

# **Introduction to Return to Work Programs**

## **What is a Return to Work Program?**

A return to work (RTW) program is a company-wide program that outlines the policy, processes, and procedures that will be used to help a worker safely return to work following an injury or illness. Ideally a RTW program should link with an employer's health and safety program.

A RTW program that is communicated to everyone in the workplace ensures that everyone knows what is expected of them if they are injured or become ill. Knowing their responsibilities prepares workers to work together with their manager/supervisor to plan an early and safe return to work.

## **What are the goals of a RTW program?**

The goal of a RTW program is to provide a healthy and safe workplace that injured and ill workers can return to following an absence from work. A successful RTW program can:

- Reduce the number of days lost to injury, illness and disability
- Reduce costs for injury, illness and disability
- Help workers return to suitable and productive work
- Prevent further injury or illness to all workers
- Make everyone more aware of disability issues.

## **Developing a Return to Work (RTW) Program**

Return to Work (RTW) needs to have its own policy and procedures. These should be supported by and linked to the company's health and safety policy and procedures.

It's important to have a RTW program in place before an injury or illness occurs. It helps to promote better communication among workers, their supervisors and the employer and to increase the opportunities for safe, timely and sustainable return to work.

Many companies already have disability management or RTW programs in place. The following eight steps can help an employer to improve an existing RTW program or to develop a new program. The information is based on key principles for successful RTW found in current research and evidence. It's not necessary to complete the steps in the order outlined below. An employer may find that some steps have already been completed and they want to now complete other steps in order to improve the program or fill in gaps.

### ***Step 1 – Commit to health and safety and co-ordinated RTW***

The best thing an employer can do to show their workers that they are committed to health and safety and RTW is to provide resources and include disability management in their business planning. Resources include a commitment of money and people's time to develop, implement and manage your RTW program. This step is about promoting a workplace culture where health and safety, and RTW following an injury/illness are good business practices.

## **Introduction to Return to Work Programs**

### ***Step 2 – Form a RTW committee***

A RTW committee should be formed to develop the program. This committee may also oversee the program once it has been implemented. The RTW committee should have representation from both management and labour (the union or worker representatives from the workplace). Experience shows that RTW programs that are developed jointly are more successful. Both parties can see the value and benefits of having a program when they have been involved in its development and implementation.

Committees can look different in different workplaces. In a smaller workplace a committee may only have two people, one representing workers and one representing management. They may also be responsible for health and safety. In a larger company, there may be a RTW committee in addition to a joint health and safety committee. There may also be a steering or advisory committee. Consider what would work best in the company.

Selecting the right people for the committee is important. These individuals should:

- Have knowledge of labour and occupational issues
- Have an understanding of the challenges experienced by people with disabilities
- Have the respect of workers in the workplace
- Be perceived as unbiased.

The RTW committee will be involved in developing and implementing the RTW program. If a RTW program already exists, a committee can review and improve it.

### ***Step 3 – Select a RTW Co-ordinator***

This individual is responsible for co-ordinating RTW activities for workers who may have a disability as a result of an injury/illness. The company can designate an individual in the workplace to carry out this function. Depending on the size of the company, this role may be a part-time or full-time responsibility. It may also be shared by members of the RTW committee. The important thing is to have a designated person or group that is responsible for RTW activities.

A RTW co-ordinator should:

- Have the authority, time and resources to co-ordinate RTW
- Have good interpersonal and communication skills
- Be knowledgeable about your workplace
- Have the respect of both management and labour
- Have knowledge of best practices in RTW.

### ***Step 4 - Assess the needs of the workplace***

A needs assessment should be conducted to assist in developing a new program or to identify gaps in an existing RTW program.

A needs assessment can help to:

- determine what structure is needed for the program
- determine the policies and procedures that are required for the specific RTW program (if there are already policies and procedures in place, the needs assessment can help the company to review them).

## **Introduction to Return to Work Programs**

Some of the basic requirements of a needs assessment are to:

- Identify the workplace's attitudes towards RTW. Interviews, surveys and other methods can be used to gather information from workers.
- Identify resources within the company that are presently available for RTW. This includes internal resources, such as an occupational nurse or health and safety committee members, and external resources such as, the WSIB, private insurance providers, and health and safety associations.
- Look at the types of assistance that are currently available to workers who are injured or ill and determine whether they are adequate. For example, does the company offer an employee assistance program to assist workers and their family?

Once the needs assessment is completed, the company can determine what they need to develop and implement the program.

Data can also be gathered at this time to help define the company's injury profile and assess the value of the RTW program. Data that should be looked at includes:

- The types of injuries in the workplace and their causes
- The length of absences
- The direct costs such as insurance premiums or hiring replacement workers
- The indirect costs such as loss of productivity or training workers in job duties
- Injury and illness trends within the company.

### ***Step 5 – Develop RTW policy and procedures***

Written RTW policy and procedures are important as they provide information to everyone on how RTW will happen following an injury/illness. They demonstrate to workers that the company has complied with legislation such as re-employment obligations and human rights. They also help to ensure that all workers are treated fairly and consistently when returning to work.

A RTW policy and procedures manual should include the following:

- A policy statement that confirms the company's commitment to the RTW program
- The goals and objectives of the program
- The criteria for who is eligible to participate in the program
- Written procedures that explain, step-by-step, what will happen from the time of an injury/ill to the time the worker returns to work
- Roles and responsibilities for the employer, worker, health professional and others, such as the worker's supervisor, who may be involved in the RTW process
- Details about how the program will work.
- A process for resolving disputes
- A method to evaluate how well the program is working
- Copies of forms that will be used in the RTW process.

## **Introduction to Return to Work Programs**

### ***Step 6 – Identify essential duties and physical demands for each job in the workplace***

Collecting information on the essential duties or tasks for jobs in the workplace is an important part of setting up a RTW program. “Essential” refers to duties or tasks that are necessary or required for the worker to perform his/her job. Identifying these tasks or duties allows the company to identify the demands of specific jobs. It also helps to plan return to work if the demands of a job can be compared to the capabilities or functional abilities of the worker.

A job task analysis can be completed by anyone in the workplace as long as they have received some training in job task analyses and can complete the job task forms. Job task analyses can also be completed by professionals such as occupational therapists or occupational health nurses. It is important to involve workers in their own job task analysis as they are often the most familiar with the demands of their job.

In general the following information is collected for each job:

- Hours worked per day/per week
- The essential job duties
- Hazards the worker may be exposed to, and any protective equipment required
- Equipment, tools and materials required or handled
- The physical demands of the job including the frequency and duration of the physical activities (for example, lifting, bending, standing, sitting and walking)
- Any accommodation options that may be available

### ***Step 7 – Market the RTW program through communication and education***

A critical part of any successful RTW program is communicating the program to everyone in the workplace. Ideally, everyone should know about the program before an injury or illness occurs.

Internally, this means that all management, supervisors, workers and unions (if applicable) need to know that the program exists, the benefits of the program and their role in making it a success. There are many ways to inform everyone in the workplace about the program. Consider using e-mail, the company intranet, memos or newsletters, bulletin boards, and meetings with managers, workers and unions.

Developing and distributing an information package and/or providing education sessions to everyone in the company can be effective ways to market the program. An information package can include the following information:

- Benefits of the program for both the employer and workers
- The RTW process including what the worker can expect during the process and who to contact during an absence. A diagram or workflow showing the steps in the process is also useful.

## **Introduction to Return to Work Programs**

- Assistance that can be provided during the worker's absence and upon their return to work
- The roles and responsibilities of everyone in the process
- Required documentation for RTW.

It is also a good idea to train supervisors in the areas of work disability prevention and RTW planning including ergonomics and accommodations. Studies have found that supervisors are important to the success of RTW due to their proximity to the worker and their ability to manage the immediate RTW work environment (Institute for Work and Health). Providing supervisors with the skills required to have positive relationships with their workers is important for a successful RTW outcome.

Externally, the program needs to be communicated to the health care community. They should know that the company has a RTW program and will work with them throughout the worker's recovery to provide work that fits their abilities.

An information package for the health care community could include:

- Benefits of the program
- Sample letter to health professionals
- A Functional Abilities Form
- A Physical Demands Information Form
- Standard restrictions for jobs in the workplace.

The WSIB and any other insurer should also know if the company has a RTW program. They should also have the names of key contacts in the company for RTW.

Communication and education should be done as soon as the program is developed. Everyone should know what they need to do if someone in the workplace becomes disabled *before* it happens. Education is especially important for managers or supervisors as they play an important role in helping the worker who is injured or ill return to work.

### ***Step 8 – Evaluate and improve your RTW program***

A RTW program should be evaluated at least once a year. An evaluation will allow the company to know if:

- the program is working
- the program can be improved
- the program has demonstrated value to the company and its workers .

The evaluation can provide valuable information regarding:

- If the company is meeting the objectives set out in the program. For example, was there a decrease in the number of days lost to injury or illness? Did the program comply with all legislation? How many permanent accommodations were made? How many RTW plans met their goal, or did not?

## **Introduction to Return to Work Programs**

- How well the process is working. For example, did the manager or supervisor contact the worker following the injury or illness? What was the length of time between the injury/illness and the first contact with the worker?
- How satisfied workers are with the program. For example, did the worker feel that the program met their needs?

Once the evaluation is complete, the company should compare the results to previous years to see how they're doing and use the results of the evaluation to improve the program. This is part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement. It includes keeping what is working well, and making changes to the parts of the program that are not working as well as they should be.

Keeping everyone in the company informed of the results of the evaluation is also an important part of an evaluation. This helps to ensure that everyone continues to have the latest information on the program.