

Drivers: "Back on the road again"



TruckSure

By Trevor Toohill

There is a whole lot of chatter going around at the moment about WorkSafe and Health and Safety in the Workplace. All of which focuses on prevention of accidents and safety at work, with the "big stick" emphasis on fines and penalties.

But what about the accidents that do happen and dealing with the aftermath – getting the injured worker back into the workforce.

Reducing the recovery time for employees injured in a workplace accident should remain paramount to transport operators who continue to face increased ACC Levies, lost productivity, and driver retention pressure.

"A clearly defined return-to-work program helps injured employees manage their care and gets them re-engaged in a meaningful capacity as early as possible."

For trucking, which ranks among the top 10 most dangerous work environments, the correlation of intense physical labour/stress and an overweight/obesity rate of 89 percent greatly increases the likelihood of injury and serious illness.

Many companies are familiar with the basic elements of a Return to Work (RTW) plan: short-term modification of a work schedule or duties that align with doctors restrictions; modifications that are fluid-based on injury type, physical ability (or limitations), skills, and pre-injury responsibilities; and a progressive return to full duty.

While RTW may have some unique challenges for transportation, and a given program will take on a unique profile depending on the particular features and needs of the company, the principles that make a RTW program successful are the same – regardless of the industry.

So, beyond the nuts and bolts, what are the qualities that will make the plan compelling and meaningful? What will make RTW truly work for both employer and employee?

1. Communication: Both the messenger and the message are critical

The message must come from someone within the company who is well informed about the program's content, policies and procedures, can relate its value to employees, and will actively oversee the program.

2. Creativity: Be open to the possibilities

The key is recognizing the value an injured worker can add to the organization, finding the right fit within an employee's specific work restrictions and getting that person re-engaged as soon as possible.

3. Culture: A supportive environment is essential

A company can have an expertly designed program that looks impressive on paper, but without a culture that values support for injured workers and embraces their return to the workplace

it cannot be successful. Employees believe what they have seen. How have other injured employees been treated? Do the employer's actions match the RTW Plan? Injured workers need to feel good about their future and know they're going to make it.

4. Tips for return-to-work success

a) Have a plan, not just a "policy"

A RTW plan can be as simple or sophisticated as a company wants or needs but it must go beyond written policy and procedure to include committed resources for executing and managing it on an ongoing basis.

b) Post injury management starts at the date of hire

Beginning "day one" companies need to provide an orientation to their RTW plan. This plan should set expectations, educate employees about the importance of early return, identify available support and clearly outline steps to follow in the event of injury, including the timetable for reporting.

c) Assign a dedicated injury counsellor

This "go-to" manager provides a single, consistent point of contact who communicates with injured employees on a weekly basis and coordinates all aspects of post injury management among doctors, ACC supervisors, and managers.

d) Fairness is key

Employees need to feel that they are treated with respect, receive accurate, consistent information and have a voice in the process.

Did you know?

- The case for "RETURN TO WORK"
- Injured workers who fail to return to work within 90 days of an injury have less than a 50 percent chance of ever coming back. After 120 days, there is less than a 10 percent chance that the employee will return to work for any company. Yet, a worker who is back by week three has a 97 percent chance of successfully returning to a full-function work capacity.
- Employees with work related illnesses/injuries who were satisfied with employer treatment returned to work in 63.5 days compared to 125.8 days for dissatisfied employees.

With costs surrounding workplace injuries continuing to rise, transportation employers, large and small, should consider putting in place a well-defined and practical RETURN TO WORK plan. The plan does not need to be complicated in order to be effective. Focusing on the fundamental drivers, communication, creativity and culture, is the key to a RTW program that works well for both employers and employees.

Beyond the positive financial impact, a well-designed plan will improve employee morale, strengthen employer/employee relationships, encourage a more supportive company culture and help reinforce a commitment to greater worker health and wellness – all contributing to a more favourable transportation work environment.

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