

## Making working life a good fit for humans

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These days, an increasing number of people would like to see working life becoming more humane. The word *humane* is derived from the word *human*. The adjective ‘humane’ refers to something specific to humans, a gentle and respectful activity or practice showing understanding for humans. In this article and in many people's wishes, the word refers to working life that is a better fit for the human nature, more gentle and humane. (Institute for the Languages of Finland, 2024.) This wish is justifiable as, for instance, experiences of stress in working life are a reality (Hakanen, 2022).

While the concept of a human has only existed for a relatively short while, humans as a species have been around for a long time. Over time, the essence of human beings has changed little, and you often hear people talking about a Stone Age brain (e.g. Huotilainen & Saarikivi, 2018), with which we try and tackle the demands of modern working life. In knowledge work, however, the elements of threat are different from those Stone Age people faced when hunting their prey. Knowledge work is typically understood as working with your brain and mind, in other words thinking, making observations and decisions, feeling and experiencing. Knowledge work is not limited to the human mind, however, as the mind interacts with the brain, the body, outside world and other people (Hari et al. 2015). This means that the mind of a human being who engages in modern-day knowledgework is constructed in relation to the world around them in each situation. Consequently, the kind of work we do, the people we do it with, the tools we use, or the kind of environment we do it in matter.

More and more people do at least part of their work remotely, or as so-called multi-location work. In addition to the main workplace, they may work at home, in their holiday house, while

travelling, on public transport, and in hotels, libraries and cafés. Remote work can in most cases be characterised as knowledge work, which we do using the familiar technological tools of today and over information networks, flexibly whenever and wherever we are. Employees are expected to have capabilities for remote work, including self-direction and digital skills (Vuorento & Joensuu 2022). While this means that any work stress affects our brains, sedentary modes of work also increase physical stress. What we need is an understanding of how the transformation of working life is connected to the well-being of the brain (Hartikainen, Pihlaja & Kolonen 2021). While remote work has brought added flexibility, it has also increased experiences of isolation and loneliness as we have less social contacts in the workplace. The design and ergonomics of the work environment are also left to the employee; not to mention other stimuli that the remote work environment may contain (e.g. Kaltiainen & Hakanen, 2023). Remote work has additionally created new kinds of headaches for supervisors and leaders, including challenges related to building trust and togetherness or to ways of supporting work ability in remote work (see e.g. Ruohomäki et al. 2023, Soikkanen et al. 2022). Regarding the way the mind is constructed in relation to the environment, the concrete change in the place where work is performed will inevitably have wide-ranging impacts, including on modes of working, content of work, management, and even our achievements.

When we talk about the human and work, we usually refer to adults. Work is indeed one of the most important aspects of an *adult human's* life, whether they are unemployed or employed, or entering or leaving the labour market. The central role of work in an adult's life has led to extensive research on such topics as well-being at work (e.g. Sonnentag, Tay & Shoshan, 2022), meaningfulness of work (e.g. Martela & Pessi, 2018), and reconciliation of work and family life (e.g. Chan et al., 2016) to mention a few examples. Research in well-being at work has largely focused on negative factors, including stress and strain, while less attention has been paid to resource factors in work. But what if we did sharpened our focus on the resources? If we as human beings cannot change over thousands of years, despite the ideology of continuous learning, then perhaps we should pay attention to things that we can influence and that can be changed: the content, conditions and management of work.

The supervisor and the leader play a key role in the transformation of work. Of course, people can influence at least some of their tasks, and they can tweak, shape and plan their work and tasks on their own initiative. In (remote) brainwork carried out at a university of applied sciences, for instance, you can brainstorm, create and reinvent projects and courses, which

improves your work engagement and thus well-being at work. Not everyone is so lucky, however, and supervisory work creates a more rigid framework for their tasks, both enabling them and, where necessary, limiting them. Nevertheless, only by changing the environment in which we operate, the tools we use, and the way in which we work, can we set a *more humane* course in working life.

No toolkit is available for people (either employees or supervisors) that would make work and performing it more humane overnight, however. We live in an increasingly complex world where different levels and systems of society interact, resulting in dynamic movement and change in different parts of the system. By inventing ways of shaping their environment, humans have in fact created a system that their Stone Age brains cannot always understand. In this respect, a leader or supervisor is no different from any other person (Haslam et al. 2011), and what matters is how we act and interact with our environment: people, materials, tools or perhaps office dogs. In this complex world, there are no straightforward answers to leading people and work, no matter how helpful they would be in the life of a human who thinks in simple ways. Rather than to a person who thinks simply or is lazy or short-sighted, a simple human here refers to a *humane person* who simplifies, classifies, generalises in their thinking, does not focus fully and makes mistakes. All this may happen in busy and stressful brainwork.

In our opinion, the key to renewing leadership is learning to know those we work with, the environment we work in, and the purpose for which we work. We can only respond to our colleagues precise needs and wishes related to work and management if we know them. In management work and the work community, it would also be a good idea to pause from time to time to reflect on the prevailing perception of the human at work: what do we actually think about humans? What constitutes a human's value as an employee, which and what types of performances do we expect of them, and what is enough? For whom and what purpose do we perform this work? This is associated with fundamental questions about the value of a human as an employee and the meaning of work. A humane leader plays a key role in verbalising this. By knowing each other and analysing our operating environment we can know who we are, where we come from, where we are now, and where we should be going. Together we can tell the story of us; for what purpose was the organisation in which we work created, and what role do *humans* in the organisation play in this unique story? On the other hand, we can identify the kinds of *humans* this specific organisation needs as a work community.

The theme of the first issue of Lumen journal in 2024 is *The human, work and renewing leadership*. We would like to extend our warmest thanks to the columnist of this theme issue, Professor Juha T. Hakala, as well as the staff, students and partners of Lapland University of Applied Sciences for their interesting and versatile articles. Juha T. Hakala encourages us to reflect on strategic procrastination; some tasks can be done better and even more efficiently when you mull over them for a while. Do we all have some tasks that would benefit from a bit of procrastination before we go any further?

The articles of this publication are themed on topical phenomena of working life and leadership. Tia Lämsä takes a look at leadership and well-being at work from the perspective of legislation. She argues in her article that it is important to note how legislation, including the Act on Co-operation within Undertakings, defines many aspects that must be taken into consideration in workplace leadership practices to safeguard and improve the employees' well-being. The contributions of Tarja Jussila as well as Johanna Majala and Merja Hjulberg also focus on the quality of leadership and human well-being in working life. The articles also discuss the importance of feedback, as everyone needs feedback on their work to enable well-being, development and renewal. Susanna Korkala, Hannamaari Niemiläinen and Anne Tolvanen reflect on the significance of feedback in work based on thesis findings.

Heidi Kaihua and Minna Sipponen show us how pedagogical solutions in study units enable students to reflect on self-direction and their natural management styles as well as to encounter employees as individuals and through their strengths. At its best, participatory pedagogical leadership of a higher education institution can support the emergence of such learner-oriented solutions, support renewal and development, and respond to societal challenges, as Pruikkonen well explains in his article. When faced with changes in work, working life and the operating environment, the key is knowing yourself and your partners. Leena Välimaa also writes about the significance of self-direction skills and identifying your personal strengths, and about how good management is reflected as good self-direction.

Meriläinen's article on remote work throws light on changes in the operating environment and work, whereas Viinamäki and Suikkanen discuss the essence of labour shortage and mismatch problem in Lapland based on statistics. While the tourism industry is one of the most important sectors in Lapland, it is afflicted by a labour mismatch problem (Viinamäki & Suikkanen). In their article, Angeria and Kemi reflect on the significance of the tourism industry and employee

retention – could this help us find solutions to the observed labour market mismatch? Paloniemi also discusses the theme of tourism, especially digital tourism, in her contribution.

Digitalisation has changed the way we exist, live and work. This also comes up in several articles of Lumen's theme issue 1/2024. The challenges posed by digitalisation are considered by Rivinen, Kerätär and Korvola in their article, in which they describe the work carried out in the GeroDigiLead project aiming to promote the digital transformation.

In addition to digitalisation, many of us today think, talk and write about the themes of sustainable development and responsibility. In her article, Korteniemä considers how we have still not achieved sustainable development and proposes internal change skills in sustainable development as a solution to promoting a change. Joutsenvirta offers transformative learning as a response to the challenge posed by the sustainability transition, with the aim of renewing our fundamental ideas through comprehensive examination and critical reflection.

Maarit Tihinen's and Toni Kraatari's article highlights the value and significance of partnership agreements concluded at organisation level. What we ultimately find behind official agreements is humans and their networks, with the help of which organisations can update and supplement their competence and share their combined potential with everyone.

Digitalisation, sustainable development, multiculturalism, labour shortages and attraction factors of work are examples of phenomena that are connected to work, transformation of work, leadership and leaders' competence requirements. You can read more about these topical themes in the articles and contributions of the current issue.

We wish every reader of Lumen 1/2024 online journal a bright winter, joy of doing things together, and interesting reading!

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