

WORKERS COMPENSATION RETURN-TO-WORK

The budget has been cut and staff-to-client ratios are down. On top of that you just lost an employee to injury. If you think that employee will return to work on their own initiative when they are medically released, you might be wrong. Waiting for that response may waste time, money, and other valuable resources. It is likely to increase the injured employee's recovery time as well as the cost of the claim.

The purpose of early return-to-work programs is to reduce the length of time off of work. In many instances, the sooner an injured employee resumes work, even on a restricted schedule or duty, the faster they will return to full duty.

Preparation for early return-to-work begins before the employee is injured by identifying light duty options. A collaborative brainstorming effort by management to identify feasible modified duty assignments is fundamental in developing a light duty "library". This process services as a training mechanism in developing the return-to-work culture and encourages managers to take an active role in bringing employees back to work.

An employee's readiness to return to work rests on the medical opinion of the treating physician, and the employer's ability to communicate the availability of alternate duty assignments to the physician. If you have posted a physician panel for treatment of work-related injuries, your communication with the treating doctor is critical. Be sure that your panel physicians have a strong return-to-work ethic that treats the employee objectively, and is able to provide immediate treatment. There is no advantage to the employee or the employer in returning someone to work before they are physically capable. Inform the physician on your panel of the operations at your organization, the light duty positions available, and their regular job duties of the injured employee. This knowledge will enable the physician to determine appropriate placement of the employee back into the workplace.

Once an injury has occurred, encourage employees to report the incident to their supervisor and seek medical attention immediately. If the employee is unable to return to full-duty after being examined by a physician, talk with them about the type of work available, which would best utilize their abilities. Address any concerns the employee may have regarding re-injury and identify tasks that are physically appropriate. The goal is to bring the employee back to work as soon as it is medically appropriate, without putting them at risk for further injury. Successful return-to-work placement of an injured employee can be indicative of management's ability to share resources and think outside of its traditional systems. Other departments or projects that have been on the back burner can be options for utilizing the injured employee's skills.

Maintaining contact and demonstrating personal caring for the injured employee is a key to making them feel needed in the workplace. Simply calling the employee to express concern regarding their health conveys your interest in seeing them back at work when they are

medically ready. Let the employee know their contribution to the organization is appreciated. The importance of letting employees know that you care about them and have a sincere interest in their well being, cannot be overstated. Any difficulty they have in receiving treatment or processing the claim is a reflection on the organization. Be supportive and find out how you can help an employee in any way, large or small.