

**Work ability through learning and development.
Discussing the link between science and practice with an
example of knowledge work research**

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Goals of the presentation

Discussing the link between science and practice with an example of knowledge work research:

1. Showing the importance of workplace learning for work ability:
 - learning at work is essential for the new world of work
 - it has to be organized systematically in every company
 - supervisors play a key role in this process.
2. Reflecting on the link between science and practice (lessons learnt from our field research project).

Challenges for work and labor markets

Digital transformation and demographic change



- **organizations** have to cope with new challenges **with an older workforce**
- **employees** have to cope with a higher frequency of innovations and changes **until the end of their legally extended working life**

Work ability in the digitized world

What has to be done to ensure that employees can maintain, promote or restore their health and work ability?

‘Work ability’: How able is he/she to do his/her work with respect to the work demands, health and mental resources? (Ilmarinen & Tuomi, 2004).

Dynamic concept: permanent balancing of demands, strains and resources

- work ability is determined by extensive vocational competencies and the continuous development of those
- jobholders need to be prepared for meeting new demands by a job design that enables workplace learning and development:
 - complete assignments, task variety, scope of action, exchange and feedback
(German Action Regulation Theory; Hacker, 1986, Volpert, 1987)

Field research on organizing work for learning and development - The role of supervisors

Research questions:

1. *What is the status quo for clerical workers in the studied organizations?*
2. *How are working conditions relating to health, learning and development outcomes?*
3. *How do supervisors affect these working conditions by leadership and work design?*

- online-surveys with employees (n=551) and their supervisors (n=144) for two times + 33 qualitative expert interviews
- in 10 organizations (financial, insurance and civil service sectors)
- focus on clerical work

The role of supervisors

Designers of work:

- direct supervisors (e.g. team managers) are responsible for the job design and work organization

They can support through learning-oriented leadership behavior:

(Operationalization by Friebe, 2005)

- supports autonomous learning, new experiences, new solutions with fault tolerance
- shows interest in learning success
- works out aims for learning and development along with the employee
- gives regular feedback



Some findings (so far)

- theoretically supportive working conditions are positively related to vocational competencies, health and work-ability
- learning-oriented leadership is positively related to supportive working conditions and strengthens the positive effect of these working conditions on the outcomes
- actually most employees experience support rather situational than systematically
- Reasons could be: Team managers are evaluated rather by other achievements than employee-development + they report too little time for it
- However, they consider learning at work important



Some key messages derived from our research

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- **Do support systematically: Feedback and communication are crucial for sustainable learning success**



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- Do support systematically: Feedback and communication are crucial for sustainable learning success
- Learning-oriented leadership needs supportive framework conditions: Give supervisors resources and acknowledgment

How to link science and practice?

How to link science and practice (lessons learnt)

What worked well?

- breaking down the results into few key messages
- clear addressee from the beginning: „the role of supervisors“
- clerical work = specific work activity
- considering the right wording for the company context
- continuous interaction with practice partners
- addressing the needs of „multipliers“ in the organizations
- addition of company-specific questions to the questionnaire (also mobilizes respondents)



How to link science and practice (lessons learnt)

And where can we be better?

- challenges of several presentations in different settings (e.g. micro-politics)
- limited budget requires priorities: High scientific output vs. higher regards for realizing practice-related benefits
- calculating more time for interaction with partners
- discussing research questions with partners in advance
- involving all the practice partners already in the design of the research project



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Thank You!

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