

Return-to-Work Programs

Implementing a well-managed return-to-work program is an important strategy in controlling workers' compensation costs. An employee who is off work for an extended period of time will lose interest in their work. Studies show that the longer a person stays off work, the less chance there is that they will return. Conversely, statistics show that the sooner an employee returns to productive work, the better the chances they will make a full recovery. At home the employee is preoccupied with the injury and focused on their disability. However, if that employee comes back to work as soon as medically possible, they must focus on being productive.

The goals of a return-to-work program should include such things as:

- Accelerating an injured employee's return to work
- Facilitating temporary job reassignment or modification
- Reducing the number of litigated claims
- Reducing the number of lost work days
- Increasing employee morale and motivation to return to work

There are benefits to both you and your employees.

Employer benefits:

- Reduces indemnity costs and improves loss experience
- Improves employee morale, sense of security and loyalty
- Minimizes productivity losses
- Reduces costs for replacement workers or overtime wages
- Reduces potential for litigation
- Decreases opportunities for malingerers

Employee benefits:

- Provides a sense of security and stability
- Reinforces management commitment to employee welfare
- Reinforces employee positive self-image
- Reinforces the daily work habit
- Discourages the "disability" mentality
- Discourages malingering
- Provides positive reinforcement for quick recovery
- Provides a safe rehabilitation program

One of the keys to success is establishing the program before you need it. Make sure that management, supervisors and employees understand their roles and responsibilities.



Management's Role

Management should make the return-to-work program part of their company's culture. Educate employees that if they are injured on the job, they will be returning to work quickly in a modified duty capacity, if necessary. Communicate the benefits to them. Reassure them that the program is one important part of a rehabilitation program, not a system to force injured employees back to work before they are physically able. Reinforce that modified duty positions are temporary positions designed to accommodate their physical limitations until they are able to return to their pre-injury jobs.

Communicate the program's purpose and goals to supervisors. Some may be hesitant to provide a position to an employee who is less than "100%." Emphasize to them the rehabilitative and productivity value of the program and its role in controlling workers compensation costs. Involve the supervisors in analyzing existing job descriptions to identify potential modified duty positions and get their input on ways to safely modify jobs for injured employees. In order to assist you in identifying the physical demands of a position, we have provided in this packet an ***Employers Job Evaluation*** form that may be submitted to the treating physician for review and approval.

The Supervisor's Role

Supervisors are the key to maintaining open and personal contact with injured employees and bringing them back to work. They should visit or call the employees, reassure them that the "team" needs them, and stay informed about the employee's progress.

The supervisor's attitude can ensure a successful return to work by making the employee feel welcome back in the workplace. They must be fully aware of the employee's physical limitations and not push the employee beyond them. The supervisor also plays an important role in preventing re-injury by explaining the duties of the modified job and ensuring that the employee does not exceed their physical limitations. Finally, the supervisor must set a positive tone for the other employees who will be coming in contact with the returning employee. If the co-workers make the employee feel guilty or unwelcome in the workplace, it will create a strong disincentive to remaining at work.

The Employee's Role

Employees must be made to understand that they have responsibilities regarding their own recovery and return to work. They have a responsibility to report their injury immediately and complete all the necessary paperwork. They must follow established rules and procedures (including the Panel Posting) and maintain contact with their employer, providing regular updates on their progress. It is also their responsibility to follow the doctor's directions and comply with their treatment plan. Finally, they must not work beyond the physical limitations set by their doctor.



Overcoming Resistance

Even with a well-planned return-to-work program in place, you may encounter resistance from some employees. If an employee refuses your return to work offer, let them explain any concerns. These may include apprehension about returning to work while still in pain or less than fully recovered. There may be concerns about being required to work beyond their physical capabilities. Explain that the position has been modified or designed to allow the employee to work within their limitations. Provide assurance that safety is paramount and that the supervisor will be working closely with them and the physician to prevent re-injury and promote a safe, full recovery.

An employee may worry that “modified duty” means “menial tasks.” When possible modify the employee’s own position to meet the physical limitations. Design modified positions to be productive and useful. However, keep in mind that any work within the employee’s physical capabilities is better than no work at all.

Occasionally, an employee may undermine their return to work by refusing to perform the assigned job functions or by being uncooperative in other ways. Monitor the employee for compliance with their restrictions, performance to acceptable levels of productivity, and satisfactory progress toward a full recovery. Document performance problems in accordance with your existing personnel policies. Discuss disciplinary actions with your claim representative before you act on them.

Summary

An effective return-to-work program can demonstrate your commitment to the health and well-being of your employees. At the same time it can significantly reduce your workers' compensation costs and significantly improve your company's productivity and profitability. Your agent and claims team at Eastern Alliance will work with you to make the most of this excellent loss management strategy.

