



# The early support model

The Early Support model is a preventing tool for sick leaves and to tackle potential problems in working ability. When declining working ability is found at early stage, it is easier to re-establish. A healthy and well-functioning work community is in everyone's interest, and intervention on working ability problems means caring.

The chemical industry's social partners in Finland (Chemical Industry Federation, Trade Union Pro, Industrial Union and Federation of Professional and Managerial Staff) have written a guidebook for Early Support model for all member companies management, personal representatives and staff in the Chemical Industry Federation. You are holding an English summary of the guidebook.

Well-being at work and Early Support is a well-established action model in Finnish companies. Early Support model is successful when it is part of the company's everyday life. Early Support is an investment in both the company, and the individual's future. Competent personnel works effectively.

Physical and mental health and safety issues are governed by laws, regulations and collective agreements in Finland. It is important, that companies follow the health and safety obligations, ensure safety at work and promote the well-being of both the individual and the whole work community. Actions on well-being at work and early support are not just a compulsory business obligation, they are, when successful, a good leadership and competence development system. Early Support brings a good spirit to the working environment and creates a well-functioning work community.

Well-being is experienced individually. What ideas do the following questions bring to You?

- What is Early Support in your opinion?
- What would Early Support mean in your business?
- What could we achieve by implementing Early Support model at our workplace?

New and open-minded thinking promotes new solutions and actions that improve well-being and might open the doors to Early Support model as a part of a successful business in the future.

## Early Support is responsible company policy

Well-being and Early Support are based on common actions at workplace. The best and most effective solutions are found in co-operation with personal representatives and the whole working community. Using interaction, feedback and learning from actions taken in Early Support model, it works in ever-changing working life now and in future. The model is part of a company's normal, everyday life.

The Early Support model is one of the elements of well-being management at the workplace. Assessment of safety risks at work draw an overall picture of safety and occupational health at work as well as needs of development actions at the workplace. The obligation to estimate risks is based on the Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Act and applies to all employers regardless of the sector and the number of employees. The Early Support model cannot replace statutory risk assessment, but the model can serve as a tool for deeper knowledge of statutory assessment.

## From suspicion to trust

Trust is the starting point for all co-operation at the workplace. Relating to the occupational well-being and occupational health, the importance of trust is emphasized accordingly.

The biggest obstacles to Early Support model are personnel's suspicions towards the model. The suspicions will be overcome, if the model is built in co-operation with the employer and employee representatives, without forgetting occupational health care. When designing, constructing, and implementing the Early Support model, it is good to give training to the whole staff on how the model works. Transparency increases confidence.

## Identifying changes in work ability

The employer is responsible for safety at work. The supervisor has the right and the duty to intervene in certain situations in regards to the employees' ability to work.

Everyone within the work community should take care of their own and their colleagues' well-being, but it is the employee's responsibility to take actions to support his/her own well-being. In the culture of caring, problems are both perceived and taken into consideration at an early stage, fairly and in an equitable manner.

The occupational health care is an active actor, but not a process leader. Interfering with problems and raising them with a worker is normal supervisory work. If necessary, person himself or his/her co-workers may also raise the issue.

Most effective is to pay attention to anticipation and respond to detected work-related problems quickly. It is easy to pay attention to late arrivals, sick leaves and absenteeism. However, it is also important to note other aspects that might tell about declining working ability.

These aspects can be:

- changes in work performance or quality of work (eg. performance, customer feedback, supervisor's observation)
- repeatedly extended working days or overtime work
- change in manners (eg. indifference, persistent fatigue, concentration and learning difficulties or lack of motivation)
- changes in behavior if they are reflected in performance or disturb the working community
- changes in the atmosphere of the work community to "vague", conflicts in work community
- employee brings out about difficulties in work ability, well-being, competence or work motivation.

## Determining changes in work ability

To determine changes in work ability is primarily addressed in the discussion between the supervisor and the employee. The supervisor has the right to request a worker's description on his/her work ability if there is a reason to doubt that the work ability has weakened or reduced. In a confident atmosphere, employees feel relaxed to discuss their issues. It is advisable to write a memo where the work ability change is described, actions and their follow-up agreed, persons in charge and timetable.

If there is a doubt there might be changes in health or employee and employer cannot find the cause for the work ability change, the supervisor directs the employee to occupational health care for more detailed clarification. If the cause of the work ability problem is clearly exposed to working environment or organizational problems, there is no need for occupational healthcare clarifications.

When evaluating changes in performance, it is advisable to consider also other factors that can affect his/her ability to work. Such factors may arise in personal discussions between supervisor and subordinate and they can be, for example, divorce or the death of a close person.

When there is doubt of work-related health problems, it is advisable to have a special appointment in occupational health care. The visit may lead to further clarifications, such as possible work-related illness or work restrictions. After the visit, it is a good idea to go through possible changes needed at workplace in tripartite negotiations between the employee, the employer and the occupational health care.

If there is employee's permission, employee representatives (Health and Safety Delegate and Shops Steward) are informed in advance about the appointment and work ability negotiations. If desired, an employee may request a Shop Steward or an Health and Safety Delegate to participate the meeting. In the discussion the occupational health practitioner gives his/her opinion of the worker's ability to work. Such kind of approach is also recommended as a preventative action. Particularly in the case of long sick leave, it is also worthwhile to use wider workability assessment processes.

After a long sick leave it is wise to consult occupational health care before starting to work again. If necessary, workability negotiations are being held triangular, so that the employer knows if there are any special arrangements required. Employer also introduces possible changes in working conditions during employer's long-term sick leave. During a long sick leave, it is advisable, that supervisor will be in touch with employer: asks to contact occupational health care and is interested in the employee's situation.

## Correcting and developing actions ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

The purpose of the Early Support model and actions taken, is to take care of the individual and the entire work community. This promotes well-being at the whole workplace. Often, problems or doubts of problems at workplace or work environment are shown as changes in the state of health or work performance. The primary purpose of the Early Support approach is to recover the ability to work. In addition, it must be assessed whether there are any other employees in the same situation.

Corrective and development actions may address one or more issues, like:

- individual's work ability, work activity or competence
- the whole team's work ability, work activity or competence
- entire work community work ability to work, competence and organizational skills
- additional training, mentoring, health counseling, rehabilitation
- co-operation, work arrangements
- machines, equipment and ergonomics
- technical improvements, adjustments, dimensioning, protection
- working environment
- lighting, noise, air conditioning, access roads, work areas
- leadership, management and processes
- interaction, leadership training, development discussions

The key goal is to find solutions within the workplace. This is not always possible. Therefore, it is important to know a variety of alternative solutions with external support. Co-operation should be seamless with the occupational health care. Employee, supervisor and occupational health care can find out in co-operation what kind of tasks employee can try out safely and what kind of tasks could improve the working ability.

Occupational healthcare's expertise is also crucial when decisions are taken on employee's need of outside support. This may involve physical or psychological rehabilitation, vocational rehabilitation or competence development.

The key idea of the Early Support approach is to find different opportunities and paths to recover or refresh work ability. This way, people feel they are taken care of in workplace as well as, if needed, outside help.

## Monitoring the actions taken ● ● ● ● ●

To ensure recovery, the agreed plan and actions should be monitored, for example, in follow-up discussions. If the agreed actions do not have the desired effects, supervisor raises the issue again and agrees on new actions and follow-up with the employee.

While monitoring actions taken, it is wise to think about the future. Did we learn something when solving the case? How would we solve this kind of case in future? Could we act differently to prevent the emergence of similar situations in the future? Are the lessons learned useful for the whole workplace or for some other groups? To enhance the action model ensures model's functioning also in the future.

## Care truly ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Employees and work communities' well-being is a sum of several things. Good leadership creates preconditions at work. Working in a supportive working community is rewarding. Internal communication and how employees face each other, are some things that affect work community's well-being. The Early Support model is built based on these aspects. With a good leadership, and especially with the supervisor's engagement, the model really functions in the work community. Through active communication and the day-to-day meetings of colleagues, supervisors and subordinates, the Early Support approach is an effective tool for developing the work community.

Well working Early Support promotes well-being at work community. The model should not be done for its own sake, but to make it easier to communicate and take care of one's neighbor. When the model is built up in co-operation with management, personnel management and employee representatives, and when it is introduced through active management involvement, the model becomes part of the company's everyday life. At the same time, potential prejudices about Early Support are crushed and practical measures are easier to grasp.

To create a well-functioning working community needs effort. The Early Support model is a good guide when traveling towards a good work community. Responsibility for Everyone at work is responsible for a good working life. One can think of how his/her own actions and behavior can strengthen the foundations of a good working life at their workplace.

One of the goals of Early Support is to tackle the problems in work communities at an early stage. It is of no one's advantage, that the problems and issues are not raised because of discretion in a situation where nobody cares and prolonging the case may have significant effects on the work ability and well-being of the employee.

Early Support model is not just a follow-up of absences of sick leaves, but rather a model of promoting employees' wellbeing, to act and communicate at work and everyday life. Early Support lasts for the entire career, but it is reflected in the various stages of working careers of individuals to promote various issues such as energy at work, competence, and career path.

Early support is a caring. A responsible company takes care of its staff. A responsible employee takes care of his/her colleague. Well-being and capable staff does a good job, now and in the future. Start caring today.