IPHC-2023

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Occupational Healthcare of Workers in Gig Economy

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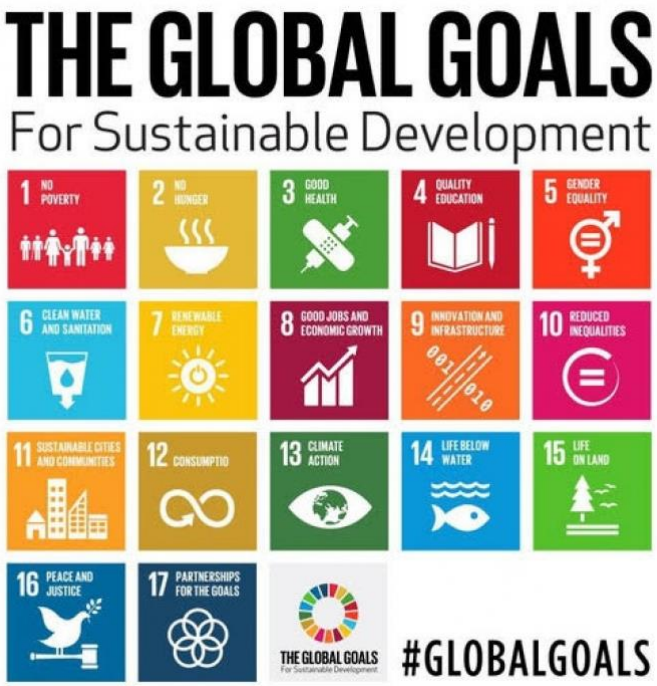
Introduction

- We explored how occupational health, safety and well-being of gig workers is supported in the occupational healthcare (OHC) context in Finland
- The research gap:
  - Little research about the OHC implementation of gig workers in Finland
  - Gig work has become more common globally (International Labour Organization 2016; Statistics Finland 2022)
- Gig workers:
  - Employment contracts in terms of contingent work including independent contractors, platform work, crowd workers, work in shared economy and self-employment (Watson et al., 2021)
- Gig work attracts due to its flexibility:
  - Short-term commitments in one or several workplaces when needed
  - Better management of personnel costs and risks
  - Work-life balance (Mattila et al., 2021)

Introduction

- Sustainability of gig work?
  - Gig workers are often young and inexperienced and work in low-skilled occupations, a vulnerable group of workers (Countouris et al., 2016)
  - High incidence of occupational injuries and accidents (Hopkins 2017; Hünefeld et al., 2020)
  - Gig workers have poorer work conditions than permanent workers (Countouris et al., 2016)
  - Self-employed have economic worries due to Corona pandemic (Elstad et.al., 2022)



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Occupational safety and health legislation in Finland

- Employers must arrange OHC services to their employees
- Employers, employees and OHC must co-operate in prevention of work-related illnesses and accidents, in promotion of health and safety of the work, and work ability
- It is voluntary for the self-employed to arrange OHC

- Occupational Healthcare Act 1383/2001; Occupational Safety and Health Act 738/2002

Good occupational health practice

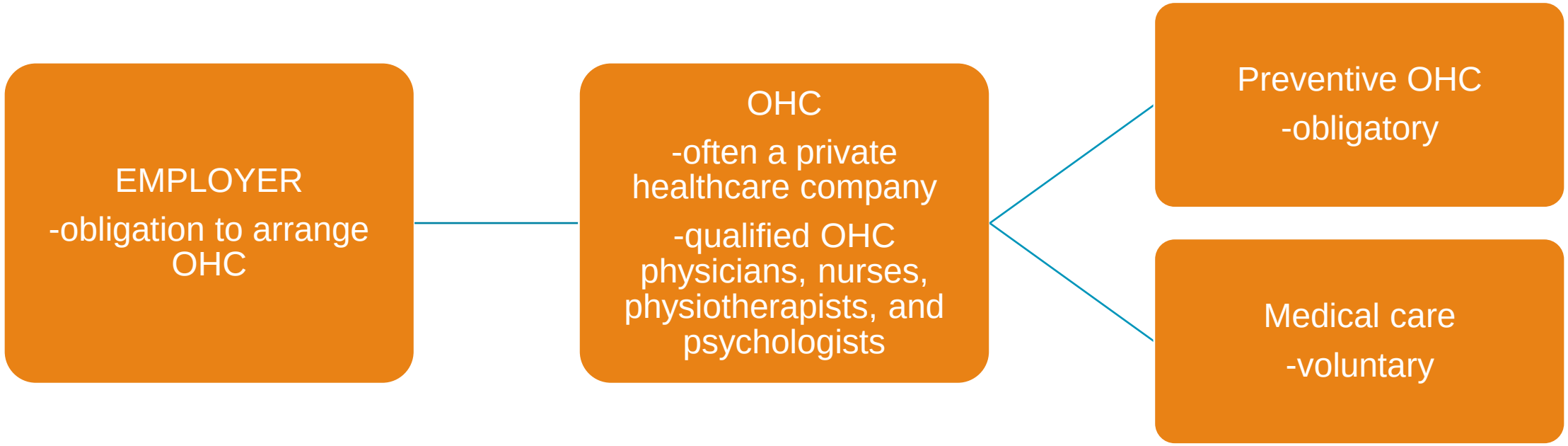
- General principles for the organisation, implementation and development of OHC, which comply with the provisions of the legislation and with the knowledge and experience of occupational health and the general principles of OHC

The work must not endanger the health of the workers!

International conventions and directives

- International Labour Organization C161 - Occupational Health Services Convention, 1985 (No. 161)
- The EU Framework Directive 89/391 on Safety and Health at Work

The Occupational Healthcare (OHC) System in Finland



Funded by the employers and the employees with obligatory insurances and employer client fees
Social Insurance Institution of Finland compensates 60% of the preventive OHC costs and 50% of the medical care costs

The factors that distinguish the Finnish OHC system from other countries are the ***comprehensive***, ***multiprofessional*** *and* ***preventive OHC*** (Reijula 2022)

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The Occupational Healthcare (OHC) System in Finland

The preventive OHC actions are implemented on the individual, work community and organizational level

- Visiting the workplaces to investigate the exposure agents, workload factors, working arrangements, and risk of accidents and violence
- Conducting periodic health examinations and work ability assessments based on the work risk assessment
- Investigating the need for rehabilitation and support for continued work and return to work
- Making suggestions for action
- Providing information, advice and guidance
- Participating in organizing the first aid
- Assessing and monitoring the quality and impact of OHC activities

Aim

- To produce new knowledge and add understanding about OHC involvement in gig workers' occupational safety and health promotion
- To contribute in developing occupational safety and health practices in workplaces
- We focused on workers employed directly in a workplace with a part-time, a periodic, or a zero-hour contract or hired through a temporary work agency and self-employed
- Our research question was:

How is the work ability of the gig workers promoted and what are the potential development needs, according to the experiences of OHC professionals and self-employed cultural workers?

Material and methods

- A qualitative, descriptive study in Finland
- Semi-structured thematic interviews individually, in pairs or groups in 2021 and 2022
- Participants (N=28): OHC physicians, nurses, OHC key account managers and self-employed cultural workers (musicians, visual artists), and experts
- Inductive content analysis method was used for the data analysis

Results

- Successful promotion of the work ability of gig workers is built on the 1) ***effective co-operation*** between the OHC, employer and gig workers, agency and user company, 2) ***implementation of the good occupational health practice***, *and 3)* ***support for the self-employed to arrange OHC***
- However, the promotion of the work ability of the gig workers' often fails
- In developing occupational safety and health practices in workplaces, the following factors need to be considered…

Results

1. Preventive OHC

- The medical care was often prioritized instead of preventive OHC actions
- Gig workers didn’t dare to use OHC in fear of losing their job
- Gig workers didn’t know about their rights for the preventive care nor the content of the care
- OHC didn’t know the exposure agents in the work of the agency worker
- Agencies didn’t monitor sickness absences of the workers

2. Clarity of the rights and the responsibilities of the parties

- OHC and the gig workers didn’t always know what OHC services they were entitled to receive
- Gig workers didn’t know their rights for the preventive OHC
- Lack of clarity regarding the payer of the OHC services of the agency workers

Results

3. Equal treatment of the gig workers

- Inequality in access to the OHC services between the gig workers and the permanent workers
- The periodic health examinations were not systematically conducted
- Gig workers' work contracts were not continued in case of problems with ability to work

4. Communication

- Insufficient communication between the OHC, the agency, the agency worker and the user company
- OHC didn't always know that the agency worker had started in the user company
- Information from the OHC was not delivered to the workers by the agency
- Conflicting guidelines during the corona period in agency and user company
- Lack of common language

Results

5. Co-operation

- Need for improving co-operation in agency work context especially when the agency worker had several agencies which all had different OHC provider

6. OHC work community level actions

- In case of bullying, the gig worker was often left alone, and the OHC was not involved

7. OHC arrangements of the self-employed

- Financial barriers, self-employed didn’t afford OHC
- Lack of knowledge, self-employed didn’t recognize their need for OHC

Conclusion

- OHC has an important role in the promotion of the gig workers' work ability in co-operation with the employers and the workers and the agencies and the user companies
- Greater involvement of OHC is needed to increase the sustainability of gig work
- Future research is needed especially of the opportunities to promote occupational safety and health in the temporary agency work due to the often so problematic tripartite working relationship

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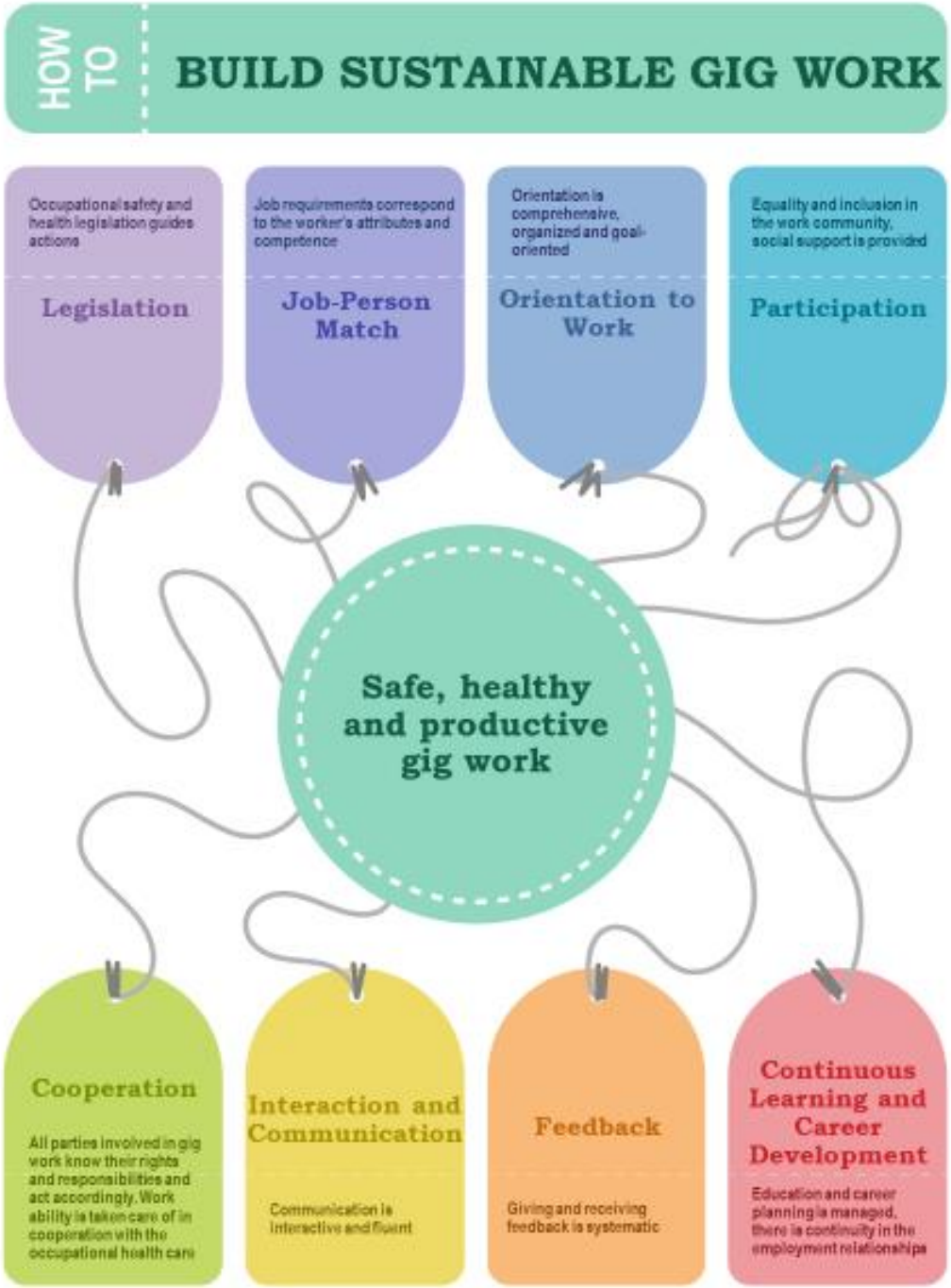
The Sustainable Gig Work Project



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