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RISKINSIGHTS

SAFETY SOLUTIONS FOR YOUR BUSINESS

TYPES OF TRANSITIONAL DUTIES IN RETURN-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

When an employee experiences an occupational illness or injury, their eventual return to the workplace can create considerable challenges, putting significant stress on both the individual and their employer. Nevertheless, return-to-work (RTW) programs can help alleviate these concerns by supporting staff as they reintegrate into the workforce. These programs may entail having an injured employee return to work with shortened hours, lighter workloads or different tasks (also known as transitional duties) as they continue to recover from their occupational ailment. RTW programs offer several benefits, allowing employers to keep their workers' compensation costs under control and giving injured employees the opportunity to resume working even when they aren't ready to take on their original job duties. In turn, such programs can allow employers to limit staff turnover, maintain productivity, boost morale and reduce litigation risks, all while helping injured employees retain their job skills, uphold workplace connections, minimize financial challenges and keep a healthier mind set during the recovery process.

In order for RTW programs to be successful, it's important for employers to determine appropriate types of transitional duties for injured employees. After all, employees' capabilities will vary based on their particular occupational ailments and associated recovery needs. If injured employees are assigned inadequate duties—whether overly demanding or potentially demeaning—they will be less likely to experience the full benefits of RTW programs. In general, transitional duties can be divided into two main categories: alternative and modified. This article provides more information on different types of transitional duties and highlights situations where these tasks are most suitable.

ALTERNATIVE DUTIES

This category pertains to an injured employee being temporarily placed into an existing position within their organization, albeit one that's less physically demanding than their original role. Examples of alternative duties include the following:

Clerical tasks

This may entail answering phone calls and emails, filling out workplace documentation, making copies, addressing letters and packages, ordering inventory and sorting supplies.

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Safety tasks

Such responsibilities may involve training new workers, updating safety resources and records to ensure compliance with applicable requirements (e.g., OSHA standards), conducting job site inspections and analyses, and acting as a spotter while other workers perform more high-risk tasks.

Maintenance tasks

This may entail performing light housekeeping tasks, inspecting workplace vehicles and equipment for possible issues, and repairing damaged parts as needed.

Alternative duties generally make the most sense for employees whose original roles involved more strenuous activities and manual labor (e.g., heavy lifting and material handling). Thus, these workers are better suited to office work and administrative tasks during recovery.

MODIFIED DUTIES

This category refers to an injured employee resuming their original job role, only with certain elements of the position removed or otherwise adjusted to comply with the worker's current physical limitations. For example, a warehouse employee recovering from an occupational back strain or shoulder sprain may be permitted to perform the majority of their job duties(e.g., taking inventory and moving boxes) but with slight alterations to specific tasks (e.g., only lifting boxes under 30 pounds or reaching for inventory at eye level).

On the other hand, this category may simply involve an injured employee returning to their original position but with a shortened workday. For instance, a manufacturing employee recovering from a minor occupational hand injury may work four-hour shifts on the production line instead of their usual eight-hour shifts until their hand is fully healed. In some cases, an injured employee may be able to supplement their modified duties with alternative duties to complete a full workday. In the previous example, the manufacturing employee could work four hours on the production line and then complete administrative tasks for the remainder of the workday to fulfill an entire shift.

Modified duties are often most fitting for employees with occupational ailments that limit their ability to handle the physical demands of a full workday or those who could be more prone to reinjury if they overexert themselves.

CONCLUSION

RTW programs are an essential component of any workplace, providing various benefits for both employers and employees. By identifying appropriate transitional duties within these programs and assigning injured workers personalized and purposeful tasks, employers can minimize the fallout from occupational ailments and cultivate a supportive work environment for their staff. Contact us today for additional workers' compensation resources.

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