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The concept of 'work ability' from the view point of employers

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Introduction: Work ability is mainly regarded from a medical insurance perspective and a rehabilitation perspective. Since work ability is manifested in working life and "bought" by employers, employers' perceptions of work ability are surprisingly unknown.

Objective: to identify and characterise employers' perceptions of work ability.

Method: The study design was qualitative with a phenomenographic approach. Six male and six female employers from various workplaces and geographical areas in Sweden were interviewed.

Results: Three domains were identified: employees' contributions to work ability, employers' contributions to work ability and circumstances with limited work ability. *The employee's contribution* to work ability included basic physical, mental, cognitive, communicative and social abilities. Endurance in abilities was essential. *The employers' contribution* to work ability included shaping work ability for their specific needs and educating employees in performing work duties based on lean production, quality and safety demands. *Circumstances with limited work ability* included having too many private commitments. Negative events e.g. divorces were described as having impact on work ability as well as positive events like building a new house.

Conclusion: The employers' conceptions of work ability were described as a relation between individual abilities shaped in a work setting, resulting in a productive outcome. The employers highlighted their own contributions in shaping work ability. Not only health problems were limiting. Individual characteristics as well as contextual factors, could limit work ability too. Knowing the importance of commitment and interest is valuable in work rehabilitation. Using situational leadership may suit people with disabilities better.