

The Finnish Concept of Maintaining Work Ability

Background to work ability

The idea of measuring the ability of an individual to sustain a working life, emerged during the early 1980s in Finland. In turn it arose from concerns that Finland's Ageing population and early departures from the workforce, were seriously damaging the economic success of the country. It seems possible that the concept of work ability could be very relevant to the UK's situation as government pursues the target of extending working lives.

What is work ability?

The work ability concept is credited to Professor Juhani Ilmarinen, Director of the Department of Physiology in the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH). Ilmarinen and co-workers studied the ability of municipal workers to overcome a variety of problems causing early departures from the workforce. They came up with a paradigm of good practice covering line and personnel management and occupational health and safety services.

Work ability is a measure of an inter-relationship between *the work capacity of the worker* and *the work he or she does*. It takes into account all the factors that might influence that capacity, and make the job more or less do-able.

Poor work ability might be caused by poor health, poor work competence, skills or knowledge, inappropriate values and attitudes, poor working conditions or management. The individual's personal circumstances, the nature of the work, the working environment and other factors can intervene.

Work ability is not separated from life outside work. Family and the close community to which an individual belongs can all have an impact.

Promoting or maintaining work ability

A key idea is that whilst work ability appears to decline naturally as people age, various interventions can be introduced to *enhance* or *maintain work ability*. Research has shown how a decline in work ability can be slowed down, halted or reversed by the choice of timely interventions.

Maintaining work ability (MWA) as a means of keeping people from early retirement through ill-health and other reasons has developed into a central aspect of the HR and manpower approaches adopted by Finnish organisations.

The *maintenance and promotion* of work ability requires good cooperation between supervisors and employees and the whole work community. Central roles are played by the occupational health and occupational safety functions in the organisation.

Work ability index

A work ability index has been devised and widely used in Finland. It is based on a self completion questionnaire. Elements in the calculation of the index are:

- An individual's current work ability compared with their lifetime best
- Their work ability in relation to the demands of the job
- The number of diagnosed illnesses or limiting conditions from which they suffer.
- Their estimated impairment due to diseases/illnesses or limiting conditions
- The amount of sick-leave they have taken during the last year
- Their own prognosis of their work ability in two years time
- An estimate of their mental resources

Poor scores are a predictor of early retirement among other outcomes unless interventions are introduced.

The work ability index has been adapted and used in other countries as well as Finland – for example it is currently being used in Australia in trials by Swinburne University of Technology, based in Melbourne, in a research programme involving partners in Australian industry under the ambit of the Business Work and Ageing Research Centre. It has also been used in a number of other European countries and some Asian ones.

Building capacity to apply the MWA concept

The skills and knowledge used to apply the work ability concept, evolved with active contributions from government agencies and the social partners. These were administered in a series of training and other campaigns that engaged the vast majority of Finnish workplaces.

Through collective agreements encouraging employers and unions to collaborate locally, flesh has been put on the bones in most workplaces. Projects proliferate. For example, 'Work Ability Tomorrow,' sponsored by the Association of Finnish Pension Institutions and the FIOH, has trained all full time occupational health professionals in the application of work ability. 5,000 worker representatives from work places attended the same training events.

Costs and benefits of maintaining work ability

The pay-off of MWA includes retention of skilled workers who can contribute to the organisation. Improvements in productivity and quality are claimed too.

Impact on Finnish workplaces

The concept of the maintenance of work ability (MWA) has become familiar to all Finns during the past decade. MWA has now become a part of daily routines that have been taken into use in most Finnish workplaces.

The Occupational Health Service system has been very active and taken initiatives to develop the forms and contents of MWA at the beginning of the 1990s. Gradually, the complexity of the activities and the need for good collaboration in the MWA have increased. Nowadays, the MWA is a task of both the personnel administration and the line management, and of the occupational health and safety services.

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TAEN – The Age and Employment Network
207-221 Pentonville Road
London N1 9UX
T: 020 7843 1590
F: 020 7843 1599
Email: info@taen.org.uk
www.taen.org.uk

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