



Australian Government

Comcare

THE WORK ABILITY APPROACH

Work Ability is a comprehensive and contemporary approach to understanding and managing wellbeing in the workplace. Work Ability goes beyond traditional workplace interventions by assisting individuals to manage their own wellbeing, now and in the future, to make sure workers are able to work at their best and retire healthy.

THE WORK ABILITY MODEL—OPTIMISING HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY

Developed under the leadership of Professor Juhani Ilmarinen, the Work Ability Model was pioneered in the early 1980s at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH). The original purpose of the Finnish model was to predict retirement age, so the instrument has a strong health component. However, after 30 years of research, it also captures factors relating to an individual's abilities and knowledge relating to work, and their sources of motivation in work life. It also recognises broader social and environmental factors that impact on a worker's ability to work.

The Work Ability Model is best conceptualised using the 'house' diagram. The Finnish Model likens Work Ability to the roof of a house. There are four floors in the house that represent different influences, which together contribute to the roof's ongoing integrity—the ability to work.

Floor 4: Work, work community and leadership

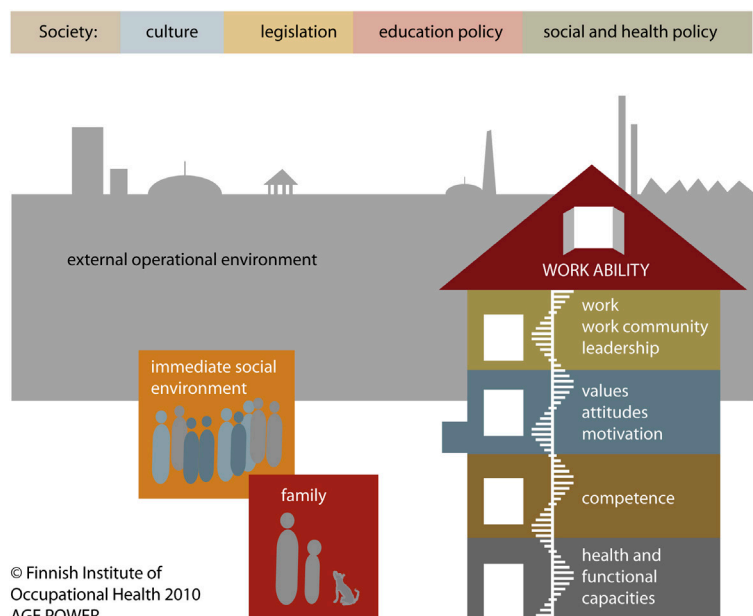
This includes:

- > the key role of the immediate supervisor and their competence and ability to facilitate resources
- > respectful treatment in the workplace
- > designing, creating, supporting and maintaining workplaces in which workers of all abilities can use their skills to engage in productive, safe and meaningful work.

Floor 3: Values, attitudes and motivation

This includes:

- > extrinsic and intrinsic benefits the individual derives from work
- > job security
- > financial security.



Floor 2: Competence

This includes:

- > knowledge, skills and abilities and their development through training
- > experience.

Floor 1: Health and functional capabilities

This includes:

- > physical health
- > psychological wellbeing
- > leisure activities.

INFLUENCES OUTSIDE THE WORK ABILITY HOUSE ALSO PLAY A ROLE

This includes:

- > family and community
- > social infrastructure
- > the operational environment.

SUPPORTING THE ABILITY TO WORK

Work that suits a worker's knowledge, skills and circumstances—undertaken in a safe, supporting environment—plays a huge part in helping them be the best they can. The workplace is also an important part of recovery from illness.

Professor Ilmarinen identified the following elements as important in supporting the ability to work.

HEALTH

The relationship between work and health is an important one. People in work are generally healthier than those who are not. However, for many workers, their ability to work is affected by common conditions such as back injuries, arthritis and mental health conditions.

Our health choices and circumstances also have lifelong consequences that impact on workforce participation. Workplaces can reduce productivity losses and premature retirement for health reasons by assessing risks when people are in their forties and providing appropriate support before problems become acute. Health promotion strategies should target specific, identified needs and align with business strategy to create a culture focused on wellness. This could include lifestyle, familial and social choices as well as personal health.

COMPETENCE/SKILLS

Lifelong learning promotes integration, participation and wellbeing. We need to recognise the diverse skills of the entire workforce, including supporting skill development for older workers. As workplaces embrace new technologies, new opportunities exist to reduce constraints on work ability. Physical capacity and proximity become less important for effective work engagement.

Productive, healthy and safe workplaces that implement workplace supports make adjustments to promote ability to work, and implement organisation-wide strategies to create an inclusive and flexible workplace. An innovative workplace should include initiatives such as mentoring, job transitions, on-the-job training, adult learning and flexible and adaptive career pathways.

ATTITUDES

Attitudes to work, disability and ageing can influence the recruitment, promotion and retention of workers. To promote Work Ability, the workplace must respect the diverse skills, abilities and cultural perspectives of all. People at work need to be involved in the decisions that affect them, have a sense of purpose, and feel respected for their unique contribution.

The culture and mindset of managers is vitally important as they make sure workers have the right support at the right time to maintain their ability to work. Support from human resource management—in areas such as people management, accessing flexible work arrangements, accessibility and useability—provides a greater range of options to promote individual potential. Building a culture of reciprocal trust, showing appreciation and communicating clearly will improve engagement and productivity.

WORK

Federal law puts high priority on preventing harm at work and reducing the number and severity of safety incidents. Productive good work has a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of employees, provides financial security, facilitates social inclusion, assists personal development, develops friendships, builds self-esteem and ensures protection from physical and psychosocial harm.

Healthy and safe workplaces are ones that prevent harm and promote health and wellbeing through the participation of workers. Productive work plays an enormous part in helping someone recover from illness and prevents unnecessary disability. Good work is the most effective means to improve the wellbeing of individuals, their families and communities. Work arrangements, flexibility, leadership and feedback are all important.

EMPOWERING WORKERS TO CONTRIBUTE

The workplace is centre stage for supporting and enhancing productivity. Far too many workers leave the labour market unnecessarily due to ill health and disability, and too few with a reduced capacity manage to stay employed. This is why action to sustain a worker's ability to work and support for those workers with a health problem to stay at work, or return to work after illness, are critical to healthy productivity. Also important are strategies to assist those with a disability enter the workplace. The culture and systems of a workplace and mindset of managers are critical to supporting the ability to work.

ABOUT PROFESSOR ILMARINEN

Professor Juhani Ilmarinen is highly regarded both in Finland and worldwide for his research, development and pioneering in ageing and quality of life. Formerly Director of the Work and Life Course at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, it was under his leadership the Work Ability Model and Index (WAI), an integrated and holistic approach to work-based wellbeing, were developed. In 2009, Professor Ilmarinen established JIC Ltd. The ongoing mission of the company worldwide is to implement an evidence-based model for Work Ability and to promote the status of all generations with respect to the concepts of age management, Work Ability and the life course.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Juhani Ilmarinen Consulting—www.jic.fi/

J Ilmarinen, *Towards a longer work life! Ageing and the quality of work in the European Union*, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, 2005.

Finnish Institute of Occupational Health—www.ttl.fi/en/Pages/default.aspx