

5 Ways to Get Workers Back on the Job Safely and Swiftly

A strong return-to-work plan is key to any workers' compensation program. Here are five strategies that have proven results in getting workers back on their feet we read in Courtney DuChene's September 2019 article in [Risk & Insurance](#).

1) Use Biopsychosocial Techniques to Identify High Risk Claims from the Beginning

The biopsychosocial model of care prioritizes seeing the whole picture of a work-related injury, and it's working.

Biopsychosocial methods have been used to reduce dependency on addictive medications, such as opioids, within the workers' compensation industry. They've also been hailed as a method for keeping patient's psychological needs at the forefront of care.

The biopsychosocial model also tends towards a positive return on investment, because focusing on the whole person can help doctors and case managers to identify which claims are high risk. The 2019 NWCDC features the session "Getting Injured Employees Back to Work Using Biopsychosocial Techniques," which aims to help attendees understand how to use biopsychosocial techniques to identify and intervene in high risk claims. "Injured worker psychosocial characteristics can compound complex medical conditions and create recovery barriers that impact claims outcomes," according to the session description.

"Learning up front which claims are at high risk allows claims payers to effectively intervene early and allocate appropriate resources."

2) Direct Injured Workers to Top Performing Providers

When it comes to medical care, injured workers often are not receiving the best care possible.

Less than 20% of work-related injuries are treated by the best-provider in their network, Genex reports, and few workers' compensation fee schedules are capable of covering the costs of top-tier treatment.

Making sure workers receive top-tier care can have a huge impact on their ability to return to work, however.

One way employers can ensure that injured workers have access to the best possible care is to create partnerships with health care centers of excellence, which are innovative treatment facilities that often focus on a specific type of injury.

"Centers of excellence are a different way of looking at treatment," Bijan Bijarchi, vice president, corporate accounts, York Risk told *Risk & Insurance*. "We want to help demonstrate to our industry peers that we view claims as more than just 'an injured worker receiving medical treatment' without considering all of the other factors in that person's environment, particularly when the treatment plan doesn't appear to be progressing successfully."

If centers of excellence aren't an option for whatever reason, employers can still work to ensure that their employees receive the best care possible by helping them connect with top-quality providers that are in-network.

3) Monitor Worker Fatigue on Modified Duty

Modified and light duty programs have become a staple of many successful return-to-work programs, and it's easy to see why they've been so successful: They allow employers to save money by getting injured workers back on the job, and workers often recover sooner because of the sense of purpose returning to work gives them.

"There is no greater catastrophic event for the injured workers than the loss of a job," said Bill Zachary, a senior fellow within Sedgwick. "And so, knowing that, the reinforcement of the importance of this as a process, the importance of providing light modified duty and the impact it will have on both the cost of claims and on the injured workers is extraordinary."

While modified duty programs have many benefits, they can also lead to more injuries if the injured worker isn't properly rested before returning to the job.

Worker fatigue costs employers between \$1,200 and \$3,100 per employee annually, according to the National Safety Council, and employees who are recovering from an injury aren't the only workers affected. Anyone from a parent with a crying infant to someone who took an allergy medication that makes them drowsy could be affected. But injured workers returning on light duty could be at particularly high risk.

Prescription pain medications they may be taking to manage the pain from their injury can put them at an increased risk of fatigue and some of the easier tasks they're able to perform on light duty can be repetitive, which can cause already tired workers to tune out.

Concerns about fatigue shouldn't prevent employers from bringing injured workers back on light duty, however. Plenty of strategies from stretch breaks to rotating job duties can help keep workers alert.

Instead, employers should consider fatigue alongside their return to work and safety programs, something that the 2019 NWCDC breakout session "Getting Injured Workers Back on the Job Rested and Safe" will cover extensively this November.

4) Injury Specific Care and Goals Beyond Return to Work

As the biopsychosocial model demonstrates, seeing an injured worker as a whole person and focusing on the specifics of their injury is key. This includes recognizing an injured worker has a life and goals outside of the workplace.

For nurse case manager Linda Kenavey, network manager, Paradigm, this meant helping one injured get off opiates and through a physical therapy program that helped him regain his ability to walk his dog twice a day.

"He was invigorated when he was discharged from the program and able to walk his dog twice daily, sometimes two miles at a time without distress," she said.

Having personal goals, as well as the goal of returning to work, can make workers more determined to recover from an injury.

But determination can't always help an injured worker if they're not receiving injury-specific and evidence-based care. Employers and case managers need to advocate for injured workers to receive the best care possible in order to ensure quick and proper recovery.

5) Clear Communication is Key

Getting an injured worker back on the job is a team effort, so employers should ensure there is open and upfront communication between the injured worker, their case manager and their doctors throughout the process.

Part of fostering open communication is making sure your company has a formal, written return to work policy. "Many companies haven't fully thought out — let alone communicated, what they want and expect when it comes to returning to work," according to this Genex report. It's also important to draft job descriptions to help doctors understand what the injured worker does from day-to-day and to have clear policies that help medical professionals develop safe return to work recommendations.

Effective communication doesn't just occur before an injury, however. It's important that everything from how the workers' compensation process works to what a case manager does is explained to the injured worker from the beginning to ensure that they can get back to work quickly and safely.