

The Return of Return-to-Work Programs

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Abstract

In an age of rising costs associated with worker's compensation and disability-related absences, return-to-work programs are once again at the forefront of the risk management industry. In general, large companies that sustain a high level of worker injuries already have some kind of return-to-work program in place. They may even have physical therapists who work on-site. But small- to mid-sized companies often do not have such programs. They assume that setting up a return-to-work program will require too much effort for a few dozen injuries per year. That simply is not true. Return-to-work programs ultimately reduce the number of lost work days for almost every employee involved. This accomplishes two goals. First, it reduces the company's future increases in worker's compensation or disability insurance. These insurance policies must pay out significant claims for lost wages. By reducing lost wages, claims will drop, reducing

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That simply is not true. Return-to-work programs ultimately reduce the number of lost work days for almost every employee involved. This accomplishes two goals. First, it reduces the company's future increases in worker's compensation or disability insurance. These insurance policies must pay out significant claims for lost wages. By reducing lost wages, claims will drop, reducing premiums.

Secondly, return-to-work programs create direct productivity benefits. Employees receiving disability benefits are paid, on average, 70% of their typical wage. If they can be brought back on the job faster for modified duty, they will be paid at 100% of their typical wages. So by paying only 30% more, the employer gains 40 productive work hours each week.

For a return-to-work program to succeed, companies must effectively communicate the goals of the program to the employees, emphasizing that the program is intended to get them back to work but not at the expense of their health. Identifying the major job categories in every department and then establishing modified-duty alternatives for them will also streamline the program. Also, informing injured employees within 24 hours of an accident about the return-to-work program, as well as informing medical providers about it can speed employees' time to medical release.

Even if the program follows these steps, conflicts can still arise. Most companies, for example, are managed by talented individuals who have little or no experience with the dynamics of workers' compensation or disability programs. Too often, injured employees or those out on disability are viewed as being malingerers trying to take advantage of the system. In this context, companies see these employees as adversarial. A continued source for misunderstanding is that return-to-work programs cost money to implement, and there are many who have difficulty successfully

communicating how spending these funds on return-to-work services will ultimately reduce lost time, employee turnover, expenses associated with retraining replacement employees and more.

In addition, many employees fear that their employer's return-to-work program will force them to return to work before they are physically able to be productive. Thus, documentation can be created that they are not able to perform at a satisfactory level, which will ultimately lead to their termination.

Front-line supervisors are also forced to deal with a variety of problems that can arise when an employee is brought back to modified or transition duty. Other employees might feel the injured person is getting paid equal wages to perform duties that are much less demanding. Supervisors also have concerns about their level of knowledge related to requests for accommodation. A third problem area is their frequent personalization of the process. In this case, when an employee goes off work for an injury, supervisors feel victimized, as though something has been "done" to him or her.

And finally, most risk managers have a variety of duties that require their constant involvement and attention. Return-to-work programs usually have their direct involvement in the initial stages, but this level of involvement is not practical to sustain over a long period of time. These complications can be eliminated with a thorough implementation process, however, supervised by a skilled return-to-work coordinator. This individual must be able to communicate the true benefits of an effective return-to-work program to upper management while at the same time, earn the employees' trust as their advocate.

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