

Disability management: return to work plans

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Introduction When an employee is injured and can no longer work, it can cost an organization both in lost time and compensation. What the organization does to aid the employee determines not only when the employee will return to work but also whether they will return at all. Workers often are hesitant to return to work due to various reasons; pain, fear of re-injury, prolonged activity, job performance anxiety, lack of communication, and job dissatisfaction. An organizations Return-to-Work (RTW) team is crucial in getting an injured employee back as quickly as possible. The Importance of Returning to Work It is important for the employee to return to work as quickly as possible. Returning to work helps the employee both financially and psychologically. An employee away from work for an extended period of time can lose their job skills and may feel alienated from their coworkers. People need to feel productive and like they are contributing to society, working is linked to self worth. The longer an injured employee is away from work the lower their self esteem can become. Another benefit of returning to work is that the employee will typically heal faster than an employee that remains at home. The length of time away from work also affects their likelihood of return. It is important for the organization to get injured employees back to work as quickly as possible. It affects not only the organizations bottom line but their culture as well. A speedy return to work also lowers the costs associated with injuries, minimizes the disruption, retains organizational knowledge and improves morale and employee relations. Facilitating the Return-to-Work Plan Contact the employee. The injured employee should be contacted by a member of the RTW Team within 24 hours of the injury. A quick response shows the employers concern for

their employees and sets the tone for future communication. Communicate with the Employee's Doctor. Establishing a working relationship with the employee's physician is critical to the RTW Plan. Most decisions made by the doctor in regards to returning to work are based on information they receive from the employee. Communicating with the doctor can help you clear up misconceptions about what the job actually entails, and show the organization's willingness to bring back the employee, on modified duties if necessary. This would be a good time to send the doctor a written job description that lists the job's essential functions, where it's performed and its physical requirements. Describing potential alternative task the employee could take on is very beneficial at this point. Communicate regularly with the employee. Regular communication with the employee can dramatically increase the chances that they will return to work. This will show the employee that their work really does care about them and they do want them to return to work. This can result in the employee feeling less unsure and stressed about returning to work. Regular communication also helps the RTW Team; they stay up to date on the recovery process. A member of the RTW Team should try and call once a week. They need to convey to the employee that they are missed and that the organization is willing to make accommodations that will speed their return. Always remain positive and friendly. Focus on Abilities not Disabilities. Many doctors will give the go-ahead for an employee to return to work with temporary restrictions while an injury is healing to do modified tasks. The RTW Team should discuss with both the employee and their doctor what activities they can perform.

Barriers to Return-to-Work There can be many barriers facing an employee

returning to work following an injury. The more of these barriers present the harder it is for the employee to return and the less likely that they will return at all. The Health Care Provider. Many times it can seem as if the health care provider is not cooperating with the return-to-work plan. Often this is caused by a lack of communication. It is vital to the health care provider used by the employee is properly educated/trained in managing disabilities and RTW's. The employer should request information regarding diagnosis, prognosis, treatment plan and the physical precautions to be used during the implementation of the RTW Plan. It is equally important that the health care provider be supplied with as much information about the RTW Plan as possible. Without specific information it is very difficult for a health care provider to help plan and provide information regarding the employees Mr. L's return to work, so that there is no resentment or malcontent. The Employee Occasionally the injured employee may not fully cooperate with the RTW Plan. Employee resistance sometimes is a result of fear. They may be afraid of re-injuring themselves or embarrassed to be seen by their coworkers as disabled or unable to do their job. The employer/RTW team needs to reassure the injured employee that their coworkers are looking forward to their return and that they will not be thought of as a 'lesser person'. The Plan Fails If the RTW is not well planned and executed for the individual it can fail. If the individualized RTW Plan is unsuccessful, accommodation needs must be assessed to see if they were sufficient for the worker to return to work effectively. All plans must be specific, realistic and attainable. The return to work process is dynamic and it may require several adjustments along the way. The RTW Team and Employee must be flexible

to make it work. Lack of Co-worker Support Managers and Supervisors must take the initiative in communicating the benefits of Return-To-Work Programs to all workers. Animosity towards returning an injured worker to the workplace can sabotage efforts. It is important to the process to allow co-worker support to openly discussing their concerns and to reinforcing the fact that a successful return to work will benefit everyone in the organization

Successful RTW If the RTW Plan was successful in this case Mr. L would return to work on modified duties and would eventually return to his normal position. The best way to evaluate the success of a RTW Plan is how quickly the injured employee returns to work. Conclusion The most important factor in a successful Return to Work Plan is communication. It is vital to communicate quickly and openly with all members of the team, the injured employee, and the doctor. The sooner the worker can return to work, even with modified duties the better. It helps the organization contain costs and maintain morale and helps the employee regain their life.