Making “Return-To-Work” Work For Transportation
A focus on the fundamentals of communication, creativity, and culture is key to a successful program

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Reducing the recovery time for employees injured in a workplace accident remains front and center among employers who continue to face increased workers’ compensation costs, lost productivity, and spiraling litigation.

According to a recent National Academy of Social Insurance (NASI) study, total workers’ compensation costs to employers rose by 7.1 percent to $77.1 billion in 2011, while workers’ compensation benefits rose by 3.5 percent to $60.2 billion. The benefits include a 4.5 percent increase in medical care spending to $29.9 billion and a 2.6 percent increase in wage replacement benefits to $30.3 billion.¹

With these numbers climbing, a clearly defined return-to-work (RTW) program that helps injured employees manage their care and gets them reengaged in a meaningful capacity as early as possible has become an essential business strategy for companies seeking to mitigate their exposure.

For high-wage earners, including truck drivers, there is often a misconception that returning an injured employee to work early costs more than simply paying the 66.66 percent weekly disability

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maximum. Conversely, studies show that costs are greater to keep workers at home, and those costs actually compound over time—the longer an employee is away, the greater the perceived severity of the claim or injury and, therefore, the potential to waste money.

In fact, by some estimates, average medical and indemnity costs may be more than double for an employer without an RTW program. In addition, research shows that employees who are supported by an RTW program are back at work approximately 1.4 times sooner than those injured at a firm without a program. And, delaying a claim beyond three days increases the chances of attorney involvement by 50 percent.

For trucking, which ranks among the top 10 most dangerous work environments, the comorbidity of intense physical labor and an overweight/obesity rate of 89 percent greatly increases the likelihood of injury. Add to that growing demand stemming from travel distances that are forecasted to reach as much as 662 million miles per day by 2040, along with a resulting shortage of available high-quality labor, and the message is clear: Having a practical RTW program that helps return injured workers to full health and productivity is becoming an industry imperative.

Most companies are familiar with the basic elements of an RTW plan: short-term modification of work schedule and/or duties that align with physician restrictions; modifications that are fluid-based on injury type, physical ability (or limitations), skills, and preinjury responsibilities; and a progressive return to full duty. While RTW may have some unique challenges for transportation, and a given program will take on a unique profile depending on the particular features and needs of the company, the principles that make an RTW program successful are the same—regardless of the industry.

So, beyond the nuts and bolts, what are the qualities that will make the plan compelling and meaningful? What will make RTW truly work for both employer and employee?
Communication: Both the messenger and the message are critical

To gain support and remain effective, organizations need an enthusiastic champion to introduce and provide ongoing communication about their RTW program. Even if the CFO or risk manager buys into its importance at the top, cascading the program successfully to the terminal level and then out to employees can be challenging. Depending on the organization, typically the person will be from human resources or risk management, or it may be a supervisor or frontline manager. However, even if a manager with the best intentions simply recites an RTW policy, it will surely fall on deaf ears. The message must come from someone who is well informed about the program’s content, policies, and procedures, can relate its value to employees, and will actively oversee the program.

Creativity: Be open to the possibilities

RTW solutions must be developed on a case-by-case basis—there isn’t a one-size-fits-all plan or strategy for a single industry or company. However, transportation offers great opportunities for creativity. For example, because trucking company assets are concentrated on the road, dispatch terminals may be minimally equipped, with few RTW resources and opportunities. However, off-site options, such as work arrangements with charitable organizations or nonprofits can prove very effective. In addition, despite conventional stereotypes, a full spectrum of education levels exists among truck drivers, and many have college degrees and/or advanced skill sets. The key is recognizing the value an injured worker can add to the organization, finding the right fit within an employee’s specific work restrictions, and getting that person reengaged as soon as possible. When injured and away from work, employees lose the sense of identity that is tied to their job. Providing a way for them to participate and continue to make a contribution often translates into a swifter recovery.

“Anyone can make the simple complicated. Creativity is making the complicated simple.”
—Charles Mingus
Culture: A supportive environment is essential

A company can have an expertly designed program that looks impressive on paper, but without a culture that values support for injured workers and embraces their return to the workplace, it cannot be successful. Employees believe what they have seen. How have other injured employees been treated? Do the employer’s actions match the content of its policies? The two primary drivers of litigation by an injured worker are fear and anger: fear about the ability to pay the mortgage or buy food, and anger over feeling mistreated or not having been dealt with fairly as a result of the injury. Injured workers need to feel good about their future and know they’re going to make it. The right supportive culture can help ease fear, diffuse anger, and ultimately minimize litigation.

Tips for return-to-work success

1. Have a plan, not just a “policy.”

An RTW plan can be as simple or sophisticated as a company wants or needs, but it must go beyond written policy and procedure to include committed resources for executing and managing it on an ongoing basis.

2. Postinjury management starts at the date of hire.

Beginning “day one,” companies need to provide an orientation to their RTW plan. This plan should set expectations, educate employees about the importance of early return, identify available support, and clearly outline the steps to follow in the event of injury, including the timetable for reporting.
3. Assign a dedicated injury counselor.

This “go-to” manager provides a single, consistent point of contact who communicates with injured employees on a weekly basis and coordinates all aspects of postinjury management among physicians, claims adjustors, supervisors, and managers. Depending on the size of the company and claims volume, there may be one counselor or many, and the role may be full-time or part-time. In transportation, where drivers sometimes live a significant distance from where they are domiciled, the logistics of managing an RTW program become more challenging, and the role of the injury counselor more critical. An employer may be doing all of the right things behind the scenes, but if it isn’t regularly communicating and working with injured workers, someone else will be, and that person often will be an attorney.

4. Fairness is key.

Fairness in RTW policies and procedures is essential for promoting positive relationships between management and employees, strengthening overall program participation, and paving the way for a successful and early return to work. Employees need to feel that they are treated with respect, receive accurate, consistent information and have a voice in the process—particularly in a union environment.

For more information on RTW or for help getting started with a program, contact

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Did You Know?

The Case for RTW

- Injured workers who fail to return to work within 90 days of an injury have less than a 50 percent chance of ever coming back. After 120 days, there is less than a 10 percent chance that the employee will return to work for any company. Yet, a worker who is back by week three has a 97 percent chance of successfully returning to a full-function work capacity.\(^6\)
- Forty-six percent of injured workers who hired attorneys said they did so because they felt their claim had been denied.\(^7\)
- In the initial 30 days following an injury, claim costs go up an average of 8 percent for each week of delay in reporting, increasing about 2 percent during the first week and climbing to 32 percent by the end of one month.\(^8\)
- Employees with work-related illnesses/injuries who were satisfied with employer treatment returned to work in 63.5 days, compared to 125.8 days for dissatisfied employees.\(^9\)
5. Don’t overlook the importance of social networks.
Most people spend more hours around coworkers than with family. When injured and away from work, employees not only lose the sense of identity from their job, they also lose contact with important social networks and, as a result, may become increasingly depressed or unmotivated. Reuniting workers as soon as possible with familiar social contacts provides valuable interaction and support, which can contribute to a more speedy return to full duty.

6. Include mechanisms for review and evaluation.
RTW programs should be reviewed regularly as part of the business planning process and adjusted as needed. It’s a good idea to evaluate factors such as average length of time to return to work following an injury, average claim duration and costs, and number of instances and costs of litigation. Don’t forget to include a survey tool to gain valuable feedback from employees who participate in the program.

With costs surrounding workplace injuries continuing to rise, transportation employers, large and small, should consider putting in place a well-defined and practical RTW plan. Remember, the plan does not need to be complicated in order to be effective. Focusing on the fundamental drivers of success—including communication, creativity and culture—is the key to an RTW program that works well for both employers and employees. Beyond the positive financial impact, RTW can improve employee morale, strengthen employer/employee relationships, encourage a more supportive company culture, and help reinforce a commitment to greater worker health and wellness—all contributing to a more favorable transportation work environment and continued strength of the industry.
References


4 Vanata, D.F., Bumbalough, H.L., Health Sciences, Ashland University, Ashland, OH. Health Beliefs and Dietary Behaviors Among Truck Drivers, The Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (September 2013).


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