An Effective Temporary Duty Return-to-Work Program

By Jeffrey L. Robinson, P.E., CSP

Many steps must be taken to properly establish a temporary return-to-work program. Without an effective temporary duty program, the following often occurs when an employee is injured on the job and is out on disability:

1) The injured employee is sent to the medical provider without any idea of how the workers’ compensation system works, what to expect, when it will happen, what his or her responsibilities are in cooperating with the temporary duty program or whom s/he can contact for questions or help.

2) Medical providers do not know if a temporary duty program is in place or if it is actively sponsored. In this situation, they naturally see their role as providing medical care to the injured employee. However, while the medical provider wants to eventually heal

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the injured worker to the fullest extent possible, there is little incentive to encourage the employee to come back to work until the healing process is completed. Medical providers often rely on the employee’s explanation of the work environment and what temporary tasks are available.

3) Employees fall into the “black hole” of the workers’ compensation system, get little attention from their employer and may even feel that their job is threatened. In this state, employees may feel compelled to hire an attorney to represent them.

4) The employee returns to work when permitted by the medical provider. This may be weeks or months longer than would otherwise be the case if an effective temporary duty program were in place.

5) The employer discovers that the injury created significant medical and wage replacement costs. These costs, in turn, affect loss experience with the insurance carrier and renewal terms and can increase experience modification.

Do any of these situations sound familiar? From a practical standpoint, the temporary duty program’s objective is to take those steps that will short-circuit these problems and will reduce the lost (and related costs) to an absolute minimum.

Perform an organization self-assessment (Table 1). If the answer is “no” to any one or more of these questions, then the existing temporary duty program is probably experiencing a breakdown. Do not be discouraged. All of these items can be corrected fairly quickly with a structured and committed approach to disability management as outlined here.

FORMALIZE & COMMUNICATE THE TEMPORARY DUTY POLICY

The success of a temporary duty program depends on support and direction from senior management, how well the policy complies with federal and state employment laws [Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), etc.] and how well it is communicated. A policy statement written and publicized throughout the organization is an effective means of providing guidance and of demonstrating this support.

In preparation of the development of a temporary duty policy, carefully review the employee handbook, disability policy, absentee policy, existing temporary duty policy, collective bargaining agreements (if applicable) and any other policies and procedures that may come into play.

At a minimum, the temporary duty policy should contain the following components:

• It should be in writing.
• It should clearly spell out the responsibilities of the employer and the employee.
• It should clearly indicate that the employee is expected to comply with the temporary duty policy, including a requirement that s/he call the accident coordinator on a specified basis and what the disciplinary action will be for noncompliance with the policy.
• It should make clear that the tasks assigned to the employee are, in fact, temporary. It is strongly recommended the policy state that the temporary work assignment can be terminated when any of the following occur:
  • it is no longer available;
  • when the treating physician has determined that the employee will not return to work;
  • when the employee obtains a full release to return to regular work; or
  • after a specified number of days.

It should comply with all applicable federal and state employment laws.

Once completed, this policy should be included in all human resource documents, including the employee handbook and other human resource policy and procedures. In the event this policy is developed during the benefit plan year, prepare an addendum to the

Table 1 Sample Organization Self-Assessment

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Do you have a written policy regarding return to work?</td>
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<td>2) Have you designated an accident coordinator?</td>
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<td>3) Have medical provider(s) been identified?</td>
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<td>4) Have physical job capacity descriptions been developed?</td>
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<td>5) Have communication and training been provided to employees?</td>
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<td>6) Have communication and training been provided to supervisors?</td>
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<td>7) Has a physician’s packet been developed?</td>
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<td>8) Have temporary duty tasks been identified?</td>
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<td>9) Have follow-up procedures been established for disabled employees?</td>
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handbook and give each employee a copy. Since this is such an important policy, also consider reviewing this at employee meetings, safety committee meetings and any other formal employee meetings. Also, a formal announcement should be included in the company newsletter and in similar internal publications. In short, use any and all means to announce and communicate the temporary duty policy.

If bound by collective bargaining agreements, present this policy to union leadership as well. It is important to get their buy-in and support of this policy up front.

Finally, management should also announce this policy statement to employees so they fully understand that it is sponsored by senior management.

**Establish & Formalize a Disability Management Team**

Once a formal temporary duty statement has been developed and communicated, the next step is to assemble a disability management team. At a bare minimum, the following individuals should make up the disability management team:

- accident coordinator;
- medical provider(s);
- supervisors;
- insurance company adjuster(s);
- the injured employee.

Each has important roles to play in this process, and all must be on the same page for the temporary duty program to work effectively.

**Accident Coordinator’s Roles & Responsibilities**

To effectively manage the temporary duty program, the accident coordinator should be the single point of contact within the organization.

The accident coordinator’s areas of responsibility include:

- claim reporting, which includes providing the employee with the appropriate workers’ compensation forms when an on-the-job injury is reported, completing required forms when necessary and promptly forwarding the claim forms to the necessary insurance company representatives;
- providing prompt medical treatment, which includes:
  a) making arrangements to drive the employee to the employer’s medical provider;
  b) explaining to the injured employee how the workers’ compensation system works and what to expect in terms of benefits;
  c) giving the employee the physician packet, which contains all necessary information to initiate the temporary duty process and seeing that the physician completes the appropriate medical status forms;
  d) if the employee is released for temporary duty, providing the physician with temporary tasks and obtaining the physician’s signature of approval;
  e) implementation of the company’s temporary duty policy, which includes meeting with the employee to review the physician’s written approval for temporary duty, orienting the employee to the temporary duty assignment, having the employee read the temporary duty responsibilities and sign the temporary duty offer form, monitoring employee performance and progress in the temporary duty capacity and enforcing company temporary duty policy as required;
  f) monitoring all extended lost-time cases until completion, which includes contacting the employee
at least once a week, documenting all employee/physician contacts, obtaining copies of all medical reports and prognosis and receiving a full written release from the physician before allowing the employee to return to his or her regular job;

  g) legal compliance, which involves doing all of the above in strict compliance with all federal and state employment laws.

This is a tough and demanding job. Therefore, the accident coordinator should be an individual who has a good understanding of the workers’ compensation system and the organization and has the skills and authority to act as a liaison between the various members of the disability management team. Typically, this individual is someone in an administrative role at the operating level, such as the human resources director, personnel director or plant nurse.

It is essential that the accident coordinator have the visible support of top management and have access to plant management and senior management whenever it is necessary. Not only do decisions made by the accident coordinator have a substantial financial impact on the organization, production efficiency and employee morale are also at stake.

**Medical Provider(s)**

A panel of medical providers should be established to ensure prompt, quality medical care for injured employees and to cooperate fully in the temporary duty program.

Develop and use a checklist to evaluate medical providers situated in the local area. It is a good idea to tour their facilities after completing each survey. Once a preferred medical provider(s) is selected, visit the facilities so they can understand the nature of the operation and can anticipate the types of injuries that can arise in the normal course of business.

Discuss the fact that the company offers to its employees a temporary duty program and that they are expected to fully support the company in identifying and assigning temporary tasks where medically permissible.

Ask for references and be sure to call each one of them. Make sure that they “walk the walk” and are actively assisting employers in implementing their temporary duty program.

Discuss how communication is expected to flow. Discuss the expectation to receive all relevant medical information for the purpose of evaluating temporary tasks in light of their medical prognosis. Also review the expectation to be provided written authorization before an injured employee is released to full or temporary duty. Finally, share with them how the status of all lost-time cases will be monitored and determine how they intend to communicate during this process.

**Supervisory Responsibilities**

As is the case with accident prevention, supervisors are the backbone of an effective temporary duty program. They can literally make or break the program. For that reason, sufficient time must be spent informing and training supervisors on their role in the process.

Essentially, each supervisor has the following responsibilities as they pertain to the temporary duty program:

  • assist in the identification of temporary duty jobs;
  • promptly conduct accident investigation;
  • explain and teach the returning employee the temporary tasks;
  • monitor the injured employee’s progress while on temporary duty;
  • answer questions that coworkers may have.

Each supervisor needs to take responsibility for easing the injured employee back to work. This responsibility includes understanding that the employee is not able to work at full speed and may need to return to temporary duty to build up strength and endurance.

Coworkers need to be informed so they understand the injured employee’s limitations and recognize that this treatment is fair and consistent for all workers. If they suffer an injury, they too can expect similar treatment.

The supervisor needs to be ready to deal with problems when they arise and be willing to reevaluate and modify work assignments in concert with the accident coordinator.

A supervisor should not be penalized for the potentially lower productivity of recovering employees doing temporary tasks. In fact, many companies have experimented with charging first-line supervisors’ budgets for the cost of workers’ compensation benefits paid to their employees. This action makes them realize the benefits of establishing loss control programs and bringing injured employees back to temporary duty.

**Insurance Company Involvement**

Have a formal and detailed meeting with claim adjudicators who handle workers’ compensation claims. Insurance companies appreciate a well-planned temporary duty program and a commitment to containing costs. Make this program an integral part of underwrit-
ing submission each year. Depending on the state of operation and market conditions, this could translate into scheduled premium credits and other premium discounts.

At the same time, review communication procedures with the adjuster(s) so that everyone is on the same page. The average workers’ compensation adjuster today handles twice the case load of their predecessors and is much less experienced. Too often, the adjuster simply cannot oversee each claim closely, and this can cost money in the long run.

For this reason, review the entire temporary duty process and discuss with adjusters how they are expected to communicate as they adjudicate each disability claim.

For those disability claims that require payment to the injured employee, make sure they understand that payments should be made promptly. Some employers even require that all disability checks come to them for disbursement.

For those situations in which the employee has violated the temporary duty program or refuses the temporary duty assignment, make sure s/he understands that wage replacement benefits are expected to be discontinued until the situation is rectified.

In short, make sure that the insurance carrier does not undermine the temporary duty program. More often than not, they will want to assist in any way they can.

**EMPLOYEE RESPONSIBILITIES**

Employee responsibilities should be clearly spelled out in the temporary duty policy. It is each employee’s responsibility to comply with this policy when out on work-related disability.

Employees essentially have three areas of responsibility. First, all on-the-job injuries and accidents should be reported to their supervisor immediately, no later than at the end of the work shift. They need to understand that this delay may make it difficult to understand the accident cause and to prevent its reoccurrence. It may also delay the processing of the claim as well.

In the event of an injury, specific instructions must be followed:

1) If medical treatment is required, employees will be provided an envelope containing a medical evaluation form. They should take this envelope to the hospital or clinic identified or, if they elect to do so, to their personal physician.

2) They should ask the physician to complete the form enclosed in the packet.

3) If they are able to return to work the same day, they should bring the medical evaluation form back to their supervisor or to the accident coordinator.

4) They should complete an accident report form and return it to their supervisor or to the accident coordinator.

5) If they are unable to do their regular job, make it clear to them that temporary work assignments will be available for them while they recover from their injuries. Their physician will evaluate whether it is medically appropriate to participate in the temporary work program.

6) If they are unable to return to work for the next shift, they are required to call and speak directly with the supervisor or with the accident coordinator.

7) If they continue to be off work due to their injuries, they are required to call in on a specified basis and to speak directly with the accident coordinator.

8) A written statement from the physician is needed upon the employee’s return to a temporary work assignment or to a regular job.

Employees are expected to help in preventing the accident from happening again. This will entail completing the appropriate accident investigation form and answering any questions asked of them by their supervisor or by the accident coordinator.

**Understanding Workers’ Compensation Laws & Related Employment Statutes**

With regard to workers’ compensation benefits, this entails obtaining a working understanding of how the system works and what the legal parameters are. At a minimum, have answers to the following questions:

- What medical services must the employer provide?
- Must the employer pay all physician and hospital bills?
- Who chooses the physician?
- Is there a limit to the number of physicians an injured employee may select at the employer’s expense?
- May an employer require an exam by its physician?
- What if the employee refuses to be examined?
- What information must the employee give the employer?
- Should the employee’s doctor send medical reports to the employer?
- What information should be contained in the medical reports?
- How is the amount of temporary total disability (TTD) benefits determined?
- What is the minimum TTD benefit?
- What is the maximum TTD benefit?
- How is the amount of permanent partial disability (PPD) benefits determined?
- What is the minimum PPD benefit?
- What is the maximum PPD benefit?
- What if an employee cannot return to the same
occupation after an injury or exposure and cannot earn as much money?

- How is the amount of PPD benefits determined?
- For how long are the permanent total disability (PTD) benefits paid?
  - What is the minimum PTD benefit?
  - What is the maximum PTD benefit?
  - What are the employer’s claim reporting requirements?
  - What are the consequences to the employer for failure to report?
- What is the employee’s claim reporting requirements?
- What are the consequences to the employee for failure to report?
- Can an employee be fired because s/he reported an accident?
- What is the process for settling a claim?

Understand the workers’ compensation laws in each state of operation and stay current on any changes that may occur.

Become and stay fully informed of requirements and obligations under the FMLA, the ADA and similar federal and state laws. Each has a component that further complicates the disability management process.

**Identify & Focus on Key Claim Trends**

Once the temporary duty policy has been established and communicated, the disability management team has been assembled and the legal parameters related to workers’ compensation laws are clear, the next step is to begin identifying potential temporary duty tasks within the facility.

For many companies, this may at first seem to be a daunting job. After all, there may be hundreds of tasks throughout the facility, and it may be impossible to evaluate all of them.

However, by carefully evaluating those areas of operation that have historically generated the most worker injury claims, preventing future losses and identifying many temporary duty tasks can be better understood. Carefully analyze losses over a given time-frame from the standpoint of:

- nature of injury;
- cause of loss;
- body part injured;
- department;
- time of day;
- day of the week;
- month of the year.

When completed, these loss analysis forms will provide insight into the types and number of claims that are occurring in the plant, the financial impact of the injuries, where the injuries are occurring and when they are occurring.

Each form allows a ranking to be assigned, thereby providing a method for prioritizing problem areas.

Complete these forms at least annually as surprising lessons and insights can often be learned.

The best source of information for this analysis is from the insurance carrier (workers’ compensation loss runs) and the OSHA log. In addition, the impact on experience modification can be provided by the insurance carrier or by the insurance agent via readily available claim analysis software. All factors highlighted in this analysis are critical to a complete understanding of historical loss trends.

**Perform a Job Safety Analysis on Critical Tasks or Processes**

OSHA defines job safety analysis (JSA) as:

“...carefully studying and recording each step of a job, identifying existing or potential job hazards (both safety and health) and determining the best way to perform the job to reduce or eliminate these hazards. Improved job methods can reduce costs resulting from employee absenteeism and workers’ compensation and can often lead to increased productivity.”

A JSA is designed to be a simple, cost-effective method of preparing a detailed work description, which establishes a standard procedure for accomplishing a single task. It is a valuable tool for reducing the possibility of an operational error that could result in injury, property damage or lost production.

Through this technique, a step-by-step training guide can be developed, which, when properly used,
ensures that all needed job skills are taught by a trainer, including safe operational procedures.

In addition, a JSA can be used to identify and correct work hazards that may have been inadvertently introduced by employees in an effort to simplify or to speed up a job. Also, JSA can assist supervisors in making decisions related to line balancing, time standards and job simplification.

An additional and often overlooked benefit of JSA is that it facilitates operator substitution. Since absenteeism reduces production, cost-efficient operator substitution is important to all operations. JSA helps employees learn not only their assigned jobs, but also other job functions. As a result, cross-trained employees are available to fill in when there are absentees.

A common misperception of JSA is that it must be performed for each and every job in the facility. As a result, many companies view this as an unrealistic strategy and take little or no advantage of it.

In fact, OSHA has suggested the following priority when determining which jobs to analyze first:

1) jobs with the highest rates of accidents and lost-workday injuries;
2) jobs where “close calls” have occurred;
3) new job tasks as they are created;
4) jobs where changes have been made in processes and procedures;
5) all other jobs.

Eventually, a JSA should be conducted and made available to employees for all jobs in the workplace.

A JSA can be performed on a step-by-step, planned basis. It is not necessary to perform a JSA on each and every job task in the facility. Eventually, this should be the goal. However, it is realistic to perform a JSA on those critical tasks or processes that have the highest potential or actual accident rate.

The best way to identify jobs that would qualify for immediate JSA is to match up identified hazards with those tasks or processes that have experienced lost-time, work-related injuries. It is important to include in this list similar processes in the plant that have not yet had an accident but are similar, if not identical, to those tasks or processes that have experienced losses.

Once a list of high-priority tasks or processes that require analysis has been developed, break down the job into steps. Nearly every job can be broken down into steps. List each step of the job in order of occurrence while watching the employee perform the job. Record enough information to describe each job action, but do not make the breakdown too detailed. Later, review the job steps with the employee to make sure that all steps have been observed.

After the job steps have been recorded, examine each step to determine the hazards that exist or that might occur. Ask the following questions:

• Is the worker wearing protective equipment appropriate for the job?
• Are work positions, machinery, pits or holes and hazardous operations adequately guarded?
• Are lockout procedures used for machinery deactivation during maintenance procedures?
• Is the worker wearing clothing or jewelry that could get caught in the machinery?
• Are there fixed objects that may cause injury, such as sharp machine edges?
• Is the flow of work improperly organized (i.e., is the worker required to make movements that are too rapid?)
• Can the worker get caught in or between machine parts?
• Can the worker be injured by reaching over moving machine parts or materials?
• Is the worker at any time in an off-balance position?
• Is the worker positioned to the machine in a way that is potentially dangerous?
• Is the worker required to make movements that could cause hand or foot injuries or strain from lifting?
• Can the worker be struck by an object or lean against or strike a machine part or object?
• Can the worker fall from one level to another?
• Can the worker be injured from lifting or pulling objects or from carrying heavy objects?
• Do environmental hazards—dust, chemicals, radiation, welding rays, heat or excessive noise—result from the performance of the job?
Repeat the observation of the job task or process until all hazards have been identified. Then list all hazards beside each respective job task. Use additional sheets of paper where necessary to record all observations.

After each hazard or potential hazard is listed and reviewed with the employee performing the job, the next step is to determine whether the job can be performed in another way to eliminate the hazard. This may include combining steps or changing the sequence of steps, modifying the equipment itself or requiring protective safety equipment.

If safer and better job steps can be used, list each new step. List exactly what the worker needs to know to perform the job using a new method. Do not make general statements about the procedure, such as “Be careful.” Be as specific as possible in recommendations.

A training program can be set up using the JSA to train employees in the new procedures, especially if they are working with highly toxic substances or in dangerous situations.

If no new procedures can be developed, determine whether any physical changes, such as redesigning equipment, changing tools or adding machine guards, PPE or ventilation, will eliminate or reduce the danger.

If hazards are still present, try to reduce the necessity of performing the job or the frequency of performing it.

Review the recommendations with all employees who are performing the job. Their ideas about the hazards and proposed recommendations may be invaluable. Be sure that they understand what they are required to do and the reasons for the changes in the job procedures.

OSHA recommends that the JSA be reviewed and updated on a regular basis when any of the following occur:

1) **When an accident or injury occurs.** Are changes needed in the procedures? If the problem was caused by an employee’s failure to follow established safety rules or procedures, discuss the incident with all employees performing the job.

2) **When the job changes.** Any time there is a change in the job, whether in method, materials or machinery, the JSA should be reviewed and appropriate changes made.

**Develop ADA-Compliant Job Descriptions of Available Temporary Tasks**

It is recommended that temporary duty tasks be developed by the accident coordinator in conjunction with the departmental supervisor for each job in the company. These tasks should have the following characteristics:

• any job that was analyzed during the JSA process;
• the task is another job function to be filled by a new employee or transferee;
• the task is another job function that is identified as a possible position that can be occupied by an employee coming back to work under the return-to-work program.

This analysis should be updated and reviewed at least annually or whenever operations change.

Another key area to evaluate is the extent to which the safety and health inspectors have been properly trained to do this important task. Many times, the problems companies experience with respect to the timeliness and thoroughness of their safety and health inspections can be traced directly to how well the inspectors were trained.

**Get the Claim Process on the Right Track**

A study commissioned by the California Commission on Health and Safety and Workers’ Compensation evaluated the information and assistance services for injured workers (Dembe, et al., 2003). The study obtained information from focus groups of injured workers. The focus groups consisted of employees from several different areas of the state who had filed with the Workers’ Compensation Appeals Board and who had already resolved their claims. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain qualitative data on the perceptions, feelings and manner of thinking of users of the workers’ compensation services.

The focus group participants provided many recommendations for improving information flow and for providing help for injured workers. Most recommendations involve simple improvement in the content, form and delivery of information.

**Improve understandability and content.** Many participants believe that the information given to them regarding their claim and the workers’ compensation process was too general or not readily understandable. The most common recommendation was for information to be developed that more clearly guides the injured workers through each specific step of filing a claim. Such information should tell the injured worker where to go, what to do and the anticipated time involved for each stage of the claim.

**Provide a mix of oral and written information.** Because not all employees comprehend written information well, it was recommended that information also be given orally. Recommendations included the conducting of individual or group sessions or even showing instructional videos similar to those used for safety or sexual harassment prevention training.

**Ensure appropriate timing of information.** Participants emphasized that more information regarding workers’ compensation law, claims procedures and dispute resolution should be provided at the time of employment. Participants also indicated a need for more complete information and guidance immediately following injury.

**Make information easy to obtain.** Many participants reported being unable to obtain needed information or reported obtaining needed information only after expending considerable time and resources.
Recommendations included making a wide range of workers’ compensation information available to employees. Some recommended methods for distributing the information were through posting at work, the mail or via the Internet or company intranet.

**Provide sufficient follow-up.** Many participants felt that injured workers should be provided individual help in completing forms. Also, participants were of the opinion that workers should have individual support and/or representation made available to them, such as a counselor, social worker, paralegal or legal-aid attorney.

**Treat injured workers with respect.** Many of the focus group participants felt that the employer, insurance company, claims personnel, doctors, counselors and others were rude, insensitive, cold, bureaucratic and even threatening. Participants recommended that they be treated with more respect and not assumed to be filing fraudulent claims.

**Clarify and enforce obligations of employer and insurser.** Many group participants said that employers should inform injured workers about their rights. In addition, participants believed that employer representatives needed to become more knowledgeable about the workers’ compensation system.

Successful companies are proactively communicating with their injured workers while they are off on disability. This starts the first day the employee is injured and includes an explanation of what to expect from the claim process, how medical bills will be paid and whom to contact for questions.

Many successful employers also require the injured employee to bring a physician packet to all medical providers. This packet explains the company’s temporary duty process to the medical provider and asks for information on the employee’s physical capabilities. The company then takes proactive steps to obtain additional medical information and to match up available temporary tasks when they are medically appropriate.

**Conduct Prompt & Thorough Accident Investigations**

The philosophy behind successful accident investigation procedures can be summed up as follows:

• All accidents have causes. Eliminate the causes to prevent future accidents.

• Causes of work-related injuries can be determined.

• It is possible to develop and implement appropriate corrective action, which will eliminate the cause(s) and prevent similar accidents.

• Accident investigations are a fact-gathering exercise, not a fault-finding exercise. Approach accident investigations from the point of view that “one of our own” has been hurt on the job. Pointing fingers only causes resentment and fears of punitive management action. Neither attitude fosters teamwork and a sense of common purpose.

A successful accident investigation has many common characteristics:

**Prompt medical attention.** As mentioned, the first action should be to make sure that first aid and other medical attention is provided to the injured employee and to take whatever steps are necessary to shut down machinery and processes so that other employees will not be hurt or additional property damage will not be incurred. The injured employee’s health and welfare are the first responsibility and concern in the event of an injury.

**Prompt initial investigation.** The supervisor should conduct the initial investigation and should make observations while they are fresh in the minds of those involved. Conduct the investigation as quickly as practical after the accident has occurred. Their initial observations and recommendations are absolutely critical to fully understanding what happened, learning from the experience and taking the proper steps to avoid it from happening again.

**Demonstrate genuine concern.** Prompt and fair handling of the situation demonstrates genuine concern for the safety and welfare of employees. In this way, departmental employees will look up to the disability team as people who take decisive action that is in their best interest and whose first concern is their health and safety. Departmental employees will take pride in working for someone who shows genuine concern for them.

While it might seem obvious that work-related accidents should be investigated immediately, it is not uncommon for considerable time to elapse before a thorough investigation is carried out.

Work-related accidents should be investigated as soon as possible for the following reasons:

**Facts are fresh in the minds of witnesses and those involved in the accident.** Memories begin to fade over time. Investigate the accident while facts are fresh in the minds of those who witnessed the accident to best be able to understand exactly what happened and what can be done to correct the situation in the future.

**Witnesses have not had a chance to talk and to influence others’ thinking.** It is human nature to talk with fellow employees after an accident has occurred. What one person actually saw becomes influenced by what other people saw, as well as what they heard. Investigate the accident as soon as possible after it occurs to be able to evaluate the individual perspectives before they become influenced by another’s opinions and hearsay.

**All physical conditions remain the same.** It is not uncommon to have the equipment or accident site cleaned up or repaired shortly after the accident has occurred. However, once this is done, it will be impossible to study the equipment or accident site. In such situations, it is difficult to determine what “unsafe acts” or “unsafe conditions” were present at the time of the
accident. Conduct the investigation as soon as possible to study the equipment or accident site before it is cleaned up. Take pictures if appropriate.

**People are still available for interviewing.** If the accident occurs near shift changes or breaks, people may leave the scene. It is always better to catch them before they leave while their memories are still fresh.

Quick response will show departmental employees that management is sincerely concerned for their welfare. Nothing will demonstrate lack of interest in departmental employees’ safety and health more than being indifferent to employee injury, not acting swiftly to find out what happened and not determining what can be done to prevent the accident from happening again. Their confidence in the safety and health program will be lost if swift and concerned action is not taken.

**Show consistent compassion & concern while the injured employee is on disability**

The majority of lost-time injuries ultimately involve an attorney, and the employee is off work far longer than necessary. Neither situation is to the employee’s or company’s benefit.

Successful companies have developed a system to keep in periodic touch with the injured employee. Specifically, the supervisor and/or accident coordinator should initiate contact with the injured employee at least weekly the entire time that s/he is off work. Some companies send get well cards, flowers and other signs of genuine concern.

Also, when the employee has been assigned to a temporary duty, it is important to monitor his or her progress. This helps ensure that the employee does not overexert himself/herself and cause further injury. The employee should feel wanted and genuinely cared for.

**Closely track & document all temporary duty activities**

Anyone who has been involved in the process of filing work-related disability claims, monitoring the injured employee’s progress and eventually securing the employee’s release to temporary or full duty knows that many activities are part of the process. Also, many people are involved, both inside and outside the company. Successful companies have developed reliable ways of closely monitoring all activities involved with the process.

Document all conversations and situations with an objective eye. All conversations with the employee, physician and supervisor should be documented. Usually, any documented activity will have a follow-up activity. Successful companies use a diary system to keep track of the various details and activities of a particular case.

There are no shortcuts here. The accident coordinator will normally have many details to attend to and will need to coordinate between the multiple players in a given situation.

**References**


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