

Injury Management **Return to Work**

Did you know that...

Many people think an injured worker must be off work to recover and that being injured is a barrier to returning to work. Others, including medical professionals, hear the word 'forestry' and conclude that there are no safe alternative duties for an injured worker to do!

However, you don't have to be fully recovered or to have finished medical treatment before you can return to work and there are usually many useful and safe alternative duties for workers.



XXX Logging 2019

Examining our views and practices...

Returning to work is not always easy, however, it is important to understand that work is generally good for health and wellbeing¹ and that long-term work absence can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing. Also, work absence tends to perpetuate itself i.e. the longer someone is off work the less likely they become ever to return. While the injured person's safety is always paramount, outcomes are more likely to be good when workers understand the health benefits of work, take responsibility and we have a good Return to Work (RTW) plan in place.

There are the 4 key practice areas:

- **Employer Responsibilities** – develop a RTW plan to assist workers when injured.
- **Injured Worker Responsibilities** – familiarity with the RTW plan and cooperation.
- **Early Intervention** – applying the RTW plan quickly and not missing out any steps.
- **Developing a Rehabilitation Plan** – alternative duties and close monitoring.

¹ The Australian and New Zealand Consensus Statement on the Health Benefits of Work.

<https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/realising-the-health-benefits-of-work.pdf>

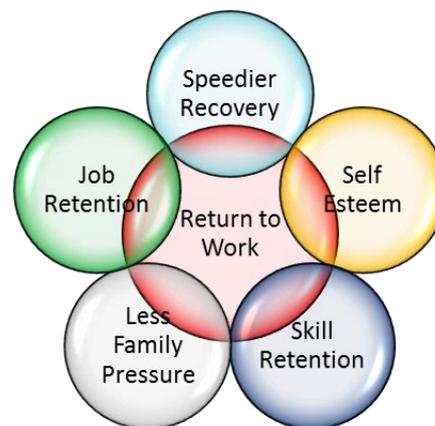


Employee Responsibilities – The essential traits that underpin good injury management are ‘leadership’, ‘proactiveness’ and ‘foresight’. An employer or manager who understands the ‘win – win’ benefits of Injury Management and RTW procedures will work hard to:

- Prepare a RTW plan and provide trainings on it e.g. during new employee inductions.
- Care for the injured employee, including driving the worker to the medical centre.
- Offer to meet with the doctor to explain the alternative duties that are available.
- Contact ACC if alternative duties will last more than 1 week and provide the case manager with all forms and correspondence.
- Prepare the workplace to receive the injured worker; re-shuffling duties if necessary.
- Develop a rehabilitation plan with the worker (what duties will be done and timings).
- Monitor the rehabilitation plan, remaining flexible to make any necessary adjustments.

Injured Worker Responsibilities – the internet has many [resources](#) that explain the benefits of RTW. Being convinced of them an injured worker is more likely to be supportive and to provide the necessary consents to make RTW run smoothly.

Early Intervention – An injured Employee may take the remainder of the injury-day to visit a doctor and to recover. The employer should monitor this initial period closely and make provisions for alternative duties to commence by the next shift if it can be achieved safely.



Develop a Personalised Employee Rehabilitation Plan – Early and purposeful communications are often the difference between success and failure. If practical, use the early stages of time, which is often spent waiting in the emergency department (or surgery) to complete system forms and to discuss the process including alternative duties.

Remember, any duty providing it is safe for the injured worker and benefits the employer business can be used as an alternative duty – [See Promapp: Develop a Rehabilitation Plan](#). Examples of duties, used successfully in the past, include first-aid training, study for an enrolled unit standard, safe behaviour observations (SBO), in-cab driver assessments.

Injury Management RTW Case Study

Struck by a branch!

A tree feller working along a fence line was preparing the felling cuts in a large edge tree in readiness for machine assistance.

As he placed the top cut into the scarf, he heard a ‘crack’ and a large branch (pictured) fell to the ground. It then rolled back and struck him in the back. The branch rolling restricted his ability to move away and he twisted awkwardly.

Thinking the worst, the crew initiated a full emergency evacuation and the feller was taken to hospital by ambulance.



What happened following the check-up?

Fortunately, his injuries were not severe – some bruising and a twisted ankle. However, the investigation team, on site first thing the next morning, noted that the tree feller was not present – he was at home with no rehabilitation plan in place!

While the contractor’s HS system had a good procedure to follow, being inexperienced with injury management, the RTW procedure had not been applied. Talking through the procedure and realising that alternative duties were both available and possible the Contractor decided to visit the tree feller at his home. Together they completed the RTW plan and the tree feller was able to restart on alternative duties that afternoon.

The rehabilitation plan commenced with a revision of training material for a unit standard (the feller was about to sit), moved to log QC and was followed by a full return to felling.

Medically Necessary or Not!

The WorkCover Tasmania ([IS-083](#)) – Time of work: what’s medically necessary? – states:

“...For most workplace injuries, time off work is not medically necessary – and ... returning to work is your healthiest option. ‘Medically necessary’ time off work means you’re totally incapacitated and need hospitalisation or strict bed rest. It may also mean that work or travelling to work is medically not advisable. This applies to both physical and psychological injuries and illnesses.”

“...Time off work under these situations ensures that the injury or illness will not significantly deteriorate, the recovery will not be delayed, and harm is not caused to the injured worker or others.”

“...Severe injuries do occur, and some injuries do result in one’s ‘functional capacity’ being affected (that is, how capable someone is of performing the tasks that are necessary or desirable in their lives). But it’s uncommon that you would have absolutely no functional capacity.”



Accommodate your Mate!

There is no absolute obligation for an employer to provide alternative duties, however, when they do, how can others at the workplace be helpful?

- Cooperate if your employer asks you to take on a different task i.e. to give your role to the injured employee.
- Be patient with the patient – they may have to work slower than normal or may be out of practice in the new role.
- Be accommodating – who knows, they may return the favour and help you out at some point in the future.