Workers' Comp

A Job Title Is Not a Return-to-Work Plan

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Comprehensive job analysis and physical demands analysis help support a safe and sustained return to work.

A release to return-to-work with physical limitations may seem straight forward but only if the physical demands of the job are understood. That is one of the lessons from *Beckman v. Manheim Tennessee LLC*. In the case, a treating physician released an injured employee with a 10-pound lifting restriction. However, the physician did not initially have a complete understanding of the employee's actual job duties and associated physical demands. Once the physician understood the job, he agreed that more specific restrictions were required. The court ultimately awarded temporary partial disability benefits.

A job title tells the provider what the position is called. A job description may offer a general overview of the role. Neither help the provider understand what the employee must physically do throughout the workday. That is where job analysis and physical demands analysis become important.

Job Analysis and Physical Demands Analysis

A job analysis helps identify the job's duties, essential functions, competencies, work environment and performance expectations. It can support hiring, training, performance management, workforce planning and the review of essential functions under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

A physical demands analysis (PDA) takes it a step further looking at the physical and environmental requirements of the job. It measures activities such as lifting, carrying, standing, walking, reaching, pushing, pulling, bending, driving and repetitive hand use. It also addresses frequency, duration, terrain, posture, equipment and environmental exposure.

Both pieces of information are important, but they serve different purposes. The job analysis helps determine which duties are essential and which may be modified, reassigned or temporarily removed. The PDA helps the physician determine whether the injured employee can safely perform those duties within the assigned restrictions.

In *Beckman*, the physician initially understood the employee's role as something similar to a retail automobile dealership position with limited walking. It was later determined that the actual job was quite different. It involved extensive walking, repeated vehicle inspections, tagging vehicles and carrying equipment. Those additional details changed the physician's assessment of the employee's work capacity.

A job analysis could have identified the essential functions of the vehicle specialist position, including what had to be done, how often it was performed and which responsibilities were fundamental to the role.

The PDA would have taken the essential functions and provided clear physical demands for the physician including the amount of walking required, the surfaces involved, the weight and duration of anything carried, the frequency of inspections, the postures used and whether sit-and-stand flexibility was available.

With this information, the employer, employee and provider would have been working from the same information before the return-to-work attempt.

Supporting a safe and sustained return-to-work

Job analyses and PDAs create a clearer understanding for all involved parties to:

- Support safer, more sustainable return-to-work decisions
- Give treating providers better information
- Match the injured employee's physical capabilities to the job
- Identify realistic transitional/modified duty options
- Reduce uncertainty and disputes

This approach also supports a better injured employee experience. Employees are more likely to trust the return-to-work process when they believe their employer and physician understand both their medical limitations and the realities of their job.

The Bottom Line

Being "released with restrictions" does not automatically mean an employee can perform the available work. A lifting restriction alone cannot account for a job that also requires prolonged walking, frequent inspections, awkward postures, equipment handling or exposure to changing environmental conditions.

As a best practice, employers should maintain current job analyses for their positions or job families that include physical demands analysis. A job analysis explains the job. A physical demands analysis measures what the job requires physically.

Return-to-work planning needs both. Medical restrictions must be compared with the reality of the work.

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