

When Employees Get Injured On the Job

This "Quick Guide" contains information and tips on what to do when an employee is injured on the job, how to determine length of an injury, and handing transitional duty. The source is the [2012 Workers Compensation Management Program: Reduce Costs 20%-50% book](#).

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The First 24 Hours are Critical

Each operation must have a written post injury response describing what happens -- the exact steps -- within the first 24 hours after an injury. It is important to make the time to reassess and evaluate your current post injury response procedure before the company begins to go astray from best practices.

Defining a post-injury procedure is one of the first things to do when making changes to the workers' compensation process because it is important to have the process in place before developing materials.

Use a worksheet to develop a post-injury response procedure for your company's specific culture.

- Begin by documenting what actually happens when a work-related incident occurs.
- Jot down the steps that occur after each injury.
- Then compare these steps to the ideal steps in the Post-Injury Response Best Practices Procedures.

At this point, you can identify gaps: without the right post injury process medical only claims will turn into lost time claims.

Staying in Touch with the Injured Employee

Management and the injury coordinator must stay in touch with injured employees who are on Transitional Duty (TD) or out of work. Here are some approaches the injury coordinator can use to stay in touch.

- **First Day Phone Call**

Begin collecting information about the incident; this should be casual and the injury coordinator should ask open-ended questions. Our [book](#), describes a First Day Phone Call to speak with your injured employee. You get a feel for the employee's attitude, the kind of care received from the medical provider, and the prognosis. You also have an opportunity to express care and concern as you inquire about whether a prescription benefits card is needed and transitional duty is possible.

Setting the proper tone is important, so use both informal and formal communication during the time an employee is out of work. This provides clear guidelines and expectations.

- **Get-Well Card**

Sending a simple Get-Well Card conveys employer concern for the welfare of the employee, plus it does wonders by lifting the injured employee's spirits.

- **Invite Employee Participate**

Often out-of-work employees lose touch with work and become "psychologically disemployed" so

keep them involved. They tend to see themselves as set apart from the job even though their employer continues to assume financial responsibility for them. Bring them on board by including them in work-related activities like safety meetings and company picnics. Stay in touch by ensuring injured employees attend weekly meetings and continue to participate in work-related functions to the extent they are physically able to do so.

Estimating the Duration of an Injury: How long should the recovery period last for an injured employee?

Try to determine from the beginning, how long it will take an employee to return to work in transitional capacity, or to full duty and to maximum medical improvement (MMI).

Adjusters have resources to determine the normal length of disability. You can use these tools also.

- Ask your claims adjusters how they estimate the length of disability.
- Guidelines are approximate recovery times based on injury severity.
- If the injury duration guidelines state the length of time for the injury is one week and your employee's physician says the employee will be out for five weeks, a disparity may exist.

However, there may be complicating medical factors as well. Every medical situation is different. Conditions such as diabetes can compound the length of recuperation.

If a disparity in the timeframe exists, ask your medical department to call the treating doctor to discuss the case doctor-to-doctor.

If the treating doctor has prescribed an extended time out of work, perhaps the doctor is unaware your company has a transitional duty program designed to accommodate all temporary restrictions.

Get Employees Back to Work with Transitional Duty

Transitional duty is important to workers' compensation management to avoid the negative consequences that result when employees are out of work for a long time, such as:

- Employees become physically deconditioned and lose marketable employment skills.
- Employees become psychologically "disemployed" and disassociate from their identity as employees.
- Out-of-work employees often become clinically depressed.
- The employee's routine changes to one no longer including a regular daily work routine.
- Indemnity payments increase and claims become more expensive.
- Attorneys become involved.
- Employees are afraid of being re-injured.
- The permanency award is likely to be higher.

Transitional Duty Checklist

Consider the following tips:

1. **Do not violate union contracts.** Work closely with the union. Ask the business agent or steward what level of assistance the union is willing to provide.
2. **Customize jobs** for frequent restructuring to accommodate the employee's increased capacity and reduced limitations.
3. **Integrate transitional duty positions** into mainstream operations so the employee does not feel isolated.
4. Employees on TD should not be eligible for overtime.

5. **Have the employee work a normal shift** so no transportation or childcare problems occur.
6. Companies with medical departments have **all employees work the day shift** so their progress can be monitored.
7. **Consider paying full wages**, even for partial work hours to avoid paying lost wage benefits.
8. **Obtain employee's feedback** about the TD position.
9. Employees on TD must **participate in weekly meetings** until they are back on full duty in their original job.
10. **Communicate your program to the workforce** so it becomes part of your company's culture.
11. Always discuss TD in a positive way.
12. The idea of "light duty" as an unproductive program is passé. Employees on TD are part of the team, just like before.
13. **Have the employee continue therapy** and medical treatments while on TD to ensure continued recovery.
14. When a TD job or task is identified, specify the position in writing on the **Transitional Assignment Form (TAF)**, including the hours and location of the new position.
15. **Have the employee bring the TAF to the supervisor** of the department where TD work will be done.
16. **Monitor the employee** to ensure no duties beyond the WAF's listed physical parameters are performed.
17. **Record meetings** on the Weekly Meeting Guidelines

Other Indemnity Cost Containment Services: Work Hardening

Sometimes the extent of an employee's injury is such it requires a more hands-on approach to returning to work. If you cannot get the employee into a transitional duty assignment, consider other options.

One of these is work hardening, "a re-conditioning program usually taking place off-site in a job-simulated environment."

As a rule, work hardening is facilitated by members of an interdisciplinary team including physical therapists, vocational rehabilitation counselors, occupational rehabilitation specialists, and, often, psychological therapists.

- Physical requirements of the injured employee's job description are simulated.
- The employee engages in the job simulation until regaining a certain level of proficiency.
- At some point, depending on the team consensus, the employee is ready to return to work either in a transitional duty or full-time position.
- Work hardening is adapted to keep pace with the employee's changing medical restrictions.

During the work hardening program an employee follows normal work rules and work schedules; for instance, the employee arrives at the work-hardening facility dressed for work at the time he/she would normally go to work

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