

# Social and health care top managers' perceptions and aims of strategic work ability management in the midst of change

<sup>1</sup>Julia Anttilainen, <sup>1</sup>Irmeli Pehkonen, <sup>2</sup>Minna Savinainen, <sup>1</sup>Eija Haukka

<sup>1</sup>Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Helsinki, Finland

<sup>2</sup>Varma Mutual Pension Insurance Company, Helsinki, Finland



## Introduction

- Top managers are responsible for organizations' human resource management and work ability management (WAM) as part of it. Therefore, their perceptions of (WAM) may influence how work ability support processes are implemented in organizations.
- We studied how top managers defined WAM, what were their aims of WAM and whether these aims were at a strategic level.

## Methodology

- The study was conducted in five large Finnish joint municipal authorities for social and healthcare organizations.
- In total 28 top managers (10 male, 18 female) were interviewed during 2019-2021 in 10 group and 6 individual interviews using semi-structured protocol. The thematic analysis followed the six-step framework by Braun and Clarke [1]: 1) familiarization with the data, 2) coding the data, 3) generating initial themes, 4) reviewing and developing themes, 5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and 6) producing the report.

## Results

- Top managers' defined WAM mainly multidimensionally and two main aims were identified: to support work ability at the individual level and organizational level.
- Individual-level aims were to anticipate declines in health and functioning, support workers already experiencing declines, develop competence, and to manage the impact of changes on work ability.
- Organizational level aims were to improve the availability and retention of personnel, to ensure the flow of work, and to increase trust and create shared values.
- The aims were described as being at a strategic level, but this was not yet realized in the organizations because the actions were reactive rather than proactive.

TM16: "So that we will have employees available, and we could retain our employees.— We want that this (WAM) is one of our competitive advantages in the labour market."

## Discussion

- Although the interviewees considered anticipation important, the common goal in the organizations seemed to be the decrease in sickness absences. This is in accordance with previous research where actions often target work disability [2].
- The ongoing changes affected the aims. Constant changes had caused uncertainty and mistrust among personnel and the top managers emphasized the importance of bringing back confidence. In addition, the labor shortage had increased workload and WAM was recognized as a way to ensure sufficient personnel resources. This is in accordance with the previous findings [3].
- The availability of employees and securing the flow of work were emphasized over financial savings. This could indicate that for the top managers, WAM is strongly related to the organizations' values, like in the upper echelons theory, in which the values of top managers' may influence the strategic decisions [4].

## Conclusion

- Top managers' multidimensional perception of WAM is crucial as it may influence the organizations' work ability supporting measures.
- Adding proactive actions alongside reacting to problems, considering both individual and organizational level actions, and setting strategic level aims for WAM is essential to guarantee labor availability and personnel retention.

## References

1. Braun V. & Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006;3(2):77-101.
2. Shaw WS et al. Employer policies and practices to manage and prevent disability: Foreword to the special issue. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*. 2016;26(4):394-8.
3. Eriksson A et al. Health promoting leadership – Different views of the concept. *WORK*. 2011;40(1):75-84.
4. Hambrick DC & Mason PA. Upper echelons: The organization as a reflection of its top managers. *The Academy of Management Review*. 1984;9(2):193.

Contact: Julia Anttilainen, researcher, FIOH, julia.anttilainen@ttl.fi. Original Publication, Doi: 10.3233/WOR-230034.