

RETURN TO WORK: The Role of Co-Workers in a Successful RTW Program



When workers get injured on the job, helping them return to work can be a challenging process involving many people in the workplace, including the injured workers, their supervisors, the safety coordinator, an HR representative, etc. But overlooked participants in the return-to-work process may be the injured workers' co-workers, who not only are impacted by this process but also can contribute to its success. Two studies from researchers at the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) and from Australia looked at the important role co-workers can play in an effective transition back to work for injured or ill workers. Here's a look at the findings from these studies and some tips based on their results you can use to improve your return-to-work (RTW) program.

Impact of RTW on Co-Workers

Co-workers can feel the often negative effects of RTW. But RTW programs are often written without considering any impacts on them or any contributions they may be able to make to an injured worker's successful return.

In the first study, the researchers conducted focus groups with co-workers from a range of occupations. They found that co-workers' capacity to support returning workers was based on several factors:

- The quality of the RTW arrangements, including managerial attention to these arrangements. For example, many co-workers reported relatively haphazard arrangements for job reassignment;
- Their relationship with the returning worker. Co-workers were more open to helping out if they had a pre-existing 'and positive' relationship with the returning worker;
- The work culture, including whether or not people 'pitched in' and acted as a team;
- The duration of the required support, because co-worker goodwill could wear thin over time; and
- Management of privacy/confidentiality issues. Co-workers who wanted to be supportive sometimes felt shut out of the process due to confidentiality requirements. And this lack of information about the nature of the worker's injury sometimes could lead to damaging rumours and speculation.

The researchers also found that, although some co-workers in the study saw RTW in positive terms, most described the process as detrimental. Examples of specific negative impacts on co-workers included:

- Extra work or heavier duties,
- Disruptions of personal work effectiveness, organizational effectiveness and workplace social relationships; and
- 'Ripple effects,' such as emotional distress, physical injury and termination of their own employment.

Role of Co-Workers in RTW Program

The second study looked at the role of co-workers in the RTW process in the electrical construction sector. The researchers conducted focus groups with union representatives and injured workers. They also carried out in-depth, one-on-one interviews with co-workers who'd worked with someone injured on the job.

The researchers found that the structure of the work can impede co-worker support and contribute to making injured workers' experiences difficult. A number of factors and work conditions were found to contribute to this difficulty:

- A competitive and cost-cutting culture that facilitates the view of injured workers as a liability;
- Job insecurity, that is, the precariousness of work;
- Different 'camps,' such as those with steady employment versus those with non-permanent work, which were unlikely to help each other;
- Little available modified work; and
- Poor official communication among workplace parties.

4 Tips to Improve Co-workers' Role in RTW

Here are four tips based on the results of these studies to help avoid some of the negative impacts of RTW on co-workers and maximize the positive contributions they can provide:

- To relieve the burden on co-workers, consider using replacement staff to fill in for an injured worker or take up the extra slack;
- Effectively communicate with co-workers so that they understand the worker's injury or illness, are consulted about RTW plans and are given guidance on how they can assist;
- Acknowledge the contributions of co-workers to the successful return of a worker, such as with monetary rewards, extra vacation days, etc.; and
- Members of senior management should set an example for how injured workers are regarded and treated.

Insider Sources

'[Bearing the brunt: Co-workers' experiences of work reintegration processes](#),' Dunstan and MacEachen, Institute for Work & Health, Nov. 12, 2012 (also published in [Journal of](#)

[Occupational Rehabilitation](#), March 2013).

'[Buddies in Bad Times' The Role of Co-Workers After a Work-Related Injury](#),' Kozny et al, *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, Dec. 2012.

[box] **RTW Resources**

For more information on return-to-work, see these articles and tools:

- [How to Comply with Return to Work Requirements](#)
- [Brief Your CEO: How Far Return-to-Work Programs Must Go to 'Accommodate' Injured Workers](#)
- [Using Supervisors to Improve the Return-to-Work Process, Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)
- [Making the Business Case for Safety: Adapting Return-to-Work Programs for Workers Working Nonstandard Schedules](#)
- [Model Return to Work Plan](#)
- [Return to Work Plan Questionnaire](#)
- [Return to Work Contact Log](#)
- [Model Return to Work Weekly Assessment Form](#)
- [Model Return to Work Closure Report](#)
- [Recorded webinar on the Ontario return-to-work rules.](#)

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