

RETURNING AN INJURED EMPLOYEE TO WORK

Safety and training are the primary means of minimizing and reducing work injuries. After an injury has occurred, however, the primary way to reduce workers' compensation costs and provide benefits is by assisting the injured worker in return to work. Employers and employees should become familiar with the benefits they can each reap through a return-to-work approach.

Return to work can benefit everyone, but to reap the benefits you must plan ahead. Planning on return-to-work should start before the work injury. Larger employers have more flexibility and resources to implement a return-to-work program but even small employers can consider these suggestions:

1. Plan ahead: Start by figuring out what each of your positions physically requires. Determine the physical requirements of each job. Consider how much the worker needs to lift, carry, kneel, walk, stand or use both hands. It may take time to determine the physical requirements of each job. Ask your employees before an injury what is required of their jobs. Write it down and keep track of it and change it as the job changes.
2. Return-to-Work Committees: Many larger employers find that a committee can accomplish more than a single human resources member or shift manager. Consider staff members who can provide the necessary input and insight for each job or shift. The committee should come up with alternative light duty or alternative duty jobs for return to work possibilities.
3. Job modification: If work is not readily available for an injured employee, maybe a job can be modified so that the employee can return in a partial capacity. The goal is to return the injured worker to the pre-injury job, but that may not be possible right away. However, an injured worker may have valuable skills and experience that can be put to good use in a modified job, thereby benefitting both the employer and the employee.
4. Progressive return to work: A worker who has been injured is probably still recovering when they are first able to return to work. They may have activity restrictions or limits on the number of hours they can work each day. It is important to follow these restrictions. Asking a recovering employee to do too much too soon can cause a big setback for everyone and defeat the goal of return to work.
5. Communication: Returning an injured worker to a modified or temporary job requires good communication between the employer, the employee, the physician, the insurance adjuster, a vocational rehabilitation counselor and/or a return-to-work committee member. Everyone needs to have a clear understanding of the return to work strategy and should be prepared to modify or progress the plan as necessary.

