

Safety Seconds

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Getting Returns from Your Return-to-Work Program

Return-to-work, light duty, return-to-duty, return-to-wellness and transitional duty are all basically the same thing. They are programs designed to bring injured workers back in a modified capacity following a work injury. Return-to-work programs are your second biggest weapon in the fight against worker compensation costs. Of course, the number one tool is preventing injuries before they happen.

If you think you are doing yourself a favor by not offering an injured worker light duty, you are wrong in most cases. You may be in a situation where you are looking for a reason to excuse a trouble making employee, or maybe you don't want an injured worker to influence your good workers. Perhaps you just don't want to spend the money to have someone shred paper and clean toilets all day. Unfortunately, in all of these cases failing to provide light duty work is one of the worse things you can do.

The best advice I can give anyone is to make your return-to-work program work for you. So here are a few recommendations on how to do just that:

- 1.) Identify light duty work prior to having an injury. As the old adage goes, if you fail to prepare, you are preparing to fail. Look at the items that get pushed to the bottom of the to-do list. A light duty employee can work on patching holes and painting without much help or effort in many cases. Select a few positions for which you would like to cross train some employees. A light duty person can train to do this job while being observed at the tasks outside of their restrictions and do what is within their capabilities. Establish a stockpile of tasks from which you can pull in the event of an injury without having to think twice.
- 2.) Write down the specifics of the light duty job. Break down the job into small tasks so that anyone who reads the description can understand the job. Items that might be helpful to have in the description may include: weights, frequency, duration, pictures and any special accommodations that can be made to make the job easier.
- 3.) Communicate with your panel providers, the medical group you have designated to work with employees. If you can, invite the entire list of panel providers to tour your facility. During the tour, be sure to focus on potential light duty jobs, emphasize the fact that you are willing to accommodate restrictions and let the providers know that you would like to communicate with them prior to an injured worker being put off work.
- 4.) Consider the light duty as an opportunity for a learning experience. Change the focus from the consequences of an injury to preventing the injury from happening to someone else. For example: perhaps the worker was injured by a slip, trip or fall. As a light duty job, this injured worker could spend their day doing shoe audits, sweeping floors and making sure aisle ways are clear. Or maybe an employee amputated a finger when they forgot to lock and tagout a machine. Send them around to write or re-write your lockout/tagout procedures. Basically, they were injured. But, let's take their focus off the injury and have them focus on how to make the workplace safer so it doesn't happen again.

The workers compensation system is frustrating; there is no question about it. We need to use and maximize any tools this system gives us. The most powerful and flexible tool is your return-to-work program. To use this tool even more effectively, make it work for you by helping to improve your safety program and prevent injuries from happening. This truly is the best way to get a return on your return- to-work program.