Towards culturally sensitive and inclusive work ability management

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Background

Food service sector workers are vulnerable to occupational health and safety (OHS) risks.

Workforce diversity in the food service sector is increasing due to immigration, population ageing and the rise of gig work (incl. temporary, part-time and periodic work).

Research examining the association between demographic and employment-related factors and OHS vulnerability in the Finnish context remains limited.



Purpose

The study investigates perceived exposure to risks and hazards, OHS management practices, OHS competence, participation in OHS development, and work community functioning and inclusiveness among food service workers.

An operational model to support culturally sensitive and inclusive work ability management will be developed.

The research questions were:

- How are food service workers' age, gender, employment type, education, work experience and ethnic background associated with perceived OHS vulnerability, and how can the risks be addressed to support work ability?
- How do food service workers perceive the factors influencing work ability and its promotion in the workplace?

Participant Characteristics

Survey (N=666): Finnish-language (n=607) and English-language (n=59), conducted between April and June 2026.

Participant characteristics:

- Sex and age: Women 79.1%, mean age 46.2 years
- Workplace: Public sector 48.3%; restaurant 29.9%, central/production kitchen 29.3%, service kitchen 30.3%
- Employment: Permanent work contract 87.5%; full-time work 75.2%
- Education: Vocational education 62.5%
- Finnish food-service work experience: n=650; M ≈ 20.1 years, SD ≈ 13.0, range 0–46

Interviews (N=16): Finnish-language (n=10) and English-language (n=6)

Methodology

1 Translating and adapting the OHS Vulnerability Measure (Smith et al., 2015) to the Finnish food service sector:

- Forward-backward translation
- Expert panel review of item relevance, clarity, and contextual suitability
- Supplementation of questionnaire items based on Finnish occupational health and safety legislation
- Pilot testing the questionnaire with food service sector students
- Plain language revision and proofreading

2 Conducting the nationwide survey:



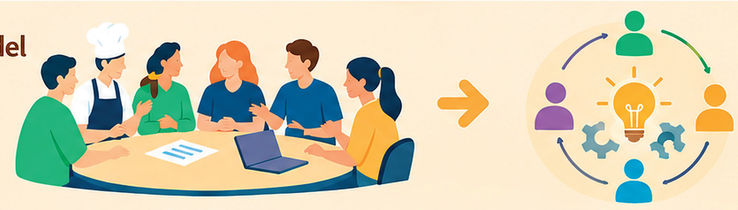
- Through private and public food service employers, a temporary work agency, and two trade unions.
- Quantitative analysis (N=666)

3 Conducting the semi-structured interviews:



- Qualitative analysis (N=16)

4 Developing the operational model using a participatory action research (PAR) approach



Discussion

- Workers recruited through employer organisations are likely members of one of the two trade unions, and some overlap cannot be avoided. Consequently, the response rate cannot be calculated.
- The importance of moving beyond the linguistic adaptation of existing OHS measures towards a broader consideration of accessibility, contextual relevance, and participation is emphasized.
- Promoting OHS and work ability in workplaces requires not only organizational commitment but also meaningful opportunities for workers to contribute their perspectives and experiences.
- These insights will inform the development of an operational model for culturally sensitive and inclusive work ability management in the food service sector.
- Future research will focus on evaluating the usability and feasibility of the model in practice.

Literature: Smith, P. M., Saunders, R., Lifshen, M., Black, O., Lay, M., Breslin, F. C., ... & Tompa, E. (2015). The development of a conceptual model and self-reported measure of occupational health and safety vulnerability. Accident Analysis & Prevention, 82, 234–243.

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