“Working remotely is like being self-employed,” he says. “It takes a lot of discipline to manage time and effort and accomplish necessary tasks, and it can be isolating.” People who try this form of employment often become disillusioned with it because they underestimate the number of hours and the degree of daily effort required in order to be successful. This does little to relieve the isolation that many are seeking to escape.

Among the changes that have occurred in services available to individuals with spinal cord injury who wish to return to work is the Social Security Ticket to Work legislation passed in 1999 which established both WIPA programs and Employment Networks. Employment Networks through this program are designed to be alternatives to the traditional state vocational rehabilitation agencies. The networks are designed to provide a broad range of vocational services including resume preparation, job lead information, and follow-up reports when the person becomes employed and may postpone medical reviews for up to 5 years if the beneficiaries are meeting timely progress as outlined by Social Security. Unfortunately, services from employment networks often fall short of the needs of a person with significant impairments. They do not provide funding to pursue education or to purchase equipment or services often needed in order to prepare for employment. This is especially critical for persons with significant disabilities.

For that, traditional state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies are still the best choice for funding of necessary items, services, or educational/vocational training. Services available vary from state to state. With regard to key points in Dr. Krause’s research on the subject of vocational interests, Mr. Rodgers noted that: “Youth is the key to vocational flexibility. Clients between 18 and 30 seem to be more open to new experiences without fear of failure. Notifying individuals who are newly injured of their return to work options is critically important.” Most of Benefits Navigator WIPA clients accept the information offered early in the rehabilitation period, but wait until they are discharged to home and settle in before they call to learn more details. “WIPA clients nationwide, as reported in some preliminary Social Security data, may be up to 70% more likely to try a return to work than those who do not receive services from this program. Once the relationship between working and receiving Supplemental Social Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, or both is made clear, and clients realize that they will not necessarily lose eligibility for their benefits by taking a paying job, many are willing to explore vocational/career opportunities and test their ability to go back to work.”

With the continued commitment of people such as Curtis Rodgers and the availability of programs such as the Benefits Navigator WIPA Program and other WIPA programs across the country, people with disabling conditions, including severe traumatic onset disability, will have increased opportunities for exploring employment in a way that meets both their financial and physical needs.
Dr. James S. Krause and colleagues at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston have conducted research over several decades that is designed, in part, to measure what happens to vocational interests after disability, such as spinal cord injury, occurs. Several articles have appeared recently in the scientific literature reporting their research findings. It is the goal of this article to convey the key conclusions arrived at by the researchers in a manner that is easily comprehended by readers who are not medical or rehabilitation professionals.

Returning to a job that is fulfilling, financially beneficial, and stable is one critical element in the rehabilitation process after disability. In order to better understand how to accomplish this task, it is important to know how individuals form their vocational interests and what happens to those interests after the onset of disability. One of the most frequently asked questions by individuals with disability is: “Can I get a good job to support myself and my family?”

There have been many research studies to assess vocational interests of people with spinal cord injury (SCI). These have found highly stable patterns of interest over as much as an 11-year interval. Most of these studies interviewed subjects well after the onset of SCI. However, Dr. Krause’s research used 3 points of measurement, with the first one occurring during the initial hospitalization for rehabilitation, and that has made an important difference in the conclusions being drawn from this project.

One interesting finding is that the level of vocational interests of the subjects interviewed increased in the first 2.5 years after SCI onset, which suggests that this period may be when many individuals with new injuries are adapting to their changed circumstances. This may well be a time when positive change can occur more easily, and individuals may be more flexible and enthusiastic about work options that are different from what they experienced prior to injury.

For example, many individuals who worked before injury had jobs that required significant physical strength, endurance, and dexterity. Since many individuals who sustain SCI are young males, it makes sense that a physical orientation to work would be present. That ‘physicality’ might not be possible after injury, and knowing when to introduce other employment options may prove helpful to vocational counselors and other treating professionals during the rehabilitation period. Individuals tend to seek out work that is consistent with their personality type so that they can act upon their interests. After injury, such options may not be readily available, and making a successful change may hinge on timing.

The good news is that there are many options to consider, and individuals who have sustained injury need to be actively involved in the process of the return to work early during the rehabilitation period in order to achieve maximum re-employment success. Adjustments will need to be made, additional education and training may be required, and the individual with disability should remain open to a wide range of options that meets his or her basic requirements in order to increase the likelihood of a positive employment outcome. Dr. Krause’s study indicates that the amount of vocational interests change is much more than would be expected. Any amount of change will occur within the context of the individual’s re-evaluation of his or her life. The desire to reintegrate into the community after injury is a key factor of success. More research remains to be done on this subject, but Dr. Krause and his colleagues have learned a great deal and are sharing the information widely. Employment is a reasonable goal for many persons with disability. Knowing your vocational interests and when these are most likely to be adjusted to different circumstances post-injury are key elements in the return to work journey.

This article is based, in part, on “Stability of Vocational Interests After Recent Spinal Cord Injury” by James S. Krause and Jillian M.R. Clark of the Medical University of South Carolina, published in “Rehabilitation Psychology” 2014, Vol. 59, No. 3, pages 321-328.