

# Challenges in the cooperation of return-to-work professionals in Finland

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**Eläketurvakeskus**  
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# Background

- The concept of work disability has expanded
  - Work disability is not only an individual medical condition but thoroughly a social, organizational and judicial phenomenon
- A fair amount of simultaneous unemployment and working capacity problems
- Challenges for the cooperation of professionals and organizations in this situation
- Not much research on the *whole* network of institutions

# The situation in Finland

- Work disability management and vocational rehabilitation system is fragmented
- The number of stakeholders in work disability prevention and return-to-work practices is high
- Various stakeholders: insurance institutions, rehabilitation providers, public employment services, municipal social welfare, primary and special health care, occupational health care, and employers
- Complexities of the cooperation > uncertainty

# Research question, data and methods

- Qualitative study on the functioning of the network of institutions and professionals involved in work disability prevention and management
- What kind of problems do return-to-work (RTW) professionals face in their cooperation with each other?
- 23 in-depth interviews of RTW professionals in Helsinki metropolitan area and in smaller localities in Eastern Finland
  - **Interviewees:** rehabilitations counsellors, pension experts, social workers, work ability coaches, HR managers, occupational physician
  - **Institutions:** rehabilitation providers, earnings-related pension providers, Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland), Public Employment Offices, Labour Force Service Centres, special health care, occupational health care, employers (personnel administration)

# 1) Communication

- Daily interaction: who to call?  
Problems particularly in the communication with Public Employment Offices
- Small towns vs. metropolitan area
  - In smaller localities communication seems to be smoother
- Lack of comprehensive joint IT systems



## 2) Distribution of responsibility

- Lack of long-term overall responsibility for individual clients
- "Double clients" in cases of simultaneous unemployment and disability
  - Distribution of responsibility between public employment offices and vocational rehabilitation covered by insurers doesn't work
    - » clients slipping through the net





## Main professional systems in the management of work disability in Finland

(modified from the case management model introduced by Loisel et al. 2001 and 2005)

# Improvements proposed by the interviewees

- **Distribution of responsibility:** more personal RTW coordinators who could support clients in the complex system > comprehensive responsibility
- **Communication:** better IT systems and contacting methods between organizations and professionals
- **More informal (but systematic) networking and cooperation**
- **More training** on RTW interventions for professionals in health care, especially for physicians



# Conclusions

- Unclear distribution of responsibility creates inequality, especially between employed and unemployed persons with working capacity problems
- The study argues for the importance of systematic interorganizational networking and stresses the role of public employment services in the multi-actor management of work disabilities
- The role of case managers (RTW coordinators etc.) is gradually increasing > expansion of (social) expertise
- Liukko, Jyri & Kuuva, Niina (2016) Cooperation of return-to-work professionals: the challenges of multi-actor work disability management. *Disability and rehabilitation*. Published online 3 July 2016.  
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