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Summary

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Rehabilitees' perspective on rehabilitation planning under the earnings-related pension system

Study based on interviews with rehabilitees participating in a work trial

In this study, we look at the experiences of rehabilitees participating in a work trial and their perceptions on seeking and planning vocational rehabilitation. We focus on how seeking and planning rehabilitation progresses, the content of the rehabilitation plan and how rehabilitees participate in and cooperate with various actors involved in the process. This study is the first part in a wider research project based on interviews with rehabilitees in which we follow the interviewed rehabilitees in the different stages of and after the completion of their rehabilitation process. The data of the survey consists of 30 semi-structured theme interviews. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2023 with rehabilitees who had received a rehabilitation decision for a work trial in February and March that year (weeks 7–13) and whose rehabilitation was about to begin.

Early intervention perceived insufficient, particularly in cases involving mental disorders

For most interviewees, the problems with work ability began more than two years before they sought rehabilitation under the earnings-related pension scheme. Nearly all of them had some experience of early intervention measures such as adjustments in working hours, tools and tasks. The study indicates that early intervention measures could be utilised more extensively. For example, not a single interviewee had experienced an early support work trial that can be prescribed by occupational health care. Based on the survey data, this could have been beneficial for at least some of the interviewees and could have supported their ability to work. Another

significant observation is that early intervention and support seem to be particularly important for people who suffer from mental disorders. Yet, in these cases, early support is often available only to a limited degree.

Rehabilitation within the earnings-related pension scheme not well known – support and assistance needed in the application and planning stage

Overall, the research results yield a positive picture of a flexible rehabilitation planning process, of the cooperation with various actors and of the assistance provided for rehabilitees. However, the interviewees' comments suggest that rehabilitation within the earnings-related pension scheme is relatively unknown among employees and many employers. Hence, in many cases, more information and support in seeking and planning rehabilitation would be needed. The interviews also revealed the need for a party who would coordinate the cooperation of the various actors and carry the overall responsibility of the application and planning stages of the rehabilitation process. The interviews further point towards the need for individual support and taking the individual situation of the rehabilitee into consideration, particularly in situations where a work coach or other professional assistant provided by the pension provider or occupational health care is unavailable.

In seeking and planning rehabilitation, occupational health care and employer representatives, as well as work coaches appointed by pension providers, were considered the most important actors. In most cases, occupational health care takes the initiative for rehabilitation. As a rule, the employer was a central actor in the planning process if the work trial was arranged at the rehabilitee's former workplace. The role of work coaches was considerable in cases where the work trial was arranged at a new workplace and involving new tasks. For the main part, the interviewees were content with the cooperation with the actors, but areas of development listed included inadequate communication with the rehabilitee, lack of expertise and information among some employers and occupational health care providers and, regarding work coaches, insufficient support in finding suitable places for the work trial.

Work trial perceived as a good, low-threshold opportunity to return to work

Most interviewees were content with their rehabilitation plan. For rehabilitees recuperating from an illness or accident or struggling with various health issues, the work trial was seen as a particularly good opportunity to try working at reduced working hours and with less strain and responsibility. The flexibility of the work trial was observed to be an important factor in this context.

As a rule, the interviewees found that their opportunities to affect their own rehabilitation process and the planning of their rehabilitation were good. The interviews revealed that the more a rehabilitee could affect the selection of the place of their work trial and the content of their work and shape their working hours and tasks, the more appropriate they found their rehabilitation plan to be. Having meaningful tasks and being able to make necessary adjustments to them were perceived to promote recovery and prevent work strain.

Some interviewees were discontent with the rehabilitation plan because, instead of doing a work trial, they would have liked to retrain for another profession, or because the field or content of the work trial was not perceived suitable, or because they felt that their ability to work was not good enough for a work trial. In these situations, the interviewees would have liked the parties involved to be more familiar with the situation of the rehabilitee and to have more open discussions about how suitable the rehabilitation plan was.

Areas to develop include discussions on employment after a work trial and the timing of rehabilitation

Most interviewees were motivated and wanted to return to work, but the group included some exceptions. Several factors affecting the motivation for rehabilitation emerged from the interviews, including the experience of opportunities to find work after rehabilitation and a successful timing of rehabilitation. More attention should be paid to these factors in the planning stage of the rehabilitation process.

The uncertainty of whether work will continue after rehabilitation and, more widely, the time after the work trial were central themes in the interviews, particularly when the work trial was carried out for a new employer. The rehabilitees often wished that they could be employed directly by the workplace where they had carried out their work trial while, for example, work coaches might have thought more about trying out new work tasks and thus improving the rehabilitees' overall opportunities for being employed again. Based on the interviews, discussing the aims and purpose of the work trial and the possibilities of employment after the work trial in as much detail and as openly as possible during the planning process would be beneficial.

The results of this study further show that particular attention should be paid to the timing of the rehabilitation. Some rehabilitees felt that their work trial began too late, and others felt that it started too early in their rehabilitation process. Around half of the rehabilitees felt that their work trial began or will begin at the right time.

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