

Abstract

The article examines the impact, in one Sri Lankan garment industry, of a management initiative devolving to line employees the responsibility for decision-making about workplace performance. At the time of the study, garment manufacturers in Sri Lanka faced increased pressure from international buyers to improve product quality and to meet stringent production delivery schedules, along with growing concerns from Western consumers regarding factory conditions and labour standards. One outcome of these pressures was increased experimentation with a range of quality management techniques to elicit workforce commitment to improved efficiency levels and higher quality standards. This study documents one experiment whereby production line operators rotated the role of production supervisor amongst themselves and accepted responsibility for minimizing production bottlenecks, and for communicating data on workplace efficiency, product reject rates and absenteeism levels to other line operators. We found that workplace productivity and product quality increased over the 18 months of the study, while labour turnover and absenteeism levels declined. Nevertheless, the study also found that the increased role in workplace decision-making provided to employees also came with increased expectations that line employees would achieve higher production targets, improve quality and monitor workplace attendance