Cooperation of return-to-work professionals: the challenges of multi-actor work disability management

Purpose: This article explores which concrete factors hinder or facilitate the cooperation of return-to-work (RTW) professionals in a complex system of multiple stakeholders.

Method: The empirical material consists of in-depth interviews with 24 RTW professionals from various organizations involved in work disability management in Finland. The interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Results: The study revealed several kinds of challenges in the cooperation of the professionals. These were related to two partly interrelated themes: communication and distribution of responsibility. The most difficult problems were connected to the cooperation between public employment offices and other stakeholders. However, the study distinguished notable regional differences depending primarily on the scale of the local network. The main areas of improvement proposed by the interviewees were related to better networking of case managers and expansion of expertise.

Conclusions: The article argues for the importance of systematic networking and stresses the role of public employment services in the multi-actor management of work disabilities. The article contributes to existing work disability case management models by suggesting the employment administration system as an important component in addition to health care, workplace and insurance systems. The study also highlights the need for expansion of expertise in the field.