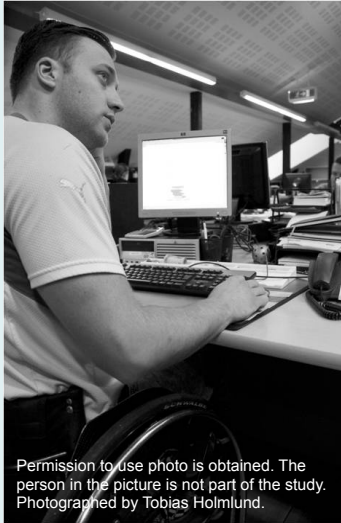


# Return To Work After Spinal Cord Injury: A 6-year Follow Up Study Of Eight Persons Experiences

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## Introduction

Return to work (RtW) can provide an important venue for community integration and social participation. In order for RtW to be effectively evidence-based and person-centered after spinal cord injury (SCI) more knowledge of the individual experience is needed.

This is a follow up study of; *Returning to work after spinal cord injury: exploring young adults' early expectations and experience* (Bergmark, Westgren, Asaba, 2011). A qualitative interview study with young adults who had not returned to work after SCI. The study revealed high expectations of work but difficulties to pursue RtW.

**Aim** The aim was to explore experiences of RtW processes over a 6-year period among young adults with SCI.

## Method

Qualitative in-depth interviews and observations based on a narrative approach were used to gather data. Software Atlas.ti 6.0 was used during qualitative thematic analyses.

## Participants

6 men and 2 women (N=8) with traumatic SCI, previously interviewed 2008, were included in the study.

Demography	Initial study 2008	Follow up 2014-2015
Age	20-34	26-41
Years post SCI	1-5	7-11
Level of SCI, AIS	C4-L1, AIS A-C	C4-L1, AIS A-C
Work	0	1 (wage-subsidized)
Ongoing education	2 (part-time, with retained sickness benefit)	1 (part-time, with retained sickness benefit)
Sickness benefit	8	5
Neither work nor benefits	0	2

Table 1. Demographical data for initial and follow up study (N=8).

## Preliminary findings

1-5 years post injury participants expressed a desire and expectation for RtW, however 7-11 years post injury RtW was described as not prioritized or possible for some. A challenge to RtW was uncertainty in relation to health, economy, and possibilities to obtain meaningful employment after SCI. Paid work were exchanged for non-paid engaging activities that offered flexibility and control however limited social interaction. When vocational rehabilitation is not sufficiently person-centered and socially relevant challenges in RtW become pronounced for the person with SCI.

## Conclusion

- RtW would benefit from being person-centered and initiated early as an integrated part of rehabilitation. Both to avoid long-term absence from labour market and to decrease uncertainty related to working ability.
- A coach model may offer continuous and person-centered rehabilitation as well as follow-up over time.
- Measures for re-adaption to meaningful and suitable employment after injury is important to avoid lock-in effects as a barrier in RtW.

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