



AKKU

Regulation of work ability in MSMEs through multimedia adapted tools

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The AKKU cross-competence roadmap

A proposal of potential linkages with the official JRC’s frameworks

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About the AKKU project

Micro and small enterprises (henceforth, MSMEs) play an important role in the European economy. MSMEs are potentially particularly affected by a shortage of young talent, as they are unable to compete with the services offered by Medium-Sized Enterprises and large companies in various respects (e.g. job security, pay levels, promotion opportunities).

MSMEs can and must react to this by paying special attention to maintaining the workability and employability of their existing workforces. In addition to the classic occupational health and safety measures, measures for the preventive maintenance of work and employability must be implemented to a greater extent, so that employees can and want to carry out their work until the planned retirement age.

A comprehensive promotion of work ability can help to close this gap: over the past few years, numerous research and transfer projects have developed and compiled instruments for the analysis and design of working conditions that make this comprehensive promotion of work ability possible.

However, there is always feedback from consultants that the existing instruments cannot be used in companies with fewer than 15 employees: they are too complicated, do not fit in with the choice of words or can only be used with a larger number of employees.

The aim of the AKKUEurope project (henceforth, AKKU) is the systematic development of a workability multimedia toolbox suitable for the target group and based on existing instruments with the aim to improve workability for MSME and specially for small and micro enterprises. For this purpose, the partnership will proceed as follows

Framing Work-Ability

The issue of work-ability has been pioneered by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Medicine (FIOH) in Helsinki. Prof. Juhani Ilmarinen – head of the department of occupational physiology at this institute until 2009 – has been working with an interdisciplinary team since the 1980s to discuss how the potential of employees can be preserved and developed in such a way that they are available to companies for as long as possible, and on the other hand, the employees reach retirement age as healthy as possible.

Of central importance for Ilmarinen is the concept of work-ability, which is often interpreted very narrowly by personnel managers and doctors, but also by the affected persons themselves: either someone is able to do his/her job – or not. In its most linear and user-friendly definition, work-ability is: *[...] the potential of a person, a woman or a man to accomplish a given task at a given time. The development of individual functional capacity must be compared to the work requirement. Both sizes can change and must be designed according to age.*





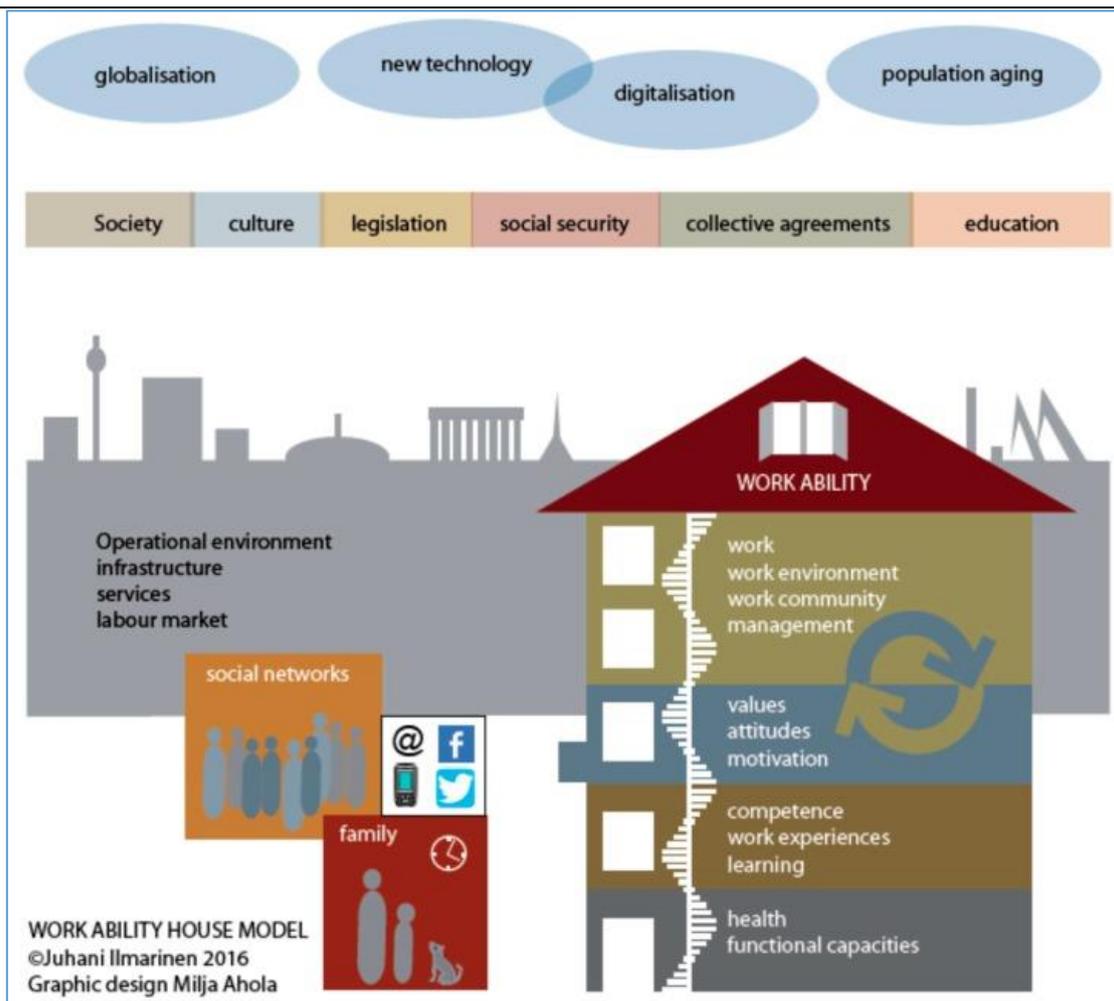
The concept of work-ability is very easy to grasp in its essentials: the workload (roles, responsibilities, task) assigned to a worker should adapt to his/her physical and mental capabilities, balancing what the workers can practically do at any given time of his/her working life.

Work-ability is a very sophisticated concept that put emphasis on the kind of working environment in which the worker find him/herself operating, and the resources he/she has available.

Visualising work-ability

Throughout years, the work-ability model found in practice a very interesting visual representation, perfectly depicting the multifaceted architecture behind its theoretical implant and design. Also known as the House of Workability (Exhibit 1), the metaphoric display of the concept found great consensus among practitioners and academics, becoming soon after its proposal quite a common standard of further referring to the concept.

Exhibit 1: The House of Workability



Source: Ilmarinen J. From Work Ability Research to Implementation. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2019 Aug 12;16(16):2882.





Each of the floor of the house of work-ability – along with other contextual factors such as family and relational networks – represents a social and economic construct influencing the work-ability of a person.

Not by chance, the ground floor is represented by *health and functional Capacities*: changes in physical well-being have of course a direct and immediate impact of the person work capacity, and restriction on health and performance will always be a threat to workers' work-ability regardless of what we observe at any other dimension.

On the second floor, we have the layer pertaining to *professional qualification and work-related competences*: this pertains to the know-how, experience and expertise that the worker is able to deploy. The higher and more sophisticated the qualification of the worker, the higher and more sophisticated the professional challenges under the direct responsibility of the worker. In an ever changing labour market, professional qualification is related to work-ability in the measure this is able to guarantee the employability competitiveness and lifelong career development pathway of the worker.

With the *values, attitudes and motivation* we are stepping into a more subjective dimension of the House of Workability: apathy, alienation, sense of dissatisfaction, lack of purpose and fulfilment, etc., represents all threats and inhibitors to working capacity.

Not by chance the *work community* layer is also represented as the largest and heaviest as whatever impact and/or has an influence on this level contribute to shape the above-mentioned floors: work environment (including lightening, acoustic and visual aesthetics of the surround space) as well as social and organisation climate, contribute to enhance workers' capacities to perform effectively and efficiently their duties.





The AKKU work-ability assessment

Ultimate aim of the AKKU project is to design, develop, and valorise at international level a wealth of knowledge and cluster of resources, tools and framework already available and compliant by scale and scope with at least one aforementioned dimensions.

This is intended to enrich the theoretical framework of the House of Workability with ready-to-use and experience based instruments for the into-practice operationalisation of the very same work-ability model.

Partners carried out at national and international level an assessment of resource that could be suitable as work-ability drivers, and categorised based on two different parameters:

- Which of the layer of the house the tool/resource might (potentially) belong to
- If the given tool/resource is meant to contribute to awareness raising, analysis and/or concrete implementation of work-ability solutions

Evidences from literature

The original working plan of the AKKU project foreseen a preliminary selection of 60 tools/resources from literature sources of partners' countries¹ to be later narrowed down to 30 final references for the AKKU work-ability model².

During the initial stage of research, partners came up with a pre-selection of 92 tools/resources potentially relevant for the co-creation of the AKKU House of Workability toolbox. Besides technical evaluation and formative assessment concerning the reliability and suitability of each of the given resource, there are some other considerations emerged throughout implementation that apply transversally and horizontally to the focus of the analysis as a whole, and the quality and quantity of information gathered on the specific topic.

While searching for *bricks* that could fit the AKKU House of Workability, partners exchanged feedbacks, views and opinions on a regular basis. After few weeks since the official launch of the research, the general impression was that the very concept of work-ability as proposed by the Finnish school is not largely mainstreamed: references and other relevant inputs have been extrapolated by partners from "second best" or indirect sources, and potential linkages with the House of Workability have been envisioned accordingly.

Beside the sample of literature from Ilmarinen & co., the very concept of work-ability is highly fragmented, and it may come in many difference shapes and forms depending on the source of analysis consulted at any given moment i.e., academia, industry, health VS HR literature. One thing that we noticed for instance is that, when clear references to work-ability as intended by the authors

¹ At exception of Belgium, as IHF asbl was responsible for the mapping and assessment with reference to the international/EU ecosystem of research and practice

² The AKKU House of Workability is available for free, in open access and Multilanguage format via the official Open Education Resource platform of the project: <https://www.akkueurope.eu/toolbox.php>





exists, it is not nearly as comprehensive as the one proposed by the Finnish school: either you have centred focus on health and security related issues, or on the opposite pole, the concerns addresses HR dynamics only.

In a sense, we start realising very soon that the building of the House of Workability required a transversal and multidisciplinary approach, as focusing on a niche of literature only limited the potential upscale of the research, and the quality/quantity of available inputs.

Most importantly, and specifically for the upper levels of the House of Workability model, linkages to the concept as framed by the project was to be outlined from scratch: the most interesting insights relating to the last two layers were provided by managerial literature, but without that the term work-ability was there.

All in all, partners' effort was not only about *mapping*, but even more so, about *evaluating* how resources assessed as potentially suitable could be included effectively in the AKKU House of Workability. This approach to the evaluation of each of the preselected resource is what lead us to cut-out more than 60 inputs that did not stand the test of suitability.





Bridging the House of Workability to the official JRC frameworks

The build-up of the House of Workability took into consideration EU-centred/international literature sources that were mapped by the Belgian partner IHF asbl, think thank specialised on European policies and programmes for education and training.

The inclusion of this layer of analysis was intended at project proposal to map and assess as many areas of interest available, diversify and widen the scale of the research field, strengthen the methodology of the assessment and the overall reliability of the process.

The international experience in implementation of the analysis of which IHF has been protagonist confirmed the perception of partners consolidated at national level: no conventional reference / interlinkage with the Finnish House of Workability can be traced. For the sake of clarity, worth to mention is the fact that, there are in fact numerous recall to the concept, but nothing that truly catches it in comprehensiveness as addressed in the context of this project.

In-depth cycles of creative discussions lead us to firmly believe that the House of Workability as it is shares many interesting joint with the official EU frameworks for education and training published by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. This is specifically relevant for the last two floors of the model: although it is true that many available resources from mainstreamed literature complement the health and safety layer of the model, partners believe that there is still a wide margin to strengthen even further the most two managerial and HR oriented layers of the model embedding the training and capacity building tools made available by the European Commission.

After discussing about this finding with partners, and with the proactive collaboration of IDP, IHF asbl and the Italian partner decided to propose a revised framework of the House of Workability that outlines potential interlinkages with the training areas proposed by some of the JRC's frameworks as triggers and drivers of a work-ability compliant managerial standard.

What we did was looking into the aforementioned trying to outline *food for thoughts* on how their associated competences relates to the concept of work-ability, and how they might be at the use of the managers and employers to foster within their organisation the most sophisticated settings enabling work-ability. The following considerations stems out just a proposal and are conceived as a transcription of the exchange of views and the free flow of knowledge between partners as concretely happened during the last cycle of implementation of the project.

About the JRC framework: a very concise and comprehensive introduction

In order to better introduce readers to the JRC frameworks for education and training, we need to take a quick step back to 2006, with the official publication by the EU council and EU parliament of





25 official recommendations addressed to both EU Commission and Member States to foster an EU-spread awareness on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (henceforth, LLL)³.

The aim of this policy document was to provide for national policy makers a set of clear coordinates that they could rely on to sustain:

- the long-term planning and programming at national level of new capacity building programmes tailored on the acquisition from students (i.e. citizens) of key competences for lifelong learning, originally envisioned as innovative drivers for social, cultural and economic development of EU societies.
- the validation of key competences and the participation of a diverse and multidisciplinary cohort of STKHs and groups of interest
- the consolidation of a standardized EU approach to the teaching and education of aforementioned competences – but flexible enough to adapt to the many contextual features influence the learning experience i.e., cultural nuances at local level, designed pedagogical approached deployed by teachers, etc.

The standardized EU approach is very the JRC frameworks came into play. When we mention “key competences for LLL” we are essentially referring to:

1. Communication in the mother tongue
2. Communication in foreign languages
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
4. Digital competence
5. Learning to learn
6. Social and civic competences
7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
8. Cultural awareness and expression

For each of the listed, there is available a related capacity building frameworks developed by international experts, and strategically conceived to promote skills, knowledge and attitudes associated to that given competence and instrumental for the education path undertake by learners.

The very structure and design of these frameworks is slightly different from the one implemented in the AKKU project. While the House of Workability seems having a sort of hierarchal principle regulating the logic and rational behind the elements completing its layers, in the case of JRC frameworks we find complementary training areas that exists as standalone islands of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and under which we find listed a series of competences that relates to it. The motivation of the House of Workability and the content within stimulated and trigger our interest in exploring potential interlinkages specifically with reference to the following counterparts:

³ Official update of: RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC)





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- Key Competence no.5 and related framework, i.e., LifeComp: The European Framework for Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Key Competence
 - Key Competence no.7 and related framework i.e., EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework

The reason behind this choice has a clear rationale: the design, development, implementation and sustainment of work-ability compliant models at MSMEs level – specifically for those tackling the highest two layers – implies sophisticated managerial and entrepreneurial solutions: personal, social, learning to learn, and entrepreneurial competences might represent indeed the triggers that could sustain micro-entrepreneurs in understanding which work-ability challenges their organisation is facing and coherent solutions⁴. In Annex 1 and Annex 2 we provide for the interlinkage model between the House of Workability, and [EntreComp](#) and [LifeComp](#) respectively.

⁴ The benchmark of the House of Workability extended even to other official frameworks not formally mentioned (see DigComp, GreenComp). After further considerations, we decided to leave them aside for lack of better evidences highlighting linkages as here discussed

