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**„Work Policy Pragmatism – A comparative case study analyses of CIP appropriation of workers”**

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**Abstract:**

Continuous improvement process (CIP) is an essential part of lean production management and integrated production systems. It intends the active participation of all employees in improving process quality and productivity. Workers on the shopfloor should also participate in teamwork and CIP workshops or idea management. By doing this, workers can contribute their capabilities for the well-being and economic success of the company. However, it is not taken for granted that the workers participation in process optimization is accepted as a duty to fulfill the interests of the company to increase the productivity - as it is mainly assumed by the company. Rather, the request to participate in CIP confronts the workers with a contradicting situation of demands: on the one hand, it offers workers the opportunity to increase the appeal of work by contributing their skills and capabilities beyond their actual, often monotonous tasks, and by influencing the design and conditions of their own work; In addition, the workers help to ensure the profitability of the company and thus also their jobs; on the other hand, CIP can have negative consequences

for the workers, such as increase in performance requirements and job rationalization, from which employees want to protect themselves.

The aim of this book is to reconstruct the forms of appropriation and handling of employees with CIP by using a comparative, qualitative case study analysis in two Austrian industrial companies. Data was collected in a mixed methods survey design from observations of workplaces and CIP workshops, interviews with workers, with executives and representatives of the planning departments. There were a wide range of forms of appropriation by the workers: These range from 'non-participation through ignoring or demonstrative rejection', to 'skeptical restraint' and 'struggling for influence', to 'proactive and unreserved participation'. The differences in the appropriations can be traced back to the fact that the workers have different subjective orientations (rated in types of participation orientation). With these different orientations and the awareness of their own interests, the workers deal with the several conditions of practices of CIP as well as the everyday conditions of work and organization.

*Status-quo-oriented* workers have a dominant interest in avoiding deterioration in the work and employment situation and tend to reject participation in CIP. *Contribution-oriented workers* focus on fulfilling their performance of a good and meaningful work. They use their participation in CIP to influence actively the conditions of their work and performance situation. *Career-oriented workers* use the participation in CIP to improve their promotion opportunities by standing out from the broad mass of employees as a high-achiever.

At the structural level of the *CIP practices*, there is a positive effect on the participation of the workers in practices with self-organized work teams with a greater scope for decision-making and self-responsible working, supportive first level management as well as process-related and problem-solving cooperation structures between indirect service departments and production. If there is a lack of these conditions and if there is a high dominance of planning experts in CIP who only focus on cost reduction rather than sustainable problem solving of work and production processes, the workers' ideas will not be received sufficiently and put into practice. As a result, as experts in their workplace, workers feel that they are not being taken seriously enough.

The central result of the study is that a pure rejection of participation in workers-based optimization processes can only be found among status-quo-oriented workers under the highly restrictive conditions of CIP and work. In all other constellations of subjective participation orientations and CIP practices, the workers use the opportunities of participation (given by structures of the participation processes) with an attitude of *work policy pragmatism* to pursue their interests in and at work - sometimes in a more conservatively, sometimes in more progressively way. The workers do not question the company's economic interests. Company interests and orientation towards company standards are a - mostly not dominant but important - part of the work-related self-conception of the workers. Essential for the participation of workers in CIP is how the company realize its interests: in everyday practical recognition of the experience and capabilities of the workers by providing real participation and supporting problem solving processes - or without them and at the expense of the worker.