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# HANDBOOK FOR MANAGEMENT WORK AND WORK ABILITY MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to develop a handbook for management work and work ability management at the case organization to support their current and future manager's success in their role.

The contents of the handbook were aimed to include clear description of management work's entity and work ability management's processes from management work's point of view. The objective of the thesis was to produce user-friendly material that can be distributed for all the managers across the organization as well as handed to future ones starting in the position as part of onboarding material.

The thesis was conducted as a productive study, implementing qualitative research methods, which were used to gather information needed to design the content structure and the layout of the handbook. Interviews were conducted to know which topics of management work and work ability management processes should be emphasized in the contents of the handbook. Design-thinking was utilized to help design a user-driven handbook material with professional visual layout.

The study showed that the handbook's contents should emphasize where managers can get support in different day-to-day situations of management work, how managers should act in accordance with the organization's work ability management and human resources (HR) processes, and how challenging social situations should be handled.

This study provided the commissioner with handbook material that could be immediately distributed to managers across the organization. This handbook was used also for planning further education on the topics in cooperation with the organization's occupational health care provider.

**Keywords:** management work, work ability, work ability management

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing business environment, the development of management work has become essential for organizations aiming to maintain a competitive edge and support a productive, resilient workforce. The evolving demands placed on managers require continuous skill development, including work ability management, to ensure that managers are equipped to support employee well-being and productivity. For organizations, investing in the professional growth of managers in these areas is a valuable approach to sustaining a well-performing, adaptable workforce. There are many things that organizations and work communities can do to restore and maintain work ability. Korhonen-Yrjänheikki (2024) believes that the state of management work is of extreme significance when it comes to the organization's work ability.

This thesis responds to the need to support management work at the case organization by developing a comprehensive handbook that can serve both current and future managers in effectively navigating their roles. The goal of the study was to create a user-friendly and accessible material that presents key management processes, including work ability management. By highlighting essential work ability management practices, the handbook aims to support managers in their day-to-day responsibilities and equip them to handle complex workplace situations with confidence.

The handbook was developed through a productive study using qualitative research methods to ensure that the content was aligned with the needs of managers at the case organization. Interviews with current managers were conducted to determine which areas of management work and work ability management required the most emphasis, ensuring that the material would be practical and relevant.

In the beginning of the thesis the commissioner of the thesis is presented. Following chapters describe the theoretical frame of management work and work ability management – setting the groundwork for understanding the challenges and needs that the handbook aims to address. The development approach and research methods used in the study are then explained, providing insight

into how the handbook's content and structure were tailored to meet managerial needs. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the key findings and ideas for further research and development of management work.

## **2 CURRENT STATUS ANALYSIS**

The commissioning party of this thesis is a Finnish company called Viafin Service Oyj, that operates in industrial maintenance across Finland. Viafin Service is the holding company of its subsidiaries. The three main operations within the Viafin Service group are Viafin GAS, Viafin Industrial Service and Viafin Process Piping.

The company has in total a little over 600 employees and is a highly trusted partner in industrial maintenance with numerous small and larger projects conducted successfully over the years. Its main services are pipeline, industrial, wind turbine and different gas system maintenance. Projects conducted are such as industrial pipelines and equipment installations, biogas, gas service, hydrogen gas and gas network solutions. Viafin Service is experiencing a brisk paced growth thanks to their strategic expansion of operations through acquisitions. Viafin Service holds competitive advantage on their field by providing high-quality local services, enabling deep customer knowledge and lasting customer relationships.

The revenue of Viafin Service in 2023 was 75,4 million EUR. The company has been listed on Nasdaq Helsinki First North since November 2018, and it holds 32 units in 23 locations across Finland. (Viafin Service, 2024.)

Due to the expansion of the organization during these past years, also the managers have had to adjust to changes and manage working with a brisk pace. The organization wants to develop their support for the managers and help them to act on this role successfully. This requires clear descriptions and supportive materials related to the role of a manager and regarding work ability management.

The purpose of this thesis is to compile a handbook material for managers of the case organization that contains a description of the management work,

and the existing work ability management processes. The objective is to produce a user-friendly material that can be distributed for all the managers across the organization to support their day-to-day work in the manager position. The theoretical framework of the thesis consists of descriptions of management work, and work ability management emphasizing the manager's point of view.

The case organization wants to have a clear description of what the manager role means, what kind of responsibilities and tasks it includes, what is work ability management, and how and why it is implemented especially by the managers. Some of these matters are already documented, however, the commissioner hopes to have them all collected into visual format. The commissioner has two key needs for the handbook:

- 1) The handbook material needs to be practical and easy to use, to serve its purpose in supporting the managers in their busy day-to-day work.
- 2) The descriptions of different management work's and work ability management's processes should be there as simplistically and understandably as possible.

The commissioner hopes to have long-lasting material that wouldn't have to be updated frequently but instead would hold its accuracy over a longer time. This is taken into consideration in that the contents of the handbook would be kept on a general level, so that the contents would apply across the organization. More detailed processes and further instructions could then be built separately to a form that is easy to update and maintain, even if there would be changes made in policies or practises.

This thesis is conducted as a productive study, implementing qualitative research methods. Using qualitative research is reasoned considering the resources for the study and the nature of the thesis. The timeframe for conducting the study offered flexibility and therefore a possibility to have a deeper look into the study's topic. Conducting a production-based study where there is a clear final product that is aimed to be designed specifically for the users, qualitative research is well reasoned – one of the usual aims of qualitative research

being to bring up the voice of a certain target group, listen to their interpretations, experiences and acknowledging them. (Hakala 2024, Chapter 3: Onko opinnäytetyösi sittenkään laadullinen tutkimus.) Based on these, the final product could be drawn up to meet the manager's needs. Qualitative researcher also often acts as an inside observer (ibid), and this applied here as simultaneously conducting the study program' professional training in this organization.

The methods for this qualitative research are selected after evaluating different qualitative methods in relation with the objectives of the thesis. Interviews, design-thinking and benchmarking are selected as a conclusion of the evaluation of different methods, based on what kind of knowledge is to be obtained from the study.

The objective of the thesis is to product a material that would be immediately usable for the managers, as well as support the on-boarding of new managers in the future. The material is to be long-lasting in a sense that it wouldn't have to be updated immediately during the next years. The research methods would allow gathering data and provide knowledge on the following matters:

- What are the topics of manager work and work ability management that especially need to be addressed and emphasized in the handbook material?
- In what format would this material be of most benefit for the user?
- How should the material be visually compiled to communicate even more complex matters concisely, yet accurately, and understandably?

The research project is managed on The Miro App. It is used to plan the thesis process and create mind maps, timetables, and other supportive visuals for conducting quality research. As an example, the figure here below presents the preliminary timetable set for the thesis process:

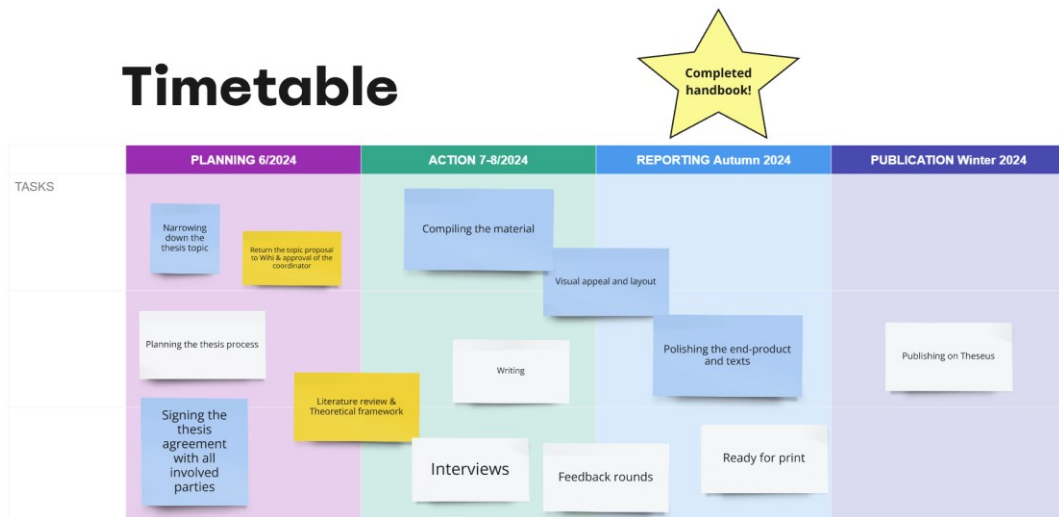


Figure 1. Timetable for the thesis created on Miro App.

The timeline of the project was roughly divided into four sections: Planning, Action, Reporting, and Publication. Time reserved for the thesis to be done was 6 months. The first phase would include planning the thesis, narrowing down the topic, and familiarization with the literature. Action phase would include continuing with the theoretical framework, compiling the materials for the handbook and conducting the interviews and the design process. Reporting phase would include collecting feedback from the handbook and having a workshop with the commissioner about the adjustments to be made for the final version. Texts for the thesis would be filled in and polished. Publication of the thesis is aimed for winter, following the thesis' project guidelines and dates of the university.

### 3 MANAGEMENT WORK

Today's managers work within a fast-paced business environment with many demands as keeping up with the changes of the world. Technologies like AI are rapidly evolving, bringing all kinds of innovations to e.g. process efficiency and management. There is something new to learn all the time. Not only do managers have to stay educated and up to date, but they are also responsible in informing their employees and supporting them in this constant learning.

New kind of leadership is needed because of the modern organizations and business environments that require reacting fast in the era of rapid and constant change. Modern leaders need multidisciplinary expertise to support their

decision-making, therefore modern leadership methods compared to the traditional ones better enable shared responsibility in e.g. decision-making. (Manka, 2023.)

Interestingly a study conducted in 2016 (Future CEO, 452 participants in executive positions of medium and large companies) showed that when CEOs of large and medium-large companies were asked to list five things that inspire them the most, people came last. Development, success, autonomy and results came first. (Manka 2023 p. 180—185.) This speaks about the values of these leaders and their organizations. According to Manka (ibid), the management work research shows that the most important development areas are especially the skills for leading people. The role of a manager includes creating good conditions for working. However, the manager also needs to be able to motivate people to do efforts towards a shared goal.

Another study ordered by *the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland* was conducted in 2018, where the research group wanted to find out the strengths and weaknesses of Finnish leadership and management, to develop work-life and help Finnish organizations succeed in the future. They found three significant strengths of Finnish leadership, and three weaknesses standing out: Finnish leaders had strong competence and knowledge on their business, with a down-to-earth approach, and a shared basis of values behind their work. What Finnish leaders fell short on was their ambitiousness, and the ability to build a culture of open communication and inspire people. Margita Klemetti from *Työelämähanke 2020* states that communication and ways of being present are going to be increasingly expected of managers in the future, and by developing these areas, Finnish ways of managing could be turned into a competitive advantage internationally as well. (Suomalainen Työ, 2018.)

Trust is of utmost importance when wanting to achieve a workplace where people and teams can succeed and be well. Management work has a major share of responsibility in building this trust. According to Risto Siilasmaa (2018, p. 187), the former chairman of Nokia and the founder and former CEO of F-Secure, trust is based on two cornerstones: transparency and equality. Transparency means sharing information, encouraging conversation and sharing the insights from the conversation. Equality is complex, but it means giving

everyone an equal chance to be heard, and promoting teams' collaboration, among many other things. Trust is not self-evident; it needs to be reinforced. This can only be done by showing an example; people need to be encouraged to look for bad news and communicating them. Managers need to know how to communicate, and how to motivate people.

### **3.1 Role of a manager**

Starting in a managing position includes setting the objectives for the role and defining which employees are on the manager's responsibility. (Hyppänen 2013, Chapter 1: Esihiestystyö). Guided by the objectives of the role, managers will build their own way of delivering the work in a quality manner. Every new manager will look over the determined area of profit responsibility and get familiar with the new team of employees. In a lucky scenario for the manager, the employees can already be highly skilled and motivated, in which case the efforts of leadership might not require so much in the beginning. However, on another scenario the manager might have to put higher priority focus and effort towards engaging and encouraging the team right in the beginning. (ibid.)

Today's managers need to know how to adopt a flexible management style, adjusting measures in relation to individuals and teams. A manager that is capable of an adaptive style of leadership can recognize the ever-changing nature of workplaces and individual employees – these leaders know when to e.g. provide guidance, and when autonomy. (Castrillon, 2024.) Therefore, it is important for a new manager to familiarize with their employees, and the team's current state, before planning how to lead them.

New managers might often be recruited internally and are then starting in a manager position for the first time, but within a company familiar for them. In these cases, the prior familiarity with the organization and the personnel might be of advantage, however it could also bring unique challenges (Hyppänen 2013, Chapter 1: Esihiestystyö). In Finland it is traditional that the managers achieve their positions from first working as employees of the company – causing that the expertise of the operations is high among these managers, and there is a deep understanding of different processes (Suomalainen Työ, 2018).

As accepting a managerial role from outside of the organization, a manager might also find the situation to have its own benefits and challenges as getting to know their new team from scratch. Treating everyone fairly and equally as well as agreeing upon common ways to work together will already take the team a long way. (Hyppänen 2013, Chapter 1: Esiמיestyö.)

The managers themselves often describe their role, as “to act as enablers of success”. In more practical terms this implies creating an environment and culture that supports their teams’ work, organizing the work in general, working according to the agreed upon common rules and guidelines, and constantly evaluating these. The following figure presents the role of a manager in managing people and operations.

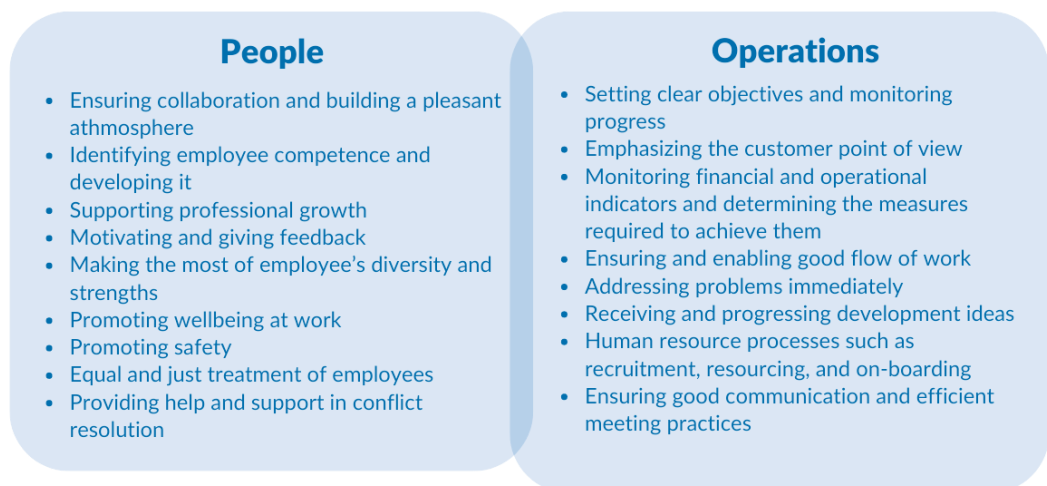


Figure 2. Role of a manager in managing people and operations

The tasks in a managing position include ensuring the flow of work and cooperation, supporting people’s development. This means that the manager will have practises and routines to frequently evaluate and develop competence and motivation of their team. Ensuring good communication is also on management work’s responsibility – managers should encourage and give feedback and know how to make the most of team diversity. These measures will enable good work ability and ensure employee engagement. The role also includes the development of operations – setting clear targets, ensuring efficiency of meeting practises, monitor performance and results, nurturing the social environment, being fair and just and help conflict resolution. (Hyppänen 2013, Chapter 1: Esiמיestyö.)

Manager work can be demanding, and it comes along with many expectations from different stakeholders. The objectives, tasks and responsibilities set for the role in the beginning provide structures for the work. However, it is important to acknowledge that even with all the responsibility and need for self-efficacy, managers are not required nor expected to work completely alone. Therefore, for every manager it is extremely important to know how to seek support for themselves and be clear with their own support network – to know who to go to for help in different types of situations – be that e.g. a manager's own manager, the company CEO, manager colleagues, HR, administration of the company or friends and family.

The competence required from a manager is a broad entity. Hyppänen (2013) describes it through a triangle frame that divides it into three main themes: Will, Skill and Knowledge, which are presented here on the following figure:



Figure 3. Manager's competence (Hyppänen, 2013).

At the basis of manager's competence lies the correct attitude towards acting as a manager – the manager wants to be in this role and has the emotional and social skills required to lead people. Empathy and an optimistic mindset are good examples of these. (Hyppänen, 2013.) Even if the manager's attitude

towards their work doesn't fully determine the atmosphere for the whole team, it surely has a major impact on it – rare things motivate a team like a good leader who is driven to deliver quality results and knows how to inspire and boost the teamwork.

According to Hyppänen (2013), communications and interacting with people are linked to management work in many ways. For the management work to be successful, a manager is required to have skills to motivate and guide the team towards actions that support reaching the shared goals. Clear communication, with openness and trust are foundational for a well-functioning work environment.

A manager will also need to have knowledge of all the obligations and responsibilities tied to the role. A manager should be familiar with the organizations strategy and know how their own work and area of responsibility links into that. (Hyppänen, 2013.) The role also includes knowing how to communicate the strategy to their employees and help them in finding their own work's alignment with it. For the employees to engage better with the team's goals, they should have a clear understanding of the “*why*” behind their efforts (the strategy not only helps determine the goals, but also answers this question).

### **3.2 Obligations and responsibilities**

A manager acts in the role of an employer. Therefore, in Finland there are laws and collective agreements that also regulate management work.

The working and employment legislation defines the responsibilities and rights of the employee and the employer. The most important responsibility for the employee is to conduct the agreed upon working tasks well, while following the instructions and demands of the employer. The employer has the right to direct the work, determine what quality it needs to be, as well as where and when the work is done. (Rauramo 2023, p. 9—11.)

Considered to be the most important legislation regarding employment relationships in Finland are the Employment Contracts Act (*Työsopimuslaki*), the Annual Holidays Act (*Vuosilomalaki*) and the Working Time Act (*Työaikalaki*).

The Collective Agreements Act (*Työehtosopimuslaki*) and the Co-operation Act (*Yhteistoimintalaki*) set the framework for collective bargaining. (Kinnunen et. al., 2024.) Legislation works as a basis for collective bargaining in Finland. The collective agreements are made agreements of the terms that employment contracts need to follow – e.g. pay, work time, annual leaves and other benefits. These collective agreements agree on the terms and conditions of employment in more detail than the applicable legislation. (ibid)

In addition to the legislation and collective agreements regulating the manager's work, there can be local agreements that are contracts between the employee and the employer. In these agreements both parties can commit to some conditions of the employment – these contracts may however be limited by the collective agreements. It is of importance for the manager to ensure that local agreements do not conflict with the collective agreement that applies. (Rauramo 2023, p. 22.)

### **3.3 Characteristics of a manager**

The desirable characteristics of a manager have changed across time, as has the working life in general. These characteristics might also vary depending on the nature of work and the working environment. Here the desirable characteristics of a manager are discussed from the point of view of modern work-life's needs.

The increasing pressures of change are facing work-life. The need for modern approaches on management can be justified with the demands that organizations everywhere are facing: the environment of business is in constant and rapid change. Therefore, reacting to changes and decision-making needs to keep up with this. For efficiency, rather than taking every decision through managers, the responsibility of decision-making can be partly given to where the work is done. Such versatile expertise is required from managers these days to support their decision-making, that it has become difficult for only one person to manage all the needed knowledge and skills to lead dynamic organizations. (Manka 2023, p. 12, 176—188.)

As resources grow tighter, the results of management are paid more attention to. Management links up to the organization's performance, profit and employee wellbeing, so there is a huge potential in benefitting from developing management practises and individual manager's competence.

According to Manka (2023) the following characteristics are seen as desirable for a manager in the modern work-life environment:

- **Fairness and justice** – a manager's job is to ensure that the basics of good working conditions are in order. Managers are fair and will involve employees in decision-making by listening to their ideas.
- **Being supportive** – a manager acts as a coach and gives necessary feedback of both positive and constructive nature. An employee can turn to their manager in a tricky situation, because they will listen.
- **Leading by example and trustworthiness** – a manager bases their acts on ethical values and is consistent with their decision-making.
- **Being responsible** – a manager monitors the work- and stress load of their employees, has the courage to bring matters up to discussion and addresses issues as necessary.
- **Empowering and inspiring people**– a manager encourages achieving set goals, creative thinking and questioning old and accustomed ways of doing things. They intellectually inspire employees and challenge them to new thinking, while ensuring that all employees know their work's core mission.
- **Taking leadership of the atmosphere** – a manager knows how to lead a positive atmosphere at work, as it effects reach out all the way to customer satisfaction.

### 3.4 Leadership

Leadership can be defined as set of behaviours that help people align their collective direction to achieve strategic goals. Leadership enables achieving things as a group, that individuals alone couldn't. (McKinsey, 2024.) To be put

simply: leadership answers the whole organization in why, what and how regarding their work tasks. A manager's job is to lead the team's actions, as well as their own. How a manager leads their own actions will set an example for the whole team, and a manager should consider leadership as a skill that can and should be practised. According to Gambill (2021), the most effective leaders share something in common: they have a pattern of foundational self-leadership behaviours that all their actions are built on top of. Self-leadership will be discussed more below.

Acting as a manager requires leadership that shows results, and these results are created together with the employees. In Finnish, management and leadership are referred to only with one word (*johtaminen*), and they are not described with two separate terms, whereas traditionally in English the leadership literature talks separately about management and leadership – management referring to “operative leadership” and leadership to “leading people”. Earlier it has even been debated if one is more important than the other, but in the present day dividing these into two separate entities is seen as irrelevant. A good leader knows how to do both, and there is no leading without the other. (Hyppänen, 2013.)

### **Self-leadership**

Self-leadership as part of management work can be thought of as planning, directing and monitoring own actions. This includes also regulating emotions and thinking, and developing skills related to these. (Moilanen, 2021.)

The starting point for self-leadership should be one's own goals and visions for the future. Clarifying the direction and aim helps achieving goals as well as possible. Self-reflection is one of the core skills of self-leadership, and it means the ability to observe and assess own actions, the origins of own actions and the consequences of own actions. (Sydänmaanlakka 2024, p. 51.) How self-leadership can be implemented into management work is presented here on the following figure:



Figure 4. Self-leadership.

Planning, decision-making and prioritizing are core elements for self-leadership. This includes accepting the surrounding on which the work is conducted within – how much of a chance do they offer to affect how things get done. Monitoring progress and making success seen is an important part of self-leadership. Detecting progress and success helps not only to motivate self, but also to make changes if it seems that there is no progress happening. Recovery is essential, and it is notable that it cannot be stored. Therefore, sufficient recovery should be taken care of on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis – not only on vacation periods. To know whether recovery is sufficient, it is important to recognize own signals of insufficient recovery as they may vary individually. Self-leadership also includes leading own thinking and emotions. It means knowing what motivates you, being able to reflect on thinking and know how to regulate emotions, especially the difficult ones. (Moilanen, 2021.)

### 3.5 Interaction and communication

Interaction can be defined as both verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication refers to speech, whereas non-verbal communication can be facial expressions, gestures and body language. Interacting happens, when there are two or more people present – we interact with each other's presence whether we want to or not. Communication between two or more people aims to understand the messages of the other, or to communicate your own message to them understandably. (TTK, 2024.) Good communication and conversation are needed in management work, as it is the way for the manager to share information, give feedback, motivate, and build the hoped upon atmosphere at the workplace (Järvinen 2016, Chapter 1: Esimiehenä onnistumisen edellytykset). Listening, being truly present and interested, showing empathy, having the ability and willingness to cooperate, firmness, supporting, and giving space are things that contribute to good communication of a manager. Things like strong prejudice, being biased, blaming others, dodging responsibility, lack of interest or constant rush all build poor communication. (TTK, 2024.)

Management work always takes place together with people. Knowing how to communicate and interact well with others is extremely important, as taking into consideration e.g. handling client cooperation and meetings, leading a team and acting with different stakeholders. Communication within organizations happens on multiple levels, and it is a key element of a manager's competence – the significance of communicational skills increases all the time as we operate within constant and rapid change of our environment. (Sydänmaanlakka, 2024.)

Skilful interaction in the daily work of a manager can be the following:

- Asking and listening. A manager should be present when encountering clients and employees, willing to share an understanding of the matter at hand and be supportive.
- Being calm and having a constructive outlook. A manager gives the situation the time needed and emphasizes moving things forward together. They know to emphasize that discussing things is a good thing, even if there are difficult emotions present.
- Being open and respectful towards others. A manager discusses matters directly and firmly, with clarity. Whilst doing so the manager understands how to be respectful towards other people, even when they do

not agree on everything – shared understanding however is always a win for both.

A manager can build a culture of open communication within a team, provided that the manager is aware of their own ways of communicating and willing to develop. Sydänmaanlakka (2024) mentions three good strategies for developing the culture of open communication within a team:

1. Telling team members about yourself and your hopes openly. This will promote trust and give the team a chance to understand their leader better.
2. Being pro-active and asking for feedback. Feedback enables development and helps to be more self-aware.
3. Improving listening skills and carefully observing communication.

### **Career development discussion and giving feedback**

One of the tools for a manager to manage the competence of their employees are frequent, well implemented career development discussions. The aim of these discussions is to promote personnel's engagement, development and good performance at work (Aarnikoivu 2008 p. 115). These conversations can be also referred to as 1 to 1 discussion, and they usually involve an individual employee, and their manager. Having development discussions between the manager and an employee is seen as reserving a space and time to discuss matters related to work and bring up to conversation any timely issues. The discussions are somewhat seen as a right of the employee. How development discussions are implemented in practise can vary greatly between different companies and managers. (Järvinen 2016, Chapter: Kehityskeskustelut osana pätevää johtamista.)

For the development discussions to be beneficial and efficient, they should be future-oriented. The aim of the discussion should be to enable success in work while considering the operational environment. At their best, career development discussions can be an excellent tool for management, whereas in the worst scenario they can be a waste of time and resources. (Aarnikoivu 2008, p. 115.) Well planned and conducted practises of development discussions ensure the created value for all parties. According to Aarnikoivu (2008), a manager can ensure the effectiveness of the discussions by:

- Having the discussions frequently. Even though managers and the employees constantly are having conversations in their daily work as well, it is up to the manager to make sure that there is also room to reflect on things more deeply.
- Conducting the discussions with quality. A manager's attitude towards these discussions determines the added value of them. If a manager thinks it is important to have these discussions, and is skilled in conducting them, the employees will also have a positive attitude towards them.
- Reminding the employee about the goal of the discussion. It helps to mention the justified need and meaning of the discussion at the start of it. If employees tend to have a sceptic attitude towards the benefits of the discussions, it can be worth mentioning that even though the absolute amount of benefit cannot be measured regarding these discussions, the employer wants to reserve the time to hear out their employees.
- Preparing and ensuring that the employees also prepare for the discussion. Different forms or a list of topics to discuss can be of help. However, it is important to leave room for the conversation to move onwards freely.

What should be included in the discussions are matters that link or affect the work of the employee. Therefore, bringing up some topics regarding the employees' personal life (such as sickness, divorce or other major life changes) may be justified, if they somehow affect the person's work or the work community around them. Here, the manager should know how to be empathetic, yet firm and clear, while discussing sensitive matters – the manager can rely on the employer's role, keep the focus on the work point of view, and re-direct the conversation towards a constructive, solution-minded course. Showing empathy is important as the employee can then feel heard and understood, whereas being clear and solution-minded keeps the discussion going on relevant tracks, preventing the career development discussion from turning into a therapy session, which of course it is not meant to be. (Aarnikoivu 2008, p. 115.)

According to the Leading Organizational Psychologist of Mehiläinen, Pekka Tölli (2024), appreciation is shown to strengthen people's engagement to the workplace, and therefore giving feedback is a beneficial tool for a manager to communicate their appreciation to a good worker. It is important to appreciate both the achievements and effort, as well as the person themselves. In management work, the amount of positive feedback should especially be paid attention to. Building the culture and practises on how feedback is given at a

workplace is a part of management work. Positive and constructive feedback are both needed, and for the feedback to go both ways: from the manager to employees, and from employees to the manager.

### **Challenging social situations**

Challenging and uncomfortable social situations are an inevitable part of work-life – and life in general. These types of situations are not repaired by avoiding them, but they should be discussed openly. A manager should know how to confidently bring matters up to discussion, and to address concerns and issues without delay. (TTK, 2024). A manager should have a genuine willingness to understand people and the situation and try not to draw hasty conclusions solely based on their own prejudices. Communicating clearly and firmly in these situations carries things forward. It eases the stress from all parties involved, when the actions of a manager in challenging situations are consistent, straightforward and fair. For guidance and help, these following guidelines are good for a manager to keep in mind as encountering a challenging social situation, or needing to bring something challenging up for discussion:

- Pause. Clarify for yourself what do you want to say and how you will express the matter with clarity and in a constructive manner.
- Bring an issue up for discussion with whoever it concerns. Be forward and rely on the manager role. Stick to the issue at hand, and as needed direct the conversation back to the initial matter.
- Tell about the observations you have made and why you found important to talk about it.
- Make eye-contact, be present and give the situation the time it needs.
- Speak in a calm, clear and firm manner.
- Listen, ask, and aim for a shared understanding, by also wanting to understand possibly opposing points of views. In case this is difficult, you can state that out loud and ask the other person to help you understand their view.
- Last, make sure that you all have the same understanding about the matter.  
(TTK, 2024.)

Socially intelligent people can manage interaction and relationships with others well and are capable of open and respectful communication with others. Interaction skills and social intelligence are one of the most important skills of a manager. (Sydänmaalakka 2024, p. 48.)

### **3.6 Managing the employment**

Management work includes tasks related to managing the employee life cycle, which includes all the actions from the moment that a need for recruitment is detected, until the employment ends for one reason or another. In the following chapter recruitment, on-boarding, absences and sick leaves and off-boarding are briefly discussed from the management point of view as it is important for a manager to understand what is does the employee life cycle management include.

#### **Recruitment**

Successful recruitments have a great impact on the organization, and by ensuring this a company can have lasting competitive advantage for the future. Therefore, it is important to take time for carefully planning recruitment processes of an organization and conducting them well. The manager responsible for the recruitment will interview the candidates, and in the end makes the decision about the new hire. Usually, for different phases of the recruitment processes, a manager can get support from human resources, the company administration, and their own manager. Recruiting a new worker can be seen as a project, where naturally it will follow certain steps, a process. (Joki 2021, p. 65—66.)

The process of recruitment can be thought of as gathering a pool of candidates, from which the next phase is to select the best candidate for the employment need. It is argued that here is no “one way fits all organizations” when it comes to recruiting, as the process’ approach should match with the characteristics of different groups of employees that the organizations are made of and need to attract. Requirements for the employee’s knowledge and skills vary across occupations. This perspective suggests that staff resourcing at an organization should reflect on the nature of work at different units. (Storey p. 37, 2023.)

The process starts with evaluating the need for recruiting – e.g. is there any way to organize the work so that it could be divided in-between current employees, or perhaps develop the ways of working, so that this way the need for recruiting could be handled. When the need for recruiting is justified, the recruitment should be planned. This includes planning the timeframe and budget for the whole project, as well as dividing the responsibilities in different phases of the recruitment process.

## On-boarding and the probationary period

A carefully prepared and well conducted onboarding enhances the safety of work and ensures sustainable collaboration between the employer and the employee. The goal of the onboarding is to get the new employee to be a part of the organization and the work-place community as fast as possible. The faster the new hire can conduct work without needing additional guidance, the better it is for all parties. The responsibility of the onboarding is on the closest manager of the new employee, and the occupational safety and health legislation obligate the employer regards to this. (Joki 2021, p. 85—88) The following figure presents an example of what kind of things onboarding usually consists of:

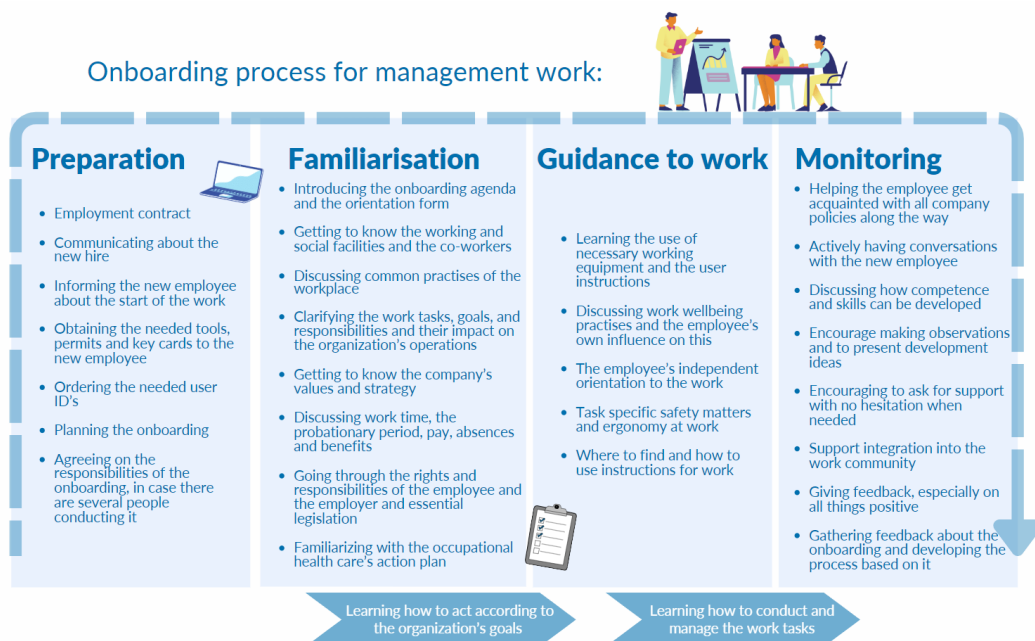


Figure 5. Onboarding process for management work

This type of process description can provide a clear basis for creating a company's onboarding program. According to Joki (2021, p. 88—91) topics that

should be included on the checklist for a manager conducting the onboarding of a new hire include the following themes:

- The company, its operations and customers
- The organization and the personnel
- Company values, policies and common practises
- The facilities, company locations and access routes
- Working time and shifts
- Pay
- Safety and health at work
- Own working space
- Own task among the company
- Communications internally
- Benefits, insurance policies, retirement, privacy matters

These themes consist of many matters to discuss and clarify to the new employee. Building an onboarding program for a company works as a checklist and can help the manager responsible of the onboarding to remember all the essential and necessary things to introduce (Joki 2021, p. 88).

The start of employment usually includes a probationary period, which starts right away as entering the new job. Therefore, the probationary period needs to be agreed upon already as signing the employment contract. During the probationary period, the employment can be dismissed by both the employer and the employee without a ground for contract termination or dismissal under the Employment Contract Act, however not on discriminatory or inappropriate grounds. For all employee contract types, the maximum duration of the probationary period is six months. For fixed-term contracts the maximum duration is half the duration of the employment contract. (Työsuojelu, 2022.)

### **During employment**

Tasks of management work include the planning of work time, vacations, and absences as well as monitoring all the mentioned above. The manager needs to make sure that there are sufficient resources during absences and vacations, or when there are changes occurring in employments. In management work this means considering absences and leaves, as planning resources for work – such as working hours and overtime regulations, annual holidays and other leaves, sickness absences, family leaves and layoffs.

## **End of employment**

The employment can come to an end for different reasons e.g. the employee might want to end it or come to retirement age, a fixed-term contract might be ending, or the contract might be terminated by the employer.

Working contract between a regular employee and the employer can be terminated. In case the employer wants to terminate the employment, they need to have either reasons of redundancy or substantial and pressing grounds arising from the individual employee. An employee can terminate the contract without giving any reason to the employer. Period of notice should be observed by both parties. A fixed-term employment ends without termination when the agreed upon period of working comes to an end, or the work agreed upon delivering during the period is finished. A fixed-term contract may only be terminated prematurely in case it has been agreed upon on the contract. (Suomi.fi, 2024.)

As the employment for one reason or another comes to an end, the manager can organize an exit-interview for the leaving employee. The goal of these discussions is to learn and enhance understanding on what the employer could develop in their practises for the future. (Hyppänen, 2013.)

According to the Employment Contracts Act, the employer is obligated to re-hire an employee under certain conditions: if an employee has been dismissed due to financial and/or production-related reasons, or as part of restructuring proceedings, the employer must offer work to those dismissed for these reasons if new employees are needed for the same or similar tasks within four months of the employment termination. If the employment had lasted at least 12 years prior to termination, the rehire obligation period is six months. (YTK, 2023.)

## **4 WORK ABILITY MANAGEMENT**

According to Väänänen (2024), a research professor at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, addresses the role of changes in working life and the psychologization of life in mental health issues. Currently the future of working

life is characterized by uncertainty, therefore challenges on work ability are on the rise. The demands of working life and self-management increase psychological strain and vulnerability. Young people being told to listen to themselves and find their own path can lead to having excessive expectations for working life.

According to Korhonen-Yrjänheikki (2024), the amount of mental health-based disability pension applications among people under the age of 35 has increased 40% between the years 2018—2023 in Finland. Currently there are over 4000 people on a disability pension who are under the age of 35, and 3400 of them are due to reasons related to mental health. Korhonen-Yrjänheikki states that there are three main reasons for the increase on the number of applications: changes in lifestyle, the overall uncertainty, and the change that the work-life has gone through. Loneliness is more common among young adults, as our social behaviour has changed after social media's arrival, and studies are showing a connection between loneliness and burn-out. The instability of the global situation due to wars and global warming can cause anxiety and economic uncertainty. The current pace of work-life has accelerated, and the level of demands keeps rising.

Pension insurance company Elo's Head of Development of Work Ability Management Poussu and Pärkkä (2021) think that there should be genuine interest towards shown towards work ability from the company's management. In practise means that while the management plans their business, they also understand the part of an individual's work ability in the entity. As an organization goes through changes or restructuring, this always affects work ability, and it should be taken into consideration together with the line managers and HR.

There are many things that organizations and work communities can do to restore and maintain work ability. Korhonen-Yrjänheikki (2024) believes that the actions of manager's are of extreme significance when it comes to work ability.

Work ability management from the manager's point of view should especially focus on actively thinking about and managing the stressors at work. They should be discussed together with the employees – what are the current main

stressors that our team is facing, and are they related e.g. to our community or the flow of work tasks? Together with the team, managers should discuss how could these stressors be handled and solved so that they do not show negatively in work ability. (Pärkkä, 2021.)

According to Seppälä (2014), stress is known to bring organizations high health care and turnover costs. Our brains are naturally tuned to sensitively pick up threats in our environment, whereas observing kind behaviour can significantly reduce this reactivity. Positive social interactions are shown to increase employee health, where a lack of bonding within the workplace has been shown to increase psychological distress. Employees are seen to feel greater trust towards their leader who is kind – acts of altruism can even increase one's status within a group. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt from NYU Stern School of Business has shown in his research that if a leader shows kindness in a form of self-sacrifice their employees are moved and inspired by it – resulting in that the employees feel more loyal, committed and likely to go above what is expected of them, to be helpful to others.

From all this the conclusion can be drawn that management work holds great responsibility and possibility to positively affect the organization's work ability. To do so, educating and providing training for managers about work ability and its management tools can be recommended. After all, management work will have its effects on the work ability either way, and if the managers do not have the necessary level of understanding of work ability and its management, their impact could even end up negative.

#### **4.1 Work ability**

In literature there is no one specific definition to work ability. As observing work ability from its maintenance and supporting point of view, it is a broad concept with many measures that can promote good work ability. The measures can be related to an individual's health, adjusting working practises, or the overall social surroundings of life.

Work wellbeing relates to work ability. Work wellbeing according to TTK (2024) means healthy, safe and well managed work at an organization that

operates with good level of professionalism. The whole organization shares an understanding of work as a part of life's entity. Work wellbeing is not only an individual experience, but an experience of both the employee, and the whole work community.

Work ability is a broad entity, which tells about the individual's resources to respond to the demands of work. Work ability is thought of as a continuum, rather than thinking we either fully have it or not at all. To outline the broad concept of work ability, Professor J. Ilmarinen has created the Work Ability House -model, that described different areas and factors of life that affect work ability. Ilmarinen's Work Ability House is presented on the website of Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and shown here in the figure below.

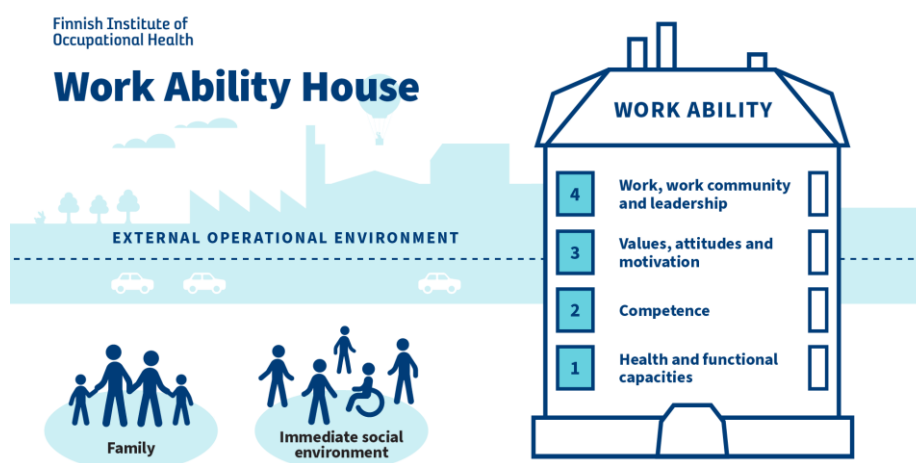


Figure 6. Work Ability House. (TTL, 2024.)

The Work Ability House stands tall and steady, when all the floors are supporting one another. It is important to ensure the alignment of these different floors, as the individual and their life alters. Also notable is that achieving good work ability and maintaining it is not solely the individual's responsibility, but that work ability supportive measures are often multidisciplinary and multi-professional collaboration between the worker, their workplace, the occupational health care, public health care, and the pension insurance companies or other providers of employment and rehabilitation services. (TTL, 2024.)

The health and functional capacities of an individual create the basis for work ability, as seen in the figure above. This includes their physical, psychological

and social ability to function, however their functional capacity itself does not equal work ability. Even in situations where the capacity to function is decreased, its affect to one's work ability varies depending on the working tasks and overall situation in life. (ibid.)

Work related competence is increasingly important to work ability. It consists of the individual's education and abilities to constantly absorb new information and acquire new skills. This factor's significance to work ability has increased during the recent years, as the changes of work-life have occurred (increased demands and need for adaptivity, as discussed already above).

Values, attitudes and motivation typically affect work ability. If the work itself, or some tasks conflict with an individual's own values, or feel un motivating, there is a risk for lowered work ability. On the flip side of this, if the work is experienced as meaningful, pleasant, and challenging enough, this promotes work ability. (TTL, 2024.)

The management of a company, and management work together with the occupational health care develop operating systems that support work ability. Work ability management should be a part of an organization's strategy, and the emphasis should be on preventive measures. Work ability management also includes reactive measures, such as early support models and supporting the return to work after absences. The external operational environment, family and immediate social environment do also all affect one's work ability – the affects can be either negative or positive (ibid).

## **4.2 Work ability management**

Work ability is a part of an organization's strategic operations. It is embedded in the day-to-day management work. Work ability management includes measures with preventive aim to lowered work ability, supportive and maintaining measures, and measures that support individual's return to work from sick leaves as well as disability adjustments. (TTL, 2024.) How it can look like in practise is that the management should anticipate the effects on work ability, as they plan e.g. organizational changes. (Poussu, 2021.) The figure below presents an example of the measures on different phases (divided into

preventive and reactive measures) of work ability management from management work's point of view.

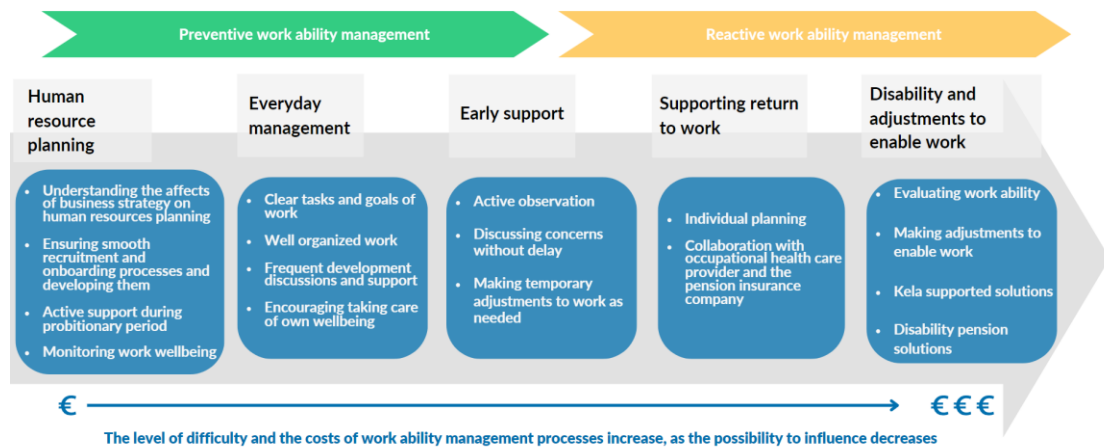


Figure 7. Measures of work ability management.

Management work includes knowing the work and working environments of their employees and through that detecting the risks they bring to work ability. The work ability of employees is linked to the costs of an organization. When employees have good work ability their wellbeing is supported by work, they are competent and motivated towards their job and their performance at work is on a good level. At this point of work ability management, the measures are usually preventive and aim to promote work ability. The employees on this side of work ability management measures have lower costs for the company. A smaller group of employees are those who already have lowered work ability or showing early signals of it. Even if these employees are a small group, they create most of the costs for the company that related to work ability. (TTL, 2024.)

The risks of work ability should be observed by managers in relation to the changing operational environments, as also being able to detect the work ability promoting factors and how to strengthen them. Management needs to understand the value that embedding work ability management to the company's strategy holds. (TTL, 2024.)

As already discussed previously, the role of a manager includes ensuring the good flow of work. Therefore, having clear instructions, goals and tasks of work are an example of everyday management that supports and promotes

work ability on an early phase. The aim of the preventive phase's measures is to support everyone's wellbeing and work ability, as well as ensuring that the work and the working environment are as healthy and safe as possible – enabling smooth and pleasant work. (ibid.)

Safety management and work ability management go hand in hand. The Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Act directs the general responsibilities and obligations of employers to take care of the safety, health and ergonomics at work. This observes matters related to the work environment, the work itself and its ergonomics, and the employee's personal requirements. Constantly monitoring these is part of the obligation. (Työsuojelu, 2023.)

Early support is a part of work ability management – early support models are internally built in companies usually in collaboration with the occupational health care provider. According to TTK (2022) early support describes all the support measures that aim to improve and support work ability and wellbeing at work.

The manager's tasks in work ability management and early support are many:

- Systematically monitoring health and work ability related risks and absences
- Directing employees to occupational health care, if they're having a challenge with their health
- Having early support discussions about the risks or concerns related to work ability with the employees
- Immediately addressing any work-related issues that creating friction in employee wellbeing or work ability (e.g. related to workplace social environment or lacking needed competence or training)
- Documenting the discussions had with the employee regards to their work ability, without any sensitive information e.g. health information
- When needed, adjusting working practises and how it is organized
- Collaborating with internal and external partners of work ability (e.g. occupational health care provider and the health and safety representatives of the company)

Supporting an employee's return to work includes individualistic planning so that the return can happen smoothly and sustainably. Part-timely returning to adjusted working tasks should never jeopardise the health or the healing pro-

cess of an employee returning to work. Planning a smooth return to work includes the manager to collaborate with the occupational health care provider and the pension insurance company as needed. (TTL, 2024.)

Work ability management within an organization can already start from the recruitment process', and the earlier it is embedded into management work's processes, the better. The stressors of the work could already be discussed as the employee is being recruited. This offers the possibility for both the employer and the employee to evaluate how well they could respond to the demands of the work role, and what kind of measures could there be from the work ability point of view to manage the stressors wisely and well. Important question to consider is if the person will be fit to act under the pressure and in the situations that the work normally includes. According to Lyytinen (2021), the employee themselves would benefit from clarifying how much they are willing to give their energy and effort to their work.

### **4.3 Challenges on work ability**

According to Pärkkä (2021), as the manager know their employees, it is easier to observe, notice, and address challenges on work ability when they occur. It might be so that the employee themselves as experiencing burn-out or like so symptoms are not able to detect it, or to discuss it with anyone. Here, the manager can still bring up for a discussion the observations they have made and notice the signals indicating challenges in work ability – of which the employee may or may not even be aware of.

According to Varma (2024), in management work it is important to know how to observe and detect changes in work ability as early as possible, both in the employees and in own work ability. This way these can be addressed on an early phase, when they're still easier to solve, and the costs for the company are little. The reasons behind challenges in work ability should always be identified. The manager needs to be aware of their own accountability when it comes to reasons for absences that are not health-based, such as:

- Poorly structured work processes
- Challenges related to competence and conducting the work tasks

- Challenges in how the work community functions in general.

If absences are due to health-based reasons, the manager will guide the employee to occupational health care and look after the employer side of collaboration with them.

Signals indicating challenges in work ability can vary, and the work community, the employer, the occupational health care and employees individually each have their own responsibilities in detecting and addressing these. The signals can be divided into ones related to 1) cognitive processes such as thinking and processing information. These include difficulties to focus, worrying, memory issues, anxiety, and disturbing thoughts. 2) Emotional reactions, such as restlessness, tiredness, depressiveness, tightness, nervousness, and fear of losing control of oneself. 3) Behavioural reactions, such as lack of productiveness, changes in eating and drinking, increased tendency to conflicts, sudden bursts of emotion, and social isolation. 4) Physical reactions such as problems with sleep, headache, pains in different parts of the body, dizziness, excessive sweating and heart palpitations. (Varma, 2024.)

#### **4.4 Manager's own work ability**

The wellbeing and work ability of a manager has clear effects to the wellbeing of the whole workplace community and to achieving desired results. Positive and healthy essence of a manager will motivate the team and promote a more hopeful environment. If the manager is close to a burn-out, it will inevitably reflect on the working team. Noticing the early signals of lowered work ability is key element in finding a solution – an observation made e.g. by a colleague or team member about changes in behaviour should be therefore taken seriously (Pirinen, 2015, Chapter: Esimiehen hyvinvointi muutoksessa.) It is important to interpret these discussions as care rather than negative feedback.

A burn-out spiral of a manager can take place without the manager themselves being fully aware of it. As the workload excessively increases, or becomes unmanageable, a manager can quickly start to lose a grip from their

work. This creates a feeling of incompetence, which increases the feel of pressure and uncertainty even more. Doubting their own abilities to perform, the manager can become cynic, and unable to get sufficient recovery even during holidays. The outcome is lasting decrease on work ability, as both physical and psychological wellbeing might collapse. (Pirinen, 2015.) This figure below presents the spiral as a bottleneck of a workplace and suggests how things could be done differently to enable sustainable work ability in management work.



Figure 8. The manager's burn-out spiral as a bottleneck in the workplace and how to do things differently.

When management work gets loaded with too much work and stressors, the manager might start to conduct their tasks even with more efforts, with the belief of needing to "just hang in there". This prolonged persisting can manifest in decreased cognitive abilities, such as forgetting things, inability to focus, and becoming impatient and irritated. As the burn-out progresses, the work tasks will start to pile up when there is no ability left to get them done within normal timelines. (Pirinen, 2015.)

According to Pirinen (2015), the manager can however do things differently. A manager always carries a great responsibility of their own wellbeing, as well as the team's wellbeing. Solutions to prevent the burn-out spiral means consistently doing actions towards wellbeing, being aware and reflective of own state, and having discussions related to also own work ability and wellbeing with people. According to occupational and organizational psychologist Nina Lyytinen (2021), no one should have to wait until they must take a sick leave, but rather bring issues up for a discussion as soon as there seems to be a need for change.

It may sound like good work ability of a manager is only up to the manager themselves to know what to do, however, it is important to understand that also the employer is accountable for its employees' work ability (managers or not), and that sustainable work ability in this current business environment requires most of all strong collaboration.

## **5 DEVELOPMENT APPROACH AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH METHODS**

In this study, qualitative data was collected through interviews. After exploring methods of qualitative research, interviewing was selected as the most suitable method based on the research theme and the desired information. Also design-thinking was utilized in designing the handbook, and it is described below. This chapter presents the research method in theory and describes how it was applied in the thesis. Finally, the data collection and processing are described, and reliability evaluated. The results and conclusions of the study are presented in the next chapters.

### **Qualitative research and qualitative research methods**

This study was conducted as a qualitative interview study. According to Hirsjärvi et. al. (2022, Chapter: 3), an interview can resemble an ordinary conversation due to its spontaneous nature, but it differs from regular conversational settings due to its structure: the interview aims to clarify certain topics

and obtain information on specific themes, guiding the conversation accordingly. Interviews are well-suited to a variety of research purposes: when the goal is to explore people and gain deeper insights and information, interviews are an effective research method. In verbal interaction, the interviewee can be asked to clarify or justify their responses, which provides depth compared to, for example, a questionnaire.

In a semi-structured interview, the idea is that questions are prepared in advance and can be posed similarly to all interviewees, but responses are provided in a freeform manner (Hyvärinen et al., 2024). The reliability of data obtained from thematic interviews depends on its quality, which includes factors such as consistency in transcription and classification as well as the clarity of the interview recordings (Hirsjärvi et al., 2022, Chapter: 8.2).

Interviewing as a data collection method is time-consuming and requires relevant expertise from the interviewer to fully leverage the benefits of the method (Hirsjärvi et al., 2022, 3.1). In qualitative research, there is no strict requirement for sample size (for instance, how many participants should be interviewed). While more data may mean better representativeness, researchers must also consider available resources for data processing when planning sample size (Saaranen-Kauppinen et al., 2024, p. 15). In this study, the sample is purposive, with participants selected through existing contacts.

The steps for handling and analysing interview data should ideally be considered during data collection. The interviewer can also begin analyzing data during the interview itself, for example, by categorizing observations or identifying recurring patterns. Qualitative analysis can be seen as a three-stage process involving description, classification, and synthesis. Numerous analysis methods and research types are available (Hirsjärvi et al., 2022, Chapter: 7.2 & 7.4).

### **Data collection through interviews**

For this study, four employees in manager and human resources (HR) roles were interviewed from the case organization. The data was collected through interviews, as this was deemed the most suitable method for the research

topic. The interviewees were selected for the study based on purposive sampling. In this study, the questions were presented to the interviewees in the same order, and clarifications were made as needed as well as additional questions. The interviewees were asked four main questions with the aim to gather information on what kind of support in general the management work in the case organization would need, which themes of work ability management need to be discussed, what kind of materials embedded in the handbook would be helpful for the managers, in what format the handbook would be most useful (PDF/printed version, else) and where should it be stored to be easy to access and use. The interview questions were:

1. What kind of support do you see management work needing in general at your company?
2. What kind of content would be beneficial to be found in the handbook from the point of view of someone working at your company as a manager, or starting there as a new one?
3. In what format would the handbook be most useful (printed version, PDF, Power Point, other)?
4. Where should the handbook be stored so that it could be easily accessed and taken into use?

The interview questions were carefully drafted based on wanting to find out how the material should be gathered to be helpful for the managers working in this certain type of working environment and professional field. The questions mapped out how the handbook could serve the management work as good as it can, and the aim was to make them be a part of creating something of value and instant usability by including the managers to the development process.

Ethical considerations were observed by providing the interviewees with appropriate information about the study in advance and obtaining their consent to record the interviews. The interviews were conducted anonymously, and no identifying information was collected to ensure privacy. Gathering information regarding e.g. job positions weren't seen as relevant for the desired information and outcome of the study. The interviewees were kept well informed prior to the interviews about the study process.

The interviewees were initially contacted by phone, and during the call the background and theme of the study were briefly described. The interviews

were conducted in Finnish. Background information on the theme was sent to the interviewees in advance, allowing them to familiarize themselves with the topic and consider the interview questions beforehand. The interviewees were informed that taking part is completely voluntary. Interview times were arranged via email, and the interviews were conducted remotely through a Teams meeting.

The interviews were conducted during June—August 2024. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes and were recorded after obtaining the interviewees' permission for recording. Duration of the interviews was intentionally kept brief to encourage participation and to limit the volume of data to an amount manageable within the available processing time. At this point, it was acknowledged that the limited data could impact the reliability of the study's results. The interview questions were carefully crafted to gather only information relevant to the study, while also allowing the interviewees the opportunity for open reflection and to express their own perspectives. The interview data was recorded, transcribed, and analysed by categorization.

By categorizing the data into different themes of management work and work ability management enabled detecting what contents in the handbook should be emphasized and on which it should especially offer tools and support for the management work.

The development approach chosen for this study was aimed to emphasize the quality and value of the data and its findings for the thesis, instead of emphasizing a great quantity of data. With the help of the data gathered and its analysis, the development of the handbook material was user-driven, which means it is planned according to the actual needs of management work at the case organization and to support the future managers who will be starting in managing positions.

### **Design process**

In addition to the interviews, the development process utilized design-thinking to help in designing a user-driven handbook material with professional visual

layout. Design-thinking is a method used to develop innovative products, concepts, business models and services. It is a human-based approach that focuses on the needs of people and aims to establish creative ideas. The foundational idea of design-thinking is to create and develop innovations with methods of designers, while engaging in a systematic, fact-based analysis of the feasibility of the innovations created during the process. It combines creativity and innovation (design) with fact-based research (thinking). (Müller-Roterberg 2020, p. 9—18.) The figure below presents the utilization of design-thinking in designing the handbook.



Figure 9. Design process utilizing design-thinking for the handbook.

Firstly, the themes for the handbook were narrowed down together with the commissioner during a workshop. The workshop was organized partly in person, and for some attendants to take part via Teams. Second phase started drafting the contents of the handbook: familiarizing with the current knowledge and research on the themes of the handbook. Organizing the interviews also started at this point and the first interviews were already had. This way as the theoretical framework built up, certain topics could be still researched more deeply as needed based on the interviews. The Miro App online was used as a tool to manage the process.

Creating the texts and visual layout for the handbook included benchmarking graphical design solutions done previously for such informative handbook ma-

terials. Benchmarking in this context meant analysing and observing the previous solutions and works of professional graphic designers, who have designed materials for e.g. independent public law organizations operating under the administration of Finnish ministries, such as the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. The goal here was to achieve a professionally credible visual appearance for the handbook. An online graphical design tool Canva was selected for use due to its affordability and suitable usability for the work. In the second workshop with the commissioner, the initial structure for the handbook was presented and discussed before moving further with the work.

As the first draft of the handbook was compiled, it was presented to the commissioning organizations CEO's, together with the commissioner's work group (that had already attended the previous workshops on the matter). In this meeting these business leaders could have a cursory look at the handbook, share comments and feedback, and then later have the material sent to them for more in-depth look. The finalizing steps included the third workshop with the commissioner, where the comments and adjustments based on the feedback of the CEO's were looked through. After this, the finalization for the printed version of the handbook was conducted.

Different offers for printing were compared. As the printing provider and the printing materials were selected, a sample version was ordered. From there the final order was placed and the final handbook would be distributed to all managers across the organization's different units. Further actions would include gathering user feedback and by that developing and utilizing the handbook's materials for further use and creating possible additional materials.

The design process enabled a handbook material that was immediately delivered to use. The commissioner was content with the outcome of the product, and the overall feedback it received was very positive. The handbook was also released in digital format to the organization's intranet platform, from where the managers could access and download it easily on their computers or mobile devices.

## 6 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In all interviews, the first two questions received extensive answers, providing valuable insights into the interviewees' own perspectives and reflections on the topics. For the first question, the most prominent theme was challenges in managing the workload in management work, largely due to the urgency and complexity of the tasks. Challenges for managers in maintaining their well-being and succeeding in their roles were often linked to situations where the pressure and demands of reporting and performance reviews were high, yet sufficient support to meet these demands was not always provided by organizational management and its supportive measures. However, some interviewees noted that efforts to address this issue have already been initiated.

Regarding manager's competence in work ability management, interviewees highlighted the need for tools defined by the organization that are easily accessible when situations arise. They expressed satisfaction with onboarding and support related to reporting and monitoring performance but noted that training in tasks related to work ability management and human resources (HR) processes could be lacking. Clear process descriptions and guidelines for HR processes were hoped for. Another recurring theme was the early support model, where supervisors should have a clear understanding of its purpose and the necessary skills to operate in accordance with the model.

A common theme mentioned by interviewees was the importance of skilfully handling challenging social situations and having clear guidance on how to approach them. From onboarding onward, managers should be aware of how and in what situations to intervene to ensure consistent and clear actions across the organization.

Several interviewees reflected on the typical path to managerial roles, observing that in these professional fields, managers often transition from expert roles but lacking formal training in leadership or management. They suggested that onboarding for management work could be enhanced by illustrating the role's tasks and work ability management using process diagrams. This would make the material more effective for managers with technical backgrounds working in industrial environments.

An interesting point that emerged from the comparative analysis of the interviews was the varying perspectives among the interviewees. Differences in the effectiveness of processes across the organization were noted. Some interviewees focused on the support needed in their unit or based on their experiences for management work and work ability management, while others reflected on which processes worked well and why these processes were crucial. Some emphasized the gaps in managers' skills or organizational support that hinder success, while others approached the issue by discussing how challenges had already been addressed and how these solutions had been successful.

All interviewees agreed that the handbook should be available in a digital format. There was also a desire for specific instructions to be easily accessible on mobile devices. This was justified by the fact that managers typically work on-site with clients, making mobile instructions and materials highly practical. On the other hand, most interviewees expressed a preference for a PDF version saved on the organization's intranet, which could be viewed on a computer.

## **7 CONCLUSIONS**

After analysing the data gathered from the interviews it was found that what the managers would benefit most of is from clear descriptions of management work and work ability management's different processes. The interviewees saw that this would support the very basis of management work. By describing management work's tasks and processes the handbook would be able to give a general understanding for the reader of what management work means, requires, and includes. This was seen as important to emphasize, since many of the managers stepping into the role as first-timers could be from specialist roles without any specific education on management and leadership. Theory aligns with this thinking, as management work includes a lot of different tasks that are based on employment legislation and the needs of the business. The most important task of a manager is to create a concrete understanding on their unit's core task and its role in the larger image considering the whole organization. This understanding needs to be clear to the manager themselves

first, then communicated to, and finally shared with their team. (Hyppänen, 2013.)

Support for both the management work and manager's own work ability was considered essential to be discussed in the handbook by the interviewees. It was seen that due to the high demands of the manager role, the support from the organization and e.g. early support model process should be well explained to the managers. From there, the manager could get a clear image of where to seek support in different situations, as well as how to follow the organization's early support model's actions when it comes to their employees. Supporting management work is relevant and beneficial as studies on today's management show that leadership is more a dynamic process, where the success of a team depends on the quality of the interactions and collaboration rather than only the characteristics of managers – who have generally been held fully responsible for the quality of management. (Manka, 2023.)

Consistency in human resources (HR) processes related to management work across the organization was brought up by majority of the interviewees. The interviewees found it important that as management work in the case organization includes lots of responsibilities also in HR related tasks during the employee life cycle, there should be consistent descriptions of these processes compiled to the handbook. It was hoped that there could be supportive materials in addition to the process descriptions, such as a "checklist for a manager" as a new employee is starting or when one wants to retire. Managers need tools to their management work in practise, and these tools can be shared e.g. on intranet platforms for the managers by HR. Especially new managers with little experience need much guidance and knowledge of the HR matters of management work. (Joki, 2021.)

It was also considered important to clarify the goal and purpose of an existing early support model, that works as part of the organizations work ability management. The interviewees found it so that currently there still might be persisting beliefs that as a manager would ask their employee to have an early support discussion, it would be considered as a "punishment".

*“It should be clear to everyone, no matter the role within the organization, that having these early support discussions mean caring about people, and that they are had to create something positive.”*

Consistency and encouragement for facing challenging social situations in management work were hoped by most of the interviewees. They found that as there would be clear guidelines from the beginning for how managers should address issues, and how to approach difficult discussions, this would be supportive especially for the managers who find these types of situations a stressful part of their job. In general, it was also seen very relevant to management work to know skilful encountering of different people, as also the customer relations are an important element of the management work. It was seen that managers would benefit from guidelines in challenging social situations regardless of whether it was with an employee or a customer. The ability to regulate positive emotions and moods has been found to indirectly influence employees' performance. Good interaction skills and practices promote employees' performance by maintaining a positive atmosphere in the workplace. The importance of emotional intelligence in leadership and workplace atmosphere, deemed successful, has been studied. It was found that the atmosphere was positive in units where the manager was evaluated as skilled in emotional competencies. (Manka 2023, p. 188.)

*“As we are working with people 100% of our workdays, it is crucial to know how to encounter different people, both employees and customers.”*

From the point of view of a manager starting management work for the first time, the interviewees saw that creating routines for the work go a long way. Organizing routines for daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly tasks in their agenda should be instructed in the on-boarding materials for the managers. Even so that the routines of management work are not directly ordered by anyone, the organization's support here could be to provide the structure and guidance into creating these routines for own work.

When asked about the preferred format for the handbook, all interviewees agreed that they would most benefit from the handbook material in digital format. As the management work within the case organization is usually done

out here on the field as well, some of them found that a mobile version with instructions could be suitable. All of them pointed that the supportive materials for management work should be easily found and accessed on the organization's intranet.

### **7.1 Reliability and ethics of the study**

As evaluating the reliability of the study, it is considered that the sample size in collecting data was small. However, the ongoing analysis of the interviews showed the data to be sufficient to give the desired information for the outcome – as a lot of the handbook's content needed to rely on the theoretical frame of management work. To enhance the reliability of the study, quantitative research methods could have been included. The added value from qualitative methods could have been a bigger quantity of data. For example, using a Webropol questionnaire could have made it possible to explore the perspective of all managers of the organization. Here also there could have been a possibility for anonymous written feedback, which could be easier for the respondents to write down than to state aloud in person (or via Teams). However, the objective of this research was to focus on the quality of data, instead of the quantity – which led to the selection of qualitative methods. Evaluating the data collection process, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods could have enhanced the reliability and offered the best results for the study.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences and by following the guidelines of responsible conduct of research.

### **7.2 Development suggestions for the commissioners**

Based on the findings of this study, developing and creating the specified, easily accessible instructions for the day-to-day operations and HR manners of management work could be recommended. They would be best taken to use from the intranet, with links to more specific step-by-step instructions as necessary. The format of these materials should be considered so that there is easily a possibility to update these instructions, as practises may change

and be updated. Usability on a mobile device could be considered as planning the materials and instructions, however, whether the instructions suitable for mobile devices would actually be beneficial greatly depends on the intranet platform's mobile app (which the organization can't affect).

The themes brought up during the interviews regarding the general need for support of management work are important to note. Managers will benefit from further training on the topics discussed on the handbook on a general level. By providing training of these topics the managers can familiarize with them in more depth and develop their skills on them.

The organization could support its self-efficient managers by offering structures for peer support – this could look like frequently getting together with other managers. Management work within the case organization often is done very independently, and frequently getting together to discuss different parts of management work could be beneficial. These events could be organized either virtually or in person per area. They could be hosted by someone from the organisation's management, but kept on a casual level, so that the conversation could be only guided e.g. by different themes per meeting. These types of peer “sparring” events could offer a time and space to also innovate and develop management work's processes further.

### **7.3 Ideas and suggestions for further research and development**

Researching the topic further could include measuring the effectiveness of current support measures for management work, including this handbook. The case organization is experiencing growth, and there are many development areas related to the support of management work. Even though this means that some management and HR processes might still be quite raw, or even missing, it can be also viewed as a possibility to then develop these processes from a clean slate to respond to the specific needs of this organization effectively.

## 8 FINAL WORDS

The objective of this thesis was to produce a user-friendly material that can be distributed for all the managers across the organization to support their day-to-day management work. Based on the outcome of the thesis, and feedback received from the commissioner, it can be concluded that the objective set was achieved extremely well. The final handbook material is distributed to managers across the organization and taken into immediate use. The commissioner can also immediately utilize the development ideas such as further trainings of the handbook's topics.

Summarizing this thesis process it can be stated that this handbook material for management work is a supportive measure to enhance the on-boarding of new managers and helping the managers grow professionally. The true skills and confidence of management work won't of course be learnt from such material; however, this handbook is a useful tool for reflecting own management skills and competence – and perhaps find ideas how to enhance the areas that are to be developed.

Management work offers both challenge and versatility. For a manager who wishes to act in their role with self-efficacy it is important to know the tasks and responsibilities included to the entity of management work, and how to conduct it all with quality results.

Quality and responsibility in management work show as taking care of own work ability – the manager's own wellbeing reflects to that of others among the work community as well. This finally reflects on the success of the whole organization. It is therefore important for the managers to remind themselves among all the demands and expectations that the journey of learning never ends, it is important to know how to ask for support, and that recovery needs to be sufficient in relation to the stress load.

This thesis project taught and provided a lot to its researcher as well. At first, I got to experience what it is like to develop and create something useful and desired in collaboration with a skilled team. The team members were all ex-

tremely experienced and proficient professionals, both in their areas of expertise and in leadership. From the very beginning, I received guidance and support in planning the project in the best possible way. I also learned about the dynamics of multifaceted collaboration, as the planning of the thesis goals and desired outcomes had to consider both the commissioning party's and the university's requirements and needs for the work. Collaboration went smoothly with both parties.

As the project progressed on a brisk schedule, I got to familiarize myself with organizing and implementing a research project in the context of real working life. This was educational, as the timelines set by working life for the project's progress differed from the timeframes set by the university.

I learned to plan various scenarios for how the work might proceed. The goals and initial schedule were defined based on a scenario where the work would progress smoothly without incidents that could negatively impact progress. However, the planning also had to prepare for a scenario where not everything would proceed as initially planned.

Fortunately, the work progressed smoothly as planned right up to the final stages. Taking the second scenario into account proved necessary, as during the final reporting phase, completing the work on schedule became uncertain and was delayed due to suddenly changed circumstances. Learning to adapt to such situations and minimize their negative impacts was undoubtedly a highly valuable learning experience for working life, in addition to all the other lessons the project provided.

I wish to thank the commissioner, my thesis supervisor, and Varma's representative for collaborating, and for making all matters run smoothly and offering all the support needed. Also, to all my closest ones who supported me greatly throughout this thesis project – you enabled me to keep going and finish the work during this fall – thank you.

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# ESIHENKILÖTYÖN **KÄSIKIRJA**

# Sisällysluettelo

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