

Transitional Duties in Return-to-Work Programs



Identifying alternative or modified duties within your Return-to-Work program can ease the transition back to work and cultivate a supportive work environment for your DSP staff

When an employee experiences an injury or illness and is off of work for an extended period of time, their eventual return to the workplace has the potential to create challenges. Return-To-Work (RTW) programs can help ensure a smooth and successful transition by supporting the returning team member as well as the larger team as they reintegrate into the work environment.

These programs may entail having an injured employee return to work with shortened hours, lighter workloads or different tasks (also known as transitional duties) as they continue to recover from their occupational injury or illness.

RTW programs offer several benefits, allowing you, the employer, to keep workers' compensation costs under control while giving injured employees the opportunity to resume working even when they aren't ready to take on their original job duties.

RTW programs can also enable employers to limit staff turnover, maintain productivity, boost morale and reduce litigation risks, all while helping injured DSP employees retain their job skills, uphold workplace connections, minimize financial challenges and keep a healthier mindset during the recovery process. Identifying transitional duties can help ease RTW.

Alternative Duties

Alternative Duties pertains to an injured employee being temporarily placed into an existing position within your DSP organization, where it is less physically demanding than their original role.

Examples of alternative duties

Clerical tasks—This may entail answering phone calls and emails, filling out documentation, making copies, addressing letters and packages, ordering inventory and sorting supplies. Helping out with delivery routes.

Safety tasks—Such responsibilities may involve training new workers, updating safety resources and records to ensure compliance with applicable requirements (e.g., OSHA standards), conducting job site inspections and analyses.

Maintenance tasks—This may entail performing light housekeeping tasks, inspecting vehicles and equipment for possible issues, and repairing damaged parts as needed.

Alternative duties generally make the most sense for employees whose original roles involved more strenuous activities and manual labor (e.g., heavy lifting and material handling). Thus, these DSP workers are better suited to office work and administrative tasks during recovery.

Modified Duties

Modified Duties refers to an injured employee resuming their original job role, only with certain elements of the position removed or otherwise adjusted to comply with the worker's current physical limitations.

For example, a DSP employee recovering from an occupational back strain or shoulder sprain may be permitted to perform the majority of their job duties (e.g., loading van/trucks and making heavy deliveries) but with slight alterations to specific tasks (e.g., only lifting boxes under 30 pounds or lifting packages above shoulders).

On the other hand, this may simply involve an injured employee returning to their original position but with a shortened workday. For instance, an employee recovering from a minor occupational hand injury may work four-hour shifts instead of their usual eight-hour shifts until their hand is fully healed. In some cases, an injured employee may be able to supplement their modified duties with alternative duties to complete a full workday.

Modified duties are often most fitting for employees with injuries and restrictions that limit their ability to handle the physical demands of a full workday or those who could be more prone to reinjury if they overexert themselves.

Conclusion

RTW programs are an essential component of any workplace, providing various benefits for both employers and employees. By identifying appropriate transitional duties within these programs and assigning injured workers personalized and purposeful tasks, employers can minimize the fallout from occupational ailments and cultivate a supportive work environment for your DSP staff.

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