



# Working time

## and occupational health



Finnish Institute of  
Occupational Health



# Working time and occupational health

## Working times change with work life

Working times and working time arrangements in Finland are constantly changing depending on economic structure, content of work, the habits of customers and the demand for workforce. The traditional shift-work professions of basic industry are in decline, whereas atypical working hours and new working time arrangements are increasing for example in the service industry.

The following changes have taken place in the loading caused by working times:

- There has been a long-term reduction in total working time and working weeks exceeding 40 hours.
- Flexible working hours are available to as many as 60 percent of workers – more than anywhere else in Europe.
- Slightly less than half of Finnish wage earners have agreed to monthly flexibility in working times for production reasons.
- The amount of shift work performed has remained the same at the level of population.
- 16 percent of workers perform shift work or period work and 7 percent regular morning or evening work.
- 15 percent have worked nights at least once a month.
- The changes in work life have brought increasing time pressures.

## Functional working time solutions encourage longer careers

Prolonging work careers means more years at work and more working time within the work career. It is important to remember that life expectancy, too, is increasing. Functional and healthy working times help maintain work ability and promote coping at work in different life stages.

- Young people need flexible working time models to enable participation in work and a satisfactory work-life balance.
- With middle-age workers, working time models that promote recovery prevent undue loading.
- With ageing workers and those with reduced work ability, adapting the work according to work ability and individual solutions regarding working times promote staying on at work.

## Working times contribute to well-being at work and the quality of work life

Issues related to working times can both improve well being at work and pose risks to occupational health. In a wide range of life situations, many people opt for part-time work or flexible or atypical working times, either to gain employment or in order to achieve a better work-life balance.

Early morning shifts, night work, long working hours – including the journey to work and back home – and irregular working times may increase loading and health risks and make it more difficult to find the right balance between work and personal life.

Working times have an impact on:

- wages, pension
- productivity of work
- work-life balance
- performance at work
- loading and occupational health

Shift work that includes night work increases the risk of sleep and alertness disorders, traffic and occupational accidents, weight gain, coronary heart disease, adult-onset diabetes, duodenal ulceration and breast cancer.

With atypical working times, also the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle may become more difficult.

## Opportunities to influence working times

Good opportunities to influence working hours

- maintain work ability and make it easier to adjust the workload
- promote work-life balance
- improve the state of health as experience by the employee and reduce sickness absences
- reduce the risk of being transferred to disability pension

Ways to promote health and increase workers' opportunities to influence on working times include:

- adjusting the workload through working times
- shifting to working time models that promote recovery; always bear in mind the importance of rest during (breaks) and after the work shift (sleep and free time), proper recovery and ergonomics.
- avoiding overly long work weeks; weekly working time should be kept under 50 hours in all circumstances, even when using flexible working hours and working-time banks.
- incorporating days off in lieu of overtime pay and other flexibility in working times as part of the organization's plan for well-being at work.
- accounting for individual preferences and wishes in the planning of work shifts.
- favouring models of operation that promote the autonomy of units in matters related to working time.

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## How can we account for recovery in shift work?

A regular, continuous three-shift system.

- a maximum of one or two consecutive early morning or night shifts
- a minimum of 12 of hours of free time between two consecutive shifts
- clockwise rotation of shifts.

An irregular shift system (period work):

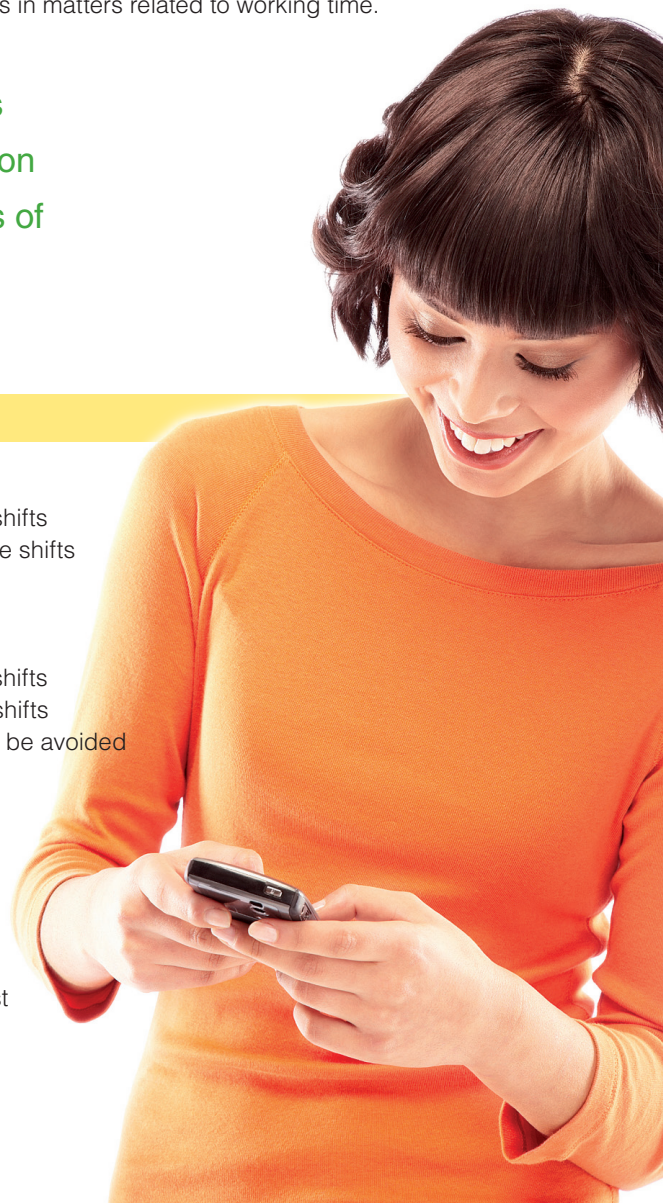
- a maximum of one or two consecutive early morning or night shifts
- a minimum of 12 of hours free time between two consecutive shifts
- e.g. evening-morning and morning-night combinations should be avoided

A regular 12-hour two-shift system

- an alternative to the strenuous eight-hour three-shift system
- use of the system should be considered on a case-by-case basis, for example on weekends

Regular night work:

- possible only with voluntary agreement from workers who must be suitable for the job
- a maximum of five consecutive night shifts



## What should occupational health services do?

Good occupational health care includes the prevention, identification and treatment of the adverse health effects caused by atypical working times. Objectives of medical examinations with workers doing night and shift work:

- assessment of the initial state of health (medical check-up at the start of employment)
- informing employees of the hazards and their prevention
- suitability assessment for employees with medical conditions or symptoms that increase the health hazards of shift work
  - special attention should be paid to the prevention of the added risk of cardiovascular disease
  - identification of factors affecting alertness (illness, medication, etc.)
- monitoring the employees' health and their adaptation to shift work
- if the adverse health effects of the work are significant and/or there are problems in work ability, the amount of night work should be reduced

The law requires occupational health services to account for issues related to shift and night work:

- In the Finnish Government's Decree on medical examinations in work that presents a special risk of illness (1485/2001), night work is mentioned as one of the reasons that call for additional medical examinations.
- Section 30, Occupational Safety and Health Act: An employee performing night work shall, when necessary, be provided with an opportunity to change tasks or move over to daywork if this is possible in consideration of the circumstances and if changing tasks is necessary, in view of the employee's personal capacities, in order to eliminate risks arising from the conditions of the workplace or the nature of the work to the employee's health.

## What can the shift worker do?

Means available to the individual worker to prevent the hazards of shift work:

- plan family life and other social life around the rhythm of the work
- ways to improve sleep and alertness:
  - a good sleeping environment
  - short period of sleep shortly before the first night shift
  - in three-shift work, take a shorter nap after the last night shift
  - regular sleep rhythm in continuous morning work
- healthy diet
  - lighter meals for night shift
  - avoid caffeine (e.g. drinks containing caffeine) too close to bedtime
- active exercise prevents insomnia
- use active stress management methods

Good opportunities to influence working hours maintain work ability and make it easier to adjust the workload.



### Read more:

Working Hours Act (605/1996)

Young Workers' Act (998/1993)

Forum for Well-Being at Work

Finnish Institute of Occupational Health

FIOH website on working time (In Finnish)

Occupational Safety and Health Administration

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

<http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1996/en19960605.pdf>

<http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1993/en19930998.pdf>

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<http://www.stm.fi/en/frontpage>