

Strengths and Development Needs in Temporary Agency Work: Temporary Work Agency Managers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In temporary agency work (TAW), the temporary work agency and the user company have employer responsibilities related to the occupational safety and health of the temporary agency workers. The aim of the study was to investigate strengths and

development needs in TAW as perceived by managers of temporary work agencies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from 19 managers at 10 temporary work agencies. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The results show that TAW is a flexible and valuable option for facilitating employment. However, there is room for developing TAW practices and procedures with the co-operation of temporary work agencies, temporary agency workers, and user companies. The findings of this study contribute to development of the occupational safety, health, and well-being of agency workers, and sustainable TAW.

Keywords: Temporary Agency Work, Occupational Safety, Health, and Well-Being, Temporary Work Agency

INTRODUCTION

Temporary agency work (TAW) means that workers are employed by temporary work agencies but they work under the management and supervision of user companies, thus TAW comprises three parties: the temporary work agency (agency), the temporary agency worker (agency worker), and the user company (Cajander and Reiman, 2020; Työturvallisuuslaki 23.8.2002/738, 2002). When a worker is hired, the subject of the agreement is work performance, and the right to supervise the work is transferred with the employees (Ala-Mikkula, 2020). Agency workers are affected by circumstances and measures at both companies, which affects the workers' well-being (Imhof and Andresen, 2018). However, very little research has been conducted on well-being of those employed in TAW (Imhof and Andresen, 2018).

About 2 percent of employees in the European Union work for a temporary work agency (Eurostat, 2021). However, in Finland, 4.8 percent of all employee workplace accidents in 2018 occurred in the TAW industry (Finnish Workers' Compensation Center, 2021). From 2010 to 2015, the accident frequency in TAW in Finland was higher than the average accident frequency in all industries (Finnish Workers' Compensation Center, 2021; Sysi-Aho and Kaari, 2017). Agency workers may lack orientation, training, and supervision due to unclear delineation of managers' responsibilities (Hopkins, 2017). Agency workers may also receive inferior personal protective equipment (Hopkins, 2017), and they neglect to report near-misses (Santiago et al, 2020). Furthermore, job insecurity and long-term TAW may negatively affect workers' well-being (Chambel and Sobral, 2019), and agency workers may experience higher levels of depression and fatigue than permanent employees (Hünefeld, Gerstenberg, and Hüffmeier, 2020). Thus, TAW employment may negatively affect the occupational safety, health, and well-being of agency workers. At the same time, TAW is often viewed as a flexible form of employment (Maroukis, 2016).

Employers' legal obligations include improving the work environment and working conditions to maintain employees' work ability as well as to prevent occupational accidents and diseases and eliminate other physical and mental hazards

(Työturvallisuuslaki 23.8.2002/738, 2002). An agency and a user company share responsibility for workers' occupational safety and health. The agency has general occupational safety and health obligations, such as providing occupational health care. The user company is responsible for the safety and health of workplace conditions and work arrangements. Therefore, the user company must comply with the obligations imposed on the employer by the OHS Act (738/2002) (Työturvallisuuslaki 23.8.2002/738, 2002) and treat agency workers in the same way as the company's own employees. In addition, the user company must inform the agency of the professional requirements of the work as well as related special features. The agency, in turn, must ensure the agency worker's professionalism, experience, and suitability for the job. The user company must notify the occupational health care service and the occupational health and safety officer when an agency work begins at the user company and arrange workplace orientation for the agency worker. (Työturvallisuuslaki 23.8.2002/738, 2002)

According to a Finnish study (Luukkonen, 2010), agencies and user companies are taking care of and paying attention to agency workers' health and safety at work. However, the parties' duties should be made clearer, and communication between the parties should be improved (Luukkonen, 2010).

According to the Finnish national supervisory authority's report (Safety and Health Administration in Finland, 2019), agencies have shown deficiencies in exercising their employer responsibilities. Small and medium-sized user companies, as well as agencies to a degree, are not sufficiently aware of occupational safety regulations regarding TAW. Deficiencies in the occupational health care workplace surveys and the identification and assessment of work hazards of agency workers were identified both in agencies and in user companies. Moreover, the report stated that the regulatory health examinations for work involving a special risk of illness were inadequate in agencies. The obligation to inform agency of occupational qualifications required and specific features of the work and to notify the start of TAW to the user company's occupational health and safety representative and occupational health care was inadequately known in user companies. (Safety and Health Administration in Finland, 2019)

This study is part of the national sustainable gig work project funded by the European Social Fund which encompasses compliance with occupational safety and health regulations and solutions for supporting employee well-being and productivity. The aim of the study was to investigate strengths and development needs in TAW as perceived by temporary work agency managers (agency managers).

METHODS

This is a qualitative, descriptive study. Agencies in geographically different regions in Finland were purposively contacted and asked to participate. Principles of research ethics were followed according to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019) and General Data Protection Regulation GDPR (EU 2016/679). The participants agreed informed

consent after they were given information about voluntary participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and anonymity and confidentiality.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews between December 2020 and March 2021. In the interviews, the participants were asked to describe their experiences of strengths and development needs in TAW. The interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews at the agencies' facilities, or online, or by telephone. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, and they were recorded. There were one to three participants in each interview. The sample totaled 19 agency managers at 10 agencies.

Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Transcription of the recorded interviews was outsourced to an external transcription service provider. The manifested content of the interviews generated 85 sheets of written data (8-point Verdana, single spaced). After reviewing the data several times, to become familiar with the content, the researchers employed the process of the open coding, creating categories and abstraction (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). The units of analysis were words and sentences containing information about the strengths and the development needs in TAW. Those descriptions were then coded for subcategories. Subcategories with similar content were grouped together as generic categories. Furthermore, the main category was created from the generic categories.

RESULTS

Strengths of TAW

According to the agency managers, the strengths of TAW are 1) job–person matching, 2) maintenance and development of professional skills, 3) job control, 4) rewards and benefits, 5) a solution for getting needed workers and managing personnel costs and risks better, 6) alleviation of labor shortages, and 7) facilitation of employment. According to the agency managers, matching the right person to the right job, i.e., job–person matching, and agency workers' well-being, was their primary goal. Agency work applicants' skills and competencies and compatibility for a specific job were considered systematically. Participants stated: "We have developed our questionnaire battery and our knowledge of human nature. Employment contracts are very seldom cancelled during the trial period." and "The workers and the user companies are equal customers for us." The agencies had networks and were able to provide diverse jobs; thus, agency workers are not dependent on a specific user company's order volume. Agency workers were able to develop and maintain their professional skills in those diverse jobs, and through additional training provided by the agency.

Agency workers had job control in terms of freedom to decide where to work,

what kind of work to do, and when. They did not have to commit to a single workplace. Moreover, work tasks could vary. Depending on the workers' agency work terms, they were able to influence their work shifts. Thus, they could control their salary. Due to such high job control, workers could achieve a balance between leisure and work, i.e., work–life balance. TAW is possible when a worker is retired or in addition to one's full-time job. The motivation for working, according to the agency managers' experience, could be to add content to life or work as a hobby. Thus, TAW can be a flexible possibility for working at different stages of life. In the case of reduced work ability, a participant said, "Elderly and disabled workers can work according to remaining [work] ability."

Agency workers are entitled to rewards and benefits provided by the agency, including gym vouchers and massages. These benefits are provided in addition to access to occupational health care which can also include medical care. A participant stated, "Sometimes, our workers receive better benefits than the workers hired by the user company. For example, our occupational health care covers more than the user company's does."

TAW helps user companies manage their personnel costs and risks better. The user companies always had the number of workers they needed with stable costs. Agency workers are also needed for seasonal work. Moreover, the user company can utilize the expertise of the agency in employment matters in addition to occupational safety. Such support releases the user company to focus on core operations and facilitates resource allocation.

According to agency managers, agencies ease the movement of labor, increase employment, and can result in a permanent work contract in user company. TAW provides an entry to work life and enough work to earn a sufficient income. The potential and professional skills of immigrant workers were recognized.

Development Needs in TAW

Agency managers identified the following development needs: 1) support for continued work or career development, 2) communication, 3) integration, 4) risk management, 5) compliance with legislation, ethical principles, and agreements, 6) development of co-operation, and 7) internal development. Agencies should support continued work, including seasonal workers, and career development. A communication and feedback culture between the agency, the user company, and the agency worker needs to be improved.

The agency managers identified that user companies provide insufficient workplace orientation. They also identified inequality and difficulty integrating in the work community as issues. An agency worker may have weak ties to the agency after being recruited and feel like an outsider and unwelcome at the user company, but long contracts reduce these problems.

Incidents and near-misses are not reported correctly due to the system or a lack of motivation. Management of the whole process needs to be improved. The system for

reporting incidents and near-misses should be easy to use.

Some companies, agencies and user companies, are started and managed with low competence and without adequate knowledge of the legislation and regulations. There may be a situation in which the agency and the user company do not have the competency needed, and agency workers do not know their rights. Agency managers also identified unethical actions especially concerning foreign labor. A participant said, “I don’t know if all the user companies understand their responsibility for the occupational safety of agency workers.” The co-operation should be improved between agencies, user companies, occupational health care, employment offices, and labor unions. Agencies should make internal changes after assessing social indicators and workers’ well-being.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results, TAW is a flexible and valuable option for facilitating employment. TAW is a flexible way for user companies to get employees when needed and provides diverse job opportunities to agency workers. The agency managers stated that TAW could be a way to permanent work contract, although in previous research it has been shown to be rare (Givord and Wilner, 2015). For the agency worker, TAW may mean job insecurity and staying in TAW indefinitely, which has been indicated to have detrimental effects on well-being (Chambel and Sobral, 2019). Although the agency managers identified many strengths in TAW, it is very difficult to find previous studies supporting their view.

Integration, equal treatment, workplace orientation, and understanding of the roles and responsibilities of agencies, agency workers, and user companies need to be improved. Unclear responsibilities could be a reason for the lack of safety orientation (Hopkins, 2017). Similar to the results of this study, a lack of worksite-specific safety orientation and reporting incidents and near-misses has been found among agency workers in the U.S. construction industry (Santiago et al, 2020). The reason for the lack of motivation to report incidents may be job insecurity (Santiago et al, 2020), work disorganization, and regulatory failure (Strauss-Raats, 2019). According to this study, the system does not provide an easy way to report incidents, and the whole process and responsibilities are not clear. Promoting the safety and well-being of workers and employment level in society are the common goals of all the parties, and thus, their co-operation with occupational health care, employment offices, and labor unions could be improved.

The development needs reported 10 years ago still exist in this study: awareness of safety responsibilities, orientation, and communication among an agency, a user company, and an agency worker (Luukkonen, 2010). The present results parallel also deficiencies found by the Finnish national supervisory authority (Safety and Health Administration in Finland, 2019) by revealing non-compliance with legislation and lack of workplace surveys, risk identification and competence of TAW. Reliability of the results was ensured by all the authors processing the analysis. We

assume that the sample size was adequate because a large amount of information was generated in the interviews to meet the aim of the study.

CONCLUSIONS

From agencies', agency workers', user companies', and society's perspectives, TAW has several strengths. However, there is still room to improve TAW practices and procedures for sustainable work. The findings of this study can be used to promote the occupational safety, health, and well-being of agency workers. Improvement requires co-operation among agencies, agency workers, and user companies. To reach a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, future research should focus on occupational safety, health, and well-being in TAW as experienced by agency workers and by user companies.

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