The authors have adopted a sociological, political and labour relations approach to their presentation of the various themes. Such an approach is justified in view of the numerous debates concerning various OHS issues and of the various flaws in OHS systems. Indeed, the person interested in the field of OHS, and even more so the practitioner in that field, ought to know about the assumptions, the ideological biases and the shortcomings underlying what is generally considered as basic knowledge. They are absolutely right, for instance, when they say that "setting exposure limits is not purely a scientific process, but also a political one" (p. 102). Too bad for those who had great faith in precise values of TLVs or other forms of exposure limits

On the one hand, some of the issues would require more in-depth exploration. For example, the book is based on "the acknowledgement that workers and employers have conflicting interests" (back cover). Every student of labour relations is aware of that. However, in Great Britain in 1974 Lord Robens, in the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Safety and Health at Work* which he chaired, suggests that whilst both parties may have conflicting interests on a majority of topics, both parties have an interest in a healthy workforce. It is on that premise that the UK legislation, like that of a majority of jurisdictions in the industrialized world, proposed concertation mechanisms such as the joint health and safety committees (JHSCs). When they are implemented and supported properly,

JHSCs have produced noticeable and lasting OHS results. So the question needs to be asked: are generally conflicting interests between the parties such an insurmountable impediment to proper OHS functioning or to efficient incident prevention?

On the other hand, the problem with that ideological debating is that it takes up too much space in the book, to the detriment of more practical notions. For example, in Chapter 3, the topic of workplace inspection is covered in only one paragraph; yet this prevention activity is of utmost importance in the prevention process, and chapters and books have been written about it.

Another example of issues that suffer from insufficient depth of treatment is the topic of ergonomics. It is briefly covered in a short chapter (Chap. 4, 24 pages), alongside a host of other physical hazards such as mechanical hazards, noise and vibrations, etc. Yet the health and safety problems resulting from poor ergonomic work design are among the most frequent, if not THE most frequent, in a majority of workplaces. Musculo-skeletal disorders (MSDs, or WRMSDs when they are work-related) is a more proper name than repetitive strain injuries (RSI); the author themselves acknowledge that there are many causes to these problems, and that repetitiveness is just one of them. The notions are not explored thoroughly enough, and the short concluding paragraph on engineering controls leaves the practitioner somewhat on his appetite.

Chapter 4 on chemical and biological hazards is another one that could benefit from more substance. Its fabric is more about the political and ideological biases on these categories of hazards than about how to prevent health problems related to them. Every year thousands of new chemical products are invented, and hundreds of them find their way to the market. How should we deal with that from an OHS point of view? And what about nanoparticles

and nano-technologies? There is nothing about those two questions in the chapter. The matter is not a simple one, and proposing the precautionary principle is a bit too simple an answer.

There are a number of other such shortcomings in this book. For instance, the introduction should have given an overview of the magnitude of the OHS problems in Canada, in terms of numbers of persons injured yearly, of work days lost or of financial costs. It would also benefit from a quick review of the state instances responsible for the OHS systems. The research on work stress reviewed in Chapter 6 has now gone much further than Robert Karasek's two-factor causation model. Box 2.5, entitled "Does safety pay?" appears to ignore the growing body of literature which indicates that a dollar invested in prevention can save or bring back between 2,2\$ and 7\$ to the company; if, as the authors contend, the search for profit is a major factor explaining management's unwillingness to invest in prevention, then crushing the argument of the profitability of prevention is counter-productive!

Despite these shortcomings, this book is still worth reading. Its teaching format can prove very useful in an academic setting. Furthermore, "this book can be downloaded from the Athabasca University website (www.aupress.ca) and shared free of charge". One can only hope for an augmented second version.

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