

Keys to an Effective Return-To-Work Program

An effective Return-To-Work (RTW) Program is a “win/win” for all concerned. The injured employee retains a sense of affinity towards his or her employer, knowing his or her many years of service have been both appreciated and rewarded. In addition to retaining a valued employee, the employer enjoys reduced overall claim costs.

Management Support

Senior-management commitment is critical to your program's success. Its ultimate goal is to save money in both Workers' Compensation and Disability claim costs, but short-term expenses can make it seem more costly than traditional lost time claims. The reason: RTW programs tend to affect two or more cost centers. When employees cannot return to their former department, that cost center suffers reduced productivity coupled with continued payroll costs. Meanwhile, the “light duty” cost center seems to be getting a “free ride.” Without pre-emptive management efforts to address these concerns, RTW Programs are doomed from the start.

Team Approach

Once management commitment is secured and communicated throughout the organization, it is time to form a Return-To-Work Team. The RTW Team is similar in design and function to a Safety Committee, but its focus is more narrow – to provide an integrated and coordinated process for administering any RTW claims that may include members of management and supervision.

- Friction may develop when the best match for the employee is in another department. Union-related seniority issues can also complicate this process so the RTW Team and management must work closely together to minimize possible antagonism.

Task Assessment

When a workplace injury appears to be a candidate for the RTW Program, the first significant step is a “Task Assessment” which compares the employee's physical limitations to

the tasks of the temporary job assignments to determine the optimal level of exertion. It requires evaluation of each component of the job (such as number and frequency of lifts) to set the appropriate level of activity given the worker's physical limitations. You will need to assess both regular and overtime duties to plan a recovery schedule that meets the employee's needs.

- The severity of the injury sometimes makes lost time unavoidable. Until the employee is ready to assume light duty, it is vital for the RTW Team to remain in close contact with the injured employee via frequent phone calls and even personal visits. In sincerely expressing concern for the worker's well-being, they must emphasize he or she is the primary beneficiary of the RTW Program.

Three Ways to Ensure Success in a Light-duty Job

You can save a lot of money when you have an effective Return-To-Work Program. When employees do not succeed in light-duty positions, however, it means you will pay more on their underlying Workers' Compensation claims.

Sometimes workers need only minor changes to their jobs to return to work: remove a certain task and the worker should be able to tolerate the job. When the worker's job or physical restrictions make that impossible, however, it is more complicated.

These strategies can help you make the change to light-duty a successful one.

1. Use Regular Jobs

You can always craft a job where an employee does absolutely nothing, but this will not help you or the employee. To succeed in modified duty, the worker has to do more than just show up and stand around to collect a paycheck. You have to find a way to keep the employee coming to the work place and performing a meaningful job.

There is another danger in calling a job a “light-duty assignment” when it adds nothing of value to the organization. For example a judge may decide he or she is still totally disabled. If the job you create is available only in your facility, and the employee would not find it elsewhere on the open labor market, a judge may conclude

the employee cannot perform regular jobs and you wind up paying a claim at a total disability level.

2. Eliminate Chances of Overreaching

Workers' Compensation administrative decisions are littered with cases of employees who were told not to perform some task if it was beyond their medical restrictions, yet the worker tried it anyway. Even when the employees disobey direct orders, these cases usually end badly for employers.

Eliminating temptation is the way to prevent employees from exceeding their restrictions. Instead of telling workers not to lift more than 30 pounds as the doctor's note says, remove the lifting from the job. Another option is reassignment to a job that does not involve lifting. By removing the option of lifting from the employee's discretion, you will reduce the chances of the light-duty assignment that accomplishes nothing – or worse, hampers the employee's recovery.

3. Have an Exit Strategy

The ultimate goal is to get the worker back to his or her pre-injury job. Setting up a light-duty assignment is just the first step. You also need to make changes when the employee's conditions improve. As employees are able to tolerate more physical demands, it may be possible to move them back into their old jobs.

Of course, you will never know if this is possible unless you monitor the employee's recovery from the injury. You should have regular deadlines to review the status of the employee's restrictions. At each doctor's appointment the employee should receive instructions from the physician. The doctor should decide whether the prior restrictions are still necessary or whether they might be too restrictive due to the employee's recovery.

CHECKLIST:

- Maintain a list of regularly available jobs that do not involve much physical activity.
- Do not leave job tasks involving activities that could violate restrictions up to a worker's discretion.
- Demand an update on restrictions every time a worker has a medical appointment.