

Expanding RTW Programs to Prevent Injury and Absence Among Older Workers

By
Sonja Teague, ARM, AIC, CPDM
VP, Integrated Absence Management
ESIS

Effective absence management solutions include stay-at-work (SAW) and return-to-work (RTW) programs offering transitional duty or alternative work accommodations after an injury has occurred. Helping employees continue to work while they complete their recovery can shorten or eliminate the need for disability leave, which may help organizations reduce costs, maintain productivity, and keep valuable employees engaged.

Employers can also use these programs proactively to help prevent injuries, especially among older employees who may struggle with the physical demands of a job. Expanding the use of SAW and RTW programs can help employers retain – and maintain the productivity of – valuable older staff members whose knowledge and experience is important to the company’s success.

The Impact of the Aging Workforce

Baby Boomers (born from 1946 through 1964) are projected to still make up 25% of the workforce by 2028. Some may decide to remain in the workforce because of a lack of retirement savings, whereas some may simply enjoy their work and choose to postpone retirement.

Retaining older workers can keep knowledgeable, valued talent available to the organization. But it can also drive up costs for workers’ compensation and short-term disability (STD) and long-term disability (LTD) claims, and increase absence durations. Older workers make up 23% of the workplace but file 28% of the STD claims and 42% of the LTD claims.¹ Older workers also experience a rate of STD-to-LTD claim conversion that is three times that of Millennials and twice that of Generation X. When that is translated to days away from work, injured workers who are over 65 can take twice as long to return to work as younger employees.²

Older workers are more likely to have underlying health issues that can affect treatment options and recovery times. Years of physical labor or repetitive motions on the job can result in musculoskeletal wear and tear that may weaken the body and leave the worker more susceptible to injury. It’s not surprising that some of the most frequent claims for employees over age 55 include rotator cuff and knee injuries. In addition, the aging process produces a decrease of muscle fibers and a reduction in muscle mass and strength that in turn drives a longer recovery period for muscle injuries.³

Modifying Jobs Before Injuries Occur

Organizations can help reduce injuries for older workers by proactively modifying jobs using

RTW and SAW accommodations before injuries occur. The changes can be simple and relatively inexpensive. For example, allow older workers to:

- Sit rather than stand during part of a shift
- Use well-designed fatigue mats if standing is required and a nearby stool or chair on which they can sit during “down time”
- Take more frequent breaks through out the workday
- Work a flexible schedule to take ad vantage of individual optimal work times
- Vary the work performed to reduce time spent in specific activities
- Work part time
- Options can also be more complex, such as ergonomically redesigning a workstation or process:
- Raise or lower work surface areas
- Provide adjustable seating
- Lower equipment to waist-to-chest level to reduce the need for reaching or shoulder stress
- Redesign equipment to minimize unsafe postures as workers enter or exit
- Improve lighting in work areas and walking paths in and around the facility
- Evaluate noise levels in the immediate work environment to ensure ample hearing capacity

- Reconfigure workstations to minimize bending or manual exertion of moderate-to-heavy force with arms away from the body
- Review walkways, walking or standing work surfaces, and stairways to ensure there are no holes, obstructions, or poor transition points that could raise the risk of a slip, trip, or fall by an older employee, and provide sufficient hand rails or grab bars wherever useful
- Avoid the need for moderate-to-high pinch forces with hands or fingers or difficult wrist angles when handling objects, handles, and doorknobs
- Make sure workstations used by multiple employees or different shifts are adjusted for each worker

Another great way to find accommodations for older workers is to ask them. Older workers may already have made their own modifications to adapt job equipment, workstations, processes, or motions to accommodate their physical limitations. These employees can be a ready source of ideas.

Don't Forget Safety or the ADA

Proactive RTW and SAW accommodations intended to reduce injury risks may have unintended consequences. If an employer changes an employee's job duties or workstation, it may be held liable for injuries that the employee claims resulted from the changes. To reduce this exposure, employers should consider contracting for a safety professional such as an ergonomist to review accommodations – especially those developed by employees on their own – for safety and conformity to best practices.

Employers should also follow the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) interactive process whenever an employee has restrictions or limitations that impact the essential job functions or leave is approved as an accommodation. You should use the interactive process for accommodations for both occupational and non-occupational injuries in order to ensure consistency and avoid any perceptions of discrimination. Adhering to the interactive process ensures that the employer is looking at the three-pronged test – is the accommodation reasonable, effective, and does not create an undue hardship for the employer – when deciding how to accommodate.

Older workers are an important resource of knowledge and talent for organizations. You can benefit from all they have to contribute by helping them continue to work safely and productively. Expanding a SAW or RTW program to include proactive assessments of the work performed by older employees can help prevent injuries, reduce the costs associated with claims and employee absence, and even boost productivity.⁴

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References

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