

A Snapshot in Safety and Risk

Transition Duty Program: 5 Key Tips to Consider

Temporary disability payments to injured workers make up a significant percentage of workers' compensation costs. Reducing temporary disability costs associated with lost workdays can benefit organizations by:

- Positively impacting experience modification factor
- Reducing payments to injured employees (in the form of workers' compensation benefits)
- Improving injury recovery time
- Reducing costs associated with exaggerated claims
- Lessening injured party's effort to seek legal counsel

The information that follows will provide the reader guidance on how to implement a successful return to work or transitional duty program to help optimize post-accident workers' compensation claims costs.

1. Evaluating Your Need for a Return to Work—Establish Metrics

Developing a return-to-work program can require input and collaboration from a variety of resources including safety and claims professionals, occupational medical providers, operations managers, finance, employer nurses and doctors, and human resources. It is critical that you obtain executive management support as middle managers often see transitional duty programs as an inconvenience and will not support your effort without an executive sponsor or support. Employees have also known to lack buy-in and not support such programs as they resent employees that are given lesser duties because of an occupational injury.

Obtaining metrics and understanding workers' compensation performance can be instrumental in gaining senior management support. Basic metrics that you may consider tracking include:

- Number of days lost due to occupational injury and/or illness
- Temporary disability payments resulting from lost time incidents
- Cost of overtime worked
- Impact on OSHA recording (Days Away Restricted or Transferred (DART) and Lost Workday Incidence Rate (LWIR))

The information you uncover will help determine the need and level of policy or program you strive to implement. The point is this. Do your homework by identifying the need for a program,

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A Snapshot in Safety and Risk

while understanding the impact that an absent program has on the organization and potential barriers before spending time creating and attempting to implement your return-to-work program.

2. Budgeting

Understanding how you will fund a RTW program can be critical to success. You can use different methods to incentivize management's compliance with the program. Some organizations look at historical information and establish a pool to pay for payroll so as not to impact departmental payroll budgets and encourage compliance. Your goal should be to understand the return on investment for running a successful program. Keep in mind, some benefits to a successfully run program are not monetary and it can be difficult to measure due to a variety of variables.

3. Developing a Program Outline

Once you have understood your lost workday trends, identified desirable metrics, established a budget, and gained executive support, you can begin developing your program. Key elements to consider as you develop your RTW program include the following:

- Policy statement
- RTW process
- Defined program responsibilities for all levels of employment
- Written job descriptions for full time equivalent descriptions
- List of potentially "productive" RTW positions
- Budget for RTW placement
- Case management
- Documentation

4. Involving Your Occupational Clinic

It is imperative that risk managers work closely with their occupational clinic or medical provider to ensure that they understand the organization's RTW philosophy, work activities, and desire that everyone comes back to their position when they are physically capable. The goal should be short transitions, restriction and/or transfer. State labor laws may differ, but you can establish caps within HR policies to avoid extended periods of time on restricted duty. Once again, this is a discussion that should take place with your legal counsel and involve HR.

A Snapshot in Safety and Risk

Inviting your occupational medical provider to visit your site and observe work activities can help ensure that your medical provider(s) have everyone's best interest in mind. Their first goal should be to provide quality medical care for your injured employees. Return-to-work programs can influence quality medical care as studies show employees in RTW programs experience faster recovery times. This is a win-win for the employer and employee.

5. Shifting Your Focus

Another ideal regarding RTW programs is to shift from restriction to capabilities. Statements indicating employee capabilities versus restriction can be matched with one or more positions.

Consider working with a charitable organization as part of your RTW strategy. Many employers have worked with charitable organizations as they feel they have limited restricted duty opportunities. Claims teams can work with the employer and organization to decide on the best approach. Essentially the charity receives the benefit of a worker while the employer pays the employee wage. This gives the employee meaningful work, which achieves the greater goal.

There are many ways to address your RTW program from informal yet purposeful for organizations that have limited need for a program to very structured and formal for organizations with high lost workday trends. Great gains can be made to drastically reduce lost workdays, reduce claims cost, improve rates of absenteeism and production. Contact Tribal First at riskcontrol@tribalfirst.com if you would like assistance evaluating your need and guidance on developing a program that suits your organization.