Variation at work as a strategy for enabling sustainable employment in the Swedish equine sector

Åsa Bergman Bruhn, Ing-Marie Andersson, Cecilia Lindahl

Abstract
The equine sector has grown strongly in recent years in Sweden as well as in many European countries. The sector includes a variety of activities, e.g. businesses related to competition and training, and non-profit activities such as association-run riding schools. Work environment issues are a major concern for the sector since it is labor-intensive, and many of the work tasks are still performed manually leading to high workloads and physical strain. Furthermore, working with and handling horses is hazardous, and the sector has a relatively high occupational injury rate. Moreover, the occupational culture promotes an attitude that you should work hard and not complain and a norm to prioritize the horses' health and well-being before your own. In addition, the sector faces challenges in retaining staff. Overall, the current working conditions and culture raise questions concerning sustainable work. The purpose of the study was to identify strategies that are important for the work to be considered sustainable over time. The study focuses on the employee perspective.

The results are based on qualitative data, collected through 47 individual interviews with employees at riding schools and trotting stables, and analyzed through a thematic analysis.

Mechanization and equipment, teamwork, arrangement of working hours and variation at work, by alternating between physical, practical, and cognitive tasks, emerged as important factors for the creation of sustainable work. The results contribute to the knowledge of the characteristics of work and how work can be organized to obtain attractive and sustainable employment in horse-related occupations.

Biography
Åsa Bergman Bruhn is a Ph.D. Student in Work Sciences at Dalarna University and Karlstad University. Her area of expertise is in the work environment, working conditions, ergonomics and systematic occupational safety and health management, i.e., factors and methods that promote attractive, meaningful, healthy, safe, and sustainable employment. The overall purpose of her Ph.D. thesis is to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of lifestyle-oriented work within the Swedish equine sector and its consequences for employee health and well-being.

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Dr. Cecilia Lindahl is a Senior Researcher at the Department of Agriculture and Food, RISE Research Institutes of Sweden. Her research area is broad covering animal husbandry, animal welfare, animal handling, and agricultural occupational safety and health. She has a Ph.D. in agricultural science with an emphasis on work science, focusing on risk factors for occupational injuries during cattle handling on dairy farms, and has since been involved in several studies on occupational health and safety within the agricultural and equine sectors.

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Ing-Marie Andersson is a senior professor in Work Sciences at Dalarna University. Dr. Andersson has an Occupational Hygiene background and has since the middle of the 80’s been focusing on control
of exposure to hazards in the workplace. She has especially focused on the development and use of visualization methods and strategies for hazard control. Her research is now focused on the transfer of knowledge from research to practice, to motivate employees and employers and on the production of training material using visualization methods. Research on attractive work has been in focus in recent years with the aim of engaging, attracting and retaining labour.

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**Question 1 (human experiences):**

The data were collected within two research projects, with the overall aim to identify, adapt, and implement methods and practices for systematic occupational health and safety management in the equine sector. The projects have had a participatory action research approach and were conducted in close collaboration with employees and employers.

**Question 2 (perspectives, industry and culture approach):**

For this study, a promotive and preventive approach has been adopted. Although the strategies were explored from an employee perspective, the results also consider the workplace and sector levels. The study has a case study design, i.e. the Swedish equine sector, with two embedded units: riding schools and trotting stables.

**Question 3 (practical examples, lessons, tools or methods):**

A better understanding of strategies important for employee health and safety can aid the equine sector, as well as other sectors and branches, to identify factors crucial to enable attractive and sustainable employment. Systematic occupational safety and health management should be seen as the core process for sustainable employment.