



### WORK IN THE SOCIAL WELFARE AND HEALTH CARE SECTOR

The social welfare and health care sector is the largest employer in Finland. It provides employment to more than one sixth of all the employed persons in Finland. One in three social welfare and health care employees work in the private sector. Those working in social welfare and health care include, for instance, practical nurses, registered nurses, physicians, social counsellors, home-help service employees, personal assistants, paramedics and social welfare and health care managers. The sector is highly female-dominated. An increasing share of employees are from an immigrant background. The wide range of professions and work tasks is also reflected in the different workload factors and competence requirements.

## There are many ways of managing the workload in the social welfare and health care sector

Work in the social welfare and health care sector can be demanding in many ways. Work stress arises from the various physical, psychosocial and cognitive demands of the work. Work in social welfare and health care is also often ethically stressful. It is important for employers and supervisors to understand and reduce the workload factors associated with work. This can help prevent sickness absences and permanent disability.

## SOLUTIONS



### Invest in good leadership and supervisory work.

Research has shown that a sense of fairness and being heard, appreciation and open interaction support work ability. Ensure that there are sufficient personnel resources. Communicate openly, listen to people and give feedback.

### Provide better opportunities to influence work and working hours.

Provide employees with opportunities to participate in the development of work and working hours. Development may be associated with working methods, the organisation of work, joint working hours planning or the arrangement of breaks, for instance.

### Identify and reduce the risk factors

that increase the physical workload. Ensure that there is sufficient orientation and guidance in work duties and that ergonomic working methods are used. It is also a good idea to modify the work and work arrangements, increase variation in work tasks and ensure sufficient breaks and the availability of necessary assistive devices.

### Strengthen competence.

Make sure that employees' competence responds to future work needs. Also invest in the competence of managers and supervisors, including from the perspective of work ability and mental health. Reserve enough time for competence development, such as learning to use new systems.

### Provide sufficient support for work ability.

Ensure effective practices for early support, sick leave monitoring, returning to work and occupational health collaboration. Build a psychologically safe work culture that involves open discussion and the courage to tackle work ability challenges at a low threshold and early enough.

In the social welfare and health care sector, the most common reason for disability among women is musculoskeletal diseases

**37%**

for women

**18%**

for men

Among men, the most common reason for disability is mental health and behavioural disorders

**27%**

for men

**22%**

for women

Source: Varma's data, 2018–2022

## What do we know?

Work in the social welfare and health care sector is demanding in many ways. Work-related physical stress results from helping patients move and go from one place to another, manual lifting and transfers and stooped working postures, for instance. Many characteristics associated with working hours, such as working in shifts and at night, can also be stressful. Work-related psychosocial stress may be associated aspects such as the content of the work, work arrangements, management and leadership or the social functionality of the work community. Work in social welfare and health care is also often cognitively and ethically stressful.

Many of the positive features of a job, such as good opportunities to influence the work and working hours, meaningful and important work, development opportunities, good supervisory work and a good work community, can protect an employee from the stress factors related to work.

## Why is this important?

Workload factors can, if they persist, have many negative effects on well-being at work and work ability. Musculoskeletal diseases are the most common reason for sick leave in the social welfare and health care sector. In the worst-case scenario, prolonged workload and an imbalance between job demands and resources can lead to permanent work disability. In many social welfare and health care professions, the risk of disability is higher than average.

## What should be done?

It is important that work and working conditions are developed together. There are many ways of supporting employees' work ability at workplaces. Solutions can involve, for instance, developing management and supervisory work, the organisation of work, improving influencing opportunities, developing competence, work modification, or developing practices to support work ability.

The development of working conditions is the key means to support work ability in the social welfare and health care sector.



### KEY WORKLOAD FACTORS IN THE SOCIAL WELFARE AND HEALTH CARE SECTOR

- Unclear organisation of work, challenges associated with management and leadership
- Insufficient personnel, haste and time pressure
- Awkward working postures, manual lifting and moving
- Working in shifts and at night and other stressful characteristics associated with working hours
- Challenges in interpersonal relations at work, e.g. lack of support from colleagues
- Information overload, interruptions, information system problems and other work-related cognitive requirements
- Restless working environment and threat of violence
- Constant changes and feelings of insecurity

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#### HOW THE BUSINESS BRIEF WAS MADE:

The solutions are based on Varma's publication series "Tietoa työkyvystä" (in Finnish), which examines, mostly based on Finnish research literature, the challenges and resources related to work, as well as work ability in the social welfare and health care sector.

Read the publication on [our website](#).

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