



## The Danish National Return to Work Project

Short paper prepared for the PEROSH Seminar: Research in Action: Removing the gap between research and practical prevention, Brussels, November 25, 2010

By Glen Winzor

Head of RTW Project Division, The National Research Centre for the Working Environment, Denmark  
gwi@nrcwe.dk

### The project in brief

The Danish National Return-To-Work (RTW) project is a large scale research driven implementation project conducted in 22 Danish municipalities covering all regions in Denmark. The project builds on emerging evidence from previous published smaller Danish and international studies of RWT interventions.

Particularly two comprehensive reviews of the scientific literature from The National Research Centre for the Working Environment had a strong influence on the project (White paper on MSD and return to work, (NRCWE, 2008) and White paper on mental health, sickness absence and return to work (NRCWE, 2010))

The study population is working-age adults, who are sick-listed for a period of at least 4 weeks. The study period is from April 1<sup>st</sup> 2010 to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012. The population includes employed, self-employed and unemployed persons. Approximately 10,000 persons are expected to be included in the project.

In agreement with the government and the social partners, the Danish Prevention Fund has granted 32.2 million EURO (240 million DKK) to the project. The grant covers the costs associated with the implementation of the project within the participating municipalities. In addition the Danish Ministry of Employment has granted 4,4 million EURO (32,5 million DKK) to finance the development, planning, administration, coordination and evaluation of the project.

The main outcomes of the Danish National Return to Work Project are measures for duration of sickness absence, RTW-status, work ability, health related quality of life, and psychological well-being. In addition cost-benefit analyses will be conducted to assess the economic burdens and benefits of the RTW-intervention.

### The intervention

At an organisational level, the intervention consists of the following elements

- Establishment of multidisciplinary RTW-organizations in sickness benefit offices
- Preparatory RTW-courses for all RTW-actors
- Case flow descriptions, tools and guides
- Process facilitation and follow-up sessions

At an individual level, the intervention consists of the following elements

- Case management /RTW-coordination
- Multidisciplinary assessment
- Individualized, co-ordinated and graded intervention
- Education and counselling (self care, coping strategies)
- Ergonomic and psychological workplace assessments and modifications



### **From research to action**

Transferring the scientific research results into large scale action has required a multi level implementation effort. A prerequisite has been the backing from politicians and the social partners. Subsequently, the main implementation effort has been the comprehensive organisational change in the participating municipalities.

It is argued that an intervention of this scale requires qualifications and experience among the group of researchers/project managers on at least the following areas:

- Credible knowledge about the intervention themes
- Communication skills / knowledge brokering skills
- Political flair
- Press handling
- Networking skills
- Programme, portfolio and project management expertise
- Strong and clear leadership
- Change management
- Process consultancy
- Quantitative and qualitative research methodology

It is also argued that an intervention of this size requires at least the following implementation focus areas:

- Clearly communicated burning platforms
- Clearly communicated visions/carrots/incentives
- Dissemination of research knowledge
- Removal of obstacles
- Empowerment of the RTW-actors
- Well-defined and clearly communicated intervention structure with point of departure in the existing structures in the municipalities
- A balanced control regime
- A well-planned and administrable data collection regime
- Some facultative elements for the municipalities in the implementation process
- Controlled room for adjustments and learning during the project period

Besides the above mentioned elements, timing is crucial.

### **Future research and action results**

The National Research Centre for the Working Environment will publish a comprehensive evaluation report by December 2012. Presumably the Danish government will use the results as an offset for the planning of the future RTW facilitation for sick listed persons in Denmark. It is also expected that a large number of peer reviewed publications eventually will be published on the basis of the profound amount of data.