

JPIASource

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ACWA JPIA Risk Management for the Water Industry

Industrial Return to Work Program

Return to Work Myths

Workers must be at 100 percent before returning to work – **FALSE**, many workers can work within their prescribed restrictions.

Injured workers just want to stay home – **FALSE**, most workers want to be engaged and back to work.

Injured workers need to be isolated from the workplace to recover – **FALSE**, studies have shown those in isolation have longer recovery times and significantly more pain.

Doctors set work restrictions on clear understanding of the employer's job needs – **FALSE**, unless the doctor has been informed of these needs, they will not know the essential job functions.



Historical Data

Between 2016 to 2021, [California Public Entities and Joint Power Authorities \(JPA\)](#) reported 565,000 cases and incurred a total cost of \$10.6 billion. This total cost was equally split between medical treatment and indemnity (wage replacement) costs.

Most injuries do not lead to lost time, and with some degree of medical treatment, most employees return before lost time begins. It is commonly understood that 5-10 percent of workers' compensation claims account for 80-90 percent of claims costs.

Studies have shown the likelihood that a worker will return to full employment with their employer is tied to the length of their absence from work. As seen in the chart from a Washington State Department of Labor and Industry report, the chance to return to full duty from an injury and illness after six months is 55.4 percent. This trend drops to 4.9 percent after a two-year absence.

An effective Return to Work (RTW) program has been shown to increase employee retention, reduce recovery time, and lower total economic costs. The RTW program has two main beneficiaries, the employee and the member, which, each plays a critical role in an effective RTW program.

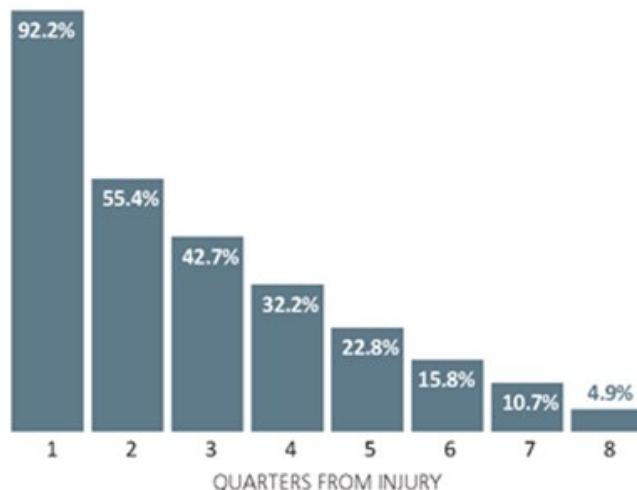
Benefits to the Employee

An effective RTW program strives to restore an individual to pre-injury work functions. Employees need to understand that the RTW is for their benefit first, with their needs kept in mind and the ultimate goal to return them to full duty. The program should focus on an employee's abilities, not their disabilities. An effective RTW will result in:

- **Faster Recover Time** – Research has shown that recovery rates improve when individuals remain connected to the workplace. In some studies, RTW programs have reduced the time back to full duty by 3-4 weeks.
- **A Better Transition Back to Regular Duty** – When the employee can remain at work, they are less likely to miss critical communications or changes to procedures. They can also participate in projects and transition to new roles as work restrictions change.
- **Retain Social Connections** – Employees who can be accommodated and remain at work can prevent the “disability mindset” that can come from not going to work, prolonging the recovery time and mental stress.

Post-injury Return to Work

Probability of returning to work in an eight-quarter period if not returned within initial three months of injury.



Source: Washington State Department of Labor and Industries

Benefits to the Member

Some leaders may see the implementation of a RTW program as labor-intensive. Yes, some initial upfront work will need to be completed to implement the RTW program, but the program's benefits far outweigh this initial discomfort.

- **Retain the Worker and Their Knowledge** – The unexpected loss of institutional knowledge is a well-documented risk our members face. If a member can accommodate an injured employee, they will retain this experiential knowledge and have it available to others.
- **Improved Relationships** – By staying engaged with an employee during their recovery, the member shows that the employee is a vital part of the team and is committed to their wellbeing. This engagement translates to staff and aids in fostering a positive and committed culture.
- **Reduced Cost** – A RTW program can directly reduce the direct and indirect costs. By having the employee participate in the RTW program, members can avoid the cost of re-training, overtime, or temporary employees. The RTW program can also aid in reducing the indemnity and medical cost of a claim, which can help reduce the impact claims have on the member's premium experience modifier (E-mod).



Resources to Develop and Implement a Program

A member agency can implement an effective RTW program by following these steps.

Draft a Program – This written program will provide the guidance and process to follow to bring injured employees that are medically able back to work while also accommodating any work restrictions. To aid members with developing their own RTW program, the JPIA has a sample RTW [program](#) and [policy](#) found on the [JPIA’s Human Resources Best Practices](#) webpage.

Identify Transitional Jobs and Tasks – Working with departments, supervisors, and staff, the member can develop a list of tasks that could be completed if they had an extra pair of hands. Commonly used strategies in this process include reduced time at a specific task, job modifications, work rotation, and adjustments to responsibilities. Members are encouraged to review the guidance and job examples found at www.askjan.org.

Select an Industrial Primary Care Clinic – Establishing a positive relationship with a local clinic and its physicians can aid in the implementation of an effective return to work program. This positive relationship can be formed by meeting with the clinic staff, and reviewing the RTW program and the commitment to returning employees to work.

Have a Point of Contact – Identify someone on staff that will submit and monitor workers’ compensation claims and the RTW program. It is recommended this designated person attend the JPIA’s Workers’

Compensation Basics training and be familiar with the [JPIA Injury/Illness Claims Reporting Kit](#).

Create and Use an Agreement Form – Have a form that outlines the start date, hours, supervisor, and end date of any modified or light-duty jobs. This form should be reviewed and updated as restrictions change by the employee, their supervisor, and Human Resources. At the 90-day mark, a discussion should be performed around possible changes to the job type, task, and time. This discussion can be conducted in consultation with the JPIA Workers’ Compensation Claims Examiner.

Call to Action

Working in groups, have staff answer the following questions:

- In your line of work, what task or job has the most significant risk of injury or stress on the body?
- What steps have been, or could be taken, to reduce the risk of injury or stresses on the body related to this task or job?
- If an injury does occur, when and to who should it be reported?
- If there was an extra hand available for a short period, what could they help with?

The *JPIASource* is not intended to be exhaustive. The discussion and best practices suggested herein should not be regarded as legal advice. Readers should pursue legal counsel or contact their insurance providers to gain more exhaustive advice.