

# How Supervisor Training Maximizes the Effectiveness of the Return to Work Process



Lost time depends not just on the work injury but the efficiency of the RTW process.

When workers miss work due to injury, it costs your company money, including both direct costs (medical bills, wages for lost work time, etc.) and indirect costs (hiring and training replacement workers, higher workers comp premiums, etc.). The more time the worker misses, the higher the costs. Implementing a return to work (RTW) program can minimize losses. And while there's no one blueprint, strategic involvement of supervisors can play a crucial role in RTW program effectiveness.

## The Supervisor's Role in RTW Programs

The goal of the RTW process is to minimize injured workers' lost time and associated costs. But what companies tend to overlook is that time missed is based not just on the extent and nature of the worker's injury but also the speed and effectiveness of the RTW process itself. How closely do injured workers and their medical providers communicate with the company? How quickly and effectively can the company then evaluate the workers' work capacities and make the accommodations necessary to ensure the swiftest and safest possible return. Specifically, there are 3 critical points in

the RTW process:

- When the worker first reports an injury or work-related health problem;
- When the worker is absent and/or undergoing treatment for the injury or health problem; and
- When the worker tries to return to work.

## **Supervisor RTW Training'or Lack Thereof**

Because supervisors know individual workers so well, they're ideally positioned to serve as point person between the company and injured worker. Supervisors can keep injured workers informed, explain company policies, ensure access to information and influence the accommodations process. But supervisor engagement in the RTW process doesn't happen on its own. In fact, all too often, supervisors disengage and fall out of touch with workers after their injuries and try to foist off support duties to nurses, HR or other personnel. Consequently, injured workers don't get the support they need and the RTW process bogs down.

Supervisors are only partly to blame for this disconnect. problems. RTW skills generally aren't part of the supervisor's normal training. Even companies that do recognize the RTW potential of supervisors often fail to provide the right kind of training enabling supervisors to play an effective role in the process.

## **The Liberty Mutual Study**

A seminal 2006 study from insurer Liberty Mutual was the first to document the potential value of supervisor leadership in RTW effectiveness. More significantly, the 'Employee Perspectives on the Role of Supervisors to Prevent Workplace Disability After Injuries' study also outlines what RTW training that companies who to achieve that potential should provide to their supervisors. Unlike previous studies, the

Liberty Mutual researchers approached the question from the perspective of the injured worker.

What support, the researchers asked, do injured workers expect and want most from their supervisors during the RTW process. The researchers interviewed 30 workers from 4 companies: a synthetic fabrics manufacturer, a food processing and packaging plant, a nursing homes network and a discount clothing retailer. To establish a baseline, the researchers had workers who had experienced a work-related injury in the past 12 months complete a questionnaire asking about the types and onset of work-related injuries they suffered, how their supervisors responded to their injuries and how satisfied they were with the supervisor's response.

In addition, they had 108 supervisors complete a pre-training survey asking about their level of preparedness to address particular health and injury issues among workers, whether workers were likely to follow supervisor advice and whether they felt supported by senior management in addressing worker health concerns. These supervisors then attended a 90-minute training session designed to promote a proactive, supportive and knowledgeable response to workplace injuries and symptoms among their workers covering:

- The reasons supervisors should encourage workers to report work-related health problems early and why early intervention is important to prevent (or minimizing severity of) musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) and work-related respiratory illnesses;
- Typical situations in which a worker may come to supervisors with an injury or health concern and recommendations and how supervisors should respond, including meeting privately with injured workers, validating workers' health concerns, using supportive language and active listening techniques and avoiding negative responses; and
- Accommodations, including the rationale and value of

accommodations, the importance of the supervisor in evaluating whether accommodations are safe and effective after a worker returns, methods to facilitate accommodations and basic ergonomics principles relevant to accommodations and injury prevention.

One month and again one year after the training, the supervisors completed surveys that mirrored the pre-training surveys they had completed and gave a confidential survey to every worker who came to them that year with a work-related injury. Surveys were also available in various locations in the workplace for workers to take and complete on their own. Workers mailed their completed surveys directly to the researchers.

## **The Study's Results**

As a result of the supervisors' participation in the training, the researchers identified several positive outcomes among supervisors and workers:

**Supervisors felt more confident in dealing with workers' injuries:** The training led to small, but sustained, changes in supervisors' attitudes toward injured workers. Supervisors reported a greater awareness of their role in the RTW process. They also reported feeling more confident in their ability to handle work-related injury concerns, especially in seeking medical advice, investigating and modifying job factors that contributed to injuries or health problems, solving injury-related problems, dealing with HR issues and answering workers' questions. Most importantly, these improvements lasted a year after the training.

**Lost work time was reduced:** About one-third of the supervisors reported that since receiving the training, work hours lost due to workers' injuries were reduced.

**Workers reported improved supervisor response to injuries:**

Workers who suffered work-related injuries after their supervisor received training found those supervisors more likely to speak privately and confidentially and make medical referrals, and less likely to blame them for their injuries. And because workers started to see their supervisors as more approachable, they might have reported injuries sooner and when the injuries were more easily treated.

## **Takeaway**

Supervisor behaviour can influence how much time injured workers miss and how swiftly they return. Positive, supportive responses to worker injuries can help workers return to work sooner and more comfortably. Conversely, negative responses may derail the RTW process, even if physical accommodations are made for injured workers. But the results of the Liberty Mutual study show that supervisor responses to worker injuries can be improved through a simple training program. And such training, the study suggests, ultimately improves RTW outcomes for injured workers, thereby cutting costs for the company.