



## MANAGER OUTREACH A KEY FOR RETURN TO WORK

*Employees on leave—whether from workplace injury, disability or leave of absence—put a financial burden on your company. Ensuring those employees return to work as soon as feasible is crucial. However, many employees struggle during a disability and the subsequent return to work process, so it is vital that companies do their part to ease this transition. One important but often overlooked role is that of the immediate supervisor.*

### A Tough Transition

Employees who are out of work due to disability, injury or other reason face unique challenges. They are isolated from their work life and colleagues, may be struggling to recover from their injury or illness and returning to work can seem daunting. If the injury happened on the job, they may wonder if the company is angry at them for reporting an injury. If they don't hear from anyone at work during their time away, they may feel as if no one cares if they return.

Time spent away from work can cause depression, frustration, and anxiety about their looming return. Research shows that the longer an employee is away from work, the less likely they will return at all.

### Manager Outreach

As mentioned, one of the most isolating factors for an individual away from work is silence, particularly from colleagues and the immediate manager. To keep employees feeling connected and engaged while on leave, managers should contact their direct report to check in.

Some companies and managers worry about violating confidentiality laws or invading the individual's privacy when contacting an employee out with an injury or disability. However, there are low-risk ways to reach out while complying with privacy laws—and the positive impact on the employee is often well worth it. When contacting employees out on leave, managers should:

- Wait a week or more before contacting, to allow the employee to process the situation and ease into a new routine as they recovers. If feasible (and/or if the employee seems open to it), maintain periodic contact throughout the leave.
- Ask how they is feeling, without inquiring about specific health information or diagnosis.
- Ask if the employee has talked to his or her doctor about returning to work.
- Emphasize that the manager and company want the employee back.
- Show genuine concern and sympathy, rather than just asking "When will you return?"
- Remind the individual about your company's employee assistance program, if applicable. It may help ease the anxiety and other emotions associated with this difficult transition.
- Keep the individual informed of company events and workplace happenings and ask if they would still like to receive your company newsletter or similar information.
- Encourage co-workers to contact the employee as well, but do not offer any information about the reason for the leave.

Managers also play an important role upon the actual return of an employee. Prior to return, the manager should inform the team about the employee's return and how it may impact their job duties. Also, the supervisor must ensure the returning individual has an adequate workstation and necessary equipment.

On the first day back, the manager should update the employee on any new hires or changes to the company or department. Assure the employee that details of his or her leave were not shared with any co-workers, and the employee shouldn't feel obligated to do so either. Emphasize that the employee's safety and health is paramount and ask that they tell you immediately if a task exceeds his or her restrictions.

Keep communication lines open. Have a timeline for the transitional work period and a set time for a return to full duties. Continue to inquire about the employee's well-being periodically and adjust your return-to-work plan as needed. Be open to accommodations needed for the individual to perform job tasks, either temporarily or permanently.

## Other Important Steps

Return to work is truly a team effort, including the employee, manager, HR, employee's physician and often an insurance representative. It is important to have an established return to work program to help ease this process for employees and detail the responsibilities and role of each member during the process. Make sure your disability carrier has a proactive return to work strategy as well, to aid in the transition.

Make sure your job descriptions are clear, include all job requirements and also offer ideas for transitional work for employees returning after an injury or illness. Use this to work with the employee's physician, to determine what the employee can and cannot do upon returning.

Transitional duties or temporary job reassignments should be encouraged, and the employee should not face any loss of pay. The entire process, including the employee's time away and return, should be handled professionally and respectfully. It is important that all employees have a sense that reporting an injury or disability is okay, that the company cares about them and that the company will do what it can to ensure a positive return to work and successful transition back to full duties.

Employees who undergo a successful and positive return to work experience are likely to be more loyal to the company and have higher morale in their jobs. Conversely, mishandling this process can cause employees to feel unhappy, betrayed or even not return. Maintain your employee talent and foster an environment of caring and positivity by creating and operating an effective return to work program—and make sure the direct manager plays his or her key role for each employee facing a return-to-work situation.