

Changing work patterns and well-being at work – experiences from Finland

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I want to thank the Japan Society of Behavioural Medicine very much for the invitation to speak to you here today. It is a great pleasure to share my views on the importance of well-being at work with you. This is true not only because it is my task as a diplomat to make my country better known and understood in Japan, but also because I personally find the subject extremely important and interesting.

Accomplishing a high level of job satisfaction among my colleagues is also an important indicator of my own personal success - of failure - as the leader of a work community, which at the moment is the Embassy of Finland in Tokyo (*slide 2*).

I am also extremely happy to be able to address an audience of medical professionals again. Some ten years ago I did this quite frequently, as I was then advising the leadership and members of the Finnish Medical Association (FMA) on international affairs. The three and a half years of absence from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when I was working full time for the FMA, were very useful for me. I learned a lot about medical ethics, health care systems and the professionals who develop and practice medicine.

I also learned a lot about my own well-being at work since the FMA is a very different organization compared to our Ministry with its own leadership and communication culture. I have great respect for the health professionals and I know well your desire to continuously expand your learning and become better at your work, with the goal of improving the health of your patients.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Finland's sovereignty (*slide 3*). Our status as an independent country and as a successful member of the global family of nations would not have been possible to achieve and maintain without hard work of the citizens. Except for our forests, Finland does not have an abundance of natural resources, and our northern location means that the climatic conditions around us are quite challenging. Therefore we have throughout our history had the necessity to build our wealth and society by working – hard and with long days, but also intelligently.

By this I mean that for us in Finland it has always been necessary to invent smarter and more efficient ways of working. The focus of this process of improvement was traditionally on better safety and higher productivity. Earlier the emphasis was on the mechanics and organisation of work, but as the science and understanding of working conditions developed, the soft side of working life started to gain more and more importance. It was then that terms like job satisfaction, work-life balance and well-being at work entered the everyday discussions in our society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am not an academic researcher of working life or behavioural medicine, but rather by a practitioner who has observed and experienced working life in Finland and six other countries for some 25 years. During this quarter of a century, both public and private employers in Finland have understood the importance of well-being at work as a productivity factor, but also as a way of attracting the most qualified employees and keeping them motivated throughout their careers.

At this stage it is probably wise to have a Finnish definition of well-being at work. According to the our national *Institute for Occupational Health* the term "**työhyvinvointi**" (*slide 4*) means safe, healthy and productive work that professionally qualified employees and work communities execute in a well led and managed organization.

The work is perceived as meaningful and rewarding, and it contributes to the individuals' feeling of control over their own lives.

To understand how we in Finland perceive work as a part of our lives it is useful to have a brief look at our history (*slide 5*). Since the protestant reformation of the Catholic religion in the 16th century, Finland has been a country of Lutheran religious and ethical tradition. In the time of the reformation, which started exactly 500 years ago, Finland was a part of the Kingdom of Sweden, and our legal system, society and institutions developed in parallel with our dear current neighbour to the west.

This historical and religious background has a profound impact in the way the Finnish people behave at their work today. We have a protestant work ethic, which means that we want to execute our work diligently and efficiently. Normally the loyalty towards our colleagues and employers is high. Combined with the harsh northern climate, which in the past made it necessary for us to work hard during the short summer in order to survive the merciless winter, has led to our Finnish attitude towards work that can perhaps best be described with the words serious and respectful.

Next I am going to share with you some results of a 2014 publication (*slide 6*) of *Statistics Finland*. The report is called ***Changes in Working Conditions 1977-2013*** and it compiles the results of seven surveys conducted during that period. The publication is unfortunately available only in Finnish, but a short summary of the latest survey has been printed out for your use.

It is worth noting that during this research period of nearly 40 years changes in the nature of work in Finland have been substantial. In the 1970's our society was still finalizing its transformation from agricultural to industrial, whereas during the decades of 1990 and 2000 the service sector grew with a fast pace. At the same time the education level (*slide 7*) of the workforce rose: in 1977 some 55% of the employees had only a basic education, whereas in 2013 their share was only 11% and nearly half of the workforce had a tertiary education.

Also the gender balance changed substantially during the research period: women became a majority of the Finnish workforce around 1990. And of course also the nature of employment changed: temporary and part-time work increased as alternatives to permanent and full-time jobs. Because of our history, Finns are on average high achievers at work and therefore performing well at the workplace is a central factor for their self-esteem and social status. About 60% of the employees in Finland think that work is a very important part of their life.

In the minds of my countrymen, work does come second to family life, but it has clearly more significance for them than free time. During the past four decades, this perception has not really changed at all. Family and especially leisure have increased their importance for the citizens of Finland, but that has not led to work losing its significance in giving meaning to our lives.

Industrialization and urbanization took place in Finland only after the Second World War, that is some decades later than in many of the central European countries and also in our Nordic neighbours. The relative strength of the Labour Union movement in the post-war era has meant that the importance of working conditions, safety at work and later, well-being at work and the work-life balance, have been placed high on the agenda of the labour market negotiations as well as the society at large.

Still today over three quarters of the Finnish workforce is organised in labour unions. In my opinion the importance of the labour union movement has diminished as a driving force of improving well-being at work. These days the individual employees themselves are demanding job satisfaction from their employers. Especially among the younger generation the market system works: if the workplace is not a happy environment, the employees choose to leave and look for another job.

During the past three decades overall work satisfaction in Finnish workplaces has increased, albeit slowly. Simultaneously, the substance and content of a person's work has increased its importance in relation to the monetary compensation he or she receives for it (*slide 8*). Even if this trend has been similar for men and women, on average Finnish men still find their salary to be a more important motivational factor than the women do. For women the content of the work is a much higher priority.

A related trend can also be seen in the significance of personal development as opposed to career advancement. Whereas almost half of the employees in Finland see their personal development as important, only 11% think that advancing in their careers matters to them. Between 1977 and 2013 a remarkable change was witnessed in the perceived possibilities to develop at work as a person: from 28% in 1977 to 45% in 2013.

For many, work has increasingly become a place of personal fulfilment rather than just a way to make a living. Interestingly, there is no major difference between younger and more experienced employees. Even persons close to their retirement age still find it motivating to learn new things. The fact that Finland is the leading country in Europe when it comes to training at the workplace supports these findings. Another field where Finnish employees rank themselves number one in a European comparison is the possibility to influence decisions that have an effect on their own work.

Gender equality at Finnish workplaces has advanced during the past 20 years. Both women and men report a significant improvement on this subject, even though men still see fewer equality problems at their workplace than women do. In 2013 on average 40% of both sexes thought that gender equality at their workplace was a reality, when the share 16 years earlier in 1997 was only 25%. We are of course far from the desired goal which is a hundred percent, but the trend of increasing gender equality is clear.

The flexibility of working time has changed rather dramatically. In 1984, only 36% of the employees had the possibility of influencing their arrival or departure from work within a 30-minute range. In 2013 the corresponding share was 63%. Another trend that has strengthened is remote work (*slide 9*): there has been a tenfold increase of employees working at least partially at home between 1990 and 2013, from 2% to 20%. This undoubtedly has to do with the fact that the tools available have changed: from 17% of employees who used ICT at work in 1984 the share has increased to 93%.

During the past 15 years my employer, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland has placed well-being at work very high on the agenda of its Human Resources strategy (*slide 10*). According to the job satisfaction surveys, which are carried out annually among the whole personnel, the development has been very positive. The survey is also a very practical leadership tool: it gives me a snapshot of how my staff members feel about their working environment and what are the things we can easily fix to improve job satisfaction.

A core element of the strategy has been the enhancement of leadership skills among the middle and top management of the Ministry. In Finland we think that well-being at work is the responsibility of both the employer and the employee. The organization has to create the opportunities for well-being by fostering a culture of open communication and trust.

It also must pay attention to the leadership skills of the managerial staff, just like my Ministry has been doing for the past 15 years or so. In my experience, much of the unhappiness at a workplace is related to two factors: lack of information in general and poor communication between the leader and his team. Employees need to understand what the strategic goals of the organization are and how their own work fits into the overall picture. They also need timely and honest feedback of how they succeed in their task.

The organization must also have zero tolerance of bullying and sexual harassment. These two themes have been at the forefront of the well-being discussion during the past couple of years, and for a good reason. According to research, they are unfortunately becoming more commonplace at Finnish workplaces. To some extent these findings can reflect the fact that they are more frequently reported than before.

Bullying is a problem among children at Finnish schools and it is being tackled there. Among working-age adults bullying must not be tolerated at all, and the same is true for sexual harassment. The fact that these things are now discussed more openly is a very positive development, and in my view the openness must continue. Questions about them have been included also in our Ministry's confidential job satisfaction survey.

However, it is not enough that only the top leadership of private companies, NGOs as well as ministries and other government organizations take well-being at work seriously. Maintaining and developing job satisfaction is a joint

activity, shared by the top leadership, middle management and the employees. In the end each individual is in charge of his or her immediate personal relations with colleagues. The employees cannot escape their own responsibility of making a positive impact at their working community. This can be described with the concept of organizational citizenship behavior, which to me means that all members of an organization have both rights and responsibilities.

Well-being at work is a result of many factors. It is created every day, and cannot be achieved by only organizing health-related activities or theme days separate from the work itself. The efforts to maintain well-being at the workplace must be cross-cutting and long-term. I wish to conclude by emphasizing that in Finland we like to see well-being at work as an investment, not as a cost. It affects the competitiveness of organizations as well as their economic performance and their reputation. If the investment to achieve a high level of job satisfaction is made and enough attention is given to its implementation, the positive results will follow (*slide 11*).

Thank you for the attention.