

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTHCARE AS SUPPORT AT THE WORKPLACE DURING CHANGE

The role of occupational healthcare is to act as the expert on the connection between work and health during change. The statutory tasks of occupational healthcare that are especially highlighted during change include:

- 1) workplace surveys,
- 2) proposing measures for the improvement of working conditions and the promotion of work ability, and
- 3) counselling, guidance and providing information on matters pertaining to the healthiness and safety of the work as well as employees' health.

In accordance with the early support model for work ability, those persons or personnel groups who are in particular need of support during planned change are identified.

It is essential that occupational healthcare has up-to-date information about the working conditions. A workplace survey is always carried out when the work or working conditions change significantly, and the employer's own risk assessment should be used for it. If needed, a workplace survey can be complemented with a targeted workplace survey. During a workplace survey, it is recommended to meet employees, including face-to-face.

When preparing for change

The employer must provide the occupational health professional any information on changes in the work, work



arrangements and workplace conditions that is necessary for the assessment and prevention of any danger or damage to health as a result of the work. It is also worth asking what kind of support occupational healthcare can offer during the preparation for an upcoming change, as well as during the change itself. The workplace's

support needs are always discussed before contact during occupational health and safety cooperation.

The occupational health professionals and experts can support the preparation for change through providing information on good, functional solutions and practices to the

workplace. Occupational healthcare can also draw the employer's attention to key matters of work ability and health, such as

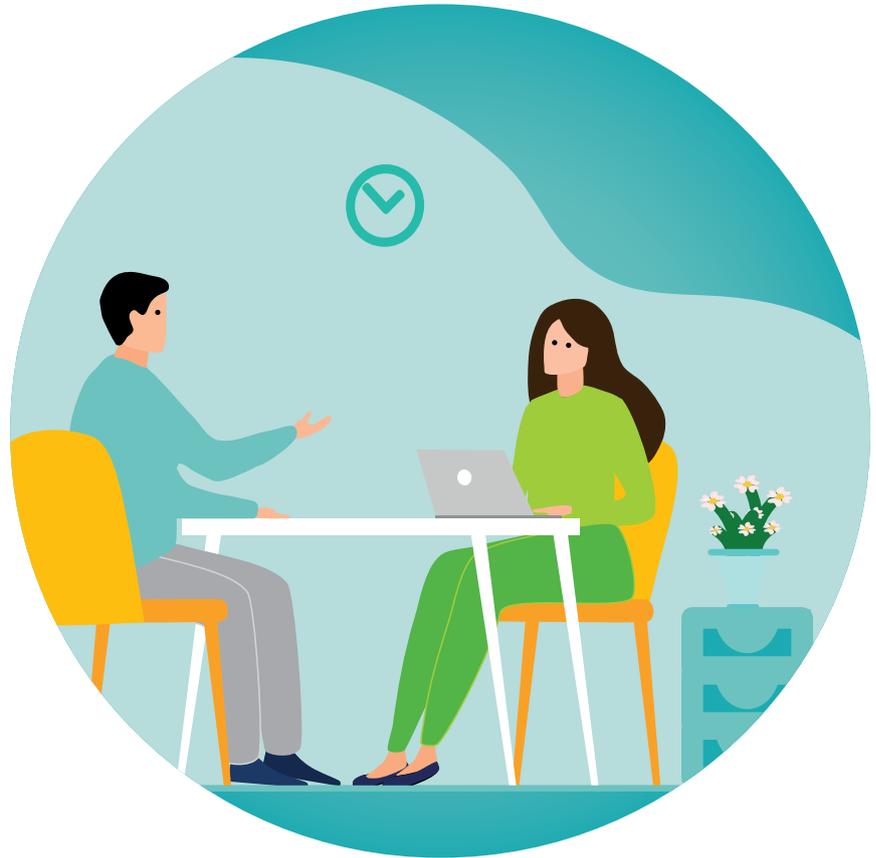
- changes in procedure and its effect on work management
- planning the work and its effect on work load
- designing work spaces through the perspective of the functionality of the spaces, healthiness, usability and accessibility, among others.

The cooperation in connection with planning is included in the occupational healthcare action plan. For example, this includes whether an occupational healthcare representative is part of the possible change team, which would make up-to-date information available on all sides. It is also good to agree upon review points during the change. The broader or more significant the change, the more important the systematic and long-term cooperation between the employer and occupational healthcare becomes.

Based on workplace surveys, the data otherwise gathered by occupational healthcare and the nature of the change, the employer, occupational healthcare and occupational health and safety cooperation personnel work together to plan what kind of psychosocial support, counselling and guidance will be provided to supervisors, staff representatives and employees, as well as how it will be arranged. Support for senior management should also be taken into account.

When the change begins

The expertise of occupational healthcare can be utilised in the training of supervisors. It is important for supervisors to review the contents and procedures of the early support model



before the start of a larger change. The things to cover include the following, among others:

- What is the role of the supervisor?
- What are the supervisor's tasks and rights?
- How can you identify a person in need of support? How can you ensure that no one is left alone during a change?
- What support opportunities are available? Needs and opportunities for individual and group support?
- Which matters are handled with individual persons and which in groups?
- Where can a supervisor get support in different situations? In which matters can a supervisor

contact occupational healthcare?

In particular, occupational healthcare can help in understanding the experiences and emotions in connection with change, as well as how to handle them. Certain ways of behaviour often repeat in all change situations. For example, it is normal for even competent employees to question or double-check familiar things in uncertain situations.

It may be necessary to arrange other refresher training for supervisors, such as for the common guidelines in applying operating models and instructions, as well as communication regarding the change.

Supervisors themselves may also be in need of support, such as meetings and discussions with an occupational psychologist.

Particularly during larger changes, it is important that supervisors and employees have sufficient and up-to-date information on what occupational healthcare services are available to them. Providing information about services is best carried out as a cooperation between the workplace and occupational healthcare. In communications, it is important to make sure that the services are explained in an understandable way and that there is information available on direct contact channels (not just a national phone number, for example).

If it is predicted that the information to be given during a briefing will have some kind of shock effects, it is good to evaluate, together with occupational health and safety, whether occupational healthcare should be invited to join the briefing in person. Additionally, make sure that there are individual appointment times available after the briefing, particularly with an occupational health nurse.

During change

The bigger the impact of the change on the personnel, the more important it is for representatives of the workplace and occupational healthcare to meet regularly during the change process. During these review points, the employer can, taking into account privacy protection and the confidentiality obligation of occupational healthcare, receive a picture of the situation from the information gathered by occupational healthcare concerning the work ability of employees.

Smooth contact between occupational healthcare and supervisors is



important in order for it to be possible to intervene in potential weakening of work ability at an early stage.

There may be severe crises on an individual level relating to change situations. It is worth reminding employees that there is a low threshold for contacting occupational healthcare, especially an occupational health nurse. Individual appointments can offer methods to support coping even in difficult situations.

If the change is connected to strong growth of the organisation or company or personnel turnover, occupational healthcare can support supervisors in helping work communities form.

If necessary, health checks can be carried out before the end of an employment relationship to assess health and work ability, and to check the health requirements for employment.

When the change is mostly over

If the change has resulted in the termination of some personnel, those who remain may experience survivor's guilt, which involves, for example, a sense of unfairness and feeling as if they watched from the sidelines as employees were terminated. Occupational healthcare can support personnel representatives and the remaining employees in processing the situation as an observer, as well as in planning and implementing measures.

Occupational healthcare can also arrange defusing and evaluation discussions, where the work community can review the lived change together, including recognising successes. In a longer change process, it is advisable to arrange discussions during the different phases of the change.

Sources:

Occupational psychologist Maija Vattulainen (Videre Oy, Mehiläinen) was interviewed for the writing of this piece. In addition, the following sources were used:

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Checklist

Employer

- risk assessment (Occupational Safety and Health Act, Section 10)
- communicating change to occupational healthcare
- addressing matters relating to the change in cooperation with occupational health and safety, such as
 - matters relating to the arranging and planning of the work which affect employees' safety, health and work ability
 - determining support needs
- operating model and practices of early support
- informing about occupational healthcare services
- training, communication and arranging support relating to the change
- cooperation with occupational healthcare

Occupational healthcare

- workplace survey, as well as a targeted workplace survey if necessary (Government Decree on the principles of good occupational health care practice, the content of occupational health care and the qualifications of professionals and experts, Section 6)
- providing information, counselling and guidance
- proposing measures and communicating good practices
- supporting work ability
- possible participation in training
- possible participation in work group preparing the change
- cooperation with the workplace

R. & Kääntä, L. Ikkunoita henkilöstövahvuuden muutokseen. University of Vaasa reports 15. University of Vaasa.

Further information

Centre for Occupational Safety
Senior Specialist Seija Moilanen
firstname.lastname@ttk.fi
Tel. 050 3310 719



[ttk.fi/en](https://www.ttk.fi/en)



@tyoturvallisuus

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Centre for Occupational Safety

Text: Senior Specialist
Seija Moilanen, Centre for Occupational Safety

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