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Reference:

Kärkkäinen, R. Reiman, A. Kärki, A. Karttunen, E. Ylikahri
K. 2023.

The Occupational Healthcare of Workers in Cig Economy
International Public Health Conference (IPHC) 16.-
18.3.2023.

The Occupational Healthcare of Workers in Gig Economy

¹Health and Welfare Faculty, Satakunta University of Applied Sciences, Pori, Finland, riitta.karkkainen@samk.fi

²Industrial Engineering and Management, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland, arto.reiman@oulu.fi

³Health and Welfare Faculty, Satakunta University of Applied Sciences, Pori, Finland, anne.karki@samk.fi

⁴Industrial Engineering and Management, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland, elli.karttunen@tuni.fi

⁵Health Department, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki, Finland, kati.ylikahri@metropolia.fi

Riitta Kärkkäinen

Abstract

Introduction

Sustainability of gig work has been questioned due to the high incidence of occupational injuries and accidents and challenges in employee well-being (e.g., Hopkins, 2017; Hünefeld et al., 2020). Gig workers often have poorer work conditions than permanent workers. The gig workers are mostly young and inexperienced and work in low-skilled occupations. Therefore, they are considered a vulnerable group of workers. (Countouris ym. 2016, p. 24-27.) Gig work comprises employment contracts in terms of contingent work including independent contractors, platform work, crowd workers, work in shared economy and self-employment (Watson et al., 2021). It has become more common globally (International Labour Organization 2016, p. 87).

In Finland, employers are obliged to arrange and organize occupational healthcare (OHC) for their workers, including gig workers. OHC consists of the activities of qualified occupational physicians, occupational health nurses, occupational physiotherapists, and occupational psychologists. The services are mostly provided by private healthcare companies. The goal is to promote workers' work ability by preventing work-related illnesses and accidents and boosting safety and health at work in co-operation with the employer and the workers. (Occupational Healthcare Act 1383/2001.)

In our study, we focused on workers employed directly in a workplace with part-time, periodic, or zero-hours contract or hired through a temporary work agency. Our aim was to produce new knowledge and add understanding about OHC involvement in promoting gig workers' occupational safety and health.

Our research question was: How are the OHC services arranged and organized in the gig work context, and what are the potential development needs, according to the experiences of OHC professionals?

Methods

We conducted a qualitative, descriptive study in 2021 and 2022 in Finland. The data were collected with semi-structured interviews individually, in pairs or groups. We asked four occupational health nurses, one occupational health physician, and two OHC key account managers, about arrangements and organization of OHC services to gig workers. Our focus was on their experiences of co-operation, orientation, communication, and support of work ability in such employment contracts. The interview protocol was tested beforehand. The interviews lasted about one hour each and they were recorded. Inductive content analysis method was used for the data analysis.

Results

The preliminary results show that arrangements and organization of OHC often fail regarding safety and health promotion of gig workers. Development needs lie in the insufficient co-operation and unclear roles of the actors. The

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triangular employment relationship challenges co-operation in temporary agency work, and as such, involvement of OHC. When considering our results, the unique OHC system in Finland should be acknowledged.

Conclusion

OHC has an important role in promotion of gig workers' work ability in co-operation with the employers and the workers. Greater involvement of OHC in occupational safety and health promotion of gig workers is needed to prevent work-related illnesses and accidents.

What will audience learn from your presentation?

- The results of this study produce new knowledge and add understanding about OHC involvement in gig workers' occupational safety and health promotion in a Finnish context
- The results contribute in developing good occupational safety and health practices regarding gig work in workplaces
- Future research needs are discussed especially of the opportunities and barriers of occupational safety and health promotion in temporary agency work globally

Biography of presenting author

Master of Public Health (MPH), MSc (ergonomics), occupational physiotherapist, Dr. Riitta Kärkkäinen studied public health in the University of Tromsø, Norway following studies of ergonomics and occupational health at the University of Eastern Finland. She received her PhD degree in 2019. Work well-being-related topics, including return-to-work support for workers with job burnout, are her main research interests. Currently, she works at the Satakunta University of Applied Sciences in Pori, Finland and is a member of a national project team exploring health, safety and well-being in gig work. This conference abstract is part of the project research.

Details of presenting author to be mentioned in certificate:

Name: Riitta Kärkkäinen

Affiliation: Satakunta University of Applied Sciences

Country: Finland

Other Details:

Presentation Category: Oral Presentation

Session Name: Occupational Safety and Health

Email: riitta.karkkainen@samk.fi

Alternative email: riittakark@gmail.com

Contact Number: +358451224063

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/riitta-k%C3%A4rkk%C3%A4inen-8b32886a/?originalSubdomain=fi>



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