



SCMIT

South Carolina
Municipal Insurance
Trust

Developing a Return to Work Program

A Step-by-Step Program Implementation Guide for SCMIT
Members

INTRODUCTION

For the past several years, SCMIT has encouraged its members to develop Return- to-Work (RTW) programs for their injured employees. Frequently known as “light, modified, transitional, or temporary duty,” these programs are designed to facilitate an injured worker’s return to the workplace as soon as feasible following a work related injury or illness.

The primary functions of all RTW programs are: (1) to provide a temporary workplace accommodation allowing an injured or disabled employee to return to work with a physician’s approval and under certain conditions known as “work restrictions” and; (2) to minimize the emotional and economic impacts to all parties involved. Studies have shown that both the human and financial costs of injury are significantly reduced with RTW programs. It is encouraging that most physicians and occupational medical providers are cooperating with employers on RTW issues by providing the medical/work conditions by which an employee can return to work. The infamously vague “light duty” slip is being replaced by specific work restrictions.

RTW programs vary in their structure, deployment, and performance. These variations reflect member commitment and determine the outcome (life span/costs) of a particular injury/illness claim. It is important to remember that RTW is designed to be a short-term accommodation for the injured employee with flexible time frames and schedules (based on injury, physical ability, limitations, skills, responsibilities, etc.).

Essential to the success of RTW programs is promotion throughout the SCMIT membership and within each entity down to the department level. Everyone should be aware that not only are “transitional duty” positions available, but that the process is encouraged and supported by management.

The key players on the RTW team should include the injured employee, the member RTW coordinator, the supervisor, the SCMIT claims adjuster, and the medical provider.

Communication between members of the RTW team is essential.

RTW coordination begins with the initial injury report and based on the follow-up medical evaluation, the RTW coordinator and the injured employee’s supervisor will coordinate the necessary modifications to the employee’s “regular” job or, if necessary, arrange for alternative duties.

DEVELOPING A RETURN TO WORK (RTW) PROGRAM

PROGRAM CRITERIA

Commitment to the RTW program must be shown to exist at all levels of management and, most importantly, with top management. Management support can be expressed in two ways:

- 1. Appointing a RTW Coordinator**
- 2. Establish Written RTW Procedures**

A written policy statement will ensure that supervisors know what is expected of them in implementing the program. The level and quality of your entity's commitment to managing the RTW process determines the overall effectiveness of the program. A written policy outlining your program should be provided in an employee handbook.

APPOINT A RTW COORDINATOR

A coordinator must be appointed to administer the RTW program and should have a working knowledge of South Carolina's Workers' Compensation Act. It is also necessary for this person to have senior management status with organization-wide scope of responsibility (i.e., Human Resources Director, Finance Director, Assistant City/Town Manager, etc.).

The primary goal of the coordinator is to facilitate RTW activities, which involves activities of the injured worker, supervisor, physician, and SCMIT claims adjuster. The most critical benchmark in preventing an indemnity lost-time claim is returning the injured employee to a full transitional duty assignment within seven days following the injury/illness. The RTW coordinator's role is to openly communicate with the injured employee, physician, and SCMIT claims adjuster throughout the process. The coordinator should have the authority to evaluate, plan, develop the RTW procedures and monitor the implementation of the program. Although the physician controls the work status decision, the RTW coordinator can greatly influence the entire process.

ESTABLISH WRITTEN PROCEDURES

Written procedures should be established to outline the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved in the RTW processes. These include:

- A) The Injury/Illness Reporting Process**

The most critical point in the management of any workers' compensation claim is the day of the injury. The member's/supervisor's response on the day of the injury significantly determines the nature, duration, cost, and eventual outcome of a claim. Members must have a strictly enforced, fast and accurate reporting system for injuries. This means employees must report injuries immediately to their supervisors who, in turn, must report the injury to the coordinator to initiate the RTW process.

It is important for the supervisor and RTW Coordinator to stay in contact with the injured employee to check on condition, extent of injury, and prognosis for return to work. Having a plan prepared in advance assists all members of the RTW team by identifying their duties and responsibilities, should the need arise.

Managers/Administrators and supervisors at all levels of the organization have a responsibility to help manage workers' compensation claims costs and to assist employees' return to the workplace as soon as it is medically appropriate.

B) The Medical Treatment Process

Members are encouraged to contact their medical providers and treatment facilities before an injury occurs so that they can become familiar with your RTW process. Provide sample modified duty assignments and job descriptions. Coordination and communication with the employee's treating physician and other health care providers is a key element of an effective RTW program.

Have the injured employee's supervisor and the RTW coordinator communicate regularly with the claimant's health care providers and the SCMIT claims adjuster. Remember that health care providers play a dominate role in determining the employee's medical condition, capacity to perform work, and the restrictions to be observed.

C) The RTW Process

RTW coordination begins with the initial injury report. The receipt of a medical status report from the treating physician is essential if the member is focused on preventing an indemnity/lost time claim. In South Carolina, indemnity begins after a seven (7) day waiting period. Upon receipt of the medical work restrictions, if any, the member must evaluate the availability of transitional duty within the physician's work restrictions. The transitional duty assignments should be able to accommodate almost any injury/illness situation.

The official existence of thorough job descriptions identifying the relevant skills, experience, and physical demands of employee positions should be maintained. The job description can help the treating physician determine if the injured employee is able to return to the same job, or if restrictions may apply. Job descriptions should be reviewed periodically.

SCMIT members should also develop, over a period of time, sample transitional duty assignments (see Appendix A and B) that allow the injured employee to return to a productive, meaningful position without further injury. By providing transitional duty assignments you can **reduce**:

- The length and complexity of the employee injury
- The duration of disability payments
- Member's experience modification rating, resulting in premium savings

SUMMARY

Remember, it is important to educate supervisors that it is a win-win solution to bring employees back to work while they are recovering from illness and injury instead of having them sitting at home. The member's active participation in the RTW program significantly affects the employee's return to work perhaps more than any other factor. Success in the RTW endeavor is guaranteed if you implement the strategies as outlined.

Implementation will result in returning injured workers to a more productive lifestyle that allows them to be more positive about themselves, even with limited capacity. In addition, the benefits derived of more productive employees and lower workers' compensation insurance costs will accrue to the member.

As always, RMS staff is ready to assist you in developing your RTW program. If you have any questions, please contact either:

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Appendix A – Sample Transitional Duty Assignments

Appendix B – Return-To-Work Task Bank

(Source of Information: Rhode Island Interlocal Risk Management Trust)

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE TRANSITIONAL DUTY ASSIGNMENTS

Gaining the support of supervision is a critical component of a return-to-work program. First-line supervisors are the “key” individuals in the process and their support is essential in the identification and offering of temporary transitional duty assignments for injured employees who are unable to perform their regular jobs.

SCMIT has identified the following Sample Transitional Duty Assignments that may be used for transitioning employees back to work to full capacity. Most of these temporary duty assignments have minimal physical demands and are meant to be meaningful, productive, and able to be performed by temporarily disabled employees.

1. Assist with clerical and general administrative duties
2. Answer telephones, perform telephone follow-up, and dispatch radio messages
3. Research issues and write reports as directed by management
4. Participate and/or assist in training
5. Perform data entry, if qualified
6. Update building bulletin boards
7. Clean and polish vehicles and/or equipment
8. Clean buildings and inspect for necessary repairs
9. Maintain, clean and repair equipment
10. Perform minor building maintenance as needed
11. Sweep/wash floors, vacuum, clean windows/bathrooms and perform light custodial duties
12. Conduct building surveys and inspections
13. Minor equipment repair, if qualified
14. Painting walls using roller or brush
15. Grounds maintenance using self-propelled walk behind or riding mower
16. Drive pick-up truck to deliver parts and supplies to co-workers
17. Flagger on construction projects
18. Inventory street and traffic control signs
19. Inventory tools, equipment, parts and supplies
20. List/mark street signs, parking signs, etc., to determine need for repair
21. Make signs
22. Perform miscellaneous sweeping or raking
23. Perform road and sidewalk inspection
24. Pick up litter around ball fields

APPENDIX B

RETURN-TO-WORK TASK BANK

One of the best methods for reducing workers' compensation costs is having a Return-To-Work (RTW) program in place. Return-to-work or "light duty" is designed to return the injured employee to the workplace as soon as it is medically reasonable to do so. This reduces the amount of time an employee is out from work and, as a result, workers' compensation costs are reduced as well. Obviously, RTW is not for everyone as some injuries may preclude an employee's return to *any* active work. RTW is intended to be temporary in nature; that is, it is generally for the length of time an employee is out on temporary disability.

The most common reason given by employers for not implementing an effective Return-To-Work program is not having any "light duty" jobs available. The key to solving this dilemma is to think in terms of *productive tasks* as opposed to complete *jobs*. Survey each department in your entity for tasks that they would like to have accomplished but have not been able to do due to time limitations, inadequate staffing, cost constraints, etc. List these tasks in the worksheet below, providing enough information so that the tasks may be matched against an injured employee's medical restrictions.

Ideally, you want to place the RTW employee in his/her department, however, this is not always possible. In those situations, a better match may exist in another department. Bottom line – the employee is doing productive work, needed tasks are being accomplished, and compensation costs are being reduced.

Description – list the assignment and provide a brief description.

Type – indicate whether an existing job, a task, special assignment, project, etc.

Duration - estimated length of time the assignment will last (ex. 3 hrs./day; 5 days/week for 4 weeks).

Location – the department or shift during which the work will be performed.

Remarks – indicate the type of restriction this task might accommodate or similar information (ex. "can be performed while sitting" or "can be accomplished using one hand").

DESCRIPTION	TYPE	DURATION	LOCATION	REMARKS