

# hierl CenterStage

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## Do You Have an Employer Return to Work Program?

A proven strategy to reduce workers compensation cost and shorten the length of a worker's compensation time is a return to work (RTW) program. Loss reduction overall can be greatly improved by an effective RTW program.

"Before RTW programs evolved, the role of an employee was a passive one. If an employee was injured and was unable to work, they ended up sitting at home and it became the doctor's responsibility to decide when they were cleared for work. Hierl takes a proactive approach to getting these workers back on the job." -Cathleen Christenson



Today, most disability or worker's compensation insurers enact RTW programs to help facilitate injured workers return to work in a timely manner. Hierl recommends a policy where employers are more actively involved with the doctor and employee throughout the worker's compensation claim. These policies clarify the employee's late duty work, alternative job duties to keep workers engaged when they are on a leave, and any other expectations up front.

A study by the Department of Labor and Industry, produced that the chances of returning to any type of work drastically reduce the longer the they are away from work. At just six months away from work, the employee only stands a fifty percent chance of getting back to any type of work. At twenty-four months, the study found the worker will most likely never return to productive work.

### Key Points to a Successful Return to Work Program

#### 1. Have a dedicated person responsible

Having a dedicated return to work coordinator or specialist to facilitate the return to work process and provide individualized planning that adapts to the worker's initial and ongoing needs shows that you care as an employer. This role will also be in charge of assigning modified work duties for the employee. Be sure to make sure the employee knows who they can contact if they have any questions or need help through the return to work process.

## 2. Maintain active communication

An essential requirement for a successful early return to work program is good communication between the employer, the employee and the medical care provider. It can be very beneficial for employers to be able to develop a relationship with medical providers in their community to allow the medical provider to understand what the company does and accurately determine when an employee can return to their workplace.

## 3. Actively engage employee in the return to work program

Often employees are injured and left to stay at home without work and they suffer a serious change to their normal routine. By spending time away from the office, it causes a disconnect from the human element that exists in the office. In order to ensure employees stay involved and return to work, it is crucial to keep them engaged usually through late duty work. Ensure that all employees know the company return to work policy and that they understand the company is committed to keeping them engaged in late duty work.

The key in successful return to work programs is making sure that any of your efforts aren't perceived as punitive but instead convey to your employees that you care about them. Make sure that all levels of employees recognize that early return to work after an injury speeds up the recovery process and reduces the likelihood of a permanent disability. Studies clearly demonstrate that employees who are off work because of an injury for more than 16 weeks seldom return to the workforce, costing companies hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Overall, workplace return to work policies have positive impacts on duration and costs of worker compensation.

Contact Hierl for guidance in enacting a return to work program or general employee safety practices. A good return to work program should be set up before it is needed.