Developing a Successful Return to Work Program
This white paper was developed based on the cumulative thoughts and experiences of participants in a 2008 Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) Conference panel on the subject of return to work programs. The discussion was moderated by a MetLife Group Disability Regional Director, and panelists included employee benefit representatives from several large employers that have successfully implemented return to work programs for their organizations. Throughout the discussion, audience members were solicited for their questions and experiences with return to work programs, creating a comprehensive overview of ideal program components and potential roadblocks to success. In addition to this DMEC discussion, Developing a Successful Return to Work Program was written with the input and expertise of MetLife’s own internal resources, including certified rehabilitation counselors and registered nurses with extensive experience in the return to work field. Please note that this piece is not intended to provide legal advice with respect to legal and/or compliance issues in the context of a return to work program. Employers should always consult with their own individual counsel with respect to those issues.
Maintaining productivity, quality of business and employee morale are concerns for many employers; employee disability can further complicate these issues by impacting workforce availability and employee engagement. How can you, as an employer, ensure that you are meeting both your company’s and employees’ needs when dealing with disability?

A well-designed and managed Return to Work program can help your organization meet a number of its needs, including:

- Business requirements, such as maintaining an experienced workforce, meeting productivity standards and reducing expenditures associated with the hiring and training of replacement workers.
- Employee engagement and morale, both for disabled employees and their coworkers.
- Ensuring that your company is meeting its legal obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

What is Return to Work?

The goal of any Return to Work (RTW) program is to return disabled employees to work in a safe and timely manner, when appropriate, by identifying and providing modified work arrangements that accommodate any restrictions and limitations. Accommodations can range from relatively inexpensive and easy to implement, such as simply moving an employee’s workstation to a quieter area, to the more complex, such as purchasing and installing adaptive equipment. It is important to realize that under the ADA, employers are required to make reasonable accommodations for qualified employees who might otherwise be barred from productive employment, provided the accommodations do not place undue hardship on the employer. By implementing an effective and consistent RTW program, your organization can avoid compliance issues while improving both business results and employee morale.
Key Elements of a Return to Work Program

An effective Return to Work program can help deliver significant results for your organization. What are the key elements of a successful RTW program?

A Comprehensive Return to Work Policy

The foundation of any successful return to work program is a company philosophy that supports employees and managers who seek to implement job accommodations that allow employees to resume working in a modified capacity. By fostering a company culture that embraces RTW, all associates, not just those personally affected by disability, will understand its benefits and support its usage. Regularly reinforcing consistent expectations ensures that both managers and associates incorporate RTW tenets into their daily actions.

Develop a comprehensive company RTW policy that clearly states its goals and the requirements imposed on those who seek to use it. Some key elements to include are:

- Disability plan design and contract language that supports RTW, indicating that the focus is quick, safe and effective return to work when appropriate for both the individual affected and the company.
- The consistent application of the program for both occupational and non-occupational injuries and illnesses.
- Details that define the time limit for modified duty assignments, such as a maximum of 90 days with reevaluation of progress every 30 days.
- Requirements that the disabled employee and his or her manager communicate at specified intervals of time to evaluate progress and keep the employee engaged throughout the return to work period.
- The frequency of medical certification that defines the disabled employee’s restrictions and limitations.

Management and Employee Support

In addition to a policy that clearly states your company’s RTW plan and goals, it is essential that you establish buy-in from senior leadership and management throughout the organization. Explain that an “all-or-nothing” attitude toward returning an employee to work is detrimental to the business; emphasize a flexible approach that recognizes any effort toward returning to work is better than having an employee completely out of work.

Make sure that your company’s policy describes the benefits of a RTW program as they apply to both the company and the employee.

- Highlighting productivity will resonate with managers — illustrate how having someone on RTW in a partial or limited capacity is better than the potential impact of having a job go unperformed. The goal of accommodation is to enable the employee to contribute as a productive member of the company.
• Emphasize to employees that a RTW program can potentially help them return to full capacity, and thus a full salary, by identifying accommodations that allow them to ease gradually back into the work environment. Point out that disabled employees may benefit from regular interaction with their managers and coworkers during the RTW period, helping them stay engaged and increasing morale during what is often a difficult time.

• The morale of non-disabled employees can be improved by seeing the efforts the company makes on behalf of employees with medical conditions. Additionally, they will be able to maintain focus on their own assignments by not having to totally assume the work of disabled employees who can do some parts of their jobs.

**Dedicated Resources**

While a manager and disabled employee may be able to identify some RTW job accommodations together, an ideal program includes a dedicated coordinator who:

• Utilizes a team approach to work with your corporate representatives, the disabled employee and his or her manager, the disability insurance carrier and health care provider(s).

• Understands what types of documentation are needed, and works with the employee’s health care provider(s) to obtain clear definitions of restrictions and limitations.

• Is an expert in the field, with the knowledge to identify potential job modifications, the ability to explain policy requirements and the savvy to act as both an advocate for the company and the disabled employee.

By employing a dedicated RTW coordinator, your managers and associates will always know the correct contact for RTW issues or concerns. Your coordinator will earn a reputation as a trusted resource, ultimately reinforcing your commitment to helping your employees return to work and aiding your company in growing a culture that recognizes the importance of RTW efforts.

**A Focus on Functionality**

When evaluating a disabled employee’s job for modifications that would allow the employee to return to work, focus on functionality:

• What are the employee’s functional limitations? Is he or she limited in the length of a workday? Is there a limit to the weight he or she can lift?

• What are the functional requirements of the job? Don't get caught up in how the job is performed today — outline its essential activities and do not focus heavily on marginal duties.
Define the ultimate purpose of the job, and work to identify ways the same result can be achieved within the employee’s abilities. Perhaps the job requires that the employee move 50 pounds of material. If the employee is restricted to lifting 25 pounds at one time, can the job be modified so the employee can move the material in two trips? Can the employee be provided with equipment, such as a cart, that makes moving the material less strenuous?

All disabilities are unique and must be treated as such — your RTW program needs to show flexibility and tailor modifications to meet the specific requirements, restrictions and limitations of each job and disabled employee. Utilize a case-by-case evaluation of limitations and functionality to ensure all disabled associates receive appropriate support in their efforts to return to work.

The Ability to Evaluate Results

Tracking your company’s return to work efforts and results is key to ensuring its long-term success. By quantifying and reporting the impact of the program, you can reinforce the company’s commitment to its employees and ensure the continuing support of management. What data should you be capturing? Identify:

* The percent of claims affected by return to work.
* The number of employees who return to work after a period of disability.
* Lost time or work days, which should be reduced if your program is successful.
* The duration of disability claims, which will likely decrease as modified arrangements are made available.

Monitoring the results of your RTW program will allow you to evaluate its performance and recognize any areas for improvement.

Factors That May Influence Success

Maintaining a successful RTW program requires continuous efforts to evaluate and improve its practices; be prepared to regularly review your results and identify any factors that may be impacting your program. Your program may be affected by:

* **Geographic location.** Individual state laws can impact your ability to offer and implement RTW accommodations.
* **Economic conditions.** An economic downturn may motivate employees to actively seek RTW accommodations in order to retain their full salaries. In a situation like this, it is especially important that you, as an employer, ensure the affected associates are truly able to safely return to work.
* **Employee demographics.** There will be differences in your ability to accommodate salaried, non-exempt and union employees. Additionally, job types (sedentary vs. physically demanding) and industries can impact the
potential types of accommodations. Many employers find that it is easier to modify jobs to meet the needs of employees who are disabled due to orthopedic conditions than to accommodate employees with other types of disabilities.

While you may not be able to address every outside influence, recognizing the effects they can potentially be having on your results may help you make other adjustments to your program.

What Types of Modifications Can You Offer Your Disabled Employees?

It is vital to include the disabled employee in any discussions of potential job modifications; the employee is often the best resource to explain his or her particular limitations and may be able to identify the most effective accommodations. When evaluating modifications to allow an employee to return to work, it is best to prioritize your options in this order:

1. Return to work without accommodations.
2. Return to the same job with accommodations.
3. Return to the same department but in an alternate position to utilize transferable skills.
4. Reassignment to another department in which the employee is qualified to work.
5. Placement of the employee in a high-priority hiring pool for future placement.

As you discuss job modifications with all the involved parties, provide examples of accommodations that range from simple to complex. Potential accommodations may include:

- Adaptive equipment.
- Schedule or shift changes, including part-time work.
- Relocation of the employee’s workstation to a less noisy or busy area; relocation to allow easier access to bathrooms or break rooms.
- Temporary telecommuting arrangements.
- Workstation modifications that allow the employee to alternate between sitting and standing.

Ask the disabled employee to consider these, and any additional modifications that may allow a faster and safe return to work.

For additional information on developing a Return to Work program, please visit www.metlife.com/returntowork.
The information in this update is not intended to constitute legal advice and should not be relied upon in lieu of consultation with appropriate legal advisors in your own jurisdiction.