

Part 1

The playing field of an employer following the personal assistance employer model



As the employer of a personal assistant you operate in a field with several players, each of whom has their own role and task.

These players include, for instance, services for the disabled, payroll accounting, occupational health care, the pension insurance company and accident insurance company, Kela, the tax authority, the employers' union and sometimes the employees' union. For most, the relationship is administrative and tied to the payroll administration.

Additional information and guidelines concerning all these players are available from disability services and centres of assistance.

Take care of your statutory agreements

As an employer, it is a good idea to make sure that your statutory agreements are in order. Make sure you have valid:

- occupational health care
- earnings-related pension insurance
- workers' compensation insurance.

Other parties

-  The Oima service plays an important role in facilitating assistants' payroll administration. Payroll administration for assistants is almost always handled via the Oima service. Oima automates the payment of wages and items related to the payment of wages (such as withholding tax and social security expenses) to the tax authority, as well as data and payments to the earnings-related pension insurance companies and accident insurance companies. The employee's trade union membership fees and debt recovery are also managed automatically through Oima.
- Membership in the Heta Union (i.e. Union of the Employers of Personal Assistants in Finland) brings security and support to employers.

Part 2

Work ability and ensuring the assistant's work ability

In your role as an employer, you act as the assistant's supervisor. This means that you manage the assistant's work and take care of their working conditions.

According to law, the employer must ensure that the work is healthy and safe. The employer must also support employees' ability to cope at work. This is why it is important for you to know what work ability is and to understand what things impact it.

Work ability means a person's ability to carry out their work. Good work ability results when the employee's job demands and resources are balanced. The employee's health and functional capacity, as well as competence and motivation impact work ability. Also the work itself and the social factors associated with it, such as work management, the work community and work culture, impact work ability.

Examples of workload and resource factors



Part 3

Focus on a good start to the employment relationship

As an employer, you are responsible for hiring an assistant. It is important for the chosen person to be a good fit for the position, in terms of both their functional capacity and competence.

The job advertisement should already state clearly what the job involves and what kinds of tasks it entails. This lets the applicant assess whether the job is suitable for them. You can give more information in the interview about the practical aspects of the work.

Be honest and open about the work. When the needs and expectations are clear on both sides, the collaboration will be better.

When you agree on an employment relationship, review the following:

- What does the employer model mean?
- How many hours a week is the work?
- How are shifts agreed on?
- What to do if the employee falls ill or has to be absent from work for another reason?
- How are other family members and pets taken into account in daily life?

A good orientation helps you get started

When the employment relationship begins, it is important that the assistant receives sufficient work orientation. This means explaining clearly:

What does the work involve?

- What are the main tasks?
- Will they help you with getting around, dressing or with household chores?
- Does the job involve running errands outside the home, such as shopping or participating in a hobby?
- Is the work more physical or does it involve being a calm presence and helping with daily tasks?

How is the work performed?

- What are the main practices that you would like the assistant to follow?

- Do you have a specific way that you would like your clothes folded or food prepared?
- Do you use assistive devices that they should know how to use?
- How do you wish for breaks to be arranged?
- Do you have routines that you wish the assistant to follow?

What is the work environment like?

- How will you ensure that the work is carried out safely?
- Is the work mainly performed at home or also outside the home?
- Are there pets or other family members in the home whom the assistant will interact with?
- Are there stairs, narrow doorways or other things in the home that affect the performance of the work?

A good orientation helps the assistant feel confident and competent. It reduces mistakes and supports smooth co-operation. Orientation is a continuous process that carries on throughout the employment relationship. If needed, make use of the checklist for persons providing orientation!

Part 4

Recognise workload

Every job has factors that can cause workload. Sometimes an assistant may feel that their work is strenuous or tiring. You might notice this, for example, if the work pace slows down or accuracy falls.

This is why it is important to take a moment and think, together with the assistant, about what things cause workload.

- Is there too much work?
- Is there something particularly challenging about the tasks?
- Or could it be that the assistant's private life is creating additional stress?

As an employer, you are obligated to assess the assistant's workload. The Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Act requires you to identify hazard, harm and workload factors and to manage them.

The workload of personal assistants can arise from many different sources.

Physical workload factors

The work may involve physical workload factors such as

- awkward work postures
- repetitive movements or physical activity
- lifting heavy objects

If the physical workload is too high or continues for long, it can begin to manifest as pain or cause other disorders in the muscles and joints. The workload should be suited to the assistant's health and work ability.

As the employer, you can talk to your assistant about how the work feels physically. Together, you can figure out how to make the work easier if something feels too strenuous. Often even small changes can make the work a lot lighter and more pleasant.

Mental workload factors

Sometimes, work situations can come up that cause us stress. Examples of these mental workload factors are:

- constant changes in the work and how it is done
- unclear or unreasonable expectations
- haste or feeling that there is too much, or sometimes too little, work
- frequent interruptions or the work bleeds into leisure time
- discrimination and other inappropriate treatment

- bad communication or difficult interaction situations
- working alone
- acting against your own or the employer's values

As the employer, you can talk to your assistant about how they experience the work. Together, you can figure out how to make the work easier if something feels too strenuous. Often even small changes can make the work a lot lighter and more pleasant.

Part 5

Help the assistant succeed in their work

Job resources refer to factors that motivate the employee and promote smooth work, and also make meeting the demands of the work easier.

This is why it is important for you, as the employer, to notice and support the things that make the assistant's work meaningful and inspiring. Resources can include, for example, tasks that the assistant enjoys or situations where they feel they have succeeded. Clear tasks and assignments also support the job resources.

As the employer, you can strengthen job resources. Ask your assistant what motivates and inspires them in their work, how their work is going and in which areas the assistant might still require support or clarification. Job resources are also supported by good interaction and receiving support – getting feedback and praise is very important. When you focus more on these moments, the work feels more pleasant and the assistant's ability to cope improves.

The following are important for supporting smooth day-to-day work and job resources:

- A mutual understanding of the duties and ways of working
- Sufficient competence on the part of the employer and assistant
- Open and clear interaction
- Trust
- Common problem-solving ability

Good dialogue builds trust: Regular discussions support trust and make expectations clear. As the employer, you can impact how smooth day-to-day work is and support job resources by being active, helping your assistant succeed, asking whether they need additional guidance and by solving problems together.

Assigning tasks and providing guidance: Tasks should be assigned clearly, and the goals and success criteria should be communicated and planned together. The guidance should be individualised and support independent work.

Feedback is essential: Feedback is a prerequisite for smooth co-operation. Positive feedback motivates and builds trust, and it should be directed at the work performance, not at personal attributes.

Saying “thank you” is important: Saying “thank you” is an easy and effective way to show your appreciation and build trust. Thank the employee for both small and big things, especially for being flexible and doing a good job.

Part 6

Bring things up and look for solutions together

All of us have bad days sometimes. If some work task, e.g. is not going well, you can ask about it politely. Often just bringing it up in a friendly manner is enough to change the situation. Try to spot the warning signs that indicate problems and boldly bring the matter up for discussion.

What signs indicate that there are work or health problems?

- changed behaviour
- withdrawal, irritability, impoliteness
- difficulty concentrating, absent-mindedness, forgetfulness
- increased tardiness
- lack of motivation, indifference, carelessness, neglecting work
- weakened work performance, decline in the quality of work
- showing up intoxicated or hung-over
- repeated or prolonged absences due to illness
- general concern for the assistant's situation



Identify



Discuss



Act

Have you noticed changes in the employee's behaviour, work quality, perceived workload, or feedback from the work community?

If you become concerned about an employee's work ability, talk with them.

In an early support discussion, you can share your observations and ask the employee how they see their situation themselves.

It is important that the discussion leads to action.

Consider together how the employee's situation can be improved.

If the issue relates to work, working conditions, work organisation, or the functioning of the work community, take action at the workplace.

What should you do, then, if you spot warning signs in your assistant's performance or resilience?

Work- or performance-related challenges as the underlying reason:

- Specify the expectations and work tasks.
- Clarify your needs, work goals and responsibilities.
- Clarify expectations, tasks and the daily rhythm.
- Ensure the assistant's competence, knowledge and skills to handle the tasks.
- Repeat the work orientation and instructions.
- Make sure the tools as well as the allocation and organisation of the work are in order.
- Find out about the assistant's motivation for this job.
- Agree with the assistant on what measures to take and on the future.

Interaction problems as the underlying reason:

- Develop joint ways of operating and interaction.
- Discuss how work is going and conduct at work. Draw up an action plan if necessary.
- Address inappropriate conduct right away.
- Agree on or update the ground rules. The employee and the employer are each responsible for how they conduct themselves.
- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy towards bullying and harassment.
- If necessary, seek help to address problem situations.

Health issues or life management challenges as the underlying reason:

- Bring problems up for discussion and examine the options.
- Agree on follow-up measures.
- Arrange work ability support through occupational health care and/or a health clinic.
- Address substance abuse issues right away.
- If necessary, contact an occupational health nurse after your discussion with your assistant.
- Guide the assistant to make an appointment with an occupational health nurse, who will help bring clarity to their thoughts and possibly refer them to basic health care services.
- Be sure to also take advantage of the support of an occupational health nurse for yourself, e.g. to deal with crisis situations.

Holding a discussion

Prepare for the discussion. Allocate enough time and ensure a quiet space for the discussion, consider what information or parties are needed to resolve the matter.

- **Discuss** your concerns and challenges at work **directly and openly**, but with respect for your employee.
- **Discuss the work and how it is going.** Make smoothly flowing work the goal and ask what would help the employee.
- **Focus on finding solutions.** What solutions and support measures may have already been implemented, what will be done in future, and how will the measures will be monitored?
- **Draw up a plan together.** Clearly write down the issues raised in the discussion, the actions taken, and the agreed actions (e.g., a visit to occupational health care, temporary work arrangements) as well as how you will monitor the situation.

Part 7

Seek help with challenges

As the employer, your job is to identify the risk factors that threaten your assistant's work ability and to try to prevent these risks. As an employer, you must comply with agreements, regulations and laws related to occupational health.

Arranging occupational health care

The employer has a statutory obligation to arrange occupational health care for their employee. Occupational healthcare contributes to a smooth employment relationship, for instance, in the following ways:

- Occupational health examinations serve as security for recruiting an assistant.
- Occupational health care experts can also help you plan the work in a way that ensures a healthy and safe workplace for your assistant and yourself.
- Occupational health care can furthermore help in various challenging situations, e.g. with sickness absence obligations or if the assistant's sick leave is prolonged.

Starting up occupational health collaboration

Before occupational health care collaboration starts, the employer must conclude an agreement on occupational health care management. Services for the disabled can help in finding a suitable service provider. Disability services serve as the substitute payer in occupational health care costs, but only up until the statutory minimum.

Occupational health care, for instance:

- Examines and assesses the employee's state of health and work ability
- Examines and assesses the health and safety of the work and working conditions
- Offers advice and guidance
- Provides referrals for follow-up measures as required. Don't forget that arranging occupational health care is the employer's statutory obligation. Statutory occupational health care is mostly preventative advice and monitoring. It does not include medical services.

When an employee falls ill

We all get sick sometimes. That is why it is a good idea to agree on the procedure to follow in case of illness right at the start of the employment relationship. For instance, you should agree on how the employer should be informed of an absence due to illness and when a sick note is needed, and how wages are paid when the employee falls ill.

Reporting absences due to illness, and pay during sick leave

- Agree with the employee when a doctor's certificate is needed for sick leave. The employer may ask for it already on the first day of sick leave.
- Go over with your employee how wages are paid in case of illness. The employer must submit information about the sick leave to payroll accounting. An employee's paid sick leave consists of the first day of illness + 9 workdays if these days would have been the employee's workdays according to the shift schedule, employment contract or regular working hours. After that, the employee must determine their income on their own, for instance, with Kela.
- You can contact services for the disabled if you are in need of a substitute assistant due to your assistant's sick leave.

What if absences due to illness are recurring or prolonged?

- Discuss recurring and/or prolonged absences with your employee.
- When an employee falls ill, it is important to agree how you will stay in contact especially during long absences. Also discuss when the return to work will take place.
- Use the 'Smooth everyday life' discussion template in the discussion if necessary.
- If illness is negatively affecting your employee's work ability, they can make an appointment with an occupational health nurse on their own initiative or on the employer's instruction.
- The occupational health nurse will, if necessary, refer the employee to an occupational health physician, who will assess the employee's work ability and plan options for returning to work and continuing at work together with the employee.
- If necessary, an occupational health negotiation involving the employee, employer and occupational health care can be arranged. You can also find up-to-date information from disability services and the Heta Union's website.
- When planning a return to work, you should discuss together whether it is a good idea for the employee's state of health to begin with part-time or full-time work.

Varma's work ability services' corporate service number provides help with work ability issues

As an employer, you can call the number **010 192 065** (Mon–Fri, 9 a.m.–3 p.m.), if you need advice with employees' work ability challenges, vocational rehabilitation or disability pensions. When you call, mention that you are an employer of a personal assistant.

Part 8

Employee's responsibility for their own work ability

Each of us is responsible for our own well-being and work ability. It is the employee's task to follow the instructions given by the employer on the work and occupational safety. It is also important for the employee to tell the employer if something is creating an excessive workload or making the work more difficult to perform.

The employee is entitled to refuse tasks that pose a serious risk to their health.

There are many ways to maintain work ability, such as:

- by eating a varied diet
- by exercising regularly
- by ensuring sufficient rest and recovery
- by developing one's own competence and working methods
- by openly discussing work and how well it is going with the employer
- by recognising what things increase motivation and support the ability to cope

Assistants should pay attention to their ability to cope at work. An assistant often plays a significant role in the employer's daily life. If the assistant works for several employers, it is especially important to ensure that they have sufficient time to recover between shifts.

When their own resources are good, the employee can perform their work well.

DISCUSSION TOOL

The ‘Smooth everyday life’ discussion between the personal assistance employer and the employee

Good dialogue builds trust. The ‘Smooth everyday life’ discussion template supports dialogue between the employer of the personal assistant and the employee. Trust does not develop or deepen by itself but instead demands concrete actions. One of the most important tools for this is good dialogue. That is why dialogue skills should be a priority.

Use the discussion template in the following situations:

- For regularly evaluating the smoothness of everyday life and co-operation
- Handling of problems

Ensure a mutual understanding of the tasks and ground rules

- Describe the tasks that are to be repeated at different times of the day, week or month already before the start of the employment relationship.
- Think ahead of time about the conduct you expect at the workplace, and share these expectations with the employee.
- Agree on how absences should be reported and what to do if they occur. When, for example, is a doctor’s certificate required for sick leave?

Build trust

- Give praise when the work goes smoothly. If things are not going smoothly, explain what should be done and how.
- Ask questions and encourage the employee to ask questions right away if something is on their mind. Encourage problem-solving.
- Agree that when problems arise, either party can bring the matter up and propose solutions.
- Initiate regular discussions on the day-to-day routines and expectations. These can take place, for instance, every six months.
- Use the ‘Smooth everyday life’ discussion template, which you can adapt to your needs. You do not have to go over each point every single time. You can also give it to the employee in advance to help them prepare.

Work tasks and working hours

- Does anything need further clarification?
- Has there been sufficient orientation?
- How have the agreed work tasks and working hours been implemented?
- How do you feel about your work targets? Do you have your duties under control?

Work guidance: planning the work tasks, work assignments, instructions

- How do you feel about your workload at the moment? What is going well? What can be improved?
- What things in your work are stressful or prevent smooth workflow (e.g. blundering, conflicts, ambiguities, flood of information, physicality or monotony of the work, lack of social contacts)?
- Where can help be found if needed?

Our interaction:

- What is the situation in terms of giving and receiving feedback? What is going well?
- Is there a need for improvement in the interaction? In what areas?
- What kind of support do you need in your work and to achieve your work goals?
- Do you feel that you are receiving this kind of support?
- What are your expectations of me as a supervisor?

The personal assistant's work ability

- What motivates you in your work? What might strengthen your motivation?
- What do you feel you are best at? In what areas do you want to develop?
- How do work and other aspects of your life fit together right now? Are there any conflicts?
- How do changes in your life situation affect your work performance?
- Do you have a health concern that you would like to talk about (e.g. recovery, physical/mental resources, social relationships, intoxicants)?