



Medical Advisory Service

Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Public Health, and Toxicology Consultants

The Finnish Model of Work Ability Ties it All Together

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For a small country, Finland has a lot of models. When one uses the search term “Finnish model” a remarkably large number of hits that show up on the internet refer to the kind that walks down the runway in fashion shows. But there are even more hits for scholarly allusions to one or another “Finnish Model” to describe aspects of that country’s remarkable economic performance and social stability.¹ It seems to be a sort of brand, used by Finnish academics and politicians, for the way Finland does things. The Finnish Model that concerns us here is the strategic plan incorporating occupational health, work capacity, and human capital development pioneered by Nokia and developed collaboratively with the Finnish government and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH).²

The Finnish insight is that measures for occupational health protection are powerful drivers for economic development and sustainability when coordinated with other actions such as changes in work organization and skill development as part of a comprehensive strategy. The basic idea of the Finnish Model is that productivity depends on three elements: worker protection, work community, and competence.² This is illustrated in Figure 1 (my interpretation), where the three visible corners of the base of the pyramid (workplace, the worker, and the organization of work) support work ability and therefore productivity.

The details of the original model are hard to find, at least in languages other than Finnish. Its leading proponent, Jorma Rantanen, retired director of the FIOH, speaks of it often but there is not much written in the accessible literature other than conference proceedings.² This is unfortunate because the moment for this concept has come, with the current global discussion on health and productivity.

Most managers care about the well-being of the workers for whom they are responsible but the reality is that they are held accountable every day for production, not risk reduction. Anything that aligns occupational health with business performance makes gains in worker protection more likely. With the Finnish model as a template, a strategy emerges for putting occupational health protection on the business agenda as a driver of productivity.

Gains in work productivity have long been addressed in piecemeal fashion for occupational health protection, productivity management, accommodations for workers with disabilities, fitness for duty, training and education for a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce, education and training in work roles, better communication, more efficient organization of work, redesign of the workplace, and quality assurance. The genius of the “Finnish model” is to bundle these and other interventions into three broad strategies, corresponding to the three work productivity elements:

- Changes in the work environment to enhance safety, control hazard, increase efficiency
- Changes in work organization to enhance efficiency, increase productivity, reduce stress, facilitate communication
- Changes in competence and skill level in the workforce to enhance productivity, foster innovation, inspire personal commitment, improve efficiency



These three bundles form three corners of the base of a pyramid (Figure) that supports enhanced productivity and reduced costs. Each “bundle” (my term, not the model’s) is a set of measures that are mutually reinforcing, both among themselves and across work productivity elements at the base. For example, changes in the workplace designed to accommodate disabled employees may also benefit non-disabled workers. A workplace designed for safety and control of ergonomic problems is almost always a more efficient workplace supporting higher productivity. At the same time training, education, and participation by workers create gains to take full advantage of that enhanced workplace, so the net effect is more than additive. Safety, healthfulness, efficiency, and smart work go together. The key is to program the changes and make them interactive.

In theory, these gains could be multiplicative, so an improvement of 50% in each “corner” of the pyramid could lead to an overall gain of 337.5%! A gain of as little as 10%, in each corner could lead to overall gain of over one-third. This impressive, multiplicative potential for gain is reportedly born out in Finnish studies but details and data are not accessible. This is not uncommon in business and microeconomic research, where there are often overwhelming obstacles to conducting and publishing objective evaluations.

The Finnish Model is a persuasive management model that ties occupational health together with essential elements of work organization and productivity. It is a means to persuade and educate management on the potential gains of worker-centered policies and a blueprint for bringing occupational health to the center of economic development and strategic planning in the corporate sector.

References:

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