

The Work Ability Index (WAI)

A brief history

Our multidisciplinary study group (occupational physiology, psychology, medicine, epidemiology and biostatistics) started cross-sectional studies among municipal employees in 1981. The study participants were followed for 16 years [1,2]. Since the beginning, the use of Work Ability Index (WAI) both in research and practice has widened to various countries, and the index has been translated into 24 languages.

Description

The WAI is an instrument used in clinical occupational health and research to assess work ability during health examinations and workplace surveys. The index is determined on the basis of the answers to a series of questions which take into consideration the demands of work, the worker's health status and resources. The worker completes the questionnaire before the interview with an occupational health professional who rates the responses according to the instructions [9]. WAI is a summary measure of seven items (range 7–49) (Table 1).

Validity

The validity and reliability of the WAI has been assessed in correlation analyses. The WAI and all its items reliably predicted work disability, retirement and mortality [8]. More recently, the validity of WAI has been studied by

Radkiewich *et al.* [3] and test–retest reliability by de Zwart *et al.* [4].

Key research

Besides the Finnish research, there is also a wide spectrum of international research [7]. The Nurses' Early Exit study included 38 000 participants from 10 European countries [3]. In Sweden, Torgén's study [5] covered a random sample of the Swedish working population ($N = 3500$). A number of large studies have also been undertaken in China [6].

Juhani Ilmarinen

References

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Table 1. Items of the Work Ability Index

Items	Range
1 Current work ability compared with the lifetime best	0–10
2 Work ability in relation to the demands of the job	2–10
3 Number of current diseases diagnosed by a physician	1–7
4 Estimated work impairment due to diseases	1–6
5 Sick leave during the past year (12 months)	1–5
6 Own prognosis of work ability 2 years from now	1–7
7 Mental resources	1–4