Finnish Institute of
Occupational Health

Operational Models for Work Ability Support as the Basis for Practical Activities

Objective: Operational models for work ability support are consistent, known and utilized by everyone

The models for supporting work ability are consistent, known and utilized by everyone. The models include workplace-agreed practices and guidelines for supporting the work ability of employees and the work community (early support, support during sickness absences, and support for returning to work).

Why?

Collaboratively agreed operational models provide the framework for supporting work ability and make it easier for the organization to cope with changes. They help management and supervisors anticipate future situations and act consistently. The models help personnel understand how the workplace supports work ability, what the roles and responsibilities of different actors are, and that the workplace supports work ability in an equal manner.

Ways to develop and implement operational models

Tailor operational models for the workplace in collaboration

Operating models for work ability management are developed based on needs in collaboration with the various actors at the workplace. Collaborative development

- enables different perspectives to be considered
- enhances understanding of how to support work ability
- enhances the acceptance and implementation of the operational model
- engages people to act following the model.

Define clear roles and responsibilities for managing work ability

Supporting work ability in the workplace requires collaboration between management, HR, supervisors, employees, occupational health and safety, and occupational health care. The roles and responsibilities are clearly described in common operating models and integrated into orientation. It is important to ensure that the roles and responsibilities are up-to-date and that all actors are familiar with their roles, especially during periods of change.

Manage workload with ergonomic solutions

Workload management is based on the special characteristics of the workplace's industry and the information gathered from the workplace, such as the results of risk assessments and workplace surveys.

The main responsibility for improving ergonomics lies with the employer, but it requires collaboration, expertise, and participation of all those who work in the workplace. Occupational health care provides support in finding ergonomic solutions.

- Physical ergonomics development considers the work environment, tasks, equipment, movements, and different types of employees.
- Cognitive ergonomics focuses on reducing cognitive load, distractions, and interruptions.
- Organizational ergonomics solutions consider personnel allocation, work time and shift scheduling, work breaks, and other similar matters.

Anticipate workforce and competence needs with the help of performance appraisals

A performance appraisal gives the supervisor information about the employee's competencies, competence needs, and future aspirations. It is also a good time to discuss the employees' well-being at work and workload. This information can be used to predict future staffing and competence needs for a unit or team.

Address factors that threaten work ability in advance

Early support for work ability can be divided into preventive and corrective measures.

Early support for work ability should focus primarily on preventive measures as part of day-to-day management. Preventive measures support the well-being at work and work ability of all employees.

Corrective measures are taken when there are noticeable changes in the employee's work ability or other concerns arise.

The primary responsibility for early support of work ability in the workplace falls on the supervisor. When problems with the employee's work ability are identified, they are first discussed with the employee.

- Is the employee's job description clear and is the employee familiar with the basic tasks and objectives?

- Does the employee have the necessary competence for the task?

- Is the amount of work appropriate?

- Does the employee have sufficient motivation for work?

- Is the employee's functional capacity sufficient for the work?

Utilize early support discussions to discuss the causes of sickness absence

Early support discussions can be used to identify both work-related and non-work-related stressors and to influence the causes that may lead to sickness absences.

Psychological safety and a confidential atmosphere in the workplace facilitate an open dialogue between the supervisor and employees.

Plan job accommodation practices

Job accommodation is one of the most effective ways to support work ability. An employee may require accommodation due to, for example, an injury, illness, life situation, or cultural background.

Discuss with the employee, how the work tasks can be modified. Job accommodations may include

- working hours

- how the work is organized

- the work environment

- the technology or assistive devices used at work

- support measures

- commuting.

The accommodation methods are recorded in the work ability support model and submitted to occupational health care.

Strengthen work ability management skills

Supervisors, HR, and occupational health and safety are most actively involved in work ability issues, but top management also needs work ability management competence to be able to act following their role and responsibilities.

Work ability management skills are developed during orientation and through regular internal training. If necessary, request support from occupational health care or the occupational pension company.

Tools

- Assessing and developing working conditions in the workplace from a recovery perspective. Can be used as part of regular workplace risk assessment and occupational health collaboration
Recovery Calculator (ttl.fi)

- Drawing up a modern substance abuse programme for the needs of the workplace
Substance Abuse Programme Tool (ttl.fi)

- Mapping out the specific characteristics of the workplace and developing exercise and recovery measures that are suitable for the work community
Exercise According to Work Tool (ttl.fi)

- Identifying cognitive stress factors
Cognitive Work Survey (ttl.fi)

- Tips for daily management, identifying resources, risks and stress factors, and dealing with challenging situations in the workplace
Supporting Mental Health at Work – Material for Supervisors (ttl.fi)

- Job accommodation steps, methods and the roles of different actors
Mind and Work Accommodation Material (ttl.fi)