

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE RETURN-TO-WORK PROGRAM STRATEGY GUIDE



WHAT IS “RETURN-TO-WORK”?

“Return-to-work” (RTW) is a process designed to help employees disabled due to illness or injury get back to work in a safe and timely manner.

BENEFITS OF A RTW STRATEGY

Proactively setting up your RTW program now will ensure your company is ready to address early RTW opportunities when they arise. Transitional RTW after an injury or illness benefits both the employee and the company. These benefits apply to both occupational and non-occupational injuries and illnesses.

🔗 Employer benefits:

- Controls direct and indirect absenteeism costs
- Reduces lost productivity
- Reduces need to train replacement workers
- Increases morale and improves operations
- Maintains skill sets of valuable experienced people

🔗 Employee Benefits:

- May help facilitate recovery
- Supports a sense of self worth
- Allows employee to stay in same or similar job
- Prevents interruption of salary and/or benefits

HOW TO GET STARTED

Follow these ten steps to get your organization started in developing an effective, structured RTW program.

ACTION ITEMS 1-5

Program Preparation/Implementation

1. Develop a RTW policy
2. Establish a RTW team
3. Develop functional job descriptions
4. Identify opportunities for transitional duty
5. Educate and communicate

ACTION ITEMS 6-10

Program Activities

6. Report injuries or illnesses promptly
7. Coordinate RTW with medical care
8. Investigate the incident (for occupational injuries only)
9. Return the employee to work
10. Monitor, measure and modify



Both management and employee support for your RTW program are essential for success.



ACTION ITEM 1

Developing a RTW Policy

Develop a policy for RTW that reflects your company’s commitment to help employees get back to work after an injury or illness.

- The expectation that all employees will participate, including employees with occupational and non occupational injuries/illnesses
- Let employees know your organization is serious about their health and well-being, and that, if they incur a disabling event, the company will consider transitional work options deemed appropriate and approved by their treatment provider

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- The company's commitment to offering meaningful transitional duty assignments
- Clear guidelines regarding eligibility, entrance and exit criteria for the RTW program and transitional duty positions
- Steps to be taken when an employee injury or disability occurs
- Steps to take to include union representation in the planning stages (if applicable)*



ACTION ITEM 2

Establish a RTW team

The effectiveness of a RTW program depends on support from both managers and employees. Remember, a positive management attitude and employee support will be essential for success.

The RTW team should include some or all of the following:

- Employee representative
- Supervisors or managers
- Human resources staff
- Occupational health staff
- Occupational safety staff
- Union representative (if applicable)*
- Insurance representatives – medical case management, vocational rehabilitation, loss control, claims
- Representative from health care vendors (medical provider)



Remember, disabled workers have skills. Focus on ability, not disability.

* To obtain labor support, include the union in the development of the program, and be sure to have union representation on the RTW team. During union contract negotiations, develop contract language that will allow a RTW program. To prevent collective bargaining issues, develop clear eligibility, entrance and exit criteria for the RTW program and transitional duty positions.



ACTION ITEM 3

Develop Functional Job Descriptions

- Review current job descriptions – start with core jobs or job “families” to help narrow the scope
- Modify job descriptions as necessary to document essential duties and functional requirements
- Consider having a formal Job Analysis performed for jobs that may not be complete or accurate
- Consider including a section for potential job modifications or transitional work (see Action Item 4)



ACTION ITEM 4

Identify Opportunities for Transitional Duty

- Ask for suggestions from employees, supervisors
- Consider the use of risk management staff or vendors to help design job modification options
- Consider adaptations to existing jobs or reorganization of existing job tasks
- Identify people (co-workers, managers) who can help or temporarily provide assistance to



ACTION ITEM 5

Educate and communicate

Communication and education are key elements in an effective RTW program – particularly important while the disabled employee is out of work. Make sure your RTW messaging is clear and consistent across all lines of communication, both internally and externally.

- Be sure all partners understand your company's RTW philosophy and program procedures
- Communicate your RTW policy to health care providers through employer or claims communications
- Establish a rapport with local physician(s) and hospital(s)/clinic(s)
- If possible, review your RTW program with medical providers
- Invite medical providers to your facility for an orientation to your operation and your RTW program

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- If possible, videotape jobs. Send videotapes and functional job descriptions to medical providers to provide an objective picture of the employee's job tasks and work environment
- Stay in touch with the absent employee to help him/her feel connected with peers, the workplace and the organization
- Ensure the affected employee understands benefit policies and timeframe of benefits
- Communicate all significant activity or changes to involved parties (disabled employee, employer representative, medical provider, insurance carrier)



Early reporting of injuries and illnesses is the first step in a successful RTW program.



ACTION ITEM 6

Report Injuries or Illnesses Promptly

- Recommend immediate reporting of illnesses or injuries to the claims administrator
- Educate supervisors on best practices, including early reporting of injuries/disabilities, effective communication with employees and supporting work restrictions



ACTION ITEM 7

Coordinate RTW with Medical Care

Your program's success depends on your communications with your employee, medical provider and insurance carrier regarding RTW options.

For Occupational Injuries:

- Send the injured employee for medical treatment right away
- Arrange for transportation of the employee to the doctor or provide an escort

For Occupational and Non-occupational Disabilities:

- Talk to your employees to determine if they have accurate information about their disability or workers' compensation benefits, their medical condition, and how to encourage their recovery

- Provide a copy of the functional job description to the physician so he/she has accurate information about the patient's work duties and your willingness to provide temporary accommodation
- Be sure your claims administrator is aware of your RTW program and possible transitional work options



ACTION ITEM 8

Investigate the incident (for occupational injuries only)

- Investigate the work-related incident
- Determine possible causes and solutions to prevent similar incidents
- Implement necessary safety/wellness interventions
- If needed, engage a risk management provider to assist in this effort



You may need to make accommodations to help disabled employees return to work and perform their essential job functions.



ACTION ITEM 9

Return the Employee to Work

Bring disabled employees back to work in a well defined transitional work capacity in accordance with their medical provider's approval. A job analysis and/or workstation assessment may be necessary to verify job demands and to determine opportunities for modification.

Accommodations you may need to make might include:

- Modifying the work area
- Restructuring or reassigning job tasks
- Providing short-term retraining to perform new, but temporary work assignments
- Providing adaptive equipment that offers the employee increased comfort or ease in work duties
- Offering work schedule or work location flexibility

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ACTION ITEM 10

Monitor, Measure and Modify

It's important to plan how your organization will record, track and monitor your RTW results. Before the program is implemented, we recommend defining measurements of RTW activities. It's also important to review this data on a periodic basis (every six to 12 months) to determine if the program is effective, and if there are any enhancements or changes that need to be made.

OCCUPATIONS, LOCATIONS AND OTHER FACTORS THAT MERIT A CLOSER LOOK:

- Specific occupations that have a less than ideal RTW history
- Specific locations that have lower than average RTW rates or absences of longer duration
- Specific occupations/locations that have better than expected RTW rates which could be used as “models”
- Average duration of absences, ideally based upon the type of disability
- Higher incidence of lost time related to specific diagnosis or conditions
- Higher incidence of disability with certain diagnosis in relation to specific locations or job classifications
- Cost associated with delayed RTW
- Incidence of delayed RTW

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