Despite long being one of the main concerns of Finnish health policy, health inequalities continue to grow. Workplaces represent good forums for influencing the health and well-being of working-age people. They are communities with their own rules and policies, and these rules, together with the culture of a workplace, can have an impact on employees’ health. If we wish to reduce health inequalities we should direct persistent, comprehensive, health-promoting activities particularly towards professions in which employees face high risks in both their health behavior and their working conditions.

The "Decreasing the health inequalities between professions" -project (TEROKA, 2008-2012) was funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The project used different registers and surveys to analyze the professional sectors in which workload, work ability problems and risky health behavior have accumulated, and in which the prevalence of illnesses among employees is especially high. The ratio of men to women and the occurrence of occupational diseases in these sectors also influenced the selection of companies for the study. Eight companies representing house building, the metal, food and cleaning industry, the retail trade and security were chosen to participate in the project. The size of the companies varied from small and medium-sized to large international organizations. The main aim of the TEROKA project was to introduce and to learn a participatory, interactive method to support the promotion of well-being at work and health. The idea was to make the method part of organizational practice through positive experiences. The long-term goal was to improve the well-being of those in a weaker position as regards health, and thus to create sustainable careers.

During the project, employer representatives, employee representatives and occupational health service representatives worked together to promote the health of employees and to improve work and working conditions. The central ideas of the TEROKA project were the involvement of staff and the hearing of their opinions, and co-operative development. The project used the Metal Age tool.

Top management, middle management, immediate superiors, employees, labor protection and occupational health services worked in co-operation. This ensured a multifaceted view of the well-being of employees. A wide variety of different matters related to well-being and health emerged as targets for development: interaction and communication, supervision, working conditions and health behavior. The project revealed a keen interest to develop interaction and practices, especially between immediate superiors and employees. These areas were developed to make basic work run more smoothly and to improve well-being. According to the discussions of the workgroups, immediate superiors play an essential role in how employees cope at work.

Most actions decided on by the companies were realized. The areas chosen as targets for development affected how well the skills of the different actors involved could be exploit-ed. The expertise of, for example, OHS could be used in some areas, whereas other areas belonged more to the organizations’ internal issues. The developmental work was sup-ported by concrete planning and carrying out follow-ups as planned, whereas insufficient communication with employees hindered progress. Organizational level issues, such as the structure of the organization, methods of operation and resources affected the every-day developmental work in the companies.
In some companies, the continuation of the development work after the TEROKA project ended was secured by linking the development to existing company structures (e.g. the occupational safety committee). In other companies, the continuation of development work was more challenging. However, even these companies planned to continue the development work in existing company practices or practices created during the project.

The support of work ability and health promotion must be based on fluent interaction both between the workplace and OHS, and between the different actors at the workplace. Smooth communication and interaction should also play an important role in labor protection and occupational safety work. The participation of employees in the development work is important because this in itself increases their work ability and well-being, as they feel that they can influence their own work. By involving the employees, it is possible to define the key elements that need developing in order to make work more fluent and to increase well-being. However, the development of leadership and immediate superiors cannot be ignored in workplace health promotion. In addition, the structure of companies must ensure the protection of work ability as part of normal activities at work.

At the company level, the successful improvement of work ability and well-being is based on the companies’ own needs. The commitment of top and middle management to the process is essential. The right composition of the development working group, fluent co-operation, and the will and courage to co-operate, even if it involves a new way of working, are basic conditions for fruitful developmental work in companies.

As regards decreasing the health inequalities between different professions, psychosocial and interaction aspects emerged as important factors. Management needs a comprehensive approach to health and well-being. The experience of OHS should also be utilized in this process. In blue-collar workplaces it is possible to increase employees’ opportunities to influence their work by restructuring and using methods that involve the employees themselves. To produce health effects, one should consider, in addition to using methods that support health promotion, taking advantage of each profession’s culture and way of thinking. Companies should systematically create a supportive and empowering culture that promotes well-being at work. In the long run, this may also affect health inequalities.