

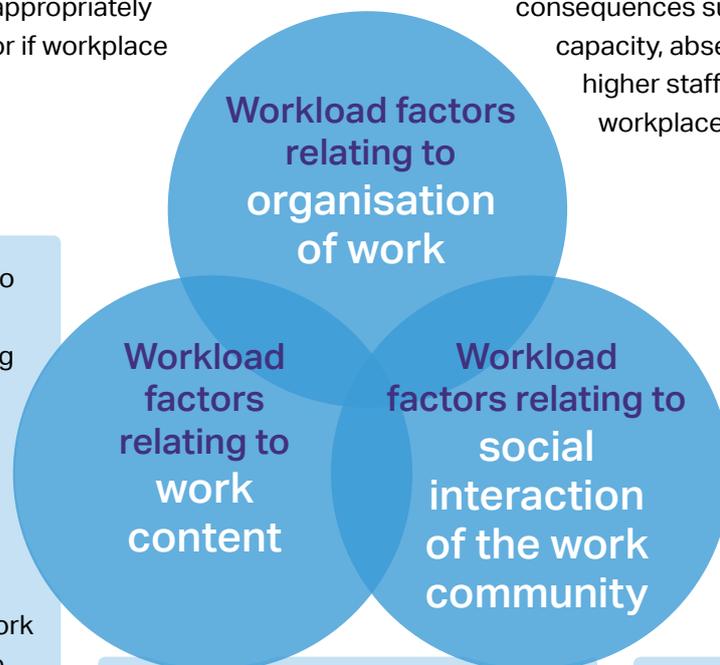
# Psychosocial workload

## Psychosocial workload factors

Harmful psychosocial workload can occur **at any workplace**. Psychosocial workload factors refer to **properties related to work content, work organisation and social interaction in the work community**. These things cause harmful work-related strain if they are not appropriately dimensioned and managed or if workplace conditions are poor.

## Negative impacts of harmful workloads

When employees are exposed to harmful workloads for long periods of time, when there is no opportunity to recover from work or when the workload is very heavy or repetitive, it puts the employees' health at risk. Harmful workloads can have negative consequences such as reduced work capacity, absenteeism from work, higher staff turnover and more workplace accidents.



Workload factors relating to the **organisation of work** involve the planning and distribution of work and ensuring that appropriate prerequisites for working are in place. Harmful workloads can be caused for example by

- too much or too little work
- too much time pressure at work
- harmful factors relating to working hours, such as shift work, night work, constant commitment to work or much travelling for work outside working hours
- mobile work
- shortcomings in work equipment or working conditions
- unclear job descriptions, objectives or responsibilities, or unclear division of work.

Workload factors related to **work content** refer to aspects that depend on the nature of the work and on work duties. Harmful workloads can be caused for example by

- monotonous work
- fragmented work
- having to be constantly vigilant
- qualitative expectations for work
- excessive amount of information
- constant interruptions
- too much responsibility
- recurring challenging interaction situations when working with clients.

Workload factors relating to **social interaction of the work community** can include, for example

- working alone
- social or physical isolation
- collaboration problems in the work community
- poor communication
- lack of support from the supervisor or colleagues
- harassment or other inappropriate treatment
- inequalities in treatment or discrimination.

## Preventing harmful workloads

The Finnish **Occupational Safety and Health Act** stipulates that employers must take appropriate measures to ensure the safety and health of their employees in the workplace. This means it is not sufficient to mitigate negative consequences. Instead, preventive measures against harmful workloads must be ensured in advance. Employers are expected to be aware of the psychosocial workload factors of their workplace and to take measures proactively themselves if the workload is deemed harmful or jeopardises their employees' health.

Psychosocial workload factors can be managed as systematically as shortcomings in the physical work environment. The main tools for this purpose are **analysis and assessment of the risks at work**. A thorough assessment allows the employer to better identify which workload factors require attention.

By failing to carry out a comprehensive assessment or failing to do one at all may result in a lack of understanding about which proactive measures might be required or failure to institute any measures at all.

Where employers lack the expertise to analyse and assess workload factors, they must use such external experts as professionals who provide **occupational healthcare services** for the workplace. A workplace investigation carried out by an occupational healthcare provider can be used to help to identify harmful workload factors. Under the **Occupational Health Care Act**, employers must ensure that the workplace investigation indicates

- which psychosocial workload factors have been identified at the workplace
- the conclusions made about workload factors affecting health
- proposals on possible necessary measures to be adopted.

## Employer's obligation to analyse and assess workload factors

Workload factors differ from job to job. Therefore employers must identify all psychosocial workload factors in their own workplace. A thorough and systematic risk assessment helps the employer to identify which measures are needed.



## How to reduce harmful workload

Once an assessment has been made, the employer must adopt the measures required to ensure that the work does not jeopardise the health of employees.

Employers can

1. reduce or eliminate harmful workload factors
2. offer their employees means to control such factors
3. create support structures for employees who suffer from harmful strain at work.

## Measures should primarily focus on the risk factor

If a risk assessment proves that a workload factor causes a significant risk to health, the factor must be reduced, one way or another.



A comprehensive assessment allows the employer to pinpoint which factors to focus on and institute the measures needed. When necessary, the employer can use the assistance of the occupational healthcare service provider.

Workload factor	Examples for reducing workload factors
Too much work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reorganised or adjusted duties</li> <li>• review of work division</li> <li>• clearer work processes</li> <li>• prioritisation of duties</li> </ul>
Lack of support from supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• redefined supervisory responsibilities</li> <li>• more resources for supervisory work</li> <li>• managerial training</li> <li>• clearer supervisory policies and models</li> <li>• tools for supervisory work</li> </ul>
Shift work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• less shift work</li> <li>• developing the shift work system (e.g. taking into use rapid shift rotation)</li> <li>• work shift planning</li> </ul>

## Tools for employees to control harmful workload factors

It is not always possible to eliminate workload factors when they are an integral part of the work. For example challenging clients cannot be avoided altogether if the work includes customer service. However, employers should provide their staff tools to control workload factors. This could include training, flexible working hours, breaks, more social support and reinforcing the positive aspects of the work.

- > **The Occupational Safety and Health Act requires that employers supply their staff with necessary information on psychosocial workload factors at the workplace. In addition, employees must be instructed on how to apply safe work practices in order to avoid harmful workloads.**

## Practices for supporting employees suffering from work-related strain

The workplace must take precautions to deal with employees' harmful work-related strain. Employers are responsible for ensuring that they are able to detect harmful strain in their staff members at an early stage and to ensure that the employees can continue in their work without being exposed to health risks.

Employers must make sure that they have established in collaboration with their occupational healthcare provider adequate practices to safeguard the ability of their employees to work. Such practices are, for example,

- policies and models for early support to safeguard work ability
- procedures for sick leave notification
- practices for return to work.

 Employers must give their employees guidance about safe working practices in order to prevent harmful strain.

 Harmful workloads can have negative impacts, such as poor work performance or sick leave.

**Supervisors** are responsible for recognising harmful workloads as early as possible. They should be able to take action at the first signs of harmful strain. Typical signs are present when an employee works increasingly longer hours, the quality of his or her work quality deteriorates, he or she shows changes in behaviour and when more conflicts or dangerous situations arise in the work community than before.

- > **Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, employers must make arrangements in order to train supervisors to identify and handle cases of harmful workloads in the workplace.**