Workers' Comp

Reducing Disability Durations and Improving Claim Outcomes Through the Use of Transitional Duty

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Transitional duty is defined as a temporary assignment to a modified (schedule, job tasks) version of one's regular job or even reassignment to another position while recovering from injury or illness with the goal of returning to full duty upon recovery. Transitional duty is about identifying what an employee can do and matching their capabilities to a work assignment.

Studies have shown that extended time away from work can have negative consequences. For many individuals, work means more than a regular paycheck, it is part of their identity and may be their main social network. If being injured or ill isn't disruptive in and of itself, isolation, loss of identity and self-esteem can lead to anxiety and depression that potentially will prolong the recovery. One **study** revealed the likelihood of injured workers being treated for depression was 45 percent greater compared with workers who were not injured. And getting hurt on the job brings a heightened risk of mental hardship. A group of researchers **found** people who were injured at work were more likely to become depressed than those who were hurt outside of work. The researchers surmised that worries about reduced income, for example, might be partly to blame.

There are many benefits to creating transitional duty programs to temporarily accommodate employees following an injury or illness at the worksite; however, some employers find it difficult to do so. When employers find themselves in this situation, there is another option for transitional duty placement. It involves giving the employee's time to a non-profit. In this situation, the employee remains productive at the off-site and the employer is giving back to the community.

Care should be taken when considering off site transitional duty with a non-profit. First and foremost, the placement is meant to be temporary in nature and used when there is high probability the injured employee will be able to return to full duty within a reasonable time. There should be clear communication with the employee that the assignment is temporary to support their recovery with a start and anticipated end date, along with information pertaining to their salary and benefits while in the placement. Program oversight of the temporary

assignment is essential to ensure that the employee's current functional capabilities as outlined by the treating physician are being adhered to. In addition, as the employee continues to recover and regain functionality, the physician should be asked to update their functional capabilities so that the placement position mirrors their functional abilities. By nature, we don't progress from no ambulation to running a marathon overnight, we improve incrementally, over time.

Transitional duty whether on-site or off-site at a non-profit can really change the narrative from disability to ability. There are benefits for both the employee and employer. For the employee, it can help to restore their self-esteem and create an avenue for socialization vs isolation. They begin earning a wage and typically have benefits restored. Focusing on what the employee can do not only encourages them to keep working towards full recovery but also may lessen the focus on any pain associated with the injury or illness and help them build not only stamina but resilience. It allows the employer to give back to the community while reducing disability durations. A win for all involved.



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