

RETAIN

Retaining Employment
and Talent After
Injury/Illness Network



For Your Insight:

Research and Practice From the Field

February 5, 2020

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This biweekly update highlights relevant research for RETAIN states and summarizes key takeaways that may benefit program implementation. Each summary includes a link to the article, resource, or formal abstract.

A Review of Best Work-Absence Management and Return-to-Work Practices for Workers With Musculoskeletal or Common Mental Disorders

Durand, Corbière, Coutu, Reinhartz, and Albert (2014) conducted a review of the literature related to best practices in “work-absence management and return to work [RTW] practices” for work absences related to musculoskeletal (MSK) disorders or common mental disorders. The authors analyzed 17 documents—including guidelines, systematic reviews, papers, research reports, and book chapters—to highlight “the importance of organizations adopting a health and job retention policy that subscribes to a worker support approach and includes a work-absence management process.” The authors proposed a process for stakeholders, including “workers, supervisors, co-workers, senior management, the persons responsible for work-absence management, and union representatives,” to facilitate RTW processes for those returning to work from MSK- and mental-disorder-related absences. The process includes “(1) time off and recovery period; (2) initial contact with the worker; (3) evaluation of the worker and his job tasks; (4) development of a return-to-work plan with accommodations; (5) work resumption; and (6) follow-up of the return-to-work process.” The authors then describe the roles and responsibilities for each type of stakeholder that may be involved in these RTW processes. The authors conclude that even though the proposed processes detail the steps involved in supporting RTW, future research of interventions is still necessary “to evaluate the implementation, effects, and cost-effectiveness of such a process.”

Abstract available: [Durand, M. J., Corbière, M., Coutu, M. F., Reinhartz, D., & Albert, V. \(2014\). A review of best work-absence management and return-to-work practices for workers with musculoskeletal or common mental disorders. *Work*, 48\(4\), 579–589.](#)

Tags: organizational policy, work disability, RTW processes

The Promise of Better Economic Outcomes for Workers With Musculoskeletal Conditions

From 1981 through 2015, the number of people awarded Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits due to disability caused by MSK conditions more than quadrupled (Anand and Ben-Shalom, 2017). In this brief, Anand and Ben-Shalom (2017) explore (1) possible explanations for the increase in SSDI claims for people with MSK conditions, (2) evidence-based interventions to help people with MSK conditions stay at work, and (3) whether the described interventions would be successful in other contexts (work environments). The authors describe several factors that may contribute to the rise in the number of people with MSK conditions receiving SSDI benefits, including the aging population, “fewer well-compensated jobs for workers with [fewer years of] education ... tightened eligibility standards for workers’ compensation ... the rise in the value of SSDI benefits for low-skilled workers ... and the rise in health care costs.” In addition, “there has also been a trend toward more job displacement, particularly in manufacturing,” a higher prevalence of obesity, and an increased use of opioid medications and invasive surgery to treat MSK conditions. The authors describe several existing interventions to help people with MSK conditions stay at work, including a program in Washington State that matched people with health services coordinators, an Australian public service campaign that aired commercials about proper treatment for low-back pain aimed at physicians, and randomized controlled trials and systematic literature reviews that focus on interventions for workers with MSK conditions to improve “functional and work outcomes.” The authors conclude with a discussion about whether similar interventions explored in this brief should be pilot-tested by the federal government, state governments, philanthropic foundations, and other stakeholders “to examine whether these interventions are effective in contexts other than those that have already been tested.”

Issue brief available: [Anand, P., & Ben-Shalom, Y. \(2017\). *The promise of better economic outcomes for workers with musculoskeletal conditions* \(Issue Brief\). Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College.](#)

Tags: MSK conditions, RTW interventions

Effective Accommodation Practices (EAP) Series: Monitoring Reasonable Accommodations

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) created this resource to help employers seeking to draft policies and processes to guide employers and employees through the accommodation process. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act requires that reasonable accommodations be made available for covered employees, JAN notes that no standard or required *processes* exist to support developing “accommodation solutions” for employees. JAN’s interactive accommodation process includes six steps: (1) recognizing an accommodation request, (2) gathering information, (3) exploring accommodation options, (4) choosing an accommodation, (5) implementing the accommodation, and (6) monitoring the accommodation. The authors describe the importance of continuing to monitor the accommodation, stating that this final step is often overlooked, when it should be seen as its own ongoing process, because it is “important to ensure that accommodations continue to be effective after implementation.” The document also explains five steps to consider when monitoring an accommodation: (1) check on effectiveness, (2) maintain the accommodation, (3) encourage ongoing communication, (4) restrict medical inquiries, and (5) document findings. The document also includes a link to sample forms that can guide employers to monitor an accommodation.

Resource available: [Job Accommodation Network. \(2018\). *Monitoring reasonable accommodations.*](#)

Tags: accommodation plan, employers, injured workers

Competencies for Effective Program Evaluation and Quality Assurance in Vocational Rehabilitation

Sabella, Grooms, Markve, and Shoemaker (2018) surveyed 43 program evaluation and quality assurance (PEQA) experts specializing in vocational rehabilitation (VR) to identify competencies necessary for successful PEQA in state VR. The authors define *competency* as “the ability to perform the necessary functions of an occupation and successfully cope with the naturally occurring contingencies inherent in all jobs.” The primary competencies identified included (1) skills in methodology and data analysis; (2) interpersonal skills and effective communication; (3) having “a thorough understanding of the complexities of the state-federal system”; (4) project management skills; and (5) critical thinking, which is a skill comprising “problem solving skills, creative thinking, objective decision-making, and reflective practice.” The authors conclude that it is “vital for [the] PEQA practitioner to be well balanced and well rounded in their knowledge and skills in the primary competencies that allow them to be successful.”

Abstract available: [Sabella, S. A., Grooms, D. A., Markve, M. E., & Shoemaker, M. T. \(2018\). Competencies for effective program evaluation and quality assurance in vocational rehabilitation. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 84\(3\).](#)

Tags: continuous quality improvement, program evaluation, quality assurance, competencies, performance management

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