RETURN TO WORK PROGRAM

A Comprehensive Guide to Developing an Effective Plan

HORST INSURANCE

Provided by: Horst Insurance

WHERE TO BEGIN

The following guide will help you construct an effective Return to Work Program and create meaningful work assignments for workers injured both on and off the job. It includes background statistics to support the program, steps to take before execution, how to manage the program and implementation recommendations.

Step 1: Know the Facts
Supporting your Return to Work Program with evidence that it will help save {Insert Your Company's Name} money is the best way to convince upper management to get on board. Obviously, injured employees drive up company costs in the form of lost work days and compensation costs. Studies clearly demonstrate that employees who are off work because of injury for more than 16 weeks seldom return to the workforce, and companies get stuck paying hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in unnecessary costs.

Step 2: Gather Data
Before you institute a program, research your company culture to understand what current employee attitudes are toward injury and returning to work. That way, after you create an official Return to Work Program, it will be easier to evaluate and determine whether there has been a positive mindset shift. Get to know your company culture at all levels and from a range of perspectives. Visit worksites and talk to employees to understand how your current Return to Work Program – or lack thereof – functions. Develop a needs assessment to determine how much work you need to do to shift company culture and practice.

Step 3: Demonstrate a Commitment to Early Return to Work
Make sure all levels of employees recognize that early return to work after an injury speeds up the recovery process and reduces the likelihood of permanent disability. Everyone from upper management to hourly employees should understand the goals, purpose and background on the program. There is no use taking large strides to enact a program if management does not support and recognize the need.

These elements are the foundation and support for your Return to Work Program. Take plenty of time for these steps before moving on to create your program.

RETURN TO WORK PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Steps 4 through 7 of this guide will go straight into your written Return to Work Program, as they are the elements that will help you take action and establish a plan.

Step 4: Create Goals
State {Insert Your Company's Name}'s purpose in creating the program and emphasize management's commitment to making it work. Keep it positive, but be sure employees understand the Return to Work Program is a serious initiative. This is also the place in your written program to define what type of duty you offer or require – your program can revolve around transitional duty, alternate duty or both.

Example Goal Statement: {Insert Your Company's Name}'s Return to Work Program is in place to accommodate injured workers by identifying new duties or modifying

jobs to meet their physical capacities and respect doctors' restrictions. The goal is to return our employees to productive work, regular schedule and full wages as soon as possible, as they are the essential livelihood of {Insert Your Company's Name}. Because our employees are so valuable, we have both a Transitional Duty Program, which is designed as a therapeutic tool to accelerate return to work by addressing physical and emotional limitations, and an Alternate Duty Program, which is a placement service for workers deemed unable to perform the functions of their pre-injury job by a medical professional.

Step 5: Create a Return to Work Team and Define its Responsibilities

A Return to Work Team is crucial to the program's success because it provides leaderships, sets expectations for injured employees, acts as a communication channel between all involved parties and ensures the Return to Work program is being administered correctly. This team should consist of a representative from each of the following areas, and you may want to use these role descriptions directly in your written program:

- *Senior Management*
    - o Ensures implementation; promotes and supports the program
- *Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist***
    - o Serves as expert on physical and psychosocial aspects of disability, can testify in court as vocational expert, understands job analysis and physical capacities forms, supervises Return to Work Program administration
- *Workers' Compensation Professional* (either an in-house representative or someone from your insurance company or TPA)
    - o Provides medical information, problem-solving skills and general support
- *Supervisor(s)*
    - o Directly supports the injured worker's return to work by giving out the modified assignments, facilitating communication and ensuring the employee does not exceed the assigned physical restrictions
- *Union*
    - o Promotes the {Insert Your Company's Name} Return to Work Program to union membership; advocates for employees and assists in return to work planning for specific employees when requested
- *Panel Physicians*
    - o Prepares a medical treatment plan that is safe, promotes early return to work and keeps {Insert Your Company's Name}'s aggressive program in mind
- *Human Resources Department*
    - o Coordinates with Return to Work Program Manager on employee benefits, wages, Family Medical Leave and workers' compensation issues

> ***the best candidate for team lead or Return to Work Program Manager*

The Return to Work Team should also be responsible for creating and maintaining a transitional duty job bank, which is discussed in greater detail in Step 6.

Step 5: Develop a Work Flow Chart Outlining the Return to Work Process

A crucial part of the Return to Work Program is the process and steps involved in administration. A good flow chart will eliminate confusion about the program and identify proper actions for all levels of employees, and this flow chart should serve as your action plan. Request a sample Work Flow Chart to use with your Return to Work Program from Horst Insurance at 717-560-1919.

Step 6: Develop and Maintain a Job Bank

Again, the Return to Work Program Manager should be the owner of the job bank; however, he or she should meet with supervisors and managers to identify adequate transitional tasks. You could also encourage all employees to submit ideas for transitional duty tasks as they come up – the tasks in the job bank can, and should, range in levels of physical strain required to complete them. This job bank can be as formal or informal as necessary, but it is essentially a laundry list of tasks or assignments across all departments that ideally should get done but often get overlooked because of lack of staff, time, funds, etc. It might be helpful to organize the job bank both by work location and by physical demand level to find the most appropriate task for an injured employee.

Keep in mind that while safety of the employee is the most important, it is also essential to the success of your Return to Work Program that the tasks are productive. Make every effort to keep work hours and days off consistent with the injured employee's work schedule, but also make sure he or she is aware that the transitional task may require an altered schedule. If the transitional duties in the job bank are considerably less skilled than the employee's pre-injury job, consider paying less than full-duty rate if your state laws allow. You will pay less in payroll taxes and, at the same time, you will motivate the worker to return to full duty.

Step 7: Create a Communication and Education Plan

To make your Return to Work Program a success, you should have full cooperation with all parties involved. This includes the injured worker, his or her supervisor, union officials, medical providers and workers' compensation professionals. If any of these parties is not fully committed to the program, your success will be limited.

To maximize the program's communication efforts:
- Provide written program descriptions and definitions – make these items readily available, accessible and readable
- Keep job descriptions and job analyses on file for each employee in case he or she ever becomes injured
- Review the Return to Work Program with employees during new hire orientation and periodically throughout the year
- Provide one-on-one sessions with injured employees to reiterate expectations and assign transitional tasks

FINAL STEPS

The last step in implementing a Return to Work Program is to include a way to measure your progress. Step 8 will offer suggestions on how you can manage your Return to Work Program.

Step 8: Recordkeeping

Put simply, the best way to measure the success of your program is to collect return to work data. Financial savings may be difficult to quantify, but one thing you can do is track the money you save on an individual basis for each injured employee who goes on transitional duty. Also, it will be helpful to keep a Transitional Duty Database. Use this to chart:

- The number of employees assigned to transitional duty
- The average duration of transitional duty assignments
- The percent of employees filing new claims each month who are placed in transitional duty
- All receipts of work release to transitional duty assignments from a medical professional

Step 9: Distribute the Plan

After you create your written Return to Work Program using these guidelines, distribute it to employees at every level. In your written Return to Work Program that you distribute, in addition to all of the steps included in this guide, be sure to include:

- Your Return to Work Policy, which should have a section to be signed, dated, returned to Human Resources and filed for each employee
- The Return to Work Flow Chart
- Other relevant material that may be helpful to employees experiencing work related injuries or illness, including workers' compensation information

You might also consider holding a meeting to build support for the program and so that employees can ask questions. Revisit the Return to Work Program annually to re-evaluate the written procedures and policies and analyze its success.

If you have further questions about writing or implementing your Return to Work Program, Horst Insurance can assist you.