

Occupational Safety

Cost Containment: Early Return-To-Work Programs

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Abstract

Guidelines for the development and implementation of an Early Return-to-Work program, as part of a workers' compensation insurance cost-containment plan, are presented in this report. Workplace issues affecting disability management are discussed. The roles of the employer, employee, insurance company, and medical practitioners are identified. The supervisor is identified as a key player. Alternate/modified work activities, job modification, and first-day-back management are also discussed. Sample letters and forms are included.

Introduction

"After an illness or injury, most employees would rather be on the job in some capacity than out of work altogether. After all, as Jean-Paul Sartre once said, work is 'the significance of the individual.' When an employee is unable to work, his or her confidence or self-esteem suffer, and so could your company's profitability. To get employees back to work quickly and safely, then, is a win-win situation." [6]

An Early Return-to-Work Program (ERTW) is one element of a cost containment policy designed to eliminate wasteful spending and reduce the cost of workers' compensation insurance. In this context, it is a concept dedicated to helping injured workers get back to work, by providing them with temporary, modified jobs that take into consideration physical restrictions, skills, interests, and capabilities. It is also part of disability management.

Moreover, studies conducted by Proficient Health & Rehabilitation Services, Inc., Wheaton, Ill. Found that delayed treatment for worker injuries can produce greater costs. Likewise, early case management through time accountability and responsibility of all involved, including the employer, the employee, the payer, and the providers, leads to just the opposite. [4]

As the employee's health and strength improve, job tasks are gradually increased until the employee is back to work and functioning at full capacity.

Return-to-Work Program objectives should include the following:

- Accelerate the employee's return to work by addressing the physical, emotional, attitudinal, and environmental factors that otherwise hinder the return-to-work process.
- Facilitate temporary or permanent job reassignment or job restructuring.
- Identify alternative employment consisting of modified duties.
- Reduce the number of cases entering the workers' compensation litigation system.
- Decrease the number of lost work days.
- Increase employee morale and motivation to return to and remain at work.
- Assist in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

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An added benefit of an ERTW Program is the development of improved employee loyalty and morale and enhancement of the employer's image and citizenship in the community.

The purpose of this report is to identify guidelines for the development and implementation of an effective ERTW Program, using a team approach involving claims, loss control, rehabilitation providers, and the employer's human resources and safety departments. The *team* concept is critical in the success of the ERTW Program. The employer, insurance company, rehabilitation specialist, and attending physician play important roles in the team approach.

Facts About Return-To-Work And Injured Employees

- Sixty percent of workers who are away from the job beyond 14 days are already in financial trouble.
- Occurring accidents contain both tangible and intangible costs
- Tangible costs are easily measured and relate directly to the accident such as, lost wages and medical cost
- Intangible costs, which are less likely to be measured, can include loss of productivity while on modified duty. [3]
- A patient's emotional distress usually increases, and so does the resulting number of surgical procedures, as days away from work increase. This is greatly reduced when a worker enters a productive role, including modified duty.
- Eighty to ninety percent of workers injured on the job would rather be working than convalescing at home.
- One study¹ (Source: California Workers' Compensation Institute) shows that the chances of litigation are reduced by 50% if the employer contacts the injured worker within one week after the injury occurs and positively reinforces the worker's self-image and value to the company.
- Returning an injured worker to the work place reduces associated recovery costs, including medical expenses, rehab expenses, therapy, and surgical expenses. Often the percentage of permanent impairment is significantly reduced.
- Typically, the claimant will contact an attorney two weeks after injury.
- Eighty percent of all litigated claims result in higher settlements.
- Workers who retain an attorney see an average of 5.2 doctors. Those who do not retain an attorney are treated by an average of 2.0.
- ERTW programs have proven effective in reducing attorney involvement, quicker recovery, and reduced related costs while providing an excellent employee benefit.

Impact on Workers of Extended Time Loss

Employees are affected physically, psychologically, and in other ways by long-term injuries. Some are:

- Pain and suffering.
- Partial loss of full income.
- Embarrassment, loss of self esteem.
- Deterioration of work ethic.
- Anger against company; tendency to "bad mouth" firm.

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- Feelings that the company does not care about him/her.
- Loss of skills and knowledge acquired on the job.
- Loss of friendships established at the workplace.
- Tendency to have deterioration of muscle tone from inactivity.
- Tendency to have depression, drug abuse and alcohol abuse.
- Tendency to engage in spousal abuse and to experience other family problems.
- Anxiety about "what's going to happen to me next?"

These effects can also lead to abuse of the workers' compensation insurance system.

Workplace Issues Affecting Disability Management

In addition to rising costs, several issues have emerged in this decade that will have a significant impact on disability management. Employers must now comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and financial liabilities created by a new accounting rule, FAS 112. Also, the incidence of disability is likely to increase with an aging work force.

Americans With Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which became effective in 1992, increases employer accountability and responsibility to maintain employment opportunities for disabled workers. The law has reinforced the need for comprehensive disability management programs that can help control cost and retain disabled workers with valuable skills. This is particularly important as the pool of qualified American workers shrinks.

Financial Accounting Statement 112

A new accounting rule, *Financial Accounting Statement 112*, is also likely to give employers an incentive to evaluate the benefits of getting disabled workers back on the job. Effective in 1994, FAS 112 requires employers to reflect disability-related costs, along with other benefits given to former or inactive employees, on their financial statements.

The new rule requires employers with insured plans to project their liability for future disability premium costs, while companies that self-insure are required to add the projected cost of disability benefits and administrative expenses to their balance sheets. FAS 112's impact will likely be felt the most by firms, such as manufacturing or construction, that tend to have a high level of work-related injuries and disability.

An Aging Work Force

An older work force is expected to incur an increasing number of claims for long-term disability benefits, because disabilities that limit or prevent work increase with age. Among workers age 45 to 54, 10.3 percent have work disabilities, while the percentage rises to 22.3 percent for those between age 55 to 64. In general, the length of disability for older workers is longer and the likelihood of return to work also declines with age.

All of the these issues, in addition to the rising cost of employee benefits and compensation costs, point to the need for cost-effective management of disabilities in the American workplace.

Benefits For Employers

Effective return-to-work programs benefit employers because they can:

- Reduce workers' compensation insurance costs.

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- Promote good will and enhance corporate image.
- Allow active participation of management in the employee's recovery.
- Reduce costs associated with temporary or replacement workers.
- Reduce potential for litigation.
- Maintain an experienced work force.
- Minimize productivity slow-down.
- Improve employee/management relations.
- Promote employee morale/security.
- Improve work ethic.
- Decrease opportunities for repeaters and malingerers.
- Decrease potential of re-injury.
- Tie workers, supervision, and management together.

Benefits For Employees

The programs also benefit employees because they can:

- Provide sense of security and stability.
- Reinforce management commitment to employee welfare.
- Reinforce a positive self-image to injured worker.
- Provide positive reinforcement to injured worker to recover quickly.
- Discourage the "disability syndrome" thought process.
- Encourage normal working relationships with other employees.
- Reinforce the "going to work daily" habit.
- Allow injured worker to directly contribute to profitability of employer.

Effective Disability Management Strategies

Key benefits of a disability management program include lower insurance cost, greater retention of skilled workers, and enhanced employee relations. Based on long-term disability case management experience, the following tips for an effective program are offered:

- Foster a Return-to-Work Culture.
- Promote ADA Awareness
- Work Together
- Maintain Communications

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- Emphasize Early Intervention
- Track Disability Data
- Consider Plan Design
- Coordinate Information
- Use Managed Care and Managed Disability Expertise
- Encourage Wellness

Foster a Return-to-Work Culture.

Involve senior management in active support of the goals of disability management. Be willing to make accommodations, such as allowing part-time work or temporary modified duty, which help aid recovery and early return-to-work.

Promote ADA Awareness

Educate front-line supervisors and managers about the ADA . Ensure that job descriptions clearly identify essential job functions. This will help managers fit a disabled employee into an appropriate job.

Work Together

Get all interested parties - the employer, physician, rehabilitation consultant, and insurer - involved in helping a disabled employee return to work. Ask the disabled employee's supervisor to help identify opportunities, as well as accommodations that could be made, for the employee to return to work.

Maintain Communications

Maintain open communication between all members of the disability team. Someone who knows the disabled employee, preferably his or her supervisor, should contact the person shortly after a disabling illness or injury and maintain periodic contact throughout the period of disability.

Emphasize Early Intervention

Use case management and rehabilitation services to increase an injured worker's chances of returning to work and to lower disability costs.

Track Disability Data

Select a disability administrator or insurer that will provide information on incidence, duration, and outcomes of claims. Self-funded employers can designate individuals to monitor and audit long-term disability (LTD) and other disability claims and disability management activities inside and outside the company.

Consider Plan Design

Write the LTD, in plain language, to require rehabilitation services. Integrate short- and long-term disability programs to ensure that disability claims are tracked for the best possible management from day one.

Coordinate Information

Share information among workers' compensation administrators, long-term disability and workers' compensation carriers, and health insurers, as permitted by state privacy laws, to facilitate recovery and a return to work.

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Use Managed Care and Managed Disability Expertise

Select health insurers or administrators that offer high-quality claim administration as well as medical case management. Coordinate health and disability claim services to promote effective utilization of medical services and cost control.

Encourage Wellness

Develop a wellness program that targets high-risk individuals. Provide education on injury and illness prevention and offer health screening and exercise programs. When a workplace injury occurs, use the opportunity to educate other employees on how to avoid a particular worksite hazard.

The Role Of The Employer

The key elements associated with the employer's responsibilities and accountabilities in a Return-to-Work program are:

- Management Support
- Communication
- Position Description (outlining essential job functions) and Job Analysis
- Orientation and Training
- Hazard Identification and Control

Management Support

First and foremost in the development of an Early Return-to-Work Program is the establishment of a policy stating management's commitment, responsibility, and support for program implementation and achievement of its objectives. This show of support should be evidenced in each level of administration. A key element in achieving and promoting support is communication.

Communication

The simplest method of assigning responsibility and accountability for implementation of the ERTW Program is the appointment of a coordinator with strong communication skills.

The coordinator represents the employer and assumes the position of liaison between the managing supervisor and the employee, the labor representative (if any), the insurance company, and the physician. Active communication, especially with the supervisor and employee, will help to monitor the course of treatment, and will encourage and reaffirm the employee's value to the company, prompting a timely return to work. Direct communication between the supervisor and employee is also important in improving the employee's morale.

Continued communication with the insurance company will expedite the processing of information involving an employee's rehabilitation progress. Written communication with all "team" members enables the coordinator to establish realistic targets for the employee's return to work and allows for all parties to plan for a smooth and positive transition as the employee returns to productive status.

Position Description and Job Analysis

The employer needs to develop position descriptions that identify essential job functions. The position description process identifies those jobs or tasks that are performed by able-bodied employees and can be modified to accommodate disabled workers. Some jobs can be classified as "transitional" for placement of workers returning on a temporary "modified-duty" basis.

Job tasks can be effectively identified on a narrative or matrix basis. However, the descriptions must conform to U.S. Department of Labor standards. The documented description of standard and modified job tasks should

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be retained in a manual and supplemented with photographs or diagrams depicting the performance of these tasks.

The manual of position descriptions and job analyses should be made available to the insurance carrier and the treating physician for review, reference, and feedback.

Orientation and Training

It is important to orient and train new and existing employees on the elements of the ERTW Program. The process should include a review of the applicable workers' compensation system being employed, so that a claim can be expedited properly.

Employees should understand the concepts of the ERTW Program, especially management commitment, position descriptions, and identification of standard and modified job tasks.

The rehabilitation process should be reviewed along with management's procedure for identification of transitional modified duty positions designed to return the employee to work according to a planned, targeted time period. The insurance company rehabilitation specialist can assist the managing supervisor and/or human resources manager through inquiries made to the physician on identified employee limitations and analysis of essential job functions, to develop modifications that address these limitations.

Most importantly, the orientation process should affirm the employee's confidence that his/her best interests are being considered.

Management should be included in the ERTW Program orientation and training process. Management needs to be familiar with program benefits involving the company, the insurer, and the employee. Cost containment measures should be reviewed and a documented cost savings tracking program developed. A documented record of savings attributed to the ERTW Program will help the coordinator obtain support for continued program activities.

Hazard Identification and Control

Hazard identification and control procedures are used to detect loss exposures which, when corrected, will reduce the likelihood of employee injury or illness. The basic objectives of such a program are to maintain a safe and healthful work environment, reduce or eliminate the risks of injury, and maintain operational profitability for the corporation.

An important segment of the hazard identification and control process is the job hazard analysis (JHA), also known as the "Job Safety Analysis" (JSA). Closely related to the development of position descriptions and related job tasks, the JHA is used to analyze each step of a job, to identify safety, health, and ergonomic hazards and develop solutions that will minimize or eliminate them.

Facility and workplace inspections represent another important segment. Inspections are conducted to "detect and correct" hazards and deficiencies and can be conducted by managers, supervisors, employees, safety committees, and/or technical specialists.

All aspects of the Hazard Identification and Control Program should be periodically monitored with a documented loss control program audit.

The Role Of The Insurance Company

The role of the insurance company is to obtain and support the employer's commitment to the development and implementation of an ERTW Program.

Through the services of its claims and rehabilitation units, the carrier plays a key role in identifying the potential candidates for the program. Once identified, the carrier plays a key role in identifying the potential candidates for the program. Once identified, the adjuster and rehabilitation specialist need to obtain medical documentation of the employee's work potential from the physician.

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In keeping with the "team" approach, the carrier maintains active verbal and written communication with the disabled worker. The employer's questions on benefits are also critical to the success of the insurance company's participation in the ERTW Program.

The loss control representative plays a significant role in the return-to-work process. The loss control efforts of the employer in reducing accidents and eliminating or controlling loss exposures can be supported by the carrier through its loss control unit, with services including industrial hygiene and ergonomics evaluation, job hazard analysis, loss control policy and program review, and employee/supervisor safety training.

The Role of The Treating Physician

Whether contracted by the employer, adjuster, or employee, the physician's primary role is the review, evaluation, documentation, and treatment of the employee's disability.

The physician must have access to the employer's position descriptions to review the current and modified job functions, and recommend additional modifications and work restrictions where warranted. The employee's current and future medical status and physical capabilities are determined and documented, and communicated to the interdisciplinary team.

Medical progress needs to be monitored. Physician referrals are made where a more definitive diagnosis is needed to evaluate anticipated recovery results.

Communication is a key component in the roles of the carrier and the physician as they provide services agreed upon with the employer.

The Role Of The Employee

The employee must also play a role in the return-to-work process. Employees have a responsibility to:

- Report an injury right away to a supervisor.
- Complete all the needed paperwork.
- Follow the established rules and practices.
- Maintain contact with the employer.
- Provide regular updates on their health condition.
- Follow the physician's directions and treatments.
- Not work beyond the medical limits set by the physician.

The Role Of The Supervisor

The supervisor is the key to keeping the company contact with the employee open and on a personal basis. The return-to-work coordinator can assist the supervisor in maintaining this contact while the employee is off work.

A supervisor should always respond positively to the employee's first report of injury. The supervisor should:

- Take time to handle the injury properly.
- Authorize medical attention immediately.
- Believe the employee. Don't suspect fraud.

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- Complete the first report of injury form.
- Investigate the accident or illness and record all pertinent information.

Supervisors play an important role in bringing the injured employee back to work. The supervisor should:

- Visit the employee and encourage fellow workers, if appropriate, to do the same.
- Keep informed about the employee's progress.
- Reassure the employee that the "team" needs him/her.

The supervisor's attitude can make the employee's return to work successful, by:

- Making the returned employee feel welcome and glad to be back.
- Providing temporary modified duties that have been approved by the doctor.
- Explaining the new duties clearly and emphasizing the importance of a temporary job.
- Pointing out any new safety precautions, or old ones, that the employee may have forgotten.

Early Management Of The Injury

The immediate response to the injured through first aid will help minimize the extent of the injury. Once a serious injury has occurred, the family should be notified by the company and the insurance carrier contacted. Contact with the employee should be made immediately following medical treatment and should be sympathetic in nature, as well as expressive of the company's concern. Discuss the Early Return-to-Work Program with the employee and continue to call and discuss the employee's progress from time to time.

It is important that the program coordinator track medical visits with the physician and discuss each visit and the employee's progress with the physician and the employee.

Return-to-Work Offer

At some point it is appropriate for the employer to offer work to the injured employee. The offer:

- Describes the temporary work and conditions.
- Outlines the expectations for employee and supervisor.
- Provides legal documentation.

It is not necessary to make the initial offer by mail. The offer for the modified work can be made by phone and the employee can start the very next shift. Follow-up can be made with a letter to the employee.

It is essential to have the employee's doctor approve, in writing, the modified duty. This can be done after the employee starts the assignment.

Supervising the Returned Worker

Monitoring is necessary to ensure that the employee works within his/her limitations and that supervision is appropriate. Supervisors can undo the work of the ERTW program by insisting the employee work outside the prescribed limitations; therefore, it is extremely important that they be well briefed on the program and "buy into" it.

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The supervisors must set a positive tone for the rest of the employees that will be coming into daily contact with the returning worker. The worker needs to feel wanted and secure. A positive psychological state is tremendously important at this stage in the worker's recovery.

Finally, at some point the worker should be ready to return to full work. This is the whole idea behind ERTW. Again, the entire management activity needs to be coordinated with the doctor and the insurer.

Working With Medical Limitations and Modified Duties

Since no work assignment should be made without proper medical authorization, a good rapport between the company and the physician must exist. The physician needs to be aware of the company's policy regarding the ERTW Program and the degree of accommodation that the company can make. This can best be accomplished by discussing the matter with the doctor before information is put on the Return-to-Work Evaluation Form.

The specific limitations, with regards to lifting, bending, standing, or contact with various substances, need to be identified by the physician.

The supervisor must understand these limitations and implement them when an employee returns to work. Medical limitations must be clearly understood and clearly followed by the employee, as well as the supervisor to prevent further injury.

Types of Alternate Work Activities

An employee who is off-work for a sustained period of time will lose interest in his/her job and be less effective upon returning to work. There is a point when a disabling injury becomes irreversible and the longer the person stays off work, the less chance there is for them to return. An early return-to-work program enhances the psychological and physical healing of an employee and limits possible malingering cases due to poor company attitudes or poor company relations.

The main idea is that the employee moves from a rather placid environment, where the disability is the reason for being at home or off work, back to an environment that stimulates productivity. The psychological and mental behavior exhibited by a productive individual is much more conducive to the company's goal and the individual's goal than one of a non-productive disabled person. At home, the employee's mind is preoccupied with the injury, and this may magnify the physical pain. At work, the employee's mind is busy with production, and the productive atmosphere fosters positive thoughts.

Modified Work

When an injured employee is brought back to work and placed temporarily within an existing job that is not as physically taxing or demanding as their normal job, it is considered to be *modified work*. This temporary job placement must meet the physical restrictions that a physician has assigned to the injured employee.

Restricted Work

When an injured employee is brought back to their normal job, with restrictions assigned by the doctor, it is considered *restricted work*. For example, the doctor may restrict the weight to be lifted by the injured worker to "no more than 30 pounds, six times per hour." It is important to convey these restrictions to the injured worker, his/her supervisor, and others.

Modified Duty or Total Accommodation

When positions are specifically created which will accommodate the restrictions of any injured employee, it is considered to be *modified duty* or *total accommodation*. These positions may be previously established or created as individual injuries dictate.

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Job Function Analysis

A Job Function Analysis is an extension of a Job Description and its purpose is to:

- Describe tasks and physical demands of the regular job.
- Develop a task inventory. Catalog many individual tasks, which can be used to fill the work day, for an injured worker.
- Allow the supervisor a broad selection from which to choose and accommodate many different types of injuries.
- Supervisors should prepare a Job Function Analysis for each "position" they supervise and should tie it into the Position Description. This way, a worker's original job can be modified quickly.

The task inventory enables the supervisor to quickly identify and combine many tasks to fill up an injured employee's allowed work time.

Tips for the Supervisor

- Always look at the employee's regular job first. Let them continue to do the parts of their job that they are able. If you need to "fill in," select, from your task inventory, those assignments that fall within the written medical limits.
- Expect to change assignments as the employee's condition improves. Again, have the doctor write changes in restrictions.
- If you do not see progress every 2 weeks, discuss the situation with the employee, doctor, and the Human Resources Department.

Accommodating Workers Speeds Return To Work

Making accommodations can bring employees back to work sooner. Providing special adaptive equipment, the flexibility to work part-time or to do regular-duty work temporarily can help disabled employees gradually regain the stamina and ability needed to perform their essential job functions. Modifying work stations, restructuring job tasks, and providing short-term retraining are other tools that can help employees return to work.

Job accommodations can be as simple and inexpensive as providing an elevated work surface to allow an employee with a back condition to alternate between sitting and standing at his or her desk. Experience indicates most job accommodations cost less than \$500. Some accommodations may involve the purchase of adaptive equipment, such as a glove with a built-in wrist support or a special lens to improve readability of a computer screen for a worker with a visual impairment.

Job modification is a part of work accommodation. It may involve changes in training, tools, machine or workstation design, or an alteration in work procedures.

The following are some simple, yet effective, ways to implement job modifications:

- Minor workstation modifications - simplify the work flow process and eliminate unessential features.
- Job task redesign - rearrange task sequence, eliminate tasks, or distribute them to more than one worker.
- Ergonomic or physical accommodations - provide adjustable chairs, hydraulic pallets, clamping devices, and ergonomic or electric tools.
- Environmental accommodations - rotate workers to limit exposure to repetitive trauma.
- Others - arrange graduated or flexible work hours, a mid-week return to work, or a modified work job-bank.

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Alternate Productive Work Assignments

Alternative productive work can be full- or part-time, one-time or ongoing, but it is generally better to avoid make-work or menial tasks, both for the injured employee's sense of worth and for the morale of your entire work unit. Consider these assignments:

- Tasks not being done by anyone now.
- Jobs being done only occasionally.
- Those tasks now being done that, if assigned to someone else, would free other employees to do other work.

Alternative work should not be assigned without an agreement from the physician stating that the employee is capable of performing the tasks designated. The doctor must completely understand the alternate work assignment. One effective tool is to videotape the job. Videotaping the job is not expensive and will certainly be less costly than having the physician review the actual job. Insurance company loss control representatives can assist in reviewing jobs and evaluating any associated safety hazards.

Management should not overlook the importance of making certain that the entire work unit understands the alternate productive work approach and the specific assignment. It is important to make certain that the returning employee's co-workers understand the situation and the purpose of the alternate productive work assignment. It should be emphasized that the injured employee is not receiving any treatment different from what they would get.

The supervisor should also be responsible for monitoring the injured employee's progress and communicating with the workers' compensation coordinator to see that the employee returns to his or her regular job as quickly as possible. Recovery periods will vary with individuals so all parties must stay flexible and not force the situation. It defeats the purpose if the employee tries to return to his or her regular job before he or she is ready. If an employee, whom the supervisor and physician feel is ready for work, resists returning to that job, management must use its resources to resolve the problem.

Throughout the alternative work period, positive reinforcement concerning the progress the employee is making is vital. The supervisor should emphasize the abilities the returning employee is displaying rather than dwelling on the remaining disabilities. In addition to the supervisor, members of the facility management team should demonstrate their interest and concern as they come in contact with the employee. Remember, the goal is to get the employee back to his or her regular job and feeling good about his or her recovery.

If the employees are represented by a union, it may be advisable to involve the union in assessing and identifying alternate work assignments. At the same time, it is beneficial to communicate the company's philosophy and plan for alternate productive work to all employees.

The First Day Back

Keeping employees on the job after they return from an absence due to illness or injury is sometimes disappointing. Frequently, employees who return to work, after an extended illness or recovery from an accident, find that they suffer a recurrence or relapse after several days back on the job. In most cases this is a normal reaction to weeks of inactivity and often is more of a psychological barrier than anything else. It is characterized by fatigue and depression about not being able to do the job as they once could.

One technique that can help the employee "ease" back into the swing of things is to start back to work on a day when there will be a holiday in a couple of days or on a Wednesday or Thursday so that only two days elapse before there is some time off. Another arrangement, if possible, is providing a week of half days to accomplish the same purpose.

It is also advisable to visit the employee, after returning to work, on the first day to let him/her know you are glad he's/she's back, give encouragement to stay on the job, and to offer him/her help to make the extra effort required at this critical juncture.

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When an employee who has had a serious illness or long recovery from an accident or operation returns, he or she has a great deal of self-doubt, if not outright guilt about the extended absence, and needs to justify the seriousness of it. What better way to clearly indicate that "I'm not completely recovered" than by leaving again in midweek?

Supervisors must do everything they can to make it easy for a person to successfully return to the job and stay. Having maintained contact with him/her during the absence also helps pave the way back.

Conclusion - How To Make a Return-To-Work Program Work

- Assign someone enthusiastic to oversee program.
- Analyze injury statistics to determine problem areas.
- Meet with supervisors to analyze and document modified duty tasks within existing job descriptions that can be recombined to make part-time or full-time job descriptions.
- Create progressively more demanding job descriptions.
- Make certain that all tasks are important to plant operation and (ideally) enhance or maintain plant productivity.
- Include tasks that managers do that can be delegated to others.
- Be creative, use your imagination and ideas from workers and supervisors; and borrow from other companies' successful programs.
- Communicate the goals and rationale of the plan to all supervisors and employees so that everyone knows how it works and how they fit into the plan.
- Evaluate the program quarterly and make adjustments.

Sample Forms

The following sample letters and forms, if used, should be modified to meet the specific requirements of individual employers.

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EARLY RETURN-TO-WORK PROGRAM - SAMPLE LETTER FIRST LETTER TO TREATING PHYSICIAN

DATE

PHYSICIAN'S NAME

AND ADDRESS

Re: EMPLOYEE'S NAME

Dear Dr: _____:

I understand you are treating our employee, EMPLOYEE NAME. The nature of HIS/HER injury prevents HIM/HER from doing HIS/HER usual job as an JOB TITLE.

I am prepared to design a special assignment for EMPLOYEE'S NAME, while HE/SHE is recovering from this injury. To do this, I need to understand this employee's work-related medical restrictions.

Please complete the enclosed form unless you can provide me with similar information on your own form. The more specific you are, the better we will be able to find tasks EMPLOYEE'S NAME will be able to do.

As HE/SHE recovers, I expect you will change restrictions. I will ask you for updates. I will then change the employee's assignment accordingly. We share the common goal of seeing this employee fully recovered and returned to regular work.

Our policy is to continue the same wage benefits while employees are part of our early return-to-work program. With regular updates from you, we are usually able to continue early-return-to-work assignments for up to 90 days.

If you believe EMPLOYEE'S NAME will have permanent restrictions or will not be able to return to regular work within 90 days, please contact me at PHONE NUMBER.

If you have any questions or comments regarding the form, our program, or the employee's working conditions, please call me. If I have questions, I will be calling you.

Thank you for your efforts to return our employee to full health and regular work.

Sincerely,

Enclosure

c: All files

EARLY RETURN-TO-WORK PROGRAM - SAMPLE LETTER JOB OFFER OF TEMPORARY MODIFIED DUTY

DATE

INJURED WORKER'S NAME AND ADDRESS

RE: JOB OFFER OF TEMPORARY, MODIFIED DUTY

Dear INJURED WORKER'S NAME:

You are eligible for a temporary modified duty assignment. Tasks are based on your attending doctor's report. As you recover, your task assignment will change to match the limits set by your attending doctor.

Cost Containment: Early Return-To-Work Programs

You will continue in your current position. Your wage, work shift, days off, and benefits will remain the same during this temporary modified duty assignment.

This duty is available immediately. It will end when whichever of the following occurs first:

- Ninety consecutive calendar days have elapsed from the beginning date (see below).
- Work is no longer available.
- Your doctor releases you for regular work.
- Your doctor indicates you have a permanent restriction that will prevent you from returning to your regular job as JOB TITLE.
- Your claim for workers' compensation benefits is denied.

A detailed job description is attached. Please review it. If you have questions, contact me at PHONE NUMBER as soon as possible or you may call your supervisor to discuss your questions. We welcome your inquiries. We want you to feel safe and secure in your return to work.

You are expected to report:

Beginning Date: REPORT DATE
 Beginning Time: SHIFT HOURS
 Beginning Place: LIST DIVISION, ADDRESS, ROOM
 Supervisor: SUPERVISOR'S NAME
 Supervisor's Phone: PHONE NUMBER
 Work Shift: START/STOP TIME
 Days Off: DAYS OFF
 Wage Rate: WAGE

If you are unable to report as assigned, you must contact NAME at PHONE NUMBER, as possible and before the beginning date and time listed above.

Please Note: Your workers' compensation benefits may be affected. If you do not report as assigned or do not call as required, your benefits may be suspended.

I look forward to your rapid recovery and return to regular work. I hope to see you on your first day back or to hear from you by phone, if you are unable to report.

Sincerely,

Attachment - Modified Duty Description

c: Temporary-duty Supervisor

All files

EARLY RETURN-TO-WORK PROGRAM - SAMPLE LETTER DAY 60 - LETTER TO DOCTOR

DATE
PHYSICIAN'S NAME
AND ADDRESS
 Re: EMPLOYEE'S NAME Return to Regular Work.

Dear Dr _____:

EMPLOYEE'S NAME has been on a temporary modified assignment for 60 days. We have been designing tasks based on your medical recommendations and requirements. It is our observation that our employee has

Cost Containment: Early Return-To-Work ProgramsYOUR ASSESSMENT OF EMPLOYEE'S PROGRESS AND/OR RECOVERY. DESCRIBE HOW THEY HAVE BEEN HANDLING THEIR MODIFIED ASSIGNMENT

This temporary modified assignment is scheduled to end on

DATE.

Within the next 30 days we need to determine if our employee will be able to return to their regular assignment or if we need to advise the employee to seek other employment options.

Enclosed is an analysis of our employee's former job. It describes the job as it was usually done up to the time EMPLOYEE'S NAME was injured. Please take a moment to review it and complete the brief form on the job analysis.

It is essential that we receive this information as soon as possible. We would like to be able to allow our employee to continue to work, earning full wages and benefits. Your prompt response will start this process. You may mail the job analysis and your directions to the above address or FAX it to me at FAX NUMBER.

As always, I welcome your comments and questions. Please call me at PHONE NUMBER. Thank you for your cooperation and assistance in helping us keep EMPLOYEE'S NAME a productive member of our work force.

Yours truly,

c: EMPLOYEE'S NAME
INSURANCE COMPANY
EMPLOYEE'S FILE

**EARLY RETURN-TO-WORK PROGRAM - SAMPLE LETTER
DAY 75: END OF MODIFIED DUTY**

DATE

TO: EMPLOYEE NAME

FROM: NAME

Personnel Department

SUBJECT: END OF TEMPORARY MODIFIED-DUTY ASSIGNMENT ON DATE

This memo is to notify you that your temporary modified-duty assignment will end on DATE, for the following reason (Check all that apply):

- Ninety consecutive calendar days have elapsed from Day One of this temporary assignment.
- Work is no longer available.
- Your doctor has released you for regular work.
- Your doctor indicates you have a permanent restriction that will prevent you from returning to your regular job as a JOB TITLE.

Unless your doctor documents that you have recovered and are able to return to your regular job, without restrictions, within the next two weeks, we are unable to continue your employment.

Before the date of the end of this assignment, one of the following must occur:

- You must be released to your regular work without restrictions by your attending doctor.
- You must provide us with documentation of permanent restrictions that prevent you from doing your regular job. We will then determine whether or not we can reasonably accommodate those restrictions in your regular job position, on a permanent basis.

Cost Containment: Early Return-To-Work Programs

- You must provide documentation of your medical status and submit a complete work history and skills inventory, available from the Human Resources office. We will then look for other work that you are qualified to perform that meets your medical restrictions.

In the interim, you will be placed on medical leave without pay. You will no longer acquire benefits or seniority. If you have not yet arranged for continuation of your health and dental benefits call _today.

Note: The following paragraphs may apply.

You should notify Human Resources and provide them with documentation when you are released for work and no work is available. Human Resources will then resume your temporary disability payments if you are not yet medically stationary.

Please contact me at PHONE NUMBER if you have any questions regarding your employment status, your benefits, or your options. We wish you good luck in your recovery and search for future employment.

Sincerely,

c: All files

PROVIDE A FOOTER ON THIS PAGE FOR:

FORM:
MEDICAL PROVIDER'S RETURN-TO-WORK
EVALUATION/RECOMMENDATIONS

PROVIDE A FOOTER ON THIS PAGE FOR:

FORM:
EMPLOYER'S JOB ASSESSMENT

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