



WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE WORK?

Knowledge work is work that requires receiving and processing diverse information and producing new information. Knowledge work is also referred to as brain work, information work or expert work. Knowledge workers include programmers, doctors, consultants and researchers.

Joint rules for managing brain load must be created in knowledge work

Work increasingly requires versatile information processing skills, decision-making and problem-solving capability and continuously learning new things. It is important for employers and supervisors to understand and reduce the workload factors associated with knowledge work. This can help reduce sick leaves and disability pensions.

SOLUTIONS



Identify and reduce cognitive workload

or risk factors that increase the cognitive strain of work. You can use Varma's risk assessment, other tools or personnel surveys for assistance.

Develop the organisation of work.

The development work can concern e.g. the prioritisation of work duties, allocation of breaks at work or dimensioning of the workload. Also, aim to foresee the volume of incoming work.

Agree on the rules for on-site and remote work.

Agree together on how on-site, remote and hybrid work are combined. Prepare a model that supports joint brainstorming and interaction as well as balancing work and other aspects of life.

Create rules for managing interruptions.

Agree together how to create uninterrupted working hours, how and which working duties may be interrupted and how you will work in the cross-fire of several simultaneous tasks.

Prepare a model for time management.

Jointly prepare rules for how working hours will be used, how the urgency of work duties is defined, when people should be available and how fast e-mail and instant messages should be responded to.



83 %

of experts estimate that their work has tight schedules



70 %

of experts report that their work is frequently interrupted



63 %

of experts estimate that they have too many tasks at hand

*share of those who answered fully agree or somewhat agree, upper-level employees, Quality of work life survey 2018, Statistics Finland. [Link to source](#) (in Finnish)

What do we know?

Many aspects of knowledge work, such as the information overload, repeated interruptions and time pressure can increase the cognitive workload. Knowledge workers report a variety of stress symptoms, sleep deprivation and challenges with recovery. In addition, they may have cognitive symptoms, such as concentration and memory problems.

On the other hand, the many job resources of knowledge work can give protection against the stressful aspects of work. Job resources in knowledge work include good opportunities for influencing one's work, meaningful work and support from the work community and supervisor.

Why is this important?

The physical and psychosocial workload factors can impair knowledge workers' well-being at work and work ability in many ways. Cognitive symptoms, for example, are associated with insomnia, depression and anxiety. In addition, prolonged stress can lead to sick leave and even disability pension.

What should be done?

It is important to identify and prevent workload factors associated with knowledge work at workplaces. It is essential to create organisation-level solutions for managing cognitive workload.

An individual employee cannot independently manage the cognitive workload of their work alone; they need communal structures and solutions as support. The solutions can include improvements in the organisation of work, management of working hours and interruptions and strengthening communality, for instance.

Organisation-level solutions are needed for managing the workload of knowledge work.



WORKLOAD FACTORS OF KNOWLEDGE WORK

- Complicated work and varying content
- Information overload and multitasking
- Working in networks and for several recipients with different demands and timetables
- Frequent interruptions to work and disturbances
- Excessive amount of work and long working hours
- Boundaryless work not being dependent on time or place

AUTHOR AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Auli Airila, Research Manager
auli.airila@varma.fi

HOW THE BUSINESS BRIEF WAS MADE:

The business brief is based on Varma's publication on the workload factors of knowledge work and well-being at work and work ability of knowledge workers.

The publication is in Finnish, and available on our website www.varma.fi/tutkimus.

VARMA