

Return to work – key principles

Fact sheet

Do you want to help your injured employees return to work following an injury, and are unsure how to go about it? Or your efforts just don't seem to be working?

Here are the five basic principles that can assist you to achieve successful and consistent return to work outcomes.

Early communication

By talking to your injured employee you will know what is happening and what the likely impact of their absence will be on your business. You may need to communicate with a doctor and ACC so that they know enough about your workplace to assist your employee to return to work safely.

Why is early communication important?

- You become part of the recovery team from day one, able to influence, support and offer information where it's needed.
- There is less chance for misunderstanding between you, your injured employee and any others involved eg ACC, treatment provider/s.
- All parties are clear on what is likely to happen next.
- Both you and your employee will have a better understanding of the recovery timeframes as well as your employee's capabilities when they do return to work.
- Everyone will be aware of what types of alternative duties and hours are available.

Commitment to specific actions

Injured employees tend to have many questions, such as 'What do I need to do now?' and 'Will I lose my job?' These issues can become barriers to the return to work process if they are not well managed. You can nip problems in the bud simply by talking with your employee about not only what you will do to support them, but also what your expectations are.

By committing to a series of actions; (ie what you are going to do if an employee has an injury that impacts on their ability to work), you are setting the scene so everyone knows what their roles and responsibilities are.

Why commit yourself to a return to work strategy?

Recent research indicates that implementing a workplace based programme for an early return to work is beneficial for the injured employee's health and work outcomes. Having a return to work strategy will help:

- remove doubt about the future for your employee

- give your employee something positive to focus on and work towards
- show that you care about the wellbeing of your employee and your business.

Consistency

The support you provide to your injured employees should be the same in all circumstances. If you don't do this, you could create confusion amongst your employees. Having consistent practices will also make it easier to implement across different worksites.

How can you create consistency?

- Provide the same return to work support to all employees.
- Offer appropriate modified/alternative duties in all cases.
- Manage work and non-work related injuries in the same way. The cost of workplace absence to your business is the same whether the injury happened at work or outside of work.
- Monitor return to work actions you take for effectiveness.
- Focus on what your injured employee can do, not on what s/he cannot do.

Roles and responsibilities

There are likely to be several parties involved in the return to work process depending on your business. Usually the injured employee, their manager and/or the Human Resources Manager are the key parties. The medical treatment provider and ACC claims management staff are also likely to be involved. Each of these parties has a role to play and have certain responsibilities that everyone should be clear about.

Why is it important to have designated responsibilities?

- The expectations and roles for each party are made clear.
- For accountability, ensuring what needs to be done is done and at the right time.
- The process can be replicated and applied consistently across different teams and/or sites in your business.

Monitor and review

Some of the basic steps in any project include monitoring implementation and reviewing outcomes. This forms the basis for continuous improvement. The same need to monitor and review applies to the Return to Work process. Each individual's return to work should be monitored regularly and outcomes evaluated.

Why do I need to take the time to monitor the process and outcomes?

- Problems are identified early before they become barriers.

- Changes to the injured employee's plan can be made, resulting in a more timely return to full duties at work.
- You are able to identify and manage any difficulties you are having in getting employees back to work. This will help improve your processes.

More information

If you have more questions than answers regarding this, perhaps you'd like individual assistance with developing your return to work strategy, or useful advice on what you can do.

ACC has a team of experienced professionals who are able to work with you to develop a strategy that works for your business – one that is specific, individualised and free of charge.

Contact details

Phone: 0800 101 996 and ask to speak to an Injury Management Consultant

Email: returntowork@acc.co.nz