

For Your Insight: Research and Practice From the Field

November 4, 2020

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This monthly update highlights relevant research for RETAIN states and summarizes key takeaways that may benefit program implementation. Each summary includes a link to an article, resource, or formal abstract. An accessible version of For Your Insight is attached to this email.

Working With Stakeholders in Return to Work Processes: Multisystem Interactions

This chapter by Shaw (2015) focuses on the different return to work (RTW) priorities of different stakeholders involved in helping injured workers return to work, including healthcare professionals, social services, vocational rehabilitation, benefit coordinators, managers, and coworkers. These divergent priorities lead to a “lack of a shared view as an active player or contributor in the return to work processes.” To improve stakeholder interactions, Shaw recommends five reflection steps for working collaboratively with ill or injured workers:

1. *Reflect on the circumstantial nature of RTW.* Companies involved in RTW—such as healthcare, insurance, and social services—are constantly changing; it is important for different stakeholders to be aware of any changes and to reflect on how those changes may affect RTW practice.
2. *Reflect on your organizational priorities regarding RTW in the context of RTW collaborative practice.* Identify the priorities of other stakeholders involved in a worker’s RTW and any potential for engaging collaboratively to support RTW.
3. *Critically reflect on current best practices in stakeholder involvement in RTW processes and the need for targeted stakeholder participation.* Many best practices foster stakeholder interaction; it is important to reflect on how these practices may strengthen the collaborative process and improve RTW outcomes.
4. *Identify ways to create shared RTW goals with other stakeholders involved in the RTW process.* These goals should reflect how to work toward making positive changes in RTW processes, practices, and action.
5. *Evaluate and reflect on effective processes and strategies to achieve RTW success.* These strategies may emphasize effective collaborative teamwork in solving RTW issues.

Shaw concludes that stakeholder collaboration on RTW practices not only helps create a shared view of RTW processes but also makes RTW processes more efficient for injured workers.

Abstract available: [Shaw, L. \(2016\). Working with stakeholders in return to work processes: Multisystem interactions. In I. Schultz & R. Gatchel \(Eds.\), Handbook of return to work. Handbooks in health, work, and disability \(Vol. 1, pp. 327–336\). Boston, MA: Springer](#)

Tags: RTW, stakeholder engagement, work related injuries

The Importance, Measurement, and Practical Implications of Workers' Expectations for Return to Work

Young and colleagues (2015) examine the relationship between the RTW expectations of injured workers and work outcomes by reviewing 42 existing work expectation measures. The authors found little consistency on how researchers measured expectations for RTW. Many of the expectations for RTW measures are based on self-report of feelings, worries, and beliefs rather than what workers expect to happen. Many of the measures also provide no time frame for RTW, which is critical for gauging RTW expectations, because a time frame enables injured workers to base their expectations on projected RTW dates. Finally, terminology is used inconsistently across measures, thus limiting whether different measures can be interpreted the same way. The authors recommend that future work expectation measures include questions focused on (1) the individual's expectations for RTW, (2) the estimated time frame for RTW, and (3) the individual's certainty of their RTW estimate. The authors conclude that knowing RTW expectations can aid risk prediction, improve the RTW process, and improve understanding of future work outcomes.

Abstract available: [Young, A. E., Besen, E., & Choi, Y. \(2014\). The importance, measurement and practical implications of worker's expectations for return to work. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 37\(20\), 1808–1816](#)

Tags: RTW, work expectation measures

Understanding Motivation to Return to Work: The Economy of Gains and Losses

This chapter by Choi and colleagues (2016) focuses on the importance of understanding what motivates RTW by developing an understanding of the balance between gains and losses. Gaining an understanding of this balance is especially important for healthcare providers seeking to help injured workers return to work. The authors describe gains and losses in terms of primary and secondary. A *primary gain* is the relief from anxiety or guilt that a person feels due to the presence of an injury or illness. For example, a worker may feel guilty about being unable to stay on task at work, but their mental stress may decrease because they know their injury or illness explains their inability to stay on task. A *secondary gain* is a social advantage attained through a primary gain. For instance, an injured worker may view financial compensation as a social advantage because they are being paid without having to work. A *primary loss* is an event that leads to a life disruption. For example, prolonged grief from the death of a loved one or a divorce may disrupt one's ability to work. *Secondary losses* develop because of a primary loss (e.g., less time spent with friends due to mourning of a loved one). Symptoms of gains and losses may include delayed recovery, psychological distress manifesting as physical symptoms, depression, and faking an illness or injury. To help individuals manage gains and losses, healthcare providers should (1) establish rapport and trust, which are essential to the therapeutic relationship; (2) involve a disability case manager who understands the concepts of gains and losses; (3) and help the person become aware of the long-term financial consequences of disability. The authors conclude that understanding the motivations behind gains and losses is crucial for healthcare providers seeking to help these individuals return to work.

Abstract available: [Choi, Y., Asih, S. R., & Polatin, P. B. \(2016\). Understanding motivation to return to work: The economy of gains and losses. In I. Schultz & R. Gatchel \(Eds.\), *Handbook of return to work. Handbooks in health, work, and disability* \(Vol. 1, pp. 67–79\) Boston, MA: Springer](#)

Tags: RTW, mental health

Workers' Compensation Keeping Injured and Ill Workers in the Workforce

This report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (2019) reviews policy topics related to federal and state compensation systems, including (1) minimizing long-term work absences, (2) disability benefits, (3) transitioning back to work, (4) employer incentives, (5) mental health coverage, and (6) coordinating services across state agencies. For minimizing longer term absences, full-time RTW drops by 55.4% after a 6-month work absence, which highlights the importance of timely and effective treatment services and support. In addition, minimizing longer term absences from work can be complicated by federal disability benefits, such as built-in income caps that may discourage RTW. For disability benefits, 46 states provide temporary or partial disability benefits, which "generally last until employees return to full employment at their previous wage, or until the

treating physician determines they have reached their maximum medical improvement.” If a physician determines that the injury is a permanent impairment, then the worker may qualify for permanent partial or permanent total disability benefits. Permanent partial disability benefits are usually calculated based on the type of impairment, whereas permanent total disability (i.e., the worker is incapable of basic work functions) can receive a recurring lifetime benefit. Workers with permanent total disability may also qualify for both workers’ compensation benefits and federal disabilities. Strategies such as developing a transition plan can facilitate the RTW transition and reduce work absences. A transition plan may consider reduced working hours, alternative or adjusted work responsibilities, and workplace modifications. For employers, states may offer incentives in the form of discounts on workers’ compensation insurance premiums to help injured workers return to work. Mental health coverage is included in most state workers’ compensation laws; however, the “worker must be able to prove the mental health condition is directly work-related,” which can be difficult to demonstrate. Coordinating services across agencies may help reduce work absences. For example, Washington state’s Centers for Occupational Health and Education, which helps coordinate services among the worker, employer, insurer, and healthcare provider, is one approach to improving cross-agency collaboration.

Report available: [National Conference of State Legislatures. \(2019\). Workers’ compensation: Keeping injured and ill workers in the workforce. Denver, CO: Author.](#)

Tags: Workers’ compensation, disability benefits, RTW

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