

Return-to-Work: Determining Work Options

When determining work options for injured workers, the following principles will be applied:

RTW work options must:

- be productive (contribute to the objectives or operations of the company)
- be within the medical capabilities of the injured worker
- be within the skills and abilities of the injured worker
- not endanger the health or safety of the injured worker or his/her coworkers

Hierarchy of Search:

It is recommended when identifying RTW work options a hierarchy is followed:

1. Pre-injury job modified
2. Another job or job/s not requiring modification
3. Another job or jobs with modification
4. A bundling of suitable duties

Suitable Work Options:

Alternate work is considered duties or job tasks not normally performed by the injured worker.

Alternate work can be sought from an injured worker's pre-injury department or from positions from other departments within the organization. In some cases, a RTW plan may encompass numerous tasks from many different areas of the organization bundled together. It is strongly recommended that a pre-defined pool of possible alternate work is identified by the organization for RTW planning participants to consider.

Suitable alternate work can include, but is not limited to, the following options:

• Training

Consider and move forward any new training and/or refresher courses the injured worker may have been scheduled to take in the near future.

• "4th Priority" tasks

These are tasks which are always being put on the back burner due to work demands that must be met on a daily basis. For instance, this could be taking inventory, recording equipment serial numbers for insurance or tracking purposes, organizing files or storage, getting quotes for new equipment or services, photocopying, filing etc.

• "Value Added" tasks

These are tasks not currently attached to anybody's job description in an organization but which still benefit the organization. For instance, a service organization may never have conducted a customer/client satisfaction survey before and did not have this task assigned to anybody. This task may be a suitable work option for a RTW plan.

• Safety system tasks

Consider safety related tasks when determining work options. For instance, this could include conducting a hazard identification activity, safety awareness talk, worker safety perception survey, hazard control brainstorming activity, or a safety inspection, etc.

In some cases, modifications to either the injured worker's pre-injury job or alternate work available elsewhere in the organization may need to be made to make a work option viable.

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Modification of work can include, but is not limited to, changes to the work environment, work hours, tools & equipment used and job design/work organization. Examples of modifications of work can include the following options:

- **Re-bundled tasks**

This involves modifying the worker's pre-injury job so that only those tasks within the injured worker's medical capabilities are performed by the worker (who is also performing those tasks for his/her coworkers), while the remaining tasks not within the injured worker's capabilities are redistributed among his/her coworkers. This option is only feasible if the plan is not putting the other workers at risk for injury – i.e. is not creating an unacceptable physical demand upon coworkers.

- **Graduated RTW**

This is where there is a gradual increase of hours of work and/or work activities, until the worker is able to return to either full hours or full duties. Graduated RTW may be one component of a larger plan – for instance, a worker can perform all duties of his/her original job but only for 4 hours, but could do an additional 4 hours doing less physical tasks elsewhere. Or, a worker could do only 50% of the tasks in his/her normal job, but could do those plus other less physical tasks elsewhere. (These percentages would be adjusted as the worker's condition progressed.)

Other types of modifications to consider can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Changes to the method or equipment used to perform a task:**

- lift with a portable hoist/crane rather than manually
- transport materials with a trolley rather than carry manually

- rotate worker through a variety of tasks
- conduct work from a seated position rather than from a standing position

- **Making ergonomic improvements:**

- provide lumbar support for chairs
- provide adjustable workstations (desks, tables, chairs, keyboard trays etc.)
- reorganize storage or delivery areas (to reduce reaching or stooping etc.)
- provide new tools that operate with less physical demand
- provide new tools that are ergonomically designed
- improve environmental factors (temperature, air quality, noise control etc.)
- provide other assistive aids (computer arm supports, phone head sets, briefcases with wheels, dollies, etc.)

- **Other:**

- work from an alternate location
- work from home
- different shifts
- flexible work hours
- additional rest breaks

From a proactive safety perspective, in many cases these modifications can become permanent changes and/or be available to all workers performing these duties. They can reduce the potential for many injuries, especially cumulative trauma disorders, to develop.

