



# Work ability and transformation of work

## – perspectives and tools to support work ability management

Work ability is important for everyone to build a meaningful, financially secure life. Employees with good work ability are also an absolute necessity for organisations. A lot of positive development has taken place in working life but studies have also revealed concerning signals of challenges related to work ability. Many people find their work stressful, absences due to illness have increased and mental health problems have become more common. The number of disability pensions has also taken an upward turn. For its part, transformation of work poses challenges to work ability. Indeed, supporting work ability requires a more determined approach and co-operation among different parties.

### Transformation of work requires us to look at work ability in a new way

Changes in work transform the entire working life. Work contents, ways of working and the organisation of work and its management are changing. The world is becoming increasingly complex at the same time when both people and phenomena are increasingly interrelated. Certain megatrends, such as digitalisation and networking, have an impact on all sectors and nearly every job. However, there are differences in how development proceeds in different sectors and organisations and how trends change work contents and ways of

working. Many organisations use co-creation and self-organisation to find new solutions that can be adjusted quickly.

Transformation of work also influences work ability and the means to promote it. Employees are required to have new kinds of competences and be able to continuously learn new things. For instance, changing tasks and professions, technological development and economic fluctuations pose challenges to competence and the building of a sustainable career. At the same time, the significance of work in people's lives becomes more diverse. It is important to identify the aspects of changing work that support work ability and to strive to prevent unwanted consequences.

### Work ability is cyclical

Work ability refers to an individual's ability to work or to perform well in their job. It can also be seen as a whole consisting of an individual's resources and work-related factors that changes and varies along with the development of work and during the career. Work ability is not an "either-or" phenomenon, or something that an individual explicitly does or does not have. Many factors related to the individual, work, working conditions and life outside work are associated with fluctuations of work ability. In other words, work ability is cyclical. The cyclical nature of work ability means that an individual's work

ability is determined by and varies according to the variation of job demands and resources as well as in relation to the collective development of work. Work ability remains good when job demands and resources are in balance and the individual sees the changes in work as meaningful from the perspective of the individual's professional development.

### Work ability is the sum of many parts

Work ability is influenced by many biological, social, cultural, environmental and behavioural factors. Research has shown that personal factors, such as age, health, lifestyle and skills, are associated with work ability. Many factors related to work, working environment and working conditions also have an impact on work ability. Key resources that support work ability include, for instance, the meaningfulness of work, good leadership, support received from supervisors and colleagues, feedback on work and influencing and development opportunities. Work should be sufficiently challenging for the employee but job demands may also cause stress.

### Work ability management requires foresight, comprehensive understanding and co-operation

Work ability management requires an understanding of various factors that influence work ability. An understanding of the organisation's situation and developmental needs as well as of job demands and resource factors also helps foresee challenges related to work ability before they turn into a risk of disability. Work ability management also requires close co-operation among different parties. Challenges related to work ability cannot be resolved only by the individual or the organisation in question. Instead, it is important to involve the entire work ability support network, including occupational health care services, rehabilitation partners and earnings-related pension insurance company, in finding functional solutions.

Key aspects of effective work ability management are:

- Understanding the organisation's situation, employees' work ability and developmental needs
- Strengthening the meaningfulness of work and the sense of control over work
- Strengthening the resource factors related to work
- Promotion of self-organisation and co-creation of work
- Joint competence development as part of the development of operating methods
- Supporting an individual's agency as an active participant
- Identifying and strengthening personal resources
- Modifying work or adjusting it according to the employee's work ability.

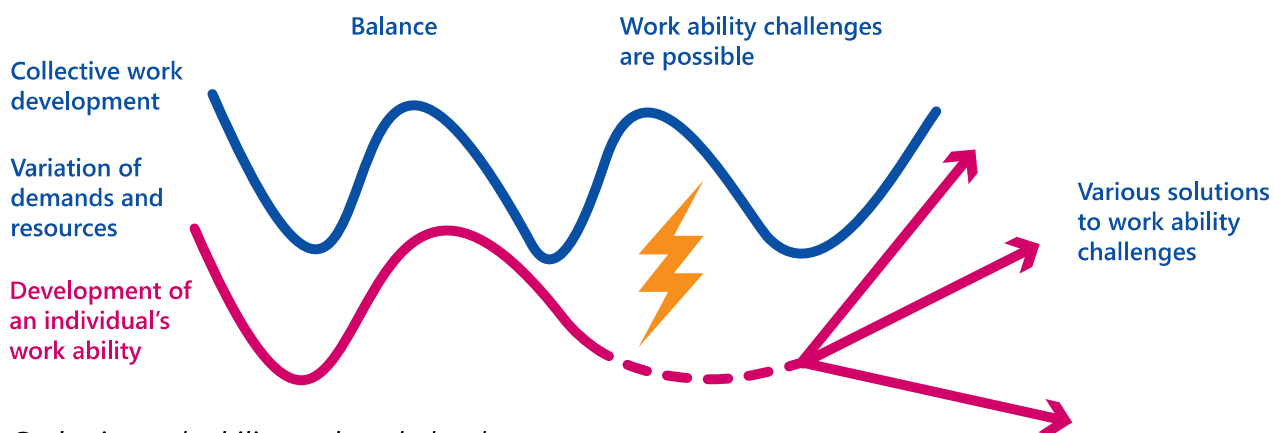
### Work ability cycle as a tool for developing work ability management

The cyclical idea of work ability enables you to deliberate at which developmental stage your organisation is and how the relation between job demands and resources among employees takes shape at that stage. Questions to consider include, for instance:

- How has work changed in our organisation?
- How can we support work ability together in this situation?
- What are the resource factors in our work and how could we strengthen them?
- What kind of competence should we develop in our work community to maintain the meaningfulness of work and people's work ability?

The organisation's joint, regular discussions about work and its demands and resource factors supports the maintenance and promotion of work ability. The best solutions for promoting work ability can be found together.

**Read more** in Varma's publication [Työn murros ja työkyky – näkökulmia ja välineitä työkykyjohtamiseen \(in Finnish\)](#).



Cycles in work ability and work development.