

## For Your Insight: Research and Practice From the Field Vol. 34

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This bimonthly 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 e-mail.

### Return-to-work success despite conflicts: An exploration of decision-making during a work rehabilitation program

Gouin (2019) looked at the influence of stakeholder decision making on return to work (RTW) for workers with musculoskeletal conditions and common mental disorders. This article reviewed data from multiple case studies and interviews to document the RTW decision-making process among stakeholders, including injured workers, healthcare professionals, employers, unions, and insurers.

Overall, the authors identified four primary components of the decision-making process: (1) the subjects of the decisions (i.e., the injured worker), including treatment options, RTW program components, and administrative aspects (i.e., the basis for compensation); (2) the stakeholders' concerns related to the rehabilitation or RTW process; (3) the stakeholders' power, or how one stakeholder may try to influence another when conflict arises among stakeholders (i.e., insurers demanding that rehabilitation programs follow their board's rules); and (4) the types of decision making involved—that is, whether the decision is consensual, negotiated, or imposed. Two types of decision making were found to be essential to RTW success: all stakeholders (1) agreeing on an RTW goal and (2) accepting an intervention plan in which tasks align with the worker's capacity. To ensure that stakeholders reach a consensus on RTW goals and tasks, rehabilitation professionals should look for potential conflicts that may hinder agreement among stakeholders.

Abstract available: [Gouin, M. M., Coutu, M. F., & Durand, M.J. \(2017\). Return-to-work success despite conflicts: An exploration of decision-making during a work rehabilitation program. \*Disability and Rehabilitation\*, 41\(5\), 523–533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2017.1400592>](#)

Tags: RTW, rehabilitation, decision-making

### Preparing for an Employee's return to work after prescription drug misuse

This fact sheet from Preventing Prescription Abuse in the Workplace Technical Assistance Center (n.d.) describes options for employers when an employee has misused prescription drugs. Employers should have a written policy that outlines next steps if an employee violates a drug-free workplace policy that prohibits the use of some prescription drugs, such as opiates. Employers also should review all their policies to ensure they follow local, state, and federal laws.

The fact sheet describes three categories of employer policies: (1) continuing employment of the employee in violation, (2) termination of the employee with the possibility of being rehired, and (3) termination with no possibility of rehiring. The first two policies rely on the employee "obtaining a substance misuse evaluation from

a recognized expert and successfully completing all of the evaluator’s recommendations.” Employees in federally regulated, “safety-sensitive” positions who misuse substances must be evaluated by professionals who have specialized training.

Another option for employers is to use employee assistance programs to help with substance misuse evaluations and to monitor an employee’s compliance with treatment and RTW recommendations. For employers who continue employment or rehire the employee, other options include offering (1) access to health insurance, sick leave, and short-term disability benefits; (2) alternative therapies to pain management, such as therapeutic massage and mindful meditation; and (3) temporary work accommodations. Employers with termination-without-rehire policies must have clear definitions of the unauthorized prescription drugs and a strong written policy that supports management’s ability to enforce that policy.

Full text available: [Workplace Technical Assistance Center \(n.d.\). \*Preparing for an employee’s return to work after prescription drug misuse.\*](#)

Tags: RTW, prescription drug misuse, employer policies

## **Workplace improvements to support safe and sustained return to work: Suggestions from a survey of workers with permanent impairments**

Sears and colleagues (2021) identified workplace factors to (1) support RTW for workers with permanent impairments and (2) summarize workers’ suggestions to improve and promote RTW. Five-hundred eighty-two workers who returned to work after a work injury completed the survey.

The most common theme to support RTW was for employers to implement safety precautions and create a safer workplace. To improve workplace safety, surveyed workers suggested that management make safety programs an organizational priority and ensure safety enforcement. The second most common theme was for employers to ensure adequate staffing and appropriate task distribution. Specifically, increased teamwork may alleviate task distribution, but understaffing may be a barrier to increased teamwork. The third most common theme focused on safety culture, such as perceived attitudes toward safety rather than established safety programs. Workers recommended that “management place a more constant and meaningful focus on safety and safety awareness in the workplace, ensure better two-way communication about safety practices and hazards, and develop better accountability systems to ensure safety.” The authors conclude that policies and interventions based on workers’ suggestions may lead to better RTW outcomes.

Abstract available: [Sears, J. M., Edmonds, A. T., MacEachen, E., & Fulton-Kehoe, D. \(2021\). \*Workplace improvements to support safe and sustained return to work: Suggestions from a survey of workers with permanent impairments.\* \*American Journal of Industrial Medicine\*, 64\(9\), 731–743](#)

Tags: RTW, safety

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