# Return to Work Program Safety Talk

## WHAT'S AT STAKE?

**A Return to Work (RTW) Program is a workers' compensation-related program allowing employees who are injured on the job to perform their usual duties in a temporary, limited, or light-duty capacity while recovering.** The overall goals of a return to work program are to lower costs related to employee injuries, keep injured employees engaged, and lower the risk of injured workers seeking legal representation due to adverse feelings related to their injuries.

Stay at Work/Return to Work programs (often called just Return to Work programs) help supervisors manage employee injury, illness and disability and ensure that employees are able to return to the workplace as quickly and safely as possible.

Returning employees to work goes well beyond treating the physical nature of the injury, health condition or disability, though. It also includes psychological impact, family and workplace dynamics. By creating an effective and holistic Return to Work program based on communication and trust, employers can take positive steps to keep their employees productive, safe and valued in the workplace.

## WHAT'S THE DANGER?

### IMPACT OF WORKERS OFF WORK

**Injuries/Illnesses**

Many injuries and illnesses are work-related – there were more than 4 million nonfatal work-related injuries and illnesses in 2015 – however, a much larger share of injuries and illnesses that may prevent continued employment occur off-the-job. Estimates suggest that there were more than 15 million nonfatal, off-the-job

injuries and illnesses requiring medical attention in 2015.

**Culture of Absence**

The longer employees are absent, the less likely they are to return to their original jobs. In some ways, this is simply a function of more complex conditions that necessitate long-duration absences, but industry experts agree there is a **Culture of Absence** that can cause employees to remain out simply due to the fact that they are not engaged in the workforce. They may realize the benefits of not working, or they may simply become detached from their prior identities and, over time, lose the drive to become productive in the workforce. This is not necessarily fraudulent behavior, as many employees are not purposefully remaining out of work, but they lack the desire to return, which can exacerbate their circumstances and translate into emotional or physical ailments.

# HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

One way to manage time away from work is to promote – through plans, processes, and training, and communication – RTW initiatives. Establishing an RTW program, including stay-at-work (SAW) elements, demonstrates an organizational commitment to employees, while also prioritizing corporate goals and objectives.

**Develop a Formal RTW Program**

Any concerned supervisor and motivated employee can engage in RTW; no formal process is required. These ad hoc initiatives are beneficial for all parties involved, but they can create some inconsistencies in processes, which may be frustrating to employees and perhaps result in noncompliant interactions with employees or even legal implications. Without support, managers and supervisors cannot be expected to be aware of all federal and state requirements, and, therefore, they may innocently ask questions that may be inappropriate or forget to track cases in line with regulatory standards (e.g., state disability, family medical leave, etc.).

By developing a more structured program with an RTW focus, an organization can better manage its features. Expectations will be communicated, and all core parties (employees, supervisors, physicians, etc.) will know what is expected of them. Also, a formal process usually includes a provision for supplying physicians with details surrounding job requirements. This may translate into a greater comfort level for returning an employee to work with modifications or in a limited capacity.

Implementing an RTW program from scratch may be challenging because many organizations have *not* rigorously analyzed their causes and costs related to absence. Absent an established baseline, predicting or demonstrating savings can be difficult. Employers should study the experiences of industry peers or competitors to appreciate that their companies can replicate successes by other organizations if they install appropriate plans and processes. It is imperative that when considering implementing an RTW program, tracking is part of the overall solution. It is only through tracking the plans, processes, and outcomes (qualitative and quantitative) that results can be monitored and changes can be made to improve on the program over time.

## PROGRAM GOALS

Employers engage in an RTW program for many different reasons, including better management of the costs of benefits offered by their organization, creating a more employee-centric process, and supporting managers toward optimal productivity. The core RTW goals should be clearly defined at the outset, reassessing them on a regular basis. In some cases, they may be attained, and, therefore, more aggressive standards should be set. In other circumstances, goals may need to be modified if they no longer correspond to corporate need or if they have been set too high and require adjusting.

Although all program goals are important, the most common objective is reduced spending. Savings can be achieved through various mechanisms and incentives to establish and maintain an RTW program.

**At the outset, these may be difficult to quantify, but organizations achieve savings through:**

- Reduction in cost of absence (disability, workers compensation, etc.)
- Decrease in replacement worker expenses (training, recruitment, team worker effect, etc.)
- Decline in medical claim costs
- Reduction in litigation costs
- Earlier identification of fraudulent cases
- Increased awareness of injury prevention and safety protocols
- Improved employee morale, which may contribute to decreased turnover

If thoughtfully established, processes and plans represent a mutually beneficial solution for employees and employers. For employees, participating in an RTW program may assist in their recoveries. It typically allows them to begin working as they recover, which frequently translates into a feeling of physical and emotional growth. Absent employees, depending on their circumstances, may become disengaged from the workplace. At times, physical ailments may transition into emotional deterioration, resulting in longer recovery time.

# FINAL WORD

Successful return to work programs have benefits for both employees and employers, including an estimated $8-$10 dollars savings every $1 invested in such programs. Return to Work strategies and programs have traditionally been utilized to reduce workers’ compensation costs, however, these programs are more valuable now than ever for companies to save time, money and retain essential human capital.