

Working life information and solutions to support work ability

Expert and knowledge work



This series on working life information and solutions to support work ability is a compilation of the working conditions, load factors and work ability resources that are typical of the tasks, occupations and sectors of our client companies.

The contents are based on statistics, expert information and research data, Elo's data and open data from research institutes.

Summary on everyday working life

As the digital age advances, the amount of knowledge work and cognitive work is expected to increase in many workplaces. The Labour Force Survey (2024) of Statistics Finland shows that the number of persons employed in fields of knowledge work has increased in recent years. For example, the number of people working as specialists and experts in different sectors is increasing. In addition to these specific jobs, there are also people carrying out knowledge work in other professional areas. Expert and knowledge work can be involved in aspects of, for example, the trade sector, finance and insurance sector, social and health care sector, industry and construction.

Expert and knowledge work often require a high level of education, which is why the share of company personnel representing the youngest employees is smaller in companies focused on expert and knowledge work than in other sectors.*



Source: Elo's data (2023)



Mood disorders are the most common grounds for disability pension in expert and knowledge work.

The incidence rate of disability pensions is indicated by the ratio of granted disability pensions to the total number of insured persons working in the field of expert and knowledge work. Mood disorders are the most common cause of disability pension in expert and knowledge work. However, in expert work, disability is also caused by other factors, such as back diseases. Incidence rate of disability pensions* Source: Elo's data (2023)



- X = other diseases
- * The diagrams in this report were created based on data concerning companies that had, in 2023, a higher than 80% share of personnel working as managers, experts and specialists.

Read more about everyday working life >

Summary of load factors and resources

Psychosocial workload

Expert and knowledge work can involve timetable pressures, simultaneous work tasks, work interruptions caused by the overlapping of tasks, information overload, a high level of accuracy and the need to remember details. Interrelationships within networks and between individuals can also create conflicting expectations for the work as set by the different parties involved in the network. Harmful workload strain can be prevented by reducing work requirements and increasing work resources.

Physical workload

As a rule, knowledge work is done while sitting, and the amount of sedentary work may increase as knowledge work increases. In office work, most of the working hours are spent in a seated position. Continuous sedentary work and VDU (visual display unit) workplace harmful stress and strain on the musculoskeletal system. In office work, harmful physical workload is caused by:

- Long-term and continuous periods of sitting in a stationary position
- In VDU work, the same repetitive movements of the head or hands, awkward and unsupported arm/hand positions
- In work carried out in a seated position, a bent, twisted or backward-leaning neck position, hunched and unsupported back position

Harmful physical workload can be prevented through work ergonomics.

Key resources

In expert and knowledge work, the key resources for work ability are, in particular, a level of competence that corresponds to the demands of the work, personal development opportunities, the degree of influence employees have over their work, good leadership, and support from the work community.



Read more about load factors and resources >

Summary of phenomena and trends

Key change trends in expert and knowledge work include the acceleration and intensification of working life, the impact of changes in working life on the building of work communities, and AI developments. Keyways to support work ability in the middle of changes include Learning-oriented leadership, common ground rules that support the work, promoting the participation of the entire work community and the fostering of a supportive atmosphere.

Cognitive work

The increasing demands of knowledge work can be examined through the acceleration and intensification of working life. Work intensification means that the employee must invest more in the working day, i.e. the work pace increases, growing number of tasks must be carried out simultaneously and the idle time at work decreases. In addition to an accelerating work pace, the demands for autonomous work, decision-making and personal career management as well as competence development have increased. An excessive level of work intensification weakens the work performance, wellbeing at work and work motivation of employees. It is possible to prevent this through successful work ability management. In this section, the intensification of knowledge work is examined from the perspectives of increasing demands for learning, time management and concentration.

Social well-being of the work community

As remote and hybrid work have become more common, the social practices of work communities are changing. The loneliness experienced by working people in Finland has increased and experiences with communality are becoming polarising. One of the fundamental needs of a person is to experience a sense of belonging, that is, to feel that they are part of a community. When optimal, communality and a shared work environment also increase work engagement, i.e., positive motivation for and mood at work. Support from the work community also reduces the risk of burnout. It is important for work communities to recognise the significance of emotions and the quality of interactions. Practices for strengthening the sense of communality in the workplace should be a focus when managing knowledge work.

Artificial intelligence and the transformation of work

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to computers or computer programs that are capable of performing tasks normally requiring human intelligence. The development of AI and automation has extensive impacts on society and working life. It is challenging, however, to anticipate the pace and precise effects of technological developments, as changes rarely proceed in a straightforward manner. So far, AI has replaced mainly routine and repetitive tasks, but in the future, any easily predictable functions of knowledge work will also be able to be shifted from human to artificial intelligence. Even though it is possible to automate some existing tasks, the development of AI may also end up generating new kinds of work. Amidst this transformation, the work ability of those involved in expert and knowledge work can be supported by ensuring sufficient competence as the skill needs evolve.

- Knowledge work is characterised by continuous on-the-job learning and related management
- Time management is needed at the level of the organisation, supervisors, work communities and individual employees
- Common ground rules concerning uninterrupted working time and quiet workspaces support the ability to concentrate
- Prioritising work tasks and understanding the time required for them ensure time for the key aspects of the work
- People want to feel that they belong to a community/people have a natural need to belong to a social community
- The loneliness experienced by workingage people in Finland has increased
- A supportive and encouraging emotional atmosphere within the workplace strengthens communality and prevents loneliness at work
- Availability of adequate support (assistance, advice, information that supports the work, feedback, practical support) is important
- As AI develops, human areas of competence will further emphasise social interaction skills, creativity, empathy and multidisciplinary co-operation
- AI can significantly help the accessing and managing of information
- It is a good idea for workplaces to consider employees' individual need for support in connection with the introduction of AI
- The use of AI may generate new tasks, such as those involving ethical expertise

Read more about phenomena and trends >

Everyday working life – general information about expert and knowledge work

Expert and knowledge work

As the digital age advances, the amount of knowledge and expert work is expected to increase in many workplaces. The Labour Force Survey (2024) of Statistics Finland shows that the number of persons employed in fields of knowledge work has increased in recent years. For example, the number of people working as specialists and experts in different sectors is on the rise. In addition to these specific jobs, there are also people carrying out knowledge work in other professional areas. Expert and knowledge work can be involved in aspects of, for example, the trade sector, finance and insurance sector, social and health care sector, industry and construction.

The number of people engaged in expert work as managers, specialists or experts is increasing

Source: Statistics Finland, Labour Force Survey (2018-2023)



Number of employed persons, thousands

Experts

Specialists

Managers

Expert and knowledge work often require a high level of education, and the role of knowledge and cognitive work is significant in everyday working life. The work often involves a lot of data processing, the internalisation and generation of new information, problem solving and decision-making. Daily tasks can consist of, for example, meeting participation, teamwork, communications through digital applications, reacting to the activities of the network surrounding the work, information acquisition, planning work and application of acquired knowledge for the purpose of solving problems.

Expert and knowledge work often require a high level of education, which is why the share of company personnel representing the youngest employees is smaller in companies focused on expert and knowledge work than in other sectors.*

Shares of personnel by age group Source: Elo's data (2023)

Expert and knowledge work



Technological developments, automation and new digital tools increase the amount of expert tasks and knowledge work¹. Knowledge work is characterised by an inherent need for continuous learning, creativity, interaction skills and co-operation within networks. Teamwork is common for senior white-collar personnel (including experts, supervisors, management) and Statistics Finland's Quality of work life survey indicated that more than 80 per cent of them are involved in some degree of teamwork. It is estimated that the importance of the communication and interaction skills needed for teamwork will increase in working life². Expert work can also include socially and emotionally demanding tasks, especially in social and health care jobs.

Work ability in expert and knowledge work

An employee's assessment of their own work ability has been shown to predict future absences due to illness and the individual's perceived health status³. The self-assessment may be based on a single question in which the respondent assesses their personal work ability on a scale of 0–10, where 0 means that the person feels they are not able to work at all and 10 means that their work ability is at its best. In the self-assessment result, a given answer of 0–5 is classified as poor work ability, 6–7 as moderate, 8–9 as good, and 10 as excellent.

The majority of those engaged in expert and knowledge work feel that their work ability is at least good. However, about a quarter perceive that their work ability is at most moderate.* Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



- Weak
- * The Work community survey is a tool provided by Elo to its customers to assist with knowledge-based management The tool helps customers to gain a situational picture of the workplace resources that, if strengthened, could be utilised to support the work ability of the personnel. Each year, more than 25,000 workers in Finnish workplaces respond to the survey.

Work disability in expert and knowledge work

Mood disorders are the most common grounds for disability pension in knowledge and expert work.*

The incidence rate of disability pensions is indicated by the ratio of granted disability pensions to the total number of insured persons working in the field of knowledge and expert work. Mood disorders are the most common cause of disability pension in expert and knowledge work. However, in expert work, disability is also caused by other factors, such as back diseases.

Incidence rate of disability pensions

Source: Elo's data (2023)



I = cardiovascular diseases

M = musculoskeletal disorders

X = other diseases

* The diagrams in this report were created based on data concerning companies that had, in 2023, a higher than 80% share of personnel working as managers, experts and specialists.

SOURCES - EVERYDAY WORKING LIFE

Reading guide concerning sources

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Expert and knowledge work

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External sources for graphs

Statistics Finland. (2024). Labour Force Survey. Employed persons aged 15 to 74 by occupation (Classification of Occupations 2010) and sex. Employed persons aged 15-74 with variables Year, Sex, Occupation 2010 and Information. PxWeb (stat.fi)

Workload and resource factors

Expert and knowledge work can involve timetable pressures, simultaneous work tasks, work interruptions caused by the overlapping of tasks, information overload, a high level of accuracy and the need to remember details. Interrelationships within networks and between individuals can also create conflicting expectations for the work as set by the different parties involved in the network. Physical workloading is most often associated with the strain caused by VDU (visual display unit) and sedentary work. Harmful workload strain can be prevented by reducing work requirements and increasing work resources. In expert and knowledge work, the key resources for work ability are, in particular, a level of competence that corresponds to the demands of the work, personal development opportunities, the degree of influence employees have over their work, good leadership, and support from the work community.

Psychosocial work strain

Expert and knowledge work often involves receiving, processing and internalising new information and independently producing information. Information overload can lead to a situation where the internalisation of new information becomes strenuous and it is difficult to manage the work situation.^{1,2} Altogether 31% of senior white-collar workers (e.g., experts, supervisors and managers) experienced the amount of information to be processed as being excessive according to the Quality of work life survey of Statistics Finland³. The conditions for work management may also be weakened if the work is overly fragmented, there is an unnecessary number of communication channels, or the information provided at the workplace is unclear, incomplete or contradictory.

Expert work often involves carrying out parallel and simultaneous work tasks, as well as remembering the details of multiple separate tasks. The excessive dispersion of focus and the fragmentation of work into unnecessarily small entities increases the workload and can reduce an individual's work performance.⁴

Expert and knowledge work requires concentration, in which case work interruptions weaken the flow of work. The worst impact from interruptions occurs if the interrupting task is different in terms of topic from the ongoing one, in which case the individual's memory is burdened by having to remember the details of topically different and separate tasks at the same time.⁵ Expert work is characterised by autonomy or self-direction. The work is often carried out independent of time and place. Work flexibility, at its best, supports work ability. However, recovery from work may be compromised if the boundary between work and leisure is blurred and separating the two becomes difficult⁶. The recovery experiences are more positive when work and other areas of life are in balance. In knowledge and expert work, in particular, the boundary between work and leisure can be vague.*

Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



Balance between work and other areas of life

Expert work often involves the need for continuous learning and this need is expected to increase even further in the future⁷. Learning and development opportunities support the ability to work. Insufficient support for learning can lead to a situation in which a person feels burdened by learning requirements.

Expert work is often carried out as part of a network, which means that expectations for the work can simultaneously come from multiple different parties. The prioritisation and scheduling of the work often have to be coordinated with other parties within the network, and flow of work can be dependent on the activities of a co-worker or team. Extensive interdependencies and complex networking can undermine the ability to anticipate aspects of the work, the clarity of work expectations and the manageability of work situations.⁸

Multitasking, in the form of participating in discussions and reading and writing instructions, messages and documents, as well as remembering details and work phases are the most common aspects of expert work⁹. An examination of both the prevalence of these aspects and the workload strain they cause enables for the assessment of their impacts on work ability. For example, the execution of many different tasks at the same time is common among experts in office work and is perceived mainly as a loading factor, in which case the challenge posed by this aspect of the job is significant in terms of work ability. It is important to reduce multitasking and disturbances in everyday working life and to clarify the instructions and expectations for the work. On the other hand, linguistic functions such as monitoring discussions and reading documents are strongly present in expert work, but this aspect of the work does not stand out among the most significant load factors, and many even perceive it as an inspiring factor. Indeed, many integral aspects of the work are perceived as both inspiring and strenuous.

Many of the demands for expert work can simultaneously be perceived as both inspiring and strenuous

Source: Work-Life Knowledge Service, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, www.tyoelamatieto.fi (2021)



Inspiring

Work ability is weakened by ambiguous or conflicting expectations for work and unclear goals. When prolonged, excessive work requirements and workload increase the risk of overload and burnout. The requirements and goals for the work should correspond with the employee's resources, competence and available time. Psychosocial work strain at work can also be caused by conflicts and inappropriate behaviour within the work community. Mental health is affected by the overall stress and strain of life. If the workload strain has been excessive for a long period of time, any adversities and load factors from other areas of life may have an even greater impact on one's work ability.

Potential load factors in expert work



Physical workload

As a rule, knowledge work is done while sitting, and the amount of sedentary work may increase as knowledge work increases. In office work, most of the working hours are spent in a seated position. Continuous sedentary work and VDU workplace harmful stress and strain on the musculoskeletal system.¹⁰ In office work, harmful physical workload is caused by11:

- Long-term and continuous periods of sitting in a stationary position
- In VDU work, the same repetitive movements of the head or hands, awkward and unsupported arm/hand positions
- In work carried out in a seated position, a bent, twisted or backward-leaning neck position, hunched and unsupported back position

Excessive sitting has been linked to, among others, cardiovascular diseases and the risk of musculoskeletal disorders. Taking walks regularly is an effective way to reduce the negative effects of sitting. Even short walks of a few minutes activate the muscles and nervous system, which interrupts the loading process caused by long periods of sitting in a stationary position. Also, altering the work position between sitting and standing, for example, with the help of an adjustable electric desk, reduces harmful workload strain. Exercising during leisure time is not enough, on its own, to reduce the harmful effects of sedentary work; rather, it is essential to increase physical activity and counterbalance the sitting during the workday as well^{12,13}.

Other load factors

Occasional work trips can bring meaningful variation to expert work. Frequent travel, however, may involve longer working hours, difficulties in reconciling work and other areas of life and workload strain related to working hours (e.g., night travel, jet lag). Methods to support the work ability of those who travel for work may include, for example, providing information and advice on destinations (e.g., getting around, cultural habits, travel health care) and supporting the organisation and planning of work trips (e.g., booking flights and hotels) in order to release working time for other tasks. In addition, the need for recovery, e.g., due to jet lag, can be assessed as part of the planning of work and working time. When assessing the need for travel, it is important to consider the possibility of replacing work travel with online meetings^{14,15}.

Expert and knowledge work often takes place remotely. When contact between an employee and the work community is infrequent, an emotional distance is created with co-workers and supervisors16. New employees and those at the beginning of their careers are in a particularly vulnerable position. In remote work, there are fewer encounters between

the employee and the work community, so it may be more difficult to identify challenges related to work ability (e.g., substance abuse problems). Regular communication makes it easier to identify problems concerning work situation and work ability in a timely manner. Risk factors involved in remote work can also include longer working hours, the blurring of the boundary between work and other areas of life, a lack of breaks during the workday due to the number of remote meetings and poor ergonomics at the remote workspace.^{17,18,19}

Key job resources

There are a lot of resources that can help to support the work ability of those engaged in expert work. Key resources include, for example, personal development opportunities, the degree of influence employees have over their work, good leadership, and support from the work community.



Skill discretion at work

In order to support work ability, expert work must be suitably challenging and offer opportunities for learning and developing. Room for development within work is one of the most important resources for work ability in expert work²⁰. Expert work often offers diverse opportunities to utilise one's own competence, skills and personal strengths at work. In order to ensure learning, it is important to have sufficient support from the work community, reflection and dialogue, as well as allotted time for learning. Without adequate support and resources, the demands for continuous learning can become a load factor^{21,22}. In an optimal situation, learning is a part of the everyday work of experts, since it involves the application of information to practical situations and the exchange of information between employees. Peer learning among co-workers is one of the most important learning methods used in the workplace²³. Learning can often also be supported by assigning suitable new tasks and responsibilities, as well as by providing opportunities to participate in the development of workplace operations, products or services. Learning can be managed systematically by providing the necessary time and support. If there is an excessive amount of learning demands, the learning needs can be prioritised through discussions with the employee.

Employee productivity consists of the employee's competence, work ability and motivation.** When employees are involved in the joint development of work, employee productivity is higher than average.* Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



Level of inclusion in work community

** Employee productivity index has been calculated from the work community surveys of Elo's client companies. The calculation is based on the publication: Aura ym. Henkilöstötuottavuuden johtaminen 2018. Aura Consulting Oy.

Servant leadership

A leadership approach that supports work ability includes fair treatment, respect for personnel, assertiveness and the ability to address issues, encouragement of initiative, clear communication of expectations and goals for work, and the courage to develop the operating models of the workplace. These acts together constitute an approach known as servant leadership, which has been proven to promote, among other things, work engagement, commitment to the workplace, trust and cohesion within the work community, change adaptability and work performance. Servant leadership also reduces the risk of burnout among personnel²⁴. Successful supervisory work requires the supervisor to engage in continuous dialogue with the employees and to recognise any challenges related to everyday work and risks that weaken well-being in everyday work.

Possibilities for influence

Expert work often offers a wide range of opportunities to influence the work. The employee's possibilities to influence can refer to decision-making possibilities, for example, in the following areas: working hours, place of work, prioritisation of work tasks, working methods, the order of work and the manner in which the work is carried out and the development of common matters in the workplace. Appropriate and sufficient possibilities to have influence over one's work reduce the risk of disability²⁵. In terms of maintaining work ability, the importance of sufficient possibilities for influence increases as job demands increase²⁶. Appropriate possibilities for influence depend, in part, on the specific nature of the work. It is important to focus on the possibilities for influence that are essential to assure the work functionality and meet the needs of the employee in each individual job. If an individual is included in decisions that are not appropriate given the nature of their work or they are given too much decision-making responsibility without clear work objectives, this can weaken the clarity of their work responsibilities and increase the workload strain.²⁷

The ability to influence one's own work is a key resource, especially in knowledge work. When there are more possibilities to influence the work, the level of enthusiasm about the work is often higher.* Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



Possibilities to influence the work

 * The diagrams in this report were created based on data concerning companies that had, in 2023, a higher than 80% share of personnel working as managers, experts and specialists.

Support from the work community

Expert and knowledge work is increasingly being carried out in the form of teamwork. As the importance of teamwork increases, it is ever more essential for work ability management to focus on promoting the work community's interaction, the development of communality and the sharing of support between members of the work community. Such support reduces the risk of burnout and promotes work ability. Support from the work community may mean, for example, offering information and advice to everyday work or work-related problem-solving, practical assistance in performing work tasks, sharing feedback and providing emotional support²⁸. In remote work, it is especially important to ensure that those in the work community are supporting one another. In addition, it is worth taking advantage of the benefits of in-person meetings, especially for the purpose of learning together and generating innovations.

Promoting recovery

Work recovery refers to the process of allowing your body and mind to recuperate from the stress and strain of working. Tasks that correspond to the employee's level of competence and a reasonable workload and work schedule create the conditions for successful work recovery. Overloading slows recovery, and it is not possible to store up resources in advance, for example, on holiday, to help with work recovery. The most important aspect of work ability is the daily integration of regular and steady recovery techniques. Outside of work, recovery is supported by psychological detachment from work, adequate rest and sleep, meaningful hobbies and positive social relationships.

Recovery should take place already during the workday. This will prevent the workload strain from accumulating and allows for more efficient recovery during free time^{29,30}. Relax-paced coffee and lunch breaks support work recovery. Other ways to support recovery during the workday include, for example, short microbreaks (less than 5 minutes), variation between heavy and light work tasks throughout the day, transition time between meetings, and exercise moments or muscle-relaxing stretches while working. Even short moments of reinvigoration contribute to recovery and promote work functionality³¹. Giving employees influence over their breaks during the workday and their working hours and shifts will support their work ability.

SOURCES - WORKLOAD AND RESOURCE FACTORS

Reading guide concerning sources

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Phenomena and trends

Introduction

Key change trends in expert and knowledge work include the acceleration and intensification of working life, the impact of changes in working methods on the building of work communities, and AI developments. Keyways to support work ability in the midst of changes include learning management, common ground rules that support the work, the participatory involvement of the entire work community and the fostering of a supportive atmosphere.

Cognitive work

The increasing demands of knowledge work can be examined through the acceleration and intensification of working life^{1,2}. Work intensification means that the pace of work is increasing. Work tasks need to be carried out simultaneously and the chances to take breaks from the work are fewer. In addition to an accelerating work pace, the demands for autonomous work, decision-making and career management as well as competence development have increased³. It has been shown that an excessive level of work intensification weakens the work performance, well-being at work and work motivation of employees^{4,5,6}, in which case the phenomenon should also be considered from the perspective of work ability management. In this section, the intensification of knowledge work will be reviewed from the perspectives of increasing demands for learning, time management and concentration.

- Knowledge work is characterised by continuous on-the-job learning and related management
- Time management is needed at the level of the organisation, supervisors, work communities and individual employees.
- Common ground rules for uninterrupted working time and quiet workspaces support the ability to concentrate
- Prioritising work tasks and understanding the time required for them create time for the key aspects of the work

Read more about cognitive work >

Increasing competence requirements call for learning management

In information-intensive work, the demands for competence development have increased⁷. The importance of continuous learning among working-age people has risen to the centre of working life discourse as a result of changing trends in society (e.g., increased competition, climate change, digitalisation) and the reform for continuous learning as included in the Government Programme in 2019^{8,9}. Although the increasing demands for learning are mentioned with reference to changes in working life, it is good to recognise the simultaneous timelessness and timeliness of the phenomenon of continuous learning. Change in working life is a permanent state in itself, which creates justification for the development and learning of individuals, communities and organisations.¹⁰ Although organisations understand the importance of learning, their means of supporting learning are often limited to courses and training¹¹. These alone are, however, no longer sufficient to meet the rapidly changing needs for competence. When learning is continuous and realised in the form of on-the-job learning, organisations need to develop ways to support this method of daily learning.¹²

Factors that facilitate and hinder on-the-job learning can be considered from the perspectives of individual and workplace characteristics^{13,14,15}. The individual capacity for on-the-job learning is formed by previous skills and experiences, motivation, agency and commitment, self-confidence and life situation¹⁶. Among those conditions necessary for individual learning, the key conditions include curiosity, orientation to learning and commitment¹⁷. At the same time, the characteristics of the workplace have a significant impact on the possibilities for on-the-job learning. For example, it has been identified that an organisational culture in which individuals have sufficient opportunities to influence their own work and mistakes are permitted supports on-the-job learning¹⁸. On-the-job learning can be supported by an organisation by, for example, building a safe and confidential learning environment¹⁹. A participatory culture within the workplace is a key factor that facilitates learning, as equal access to participation with the work community promotes learning. Good co-operative relationships (co-workers, supervisors, management) that offer the possibility to discuss openly, assess the success and failings of projects, and give positive and constructive feedback create opportunities for everyday learning. Additionally, clear roles and responsibilities within the organisation, and the utilisation of different HR management practices, such as job rotation, can support on-the-job learning.20

Studies show that reasonable demands for learning at work increase the meaningfulness of the work and work engagement. Situations in which learning requirements are very minimal or all too much result in the work being perceived as less meaningful.^{21,22} Older employees may experience more work intensification and enhanced knowledge and skill-based learning requirements, while younger employees experience more requirements related to enhanced career planning and decision-making. However, there is no correlation between an employee's age and their experiences of increased work requirements in relation to well-being at work (work fatigue, work engagement).²³ Employees must be offered a variety of different resources and opportunities to address competence and learning requirements, since there are indications that over- or under-dimensioned learning requirements weaken an individual's well-being at work and work ability.^{24,25,26}

Five steps to initiate learning in the workplace (see the learning startup package)

- Talk about learning
- Make time for learning
- Recognise that development is everyone's responsibility
- Share competence
- Support individuals

Read more and download the learning startup package (only available in Finnish): Learning startup package in Finnish >

Work prioritization and time management

Some of the most significant load factors in cognitive work include interruptions and disturbances, the need to perform multiple tasks simultaneously and time pressures related to project work²⁷. The interconnectedness of working in networks and the diversity of work communities require time management at the levels of organizations, supervisors, work communities, and individual experts. Prioritising work tasks supports time management²⁸. Supporting employees' time management has been shown to boost work productivity and occupational well-being²⁹.

The importance of time management as a part of work ability management is increasingly significant in fragmented work and complex work environments, where productive work requires extensive collaboration instead of individual performances. In networked work, it is essential to identify the core tasks of the organization and clarify common goals. Complex overlapping projects can hinder each other's progress. Therefore, it would be important for both the management of the organisation and the employees to have a shared understanding of the work priorities and the time necessary to complete various tasks. Recognising the time it takes to complete tasks and time budgeting support the time management of experts.³⁰ In smaller internal workgroups within the organization, it is also important to ensure the clarity of goals and schedules, as well as to guarantee the commitment of all project participants to common objectives. A shared understanding of the overall tasks, sub-goals, and the clear and equitable distribution of tasks among different individuals are essential for smooth collaboration. Furthermore, organisations can support time management by enabling remote work and creating environments within the office that are suitable for different kinds of work. Also, setting ground rules for time use and, for example, designating specific periods of uninterrupted work time can be useful.³¹

An expert can manage their work by prioritizing tasks, aided by creating concrete task lists and breaking down work tasks into sub-tasks. Tasks can be prioritised according to different perspectives, such as urgency or interest. The use of an expert's working time is also partially planned out in co-operation with their supervisor. The employer must provide sufficient guidelines for work prioritisation. The supervisor plays an important role in creating a culture that respects everyone's time and in establishing common time management methods that will continue to function within changing circumstances. An open discussion atmosphere with regard to the use of time and a knowledge of the working methods of individuals help to address challenges.³²

Restoring and safeguarding the ability to concentrate

One of the key building blocks in terms of time management is the safeguarding of employees' ability to concentrate. An expert's productivity and their ability to focus are strongly interlinked, so the management of interruptions is, in many ways, in the interest of organisations³³. The most important factors supporting the ability to concentrate include common ground rules, methods for managing information overload, and the planning of the premises and work breaks, which can help to reduce disruptions and interruptions. Restoring the ability to concentrate depends a lot on the working environment but also on jointly agreed practices and individuals' own working habits.

A significant proportion of experts and knowledge workers work in open offices, in which case it would be good to establish different working spaces, for example, for group work and quiet work. Adequate lighting, as well as the reduction of commotion and sound, visual barriers and the placement of workstations also support concentration in open spaces³⁴. The ability to concentrate can also be supported by enabling for flexible remote work solutions. On the other hand, remote work can also be affected by factors that reduce concentration, such as disturbances caused by the remote working environment. Common agreements within the work community can ensure that the workspace is used appropriately, meaning that, for example, meetings are held in conference rooms. In addition to the appropriate use of the work environment, cognitive ergonomics can be supported by jointly agreeing how much of the work calendar can be designated as uninterrupted working time, how communications should take place within the work community and how quickly messages need to be responded to. In order to minimise information overload, it makes sense to clarify which communication channels are most suitable for each situation, as well as to ensure the clarity of communication and that recipient lists are carefully considered. Methods for data organisation and storage, such as uniform folder structures and file templates, ensure streamlining and time efficiency.³⁵

It is the individual's responsibility to comply with the agreed operating methods and to respect the time allotted for uninterrupted work. For example, it is polite to have conversations or take care of private matters at a distance from others who are working. In addition, it is a good idea for everyone to set aside time in their calendar for focused working. Muting notifications and alarms and setting applications to the 'Do not disturb' mode make it easier to focus on work uninterrupted. It is advisable to set aside a separate time in the calendar for the purpose of asking questions and sharing advice, and to consider whether a matter for discussion could be postponed to a later time.³⁶

Social well-being of the work community

As remote and hybrid work have become more common, the social practices of work communities are changing. The loneliness experienced by working people in Finland has increased and the experiences with communality are polarising³⁷. One of the fundamental needs of a person is to experience a sense of belonging³⁸, that is, to feel that they are part of a community. At their best, communality and a shared work environment also increase work engagement, i.e., positive motivation for and mood at work³⁹. Support from the work community also reduces the risk of burnout⁴⁰. It is important for the significance of emotions and the quality of interactions to be recognised within work communities. Practices for strengthening the sense of communality in the workplace should be a focus for the management of knowledge work.

- People want to feel that they belong to a community/people have a natural need to belong to a social community
- The loneliness experienced by working-age people in Finland has increased
- A supportive and encouraging emotional atmosphere within the workplace strengthens communality and prevents loneliness at work
- Availability of adequate support (assistance, advice, access to information that supports the work, feedback, practical support)

Read more about the well-being of the work community >

Emotions are part of the workplace

Emotions are involved in people's activities, interactions, decision-making and thinking, and play a key role in working life from the perspective of individuals and organisations^{41,42}. The emotions of individual employees are related to, for example, motivation, well-being at work and job satisfaction. From the point of view of organisations, emotions play a role, for example, in the social relations of work communities, in change situations in working life and in connection with work developments. For example, from the point of view of learning management, it has been shown that certain emotions, such as safety, curiosity and courage, contribute to on-the-job learning, while other emotions, such as feelings of exclusion and uncertainty, may hinder on-the-job learning⁴³. Emotions can, therefore, promote or hinder success in achieving goals, which is why it is good to be aware of them.

Loneliness among working people has increased

Loneliness has been identified internationally as a social and public health problem⁴⁴. In 2023, altogether 28% of the working population in Finland had experienced loneliness in on-site work, 25% in hybrid work and 32% in full-time remote work. General loneliness has increased among those engaged in full-time remote work from 2021 to 2023.⁴⁵ Loneliness experienced in working life is rarely talked about, even though every fifth Finnish worker experiences loneliness and every third occasionally feels like an outsider⁴⁶.

Workplace loneliness means that an employee feels like an outsider in the workplace and isolated from the rest of the work community as well as having a weak sense of belonging^{47,48,49}. Loneliness experienced at work can be considered a risk to work ability, as it can weaken work performance, increase the symptoms of burnout and reduce perceived work engagement^{50,51,52}. It has also been shown that workplace loneliness can undermine commitment to the organisation and the experience of support from co-workers and supervisors⁵³. Feeling a lack of connection and communality makes it more likely that one will develop workplace loneliness.⁵⁴ Remote and hybrid work, for example, carry the potential risk of preventing high-quality social relationships from forming within work communities⁵⁵. On the other hand, however, there are also indications that the site of work is not directly correlated with perceived loneliness⁵⁶.

Preventing loneliness in the workplace

Experiences of workplace loneliness can be prevented by strengthening the quality of interactions and communication within the work community and by offering support and assistance to co-workers⁵⁷. The development of an encouraging and supportive working environment is a key element in the prevention of workplace loneliness, as it has been found that simply providing opportunities for interaction and co-operation are not enough to eliminate the negative effects of perceived feeling of being an outsider⁵⁸. The greatest risks to the sense of communality have been proven to include ethical stress at work and conflicting work expectations⁵⁹. Employees who do not experience workplace loneliness feel a stronger sense of belonging within their organisation and behave more proactively, which is why it is worthwhile to support the formation of teams and the development of an encouraging atmosphere within work communities⁶⁰.

How to alleviate loneliness in the workplace (adapted from HelsinkiMissio 2024)

- Recognise loneliness and the feeling of being an outsider
- Discuss the issue of loneliness
- Show compassion to yourself and others

Download HelsinkiMissio's Loneliness workbook: Workbook >

AI and the transformation of work

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to computers or computer programs that are capable of performing tasks normally requiring human intelligence⁶¹. The development of AI and automation has extensive impacts on society and working life. It is challenging, however, to anticipate the pace and precise effects of technological development, as changes rarely proceed in a straightforward manner⁶². So far, AI has replaced mainly routine and repetitive tasks, but in the future, any easily predictable functions of knowledge work will also be able to be shifted from human to artificial intelligence⁶³. Even though it is possible to automate some existing tasks, it is estimated that AI will also end up generating new kinds of work. Amidst this shift, the work ability of those involved in expert and knowledge work can be supported by ensuring sufficient competence as the skill needs change.

- As AI develops, human areas of competence will further emphasise interaction skills, creativity, empathy and multidisciplinary co-operation
- Al can significantly help the accessing and managing of information
- It is a good idea for workplaces to consider employees' individual need for support in connection with the introduction of AI
- The use of AI may generate new tasks, such as those involving ethical expertise

Read more about AI and transformation of work >

AI changes the nature of work tasks

Already today, AI has gained a stronghold in the everyday work inherent to many expert positions. For example, AI can be used for basic speech recognition and translation. In addition, AI solutions are currently being tested for use in transport, medicine and the identification of emotional expressions⁶⁴. Rapid changes can raise concerns about the disappearance of jobs and the adequacy of one's own expertise. Different views have been expressed on the impacts of replacing human work with AI solutions, but it may be more reasonable to focus on changes to individual functions or tasks within the work rather than entire job positions, since there are very few jobs in which all aspects of the work could be carried out by AI65. When considering the division of work between human and machine, it is often advisable to also focus on the division of work between people and, if necessary, to make changes⁶⁶.

As artificial intelligence replaces simpler cognitive tasks, people may have more time freed from repetitive work to engage in more complex tasks ⁶⁷. As the tasks become more challenging, this also creates new opportunities for experts to develop their competence⁶⁸, which can strengthen their work ability. On the other hand, this can also reduce the time for rest and recovery during the workday and the variation provided by earlier routine tasks at work. Al is a significant help when it comes to improving access to and managing information⁶⁹. Al can be used to efficiently sort through and filter useful information, as well as to produce analyses of large amounts of data that would be difficult and stressful for humans to manage^{70.}

It is unlikely, however, that AI will quickly be able to replace tasks requiring diverse types of communication, expression of emotions, intuition or creativity, and an understanding of culture and human activity⁷¹. In the AI era, multidisciplinary co-operation, interaction skills, flexibility and empathy have become emphasised, as human work increasingly calls for more creative problem-solving together with others⁷². In an increasingly globalised world and, in particular, within aging Finland, the ability of experts to collaborate with people from different cultures is also emphasised⁷³.

In addition to creativity and social intelligence, the ability to anticipate the future and make decisions still distinguishes humans from machines ⁷⁴. Decision-making requires a broad understanding of the whole issue and understanding of what makes sense in a given context, and in this respect, humans remain superior⁷⁵. In addition, AI is guided by statistical reasoning, in which case moral and value issues are not always taken into account in the same way as they are when humans are making decisions. Decision-making often requires ethical considerations and it is possible that the development of AI may give rise to new types of tasks, for example, that involve ethical expertise⁷⁶.

Learning and competence in the AI era

As working life evolves, the skills needed for the work are also changing. This requires workplaces to offer further training and to encourage employees to develop their skills. The impact that AI and other digital developments have on well-being at work largely depends on management practices and how companies assure the maintenance of employee competence⁷⁷. On the other hand, simply increasing training and skills, as such, is not a solution to ensure the sufficient know-how required by working life, as it is also necessary to be able to anticipate what type of skills will not be possible or justifiable to replace with technology in the future78. The significance of continuous learning is also emphasised⁷⁹. Sector-specific skills management and creative and social intelligence form the foundation for learning within the AI era⁸⁰.

The involvement of employees in the acquisition processes and introduction of new technologies is an essential aspect of change management. When employees are involved in these processes, it increases work satisfaction and the motivation to use new technologies in a way that improves productivity⁸¹. The sooner employees have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with AI or other technological developments, the more likely it is that they will be able to take advantage of the opportunities created by the new technology⁸². Even if an AI-based system is only used to support the work without any need to retrain the system, it requires an understanding of the system's operating principles in order to use it properly and derive benefit from it⁸³. An understanding of what AI does will also make it easier to find possible errors and correct them. In the future, interactive learning between humans and machines will also be an increasingly common aspect of working life⁸⁴.

SOURCES – PHENOMENA AND TRENDS

Reading guide concerning sources

For the purposes of this report, when the reference number is within a sentence, the reference only refers to the portion of the text preceding the specific reference number in question. If the reference number comes after the full stop at the end of a sentence, the source reference applies to the whole paragraph or to the sentences from the previous to the current reference number. A full source reference is given in the source list when the source first appears. When the same source is reference dagain, only the (primary) author's surname and year of the source publication are given as well as, if necessary, more specific identification information, such as the name of the source.

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Solutions for work

Leadership and management

Learning and competence management

- Assess and anticipate future competence requirements in the occupational sector and workplace
- Discuss learning needs and emphasise the importance of learning as part of everyday working life
- **Prioritise the need for learning** in discussions with employees
- Allow sufficient time for learning
- Define and monitor indicators for learning and competence development
- Take individual needs into consideration when providing support for learning
- Promote peer learning and knowledge sharing (e.g., practices for information exchange, work as partners and in teams)
- Develop a positive feedback culture (peer feedback from one employee to another, feedback from functional/administrative supervisors to employees, feedback from employees to supervisors)
- Share realisations and feedback from customers and networks with the work community
- Identify personal strengths and offer opportunities to utilise them
- Draw up personal development plans and career paths
- Offer targeted group-based career coaching (e.g., at the start, middle and senior phase of the career)
- Organise joint forums and opportunities to participate in the joint development of the work and workplace

Servant leadership

- Ensure fair treatment
- **Develop of a feedback culture** (receiving feedback from employees and sharing feedback with employees)
- Show appreciation
- Encourage initiative
- Adopt a constructive approach to errors
- Clearly communicate work objectives and expectations
- Have the courage to develop workplace operating models

- Provide positive encouragement when it comes to trying new things
- Support development and career paths

Issues specific to the management of remote workers

The principles of good leadership are mainly the same in both remote work and on-site management. The following management methods are emphasised in remote work:

- Maintain regular contact with employees regarding workload, work situation and well-being at work
- Establish common practices for the use of communication channels
- Support self-direction and autonomy (e.g., counselling on time management tools, support for prioritisation of work)
- **Promote a culture that** supports the reconciliation of work and other areas of life and respects the set boundary between work and leisure
- Lead by example the management and supervisors balance work and other areas of life in a way that supports their own work ability
- Agree on clear ground rules for sharing and saving information
- Ensure time for breaks within remote work (number of meetings and duration of meetings)
- Share information about and provide tools that support work ergonomics (e.g., additional display for desktop work)

According to research data¹, the significance of a people-oriented management approach, which includes identity management and servant leadership is emphasised in multi-location work. Identity management involves representing, guiding and strengthening the collective identity of the group. Servant leadership involves, for example, listening to employees, providing encouragement, showing appreciation, taking individual strengths into account and clarifying goals and expectations for work.

Supporting cognitive work

Strengthen cognitive ergonomics

- Support work that requires concentration through the design of workspaces, instructions for use of workspaces and remote work practices
- Agree on the ground rules for the use of working time (e.g., working time that supports concentration and is uninterrupted)
- Reduce information overload and improve knowledge management (e.g., establish common practices for recording and storing information, moderate the number of communication channels and tools, assure communications are appropriately targeted)
- Streamline the flow of information (timely and clear information)
- Address disruptions in the flow the information and issues hindering access to information
- Reduce information overload by **clarifying responsibilities** in project work. Share information in a targeted manner, as needed
- Establish common practices and the division of responsibility for recording and storing information
- Moderate the number of communication channels and tools in use
- Assure the communications are appropriately targeted
- Utilise templates, models and checklists to streamline the production of information, and compartmentalise and record issues to be adopted
- Minimise the number of overlapping projects

Plan and organise the work

- Ensure a shared understanding of the work priorities and the time spent on various tasks
- Manage the pace of work through careful time budgeting, good work planning and anticipation of peak work situations
- **Clarify work expectations** and provide guidance on prioritising work

Manage the flow of information

- Enhance the flow of information (e.g., identify obstacles)
- Reduce unnecessary information overload

Minimise physical workload

- Improve physical ergonomics (e.g., guidance on ergonomic working positions, work desks and chairs that offer sufficient adjustment possibilities)
- Encourage exercise during breaks or muscle-relaxing stretching during work
- Reduce continuous sedentary positions (e.g., short walks during the working day, use of electric desks)

Provide support for the reconciliation of work and other aspects of life

- Consider aspects of private life as part of the maintenance of work ability
- Utilise flexibility and allow for possibilities to influence working hours
- Introduce possibilities for remote work
- Establish operational models for those returning to work after a family leave
- **Train supervisors** on the methods available in the workplace to support the reconciliation of work and other aspects of life

Establish recovery practices

- Personnel training and shared information on ways to improve recovery outside of work
- Workday recovery practices (e.g., variation between lighter and heavier tasks during the day, common break practices and opportunities to influence the timing of breaks, transition period between meetings)

Steps involved in work adaptation²

- Work adaptation improves the conditions for an employee to work successfully when a disability, illness or life situation weakens their work ability.
- Effective work adaptation requires commonly agreed operating models in the workplace. A common operating model within the workplace promotes the equal treatment of personnel.

Steps involved in work accommodation

- Design organizational practises for work accommodation
- Identify the individual need for work accommodation (e.g., by the employee themselves, a co-worker, a supervisor or the occupational health service)
- Understand and gather information about the individual situation What are the most important causes of the work-related strain? (e.g., social requirements of the work, tasks requiring concentration) What are important work resources for individual situations? (e.g., what increases work satisfaction, which tasks are performed most smoothly)? What type of support is needed?
- Determine the optimal methods in accordance with the workplace's practices (e.g., working time changes, tools that support work ability, increased support for concentration, executive functions in everyday working life, replacement of socially demanding work situations with other work tasks)
- Introduce work accommodation measures to everyday working life
- Monitor the smoothness of everyday work and the status of work ability

Other methods for supporting work ability

- Career coaching (individual or group coaching)
- Support for stress management (for example, individual or group coaching)
- Individual therapy
- Support from occupational health care in lifestyle interventions (for example, nutrition therapy to support weight management or a healthy diet, substance abuse rehabilitation)

SOURCES - SOLUTIONS FOR WORK

Reading guide concerning sources

For the purposes of this report, when the reference number is within a sentence, the reference only refers to the portion of the text preceding the specific reference number in question. If the reference number comes after the full stop at the end of a sentence, the source reference applies to the whole paragraph or to the sentences from the previous to the current reference number. A full source reference is given in the source list when the source first appears. When the same source is reference dagain, only the (primary) author's surname and year of the source publication are given as well as, if necessary, more specific identification information, such as the name of the source.

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Statistics and graphs

The number of people engaged in expert work as managers, specialists or experts is increasing. Source: Statistics Finland, Labour Force Survey (2018–2023)



Number of employed persons, thousands

Professional Group

Experts

Specialists

Managers

Expert and knowledge work often require a high level of education, which is why the share of company personnel representing the youngest employees is smaller in companies focused on expert and knowledge work than in other sectors.*

Shares of personnel by age group Source: Elo's data (2023)

Expert and knowledge work



The majority of those engaged in expert and knowledge work feel that their work ability is at least good. However, about a quarter perceive that their work ability is at most moderate.*

Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



Mood disorders are the most common grounds for disability pension in expert and knowledge work.*

Incidence rate of disability pensions

Source: Elo's data (2023)



Load and resource factors

The experience of work recovery is stronger when work and other areas of life are in balance. In expert and knowledge work, in particular, the boundary between work and leisure can be vague.*

Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



Balance between work and other areas of life

Many of the demands for expert work can simultaneously be perceived as both inspiring and strenuous.

Source: Work-Life Knowledge Service, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, www.tyoelamatieto.fi (2021)

Multitasking	Memory & Digital	Planning
Linguistic	Disturbances	Ideation
	Time pressure	Instruction- related problems
Inspiring		Strenuous

Employee productivity consists of the employee's competence, work ability and motivation. When employees are involved in the joint development of work, employee productivity is higher than average.* Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



The ability to influence one's own work is a key resource, especially in knowledge work. When there are more possibilities to influence the work, the level of enthusiasm about the work is often higher.* Source: Elo's Work community survey (2023)



Possibilities to influence the work

Description of Work community survey

The Work community survey is a tool provided by Elo to its customers to assist with knowledge-based management The tool helps customers to gain a situational picture of the workplace resources that, if strengthened, could be utilised to support the work ability of the personnel. Each year, more than 25,000 workers in Finnish workplaces respond to the survey.