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Risk Control Best Practices: Guide to Developing a Return to Work Program

Injuries will happen on the job. It's important, therefore, to develop a comprehensive policy on how to handle work-related injuries, with the aim of bringing the affected employee back to productive work in an optimal timeframe – but not before they are ready. The goal is to create an open and non-confrontational workers' compensation claim environment.

A return to work program is an essential part of your safety and accident prevention plan. It begins with hiring and screening your employees, identifying modified tasks with supervisors prior to injuries occurring and communicating your plan to supervisors so that you are prepared to accommodate an injured employee as soon as they are ready to come back to work. It can not only save a lot of money on workers' compensation claims but help with the affected employees morale by letting them know their employer is supportive in their recovery and values their contributions.

Consider the following when developing a formal return to work program.

Ensure Your Job Descriptions Are Accurate And Up To Date

An effective return to work program begins with the hiring process.

- Job descriptions should be reviewed annually with the appropriate supervisors to ensure it accounts for any new tasks and equipment that is required of employees.
- Be as detailed as possible with the physical requirements of the position to assist the medical provider in determining if an employee can complete the required tasks.
- Ensure that the job descriptions are realistic and account for not just the day to day activities, but those that may come up in emergencies. For example, snow plowing for extended periods of time during storms and heavy snow shoveling.
- Ensure job descriptions are compliant with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Hiring/Post Offer Screening

- Screen your employees by providing pre-employment physicals to ensure they can complete all tasks required of them.
- Provide your medical provider with current job descriptions prior to the pre-employment physical
- Establish a relationship with a medical provider that is aware of your various operations and requirements.
- Review any concerning issues with the medical provider to ensure you understand the facts prior to making a decision on employment.

Develop a Modified Duty List

By being prepared with a list of modified duties you can avoid last minute operational adjustments and the perception that you are creating a job for an injured worker. This process enables your supervisors to be prepared, avoid resentment from co-workers and stay as productive as possible while your employee is injured.

- Work with department supervisors to create a list of tasks that can be completed but that may be accomplished with lifting/standing/twisting restrictions.
- Keep the tasks productive and impactful to the department as much as possible. Limit administrative work if possible. Focus on tasks that will help improve the department. These tasks are more likely to motivate an injured employee.
- As an example, sample tasks for DPW could include, GIS marking, road/sidewalk inspections, tree risk assessments, parts inventory and organization.



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Training Your Staff

- Ensure as part of your annual staff training and employee handbook updates that you remind all employees of their responsibility to report any injuries in a timely manner, preferably by the end of the day.
- Train all supervisory staff on their responsibilities post-accident. Including completing all necessary administrative paperwork and conducting an accident investigation.
- Remind your supervisors of the need to check in with the injured employee regularly to ensure they are meeting their restrictions.
- Review any salary supplementation benefits and rules with your staff as well as any paperwork that is required to be completed to ensure the employee is properly compensated.

Post Injury

Maintain Employee Contact

- Connect weekly with the employee during the recovery process
- Get updates from the employee and physician as often as possible
- Demonstrate empathy for the employee's well-being. Keep in mind that although there can always be exceptions, most employees are motivated to come back to work in a timely manner and want to contribute. Sometimes being injured not only affects their work but can affect their home life as well by limiting their ability to do work around the house or play with their kids.

Make A Written Modified Duty Agreement

- Provide a written modified duty agreement between the supervisor and the employee that outlines:
 - The tasks that will be expected to be completed
 - A review of the restrictions provided by the treating physician
 - The check in dates where the agreement can be modified based on reduced restrictions as well as the target end date of the agreement.
- Frequent contact will help determine the employees progress toward return to work

Monitor progress

- Document all conversations regarding work restrictions with the employee.
- Conduct regular follow-ups with the injured employee
- Communicate progress with the treating physician
- Follow up with physician on return-to-work timetable
- If you are diligent with monitoring this program, the employee will be diligent about complying with it and returning to work as soon as possible.

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