

Safety Resources from **KEMI**

Return to Work Program Suggested Guidelines for Employers

Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. The Return-To-Work Philosophy
- III. Establishing A Return-To-Work Program
- IV. Returning The Employee To Work

I. Introduction

Worker injury and illness are costly to employers and employees alike. The use of a safety program may be the most effective way for an employer to help prevent work-related injury and illness. An integral part of such a program is a return-to-work program. A return-to-work program may help employees return to work sooner following a work-related injury, improve communication between employer and employee and reduce the amount of financial resources expended during the claims process. Returning the employee to work as early as medically possible is cost effective and therapeutic and may help prevent reinjury.

An injured employee may not be able to return to work at full capacity right away. However, he may be able to return to work sooner if the employer can provide a restricted or light duty position that complies with the employee's medical restrictions. Often, these restrictions will allow the employee to work at a position less physically demanding than the one he was performing prior to his injury.

Ultimately, employers, employees and physicians want the injured employee to return to his original position as soon as possible. By using the steps outlined in this brochure, you can develop a return-to-work program that speeds the recovery process for your company and your employees.

II. The Return-To-Work Philosophy

Begin developing an effective return-to-work philosophy right away. Your company's philosophy will help you focus upon and commit to an effective process before an injury occurs. A company's return-to-work philosophy may include the following:

It's What an Employee Can Do That Counts

Focus on an employee's abilities, not disabilities. By recognizing a person's capabilities, you can easily identify alternative, productive work for that person.

Commitment to Total and Immediate Accommodation

Return employees to the workforce as soon as they are medically cleared to perform one of the company's transitional-duty jobs. Learn to see people as important resources, not expendable commodities.

Work is the Best Medicine

A positive self-image and hope for the future are critical to speedy recovery. Each day of dependency undermines self esteem. Once employees return to work, their frequency of medical treatment is often drastically reduced. Work can actually be therapeutic.

Workers Deserve an Active Safety and Health Process

Ensure your company has implemented sound health and safety procedures in all work processes. Recognize that accidents do happen, and be prepared with an action plan to provide prompt medical care and follow-up communication with injured employees.

III. Establishing A Return-To-Work Program

Consult Legal Counsel Regarding ADA Guidelines

Before developing a return-to-work philosophy and policy statement, familiarize yourself with legal issues concerning disabilities. A consultation with appropriate legal counsel regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is recommended. Understanding and complying with ADA regulations can help protect your company from potential legal action.

Create A Return-To-Work Policy Statement

A strong return-to-work policy statement should detail your company's commitment to maintaining safe operations. The statement should also reassure employees that if an incident occurs, the company will take immediate measures to provide access to medical care and provide an opportunity for employees to return to work as soon as medically feasible.

Once the statement is written, discuss it with employees and encourage feedback. Employee participation is a critical ingredient to an effective policy.

Consider these points when drafting your policy:

- Employees who sustain injury or illness will be treated with dignity and respect.
- The goal is to return employees to their original position as rapidly and efficiently as possible.
- The company will treat all injuries and illnesses as legitimate unless proven otherwise.

Establish A Program Through The Following Steps

Now that the policy statement is written, it is time to establish the return-to-work program. This process should incorporate the following five steps:

1. Organize the return-to-work team.
2. Conduct task analysis.
3. Develop alternative work assignments.
4. Educate all employees about the process.

These steps simply suggest a guideline for creating your program. Be sure to tailor this list as necessary to meet your company's particular needs.

STEP 1 Organize a Return-to-Work Team

Begin your return-to-work process by organizing a team of multi-disciplinary people from inside and outside your organization (e.g., employees, human resources staff, medical staff, a physician, a rehabilitation specialist, safety personnel, engineers, production staff). The size of your team will vary depending upon the size and function of your organization.

Assign each team member a specific role, or make it her responsibility to provide important information and support during the treatment and rehabilitation of injured employees. Consider assigning one person as "coordinator" or contact individual to head and direct the team.

Essential return-to-work team members include:

The Case Management Coordinator

The case manager coordinates and expedites recovery and return-to-productivity efforts through a proactive process directed at minimizing the impact of injury, illness or disease upon workers' capacities to perform their jobs. The coordinator maintains contact with the health care provider, the injured worker, the insurance company and the employer, while developing and maintaining record-keeping and reporting systems. The coordinator should have a thorough knowledge of workers' compensation laws as well as job tasks, production schedules and return-to-work options.

The Health Care Provider

This person must stay familiar with all operations at your facility to ensure the injured employee's physical limitations are stated in terms of job functions. The health care provider assesses the condition of injured employees, provides appropriate medical treatment and keeps the case management coordinator informed.

The Company's Management Representative

This person allocates resources to modify tasks or work sites, makes final arrangements for alternative work assignments and monitors the injured employee's progress. For unionized organizations, the union representative should also be included in this process.

The goal of your return-to-work team should be to stay involved in all aspects of case management and to provide optimal care, while remaining cost effective. The following are some case management guidelines:

- Provide access to prompt and appropriate medical treatment for the injured employee.
- Report the injury to KEMI immediately. Call the Claims Staff at 1-800-868-4553.
- Investigate the incident and modify the work environment and procedures as needed.
- Contact the injured employee's physician to discuss your return-to-work process and essential elements of the injured worker's current position. Also, request from the physician a target return-to-work date.

Once an employee is injured, no matter how severely, that employee should be contacted by the employer no more than 24 hours after the incident. The Workers' Compensation Research Institute found a 21 percent reduction in claims costs when a supervisor contacted the injured worker within the first 24 hours following an injury. This means that a representative of the company (e.g., owner, supervisor, co-worker) should contact the injured employee to find out how he is doing and to show that the company cares. This may mean a visit to the hospital or a simple phone call to the worker's home after a doctor's appointment. The representative should be able to explain any workers' compensation benefits to the employee. Contact should be maintained with the employee for the duration of the injury. (Be aware, however, that a worker represented by legal counsel may request that any communication be terminated or be directed to his attorney). Remind the employee that any restrictions the doctor may impose are not only work restrictions, but home restrictions as well.

Stay in contact with the employee's treating physician. Make it the representative's job to understand all restrictions and confirm any time restrictions (days, weeks or months). A physician's note that simply states an employee is released for "light duty" is incomplete. It is essential to send the physician a copy of the variety of transitional jobs available. Work with the physician on modifications and any time restrictions. Recognize that transitional duty is part of a process to bring the injured employee back to former strength and position. Always ensure that defined restrictions are never exceeded.

Return the injured employee to work as soon as possible. Begin with alternative work. Increase the injured employee's responsibilities as his abilities progress and he approaches the target date for full return.

Communication is Key

The success of your return-to-work process depends largely upon quality communication. Maintain the lines of communication between:

- Injured workers and their supervisors.
- Your company and the treating physician or therapist.
- Your workers' comp coordinator and KEMI.
- Your case manager and team coordinator.

The goal is to get injured employees back to work and feeling positive about recovery. Remember, however, that recovery periods vary. Returning an injured employee to work too soon might undermine recovery. If, however, you and the treating physician feel an employee is ready to return, but resists in doing so, you may contact KEMI for assistance in resolving the issue.

STEP 2

Conduct A Task Analysis

In the return-to-work process, task analysis serves two functions: The first is loss prevention, and the second is identifying alternative work assignments. You must analyze each job in the company and minimize or eliminate hazards that may cause injury or illness. Your task analysis will give you the information you need to match jobs to the capabilities of recovering employees.

First, write job descriptions that identify the requirements of each position. Get input from management and workers. This will help in determining if the injured employee is able to return to the regular assignment and will guide placement in other positions, if necessary.

Videotaping or taking photos of each task may be the best method of analysis because it creates a detailed, permanent record for measuring success. Videotapes and written job descriptions help physicians determine work readiness and possible restrictions. A written task analysis also documents your company's job positions and work site designs. A task analysis may help your company in the following ways:

- Pinpoint the root of unsafe conditions in the workplace.
- Prioritize workplace hazards so major problems can be addressed first.
- Make hazard prevention a part of new workplace design.
- Provide information to the return-to-work team and the physician treating the injured worker.

STEP 3

Develop Alternative Work Assignments

Use your completed task analysis to find jobs for returning injured employees. Alternative work activities are designed to accommodate an employee's limitations such as lifting, standing, walking or sitting restrictions. These activities could be a modified version of the employee's original job, the original job with reduced hours or a combination of tasks from other positions. Alternative work assignments should be limited only to the time the employee is under restriction. Avoid "make work" or menial tasks to ensure you maintain the injured worker's sense of work and the morale of your entire work unit.

To identify alternative work assignments, ask the following:

- What tasks are not being performed by anyone now?
- What tasks are being performed only occasionally?
- What tasks now being performed, if assigned to someone else, would enable completion of other tasks?

Again, communication is essential for success in assigning injured employees to alternative work activities. Be open with your entire staff and make sure co-workers understand the purpose of the injured employee's new assignment. Emphasize that all recovering employees will be given the same consideration.

Remember, always try to find meaningful, productive work for recovering employees. The best way to investigate your company's workplace hazards is to consult with management and employees.

If you have questions about safety at your workplace, contact the KEMI Loss Education Staff at 1-800-893-4751. We will send a representative to examine your problem areas and help determine what may work best for you.

STEP 4

Educate Everyone Regarding The Return-To-Work Program

Each person involved in returning injured workers to the workplace needs to fully understand the company's return-to-work policy and the functions served by the return-to-work team, task analysis, alternative work and loss prevention. This pertains not only to company supervisors and management, but also to outside consultants, such as physicians.

Educate Your Employees

Incorporate your return-to-work program into new employee orientation and provide ongoing training to veteran workers. Display posters in high access areas to remind workers of the policy. Include information about the process in your internal newsletter. Provide sensitivity training to help employees work with people who may have disabilities or restrictions. When an employee suffers a work-related injury, assist the employee through the workers' compensation process by helping complete workers' compensation paperwork and providing support to the injured employee's family.

Educate the Injured Employee's Treating Physician

Ensure the physician knows his role in the return-to-work process. Invite the physician to tour company facilities and discuss the philosophy, policies and goals of your return-to-work program. Provide her with a list of alternative assignment tasks.

Educate Your Supervisors

Supervisors must understand the concepts of task analysis and alternative work. Make sure they know the company's goals and procedures for implementing the return-to-work program. Knowledgeable supervisors provide the best opportunity to avoid obstacles in the implementation of this process.

IV. Returning the Employee to Work

Once you and the physician have agreed upon a transitional-duty job and its restrictions, the employee may return to work. If possible, place the employee in his own department so that he can be around familiar faces. Regardless of where the job is, however, make sure it is a meaningful one. Send the message that you value the employee's contribution to your business.

It is important to assign someone to supervise the employee's progress in the transitional-duty job. That person is to make sure the employee is following the doctor's restrictions. This supervisor should also be able to address any difficulties the employee may have (e.g., muscle soreness) and assist with follow-up appointments with the doctor, if needed.

Identifying transitional jobs, communicating with the injured employee and appropriate physicians, and assigning the employee to a transitional job are keys to having a healthy return-to-work program.

KEMI does not assume liability for the content of information contained herein. Safety and health remain your responsibility. This information is to be used for informational purposes only and not intended to be exhaustive or a substitute for proper training, supervision or manufacturers' instructions/recommendations. KEMI, by publication of this information, does not assume liability for damage or injury arising from reliance upon it. Compliance with this information is not a guarantee or warranty that you will be in conformity with any laws or regulations nor does it ensure the absolute safety of any person, place or object, including, but not limited to, you, your occupation, employees, customers or place of business.