

Developing a Return to Work Program



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One way to contain the cost of an employee injury is to decrease the recovery time away from work. Studies show the longer injured employees are away from work, the less likely they are to return to the same job with the same physical abilities they had before the injury.

Modified duty jobs involve a systematic way of providing temporary, productive work assignments for employees during their recovery from occupational injuries.

There are good reasons for an early return-to-work program. Recent national research has found that:

- ◆ If employers establish some type of proactive program early in the worker's recovery period, most will return to their original jobs.
- ◆ Most injured workers want to go back to work. It's often the delays and flaws in a disability benefit and rehabilitation system that may stifle their desire to work and create compensation dependency.

A formal return-to-work program can reduce lost workdays, reduce claims costs and reduce costs associated with recruiting and training replacement workers.

An effective return-to-work program with temporary modified duty jobs improves employee morale because it creates opportunities for injured employees to return to productive employment within the confines of their medical restrictions. It also helps employees maintain their earning capacity with additional wages to supplement workers' compensation benefits.

Your company will enjoy the benefit of maintaining productivity with experienced workers, decreased expenses of recruiting or training replacement workers, and lower claims costs.

The program must be designed, implemented and reviewed regularly by you, your injured employee, the health care practitioner, your loss control consultant, claims representative, and the department supervisor.

When developing a return-to-work program:

- ◆ Assign administration of the program to your workers' compensation claims coordinator.
- ◆ Develop a policy statement to show your support with the intent to provide reasonable accommodations for injured workers.

- ◆ Establish clear objectives for the program and monitor its success. Include structured criteria for employee eligibility and related administrative details.
- ◆ Encourage your selected physician to visit your facility and become familiar with each task or job classification. Stay in close contact with treating physicians for any program modifications needed. Work with them to observe work requirements and quantify the employee's restrictions and capabilities. Emphasize what the worker *can* do. Prepare an outline of physical requirements necessary to perform the job.
- ◆ Provide meaningful and productive work assignments. Employees assigned to nonproductive, unappealing jobs will quickly become bored and may refuse to participate in your program.
- ◆ Assign modified duty programs to work-related injury cases only. Including non-injured employees can quickly reduce the availability of accommodations.
- ◆ Don't place all modified duty jobs in one department. This creates anxiety and resentment toward those recovering and may result in an unwillingness to participate.
- ◆ Establish a pay rate that restores employees, as much as possible, to their preinjury physical capacity and earning status.
- ◆ Establish location and/or department accountability for carrying out your mission. Involve supervisors in placing injured workers.
- ◆ Start employees on modified duty during midweek to allow for a short period of work acclimation followed by scheduled time off.
- ◆ Avoid creating permanent modified duty assignments. Reevaluate the employee's recovery progress regularly. Establish a maximum period for reviewing physical limitations and capacities, then modify the work assignments as necessary. A 30-60 day limit is often used.
- ◆ Keep management informed. Is the modified duty job working as planned?

Note that this early return-to-work plan covers only temporary job restrictions. Review all permanent restriction situations with your claims representative. When permanent disability occurs, you must consider ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements for reasonable accommodation of permanently disabled workers. In these cases, we strongly advise you seek

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professional legal counsel and contact your human resources department for technical assistance.

Stay in touch with the health care practitioner, physician and insurance claims adjuster to monitor your employee's injury recovery. In some cases, providing the doctor with a revised job description may offer more work alternatives that match the employee's medical restrictions. Supervisors must also continue to monitor the situation to ensure employees are not exceeding the limits of modified duty.

Injured employees undergo many physical and psychological changes during their recovery period. Demonstrate your interest in their well being and their employment in your company by implementing modified duty programs.

Formal return-to-work plans are key elements in controlling workers' compensation costs. A well-designed and administered program can decrease your workers' compensation costs and help increase productivity.