Return to work

Collaborative return-to-work planning: developing a suitable return-to-work plan

Effective return-to-work planning requires collaboration of all partners — the worker, the employer, the Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) and the health-care provider, as needed. A collaborative return-to-work discussion should take place as early as possible after the injury, either by phone call or a meeting. In these calls or meetings, the WCB may facilitate to ensure the worker and employer are engaged in the discussion about return to work and ideas are elicited from both partners regarding what the return to work could look like.

Ensuring that the worker is actively engaged in the return-to-work discussion, including input on potential modified/alternative work, in addition to jobs or tasks identified by the employer, can be critical to gaining their trust and respect, along with making it easy for the health-care provider to approve the return-to-work plan. After all, the worker knows the day-to-day work better than anyone. Any issues or concerns the worker may have can also be addressed at the planning stage.

The worker's medical abilities and restrictions may be partially known, fully known or not be known at all during the initial planning stage. The purpose is to open the conversation and hopefully agree to a plan between the worker and the employer. If there are questions about the medical suitability of any plan, the health-care provider can be engaged to confirm that there are no medical contraindications or risks of harm to the plan.

A return-to-work plan should proactively support the worker to return to productive employment in a timely and safe manner:

- Many workers can safely perform productive and meaningful work while they recover.
- Returning to work benefits the worker and is an important part of the recovery process.
- People who stay connected to the workplace after an injury usually recover more quickly.

The ultimate goal of return-to-work planning is to return the worker to the job they held before their injury. When the worker can return to their routines, the employer, the worker and their co-workers benefit. When this is not possible, other alternatives should be considered.

When considering modified work for a worker's return-to-work plan, these priorities should be followed:

1. Worker's pre-injury job with modifications.
2. Alternate job, no modifications.
3. Alternate job, with modifications.
4. Re-bundled work tasks (alternate and/or modified) from across the workplace.

Modified work involves work duties or tasks, which may or may not be associated with a worker's pre-injury job, that have been changed or modified to accommodate the worker's medical abilities so that they may safely return to work. Modifications of work can include, but are not limited to, job tasks and functions, changes to the work area and environment, work hours and tools and equipment used.

Modified work must be:

- Within the physical abilities and skills of the worker.
- Safe. In other words, modified work should not endanger the worker's recovery or the safety of others.
- Productive. Duties should be meaningful to the organization.

Re-bundling means assigning the worker tasks from their pre-injury job position, work unit/department and/or from jobs across the workplace that are within their medical abilities. The redistribution of work must not create unsafe conditions for any worker.

Graduated return to work is the gradual increase of a worker's work hours and/or work activities, until the worker can return to full hours and duties. Graduated return to work may involve job tasks from the worker's pre-injury job or alternate work from other positions within the place of employment (temporary re-bundling).

- A graduated return to work may be required in situations where the worker is able to perform all their pre-injury job tasks, but lacks endurance or is in a treatment program. In such situations, it is usually the hours worked that are adjusted.
- If a worker cannot safely perform certain pre-injury job tasks, a graduated return-to-work plan may be limited to work tasks that the worker can perform safely and gradually add more tasks as they recover.
- Graduated return to work may also be a combination of modified hours and tasks.

Potential modifications to methods or equipment to enable a worker to perform tasks:

- A portable hoist/crane to lift objects, rather than manually.
- A team member or buddy to assist with lifting.
- Break heavy loads into smaller ones (changing a 50-lb lift into two 25-lb lifts).
- A trolley to transport materials, rather than manually.
- Rotation through a variety of tasks.
- Conduct work from a seated, rather than standing, position.

- Cordless headset.
- Wheeled laptop bag.
- Chair with adjustable lumbar support.
- Adjustable workstation.
- Tools requiring less physical force to operate.
- Tools with ergonomically designed handles.
- Localized heating source to raise room temperature.
- Scent-free workplace.
- Work-from-home option.
- Flexible work hours.
- Additional rest breaks.
- Conduct work from an alternate facility/location.

Additional task opportunities suitable for return to work

- Training and/or refresher courses that may be required in the near future or skill building for existing and future positions.
- Any type of value-added work that contributes to the employer's goals and objectives.
- Tasks that have been deferred for other priorities, such as document management and storage, inventory control or customer surveys.
- Support other areas that need to complete deferred tasks that are not aligned with the worker's abilities. Support may include telephone duties, responding to customer enquiries, etc.