

Welcome note to participants of the 20th International Symposium on Shiftwork and Working Time, Stockholm, Sweden, 28/06/2011

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Esteemed organizers of this international symposium, colleagues and friends

Good morning!

I am honored having been invited to participate of the inauguration session of 20th International Symposium on Shiftwork and Working Time, thus transmitting a brief message.

Initially, I'd like to congratulate the organizers of this event for devoting their time and efforts during several months, to let us to have the opportunity to get together, to present the results of our studies, to exchange experiences and to grant for young researchers to take part of this important scientific meeting.

During almost 30 years of academic contacts I made many friends among those who are here.

For more than 40 years, the International Symposia of Shift and Night work, how they were formerly called, and after the foundation of Working Time Society- The International Symposium on Shiftwork and Working Time- these meetings have been the main global scientific forum to present the results of studies of this thematic area.

As the time goes by we face a higher complexity and diversity in the working condition scenarios, including those related to the organization of working hours.

Significant changes took place mainly during the last decades in the global economy impacting dramatically on the organization of work. Among the most frequently mentioned, the "productive restructuring" came with growing practices of work deregulation, precarious work, work intensification, reduction on employment rates, increasing temporary jobs, flexibilization of working times and off-hours not necessarily favorable to wellbeing of the workers and service users.

In addition, we face the increasing aging of the working population and the permanent presence in the whole world of inequity at work and health.

Night and shiftwork, long and irregular working hours are usually associated to other environmental and organizational stressors, having by themselves proven ill effects on health.

It can be observed quite prevalent situations of bad working conditions in many countries, even in the select group of the so-called “developed industrial countries”. These conditions contribute to the load of early development of work-related illnesses, both physical and mental, affecting not only the workers but also their families.

The global economical adjustments resulted in the weakening of labor unions, the increase of informal jobs and structural unemployment in many countries.

The International Labor Organization published in 2007 the document “Working time around the world: Trends in working hours, laws and policies in a global comparative perspective”. It points out the unevenness in the lengths of weekly working hours and resting times, even when comparing similar work sectors in several continents and among the countries of the same continents. For example, an ILO report from 2005 showed that “a rapid economic growth and productivity gains have contributed to rising real wages in some Asian developing countries, but the benefits of growth have not translated into shorter work hours”.

Regarding this global situation, what we, members of Working Time Society, can do besides we already achieved, in order to secure the objective of healthy and decent work as defended by ILO and WHO?

Six decades ago some pioneer researchers established the boundaries of our discipline. Since then, a row of researchers maintain the continuity developing their professional studies at universities, associations, research institutes, as collaborators of National e International committees, in professional associations, and/ or invited by International Agencies, such as ILO and WHO, to participate in scientific forums preparing technical documents. Besides its technical-political feature, the decisions taken in these meetings can result in changes of work health promotion policies and bring important impact on health of the workers.

But we have a long way to go! Still, **there’s a significant gap between knowledge and practice!**

Therefore, we ask: what could be our engagement beyond our own lab or research institute? How could we make a good use of our skills to achieve professional and social networks to have not only greater dimensions but also higher efficiency and stronger impact?

The enhancement of ethics and humanity dimensions included in the objectives of the studies we conduct become an increasing requirement, as well as the broader integration among the areas and disciplines interfacing with workers’ health concerns.

Abilities and greater interaction among ourselves, researchers, consultants and other actors outside the so-called academic world is to be achieved in order to construct and/or reinforce scientific and political alliances.

The Working Time Society associated to research institutes could act as a bridge for scientific exchange for post-graduate students, as well as for technicians and officers usually not pertaining to the academic world, but to governmental agencies and NGO's supporting public health and workers' health institutions in their respective countries.

The Working Time Society has to have an active role as a liaison between several ICOH committees and other international and national professional associations.

There is a must to broaden the Working Time Society work in the regions and countries, which in spite of having an outstanding number of workers, do not have solid directions to adopt sound regulations for healthy work journeys.

It is our duty to present as a challenge to all colleagues here present – and to spread to others who could not be here: the challenge to extend our actions beyond our institutional and national borders in order to bond our ideals, our knowledge, welcoming and actively helping to reinforce the research networks and cooperation.

Yes, we can, and we shall enlarge the welcoming of young researchers!

The effort of several social actors – researchers, consultants, officers of national and international agencies is required to promote social dialogues in several countries and national communities, to improve work conditions, especially regarding the length of work day, compatible to insure an adequate quality of life for all workers.

Fifty-two years passed since Erich Fromm said the following sentence, recently highlighted in a book edited by Peter Schnall and colleagues: “The ways in which work is organized... can be as toxic or benign to the health of workers over time as the chemicals they breathe in the workplace air: ...economy must become the servant for the development of man. Capital must serve labour; things must serve life”.

I wish all of us to be well succeeded in our professional achievements and to obtain support for the required changes in the world of work.

Wish you a productive and enjoyable meeting! Thank you!

References

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