



Work Disability Prevention: A Guide for Employers

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THE FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESSFUL WORK DISABILITY PREVENTION

There is a strong connection between the health and wellbeing of people and their work environments. When people feel valued, respected and satisfied in their jobs and work in safe, healthy environments, they are likely to be more productive and committed to their work. This approach is the foundation for successful work disability prevention when a worker is injured or ill.

Work Is Important

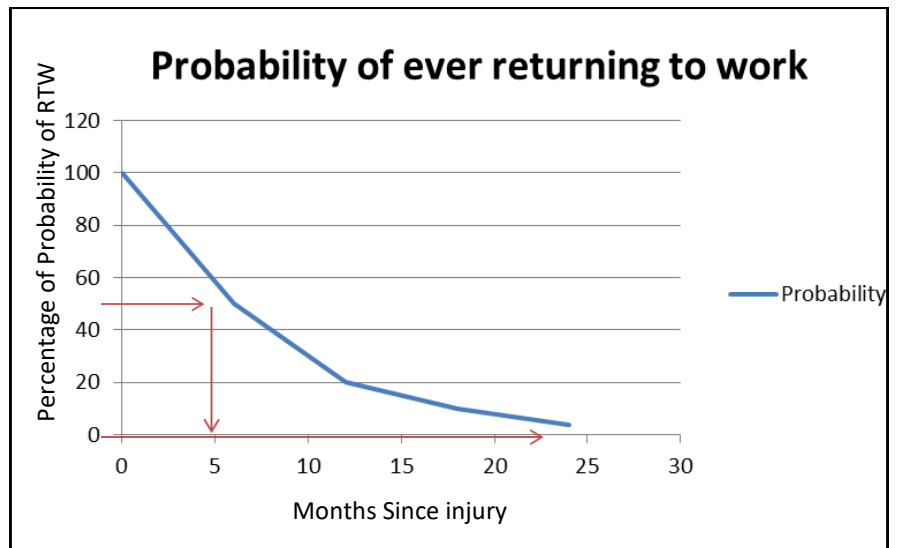
Work is an important part of life and fundamental to one's sense of wellbeing. It provides a sense of dignity, accomplishment, and provides value to the community and to society. There are also the tangible benefits of income, learning and participating in the goals of an organization.



THE COST OF ABSENTEEISM

Many people believe that being away from work after an injury or illness can decrease stress and promote healing. In reality, evidence supports that recovering at work can be better for most workers. In many ways, workplace injuries and illnesses hurt both workers and employers.

The [National Institute of Disability Management and Research \(NIDMAR\)](#) estimates that at any given time, 8 - 12% of Canada's workforce is absent due to illness or injury. At just 6 months from date of injury or illness the probability of someone ever returning to gainful employment is only 50% if they do not remain connected to their workplace. By 2 years that number drops to less than a 5% probability ([Dr. E Rumack, Occupational Physician](#)).



Source: Dr. E Rumack, Occupational Physician

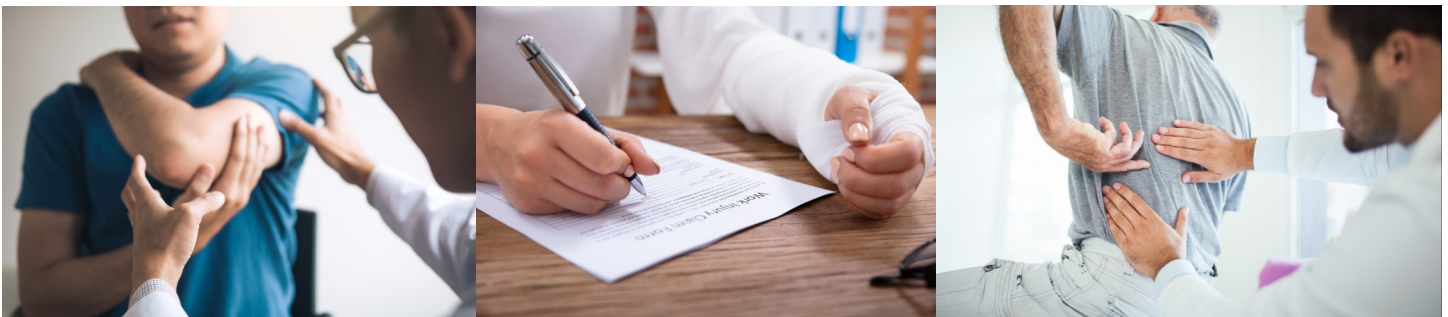




In recent years, employers have seen increases in short and long term disability assessment rates. As well, accident costs can escalate WCB premiums. In fact, many companies spend at least 10 percent of their total payroll on direct assessment costs. On top of that, research shows that for every dollar spent on direct costs related to work disability, an equal amount is spent on indirect costs including overtime, additional supervision, hiring and training costs, and loss of productivity. These indirect costs occur when a worker is off work due to a workplace injury or illness also.

The Conference Board of Canada report “Missing in Action: Absenteeism Trends in Canadian Organizations – 2013”, estimates the direct and indirect cost of absenteeism to the Canadian economy is \$30 billion per year. A summary of this report can be found [here](#).

Absenteeism creates disengagement in the workforce. [Gallup’s State of the Global Workplace \(2017\)](#) states that highly engaged business units realize 41% lower absenteeism and 17% higher productivity and that engaged workers are more mindful of their surroundings realizing 70% fewer safety incidents.



WORK DISABILITY

Being Strategic about Work Disability

Effective prevention of work disability is becoming an increasingly important strategy in today's workplaces. Work disability occurs when a worker is unable to remain at work or return to work due to an injury or illness. Injuries and illnesses can be physical or psychological or both and every injury or illness is different.

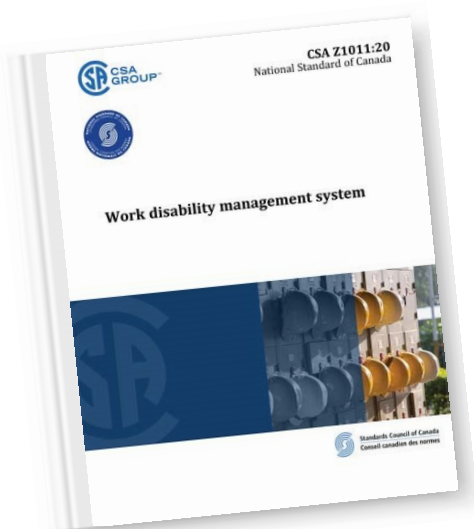


There is a growing trend in today's competitive markets, of employers intervening earlier and implementing work disability prevention strategies in an effort to minimize work disability in their organizations.

Work Disability Prevention

For the purpose of this guide the terms “work disability management” and “work disability prevention” are synonymous with each other.

In 2020 the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) released a comprehensive standard titled, “*Work Disability Management System*.” This document outlines, in detail, steps required for employers to have a best practice Work Disability Prevention Program. The standards framework is introduced in this guide and is the most current and evidence-based approach to work disability prevention for employers. The full standard document can be purchased [here](#).



The standard advocates that, “A proactive, coordinated, and organization-wide approach to work disability management is needed to minimize risk and optimize operational outcomes.” The standard suggests that, “Effectively managing disability in the workplace requires a systematic approach where policies, processes, procedures, and practices are clearly defined, evidence informed, and are reviewed periodically to ensure they are relevant.”

WORK DISABILITY PREVENTION PROGRAM

A Work Disability Prevention Program (WDPP) is a proactive approach designed to support workers remaining at work while they are recovering from an injury or illness, as well as keeping workers connected to the workplace to help them get back to work as quickly and safely as possible. People who stay connected to the workplace after an injury usually have a faster recovery.

Employers with a WDPP invest in prevention programs and strategies, so that they are prepared to support their workers in their recovery and stay at work (SAW) or return to work (RTW), if an injury or illness occurs.

Investing in work disability prevention is the best and most practical way to protect your business against work disability and is one way to emphasize and promote workplace wellness. This program can provide your workers with the support they need for a healthy recovery and timely return to work.

The standard includes a business case for implementing a WDPP. It provides some reasons why implementing a WDPP is good for business. This includes:

- ✓ reduced risk of costly disability-related human resources and financial losses;
- ✓ optimal engagement, workforce productivity and business continuity;
- ✓ positive impact on staff morale and loyalty;
- ✓ reduced risk of human rights litigation; and
- ✓ positive effect on workers' personal lives.

Developing a WDPP for your organization or business

Developing a WDPP for your organization or business will not happen overnight. It requires a proactive and committed approach to the philosophy of preventing work disability. There are a number of steps to making a WDPP a reality.

STEP 1: Ensure Management Commitment and Leadership:

Effective prevention of work disability starts with commitment and engagement from the organization's managers and leadership. This includes creating and assigning specific responsibilities for managers and leaders and ensuring that accountability is promoted.

Clear commitment from management for preventing work disability is imperative. Senior management must be:

- accountable for the development and implementation of the WDPP;
- provide appropriate resources;
- define and communicate roles and responsibilities; and
- facilitate and encourage worker participation.

All workplace stakeholders and each level of an organization have a shared responsibility to prevent and mitigate work disability. The organization should ensure that there is worker participation in the program; providing workers with the opportunity to identify barriers to SAW or RTW, opportunities for workplace accommodations and transitional duties, and assisting with the development, management, and implementation of the WDPP.

Set clear responsibilities, accountability and authority

Senior Management responsibilities:

The standard suggests that employers designate one or more representatives to ensure that a system is established. It recommends that these representatives should have defined roles, responsibilities, accountability and authority and that anyone involved in establishing the program should have the time and resources to effectively participate in its establishment, implementation and maintenance. The standard lays out responsibilities for the organization and for workers:

Organizational responsibilities:

The organization is responsible for:

- encouraging stakeholders to work collaboratively;
- ensuring timely access to information including accommodation and return to work;
- ensuring relevant workplace committees are engaged, and all relevant stakeholders are informed, consulted and given opportunities to participate;
- ensuring supervisors have the skills and ability to respond to workers' health needs including supporting the accommodation and return to work process;
- ensuring that workers' rights to privacy are respected;
- providing an inclusive and accessible workplace; and
- developing WDPP policies and procedures in consultation with workers and other relevant stakeholders.

Worker participation:

Worker participation is essential for the success of a WDPP, including active participation in treatment, rehabilitation, SAW and RTW processes. Workers can actively participate by:

- selecting health care that addresses their needs. WCB can support workers in this process, if necessary;
- identifying and reviewing opportunities for workplace accommodation. No one knows the job duties better than workers;
- identifying potential barriers to SAW or RTW. WCB can assist with identifying and working through barriers;
- assisting with planning the SAW or RTW process. This requires a collaborative approach and the worker is a key player in this process; and
- assisting with the establishment, implementation, evaluation and maintenance of the WDPP as appropriate. Involving workers in the system will aid understanding and agreement.

Foster an inclusive and accessible workplace:

Creating an inclusive and accessible workplace is crucial to the success of a WDPP. Employers should:

- encourage confidential disclosure of disability, discomfort and ill health, as appropriate;
- meet the needs of workers using a case by case approach;
- establish and maintain a procedure to assess, identify and implement accommodation needs of workers;
- ensure inclusive recruitment, hiring and onboarding procedures;
- foster a workplace culture that recognizes and values all workers, respects diversity and equality and treats workers with respect and dignity; and
- proactively address any known or systemic barriers and unconscious bias.

Have clear policies and procedures:

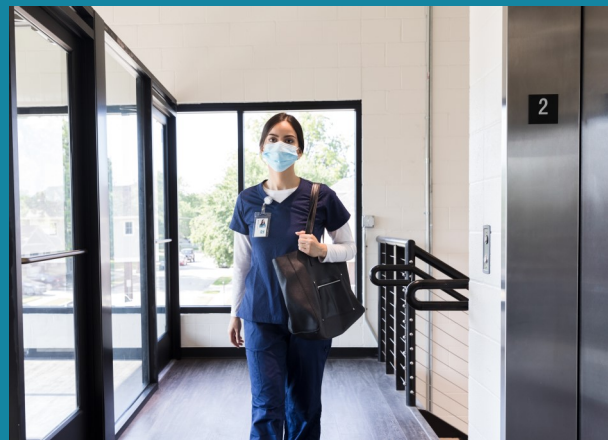
Senior Management should consult with workers and other stakeholders to establish, implement and maintain policies and procedures that will be the framework for the WDPP. The WDPP can be part of a general health and safety program or can be a stand-alone program.

Policies should:

- satisfy legal requirements. The [Workers Compensation Act](#) (Section 86) provides legislated responsibilities for employers related to return to work following a workplace injury or illness.
- be appropriate to the size and nature of the organization.
- set objectives and targets for the program.
- set out a process for continued improvement.
- be available to all workers and other interested external partners.

Procedures should:

- ensure compliance with legal requirements.
- document a clear process for timely communication between the organization and a worker following an injury or illness.
- ensure individualized accommodation and SAW and RTW practices that are considerate of the range of possible biopsychosocial factors that may pose challenges and that are consistent with applicable safety, employment and accessibility legislation and standards.
- Promote recovery , optimal health and performance
- Minimize risk to other workers
- be in harmony with other relevant internal and external procedures, programs and agreements that may impact a worker during the employment lifecycle.
- be available to all workers and other interested external partners.



STEP 2: Planning:

“The planning process is necessary to review current internal and external practices and resources, identify existing gaps, establish objectives and targets appropriate for the organization and develop an action plan to achieve them. This is a critical step towards successful work disability management implementation and includes a commitment to continual improvement. Planning not only provides a clear understanding of the strengths and improvement opportunities within the organization’s current state, it enables the development of a vision for the future state. With well-defined objectives and targets, the organization will know what is to be achieved, as well as when and how. Each organization creates an action plan that reflects its unique realities and outlines action steps that fit organizational capacity. The planning process also provides an early opportunity to bring together all key internal stakeholders.” (CSA Z1011:20).

The planning process should:

- review internal policies, processes, programs, procedures, practices and resources.
- ensure that key stakeholders have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to conduct an effective review.
- use a biopsychosocial approach to identify gaps, barriers and opportunities in internal policies, procedures, practices, programs and resources.
- include completion of a needs assessment.
- set objectives and targets and establish an action plan.
- provide for periodic updates of the WDPP.

STEP 3: Implementation:

“Implementation of the work disability management system in accordance with an orderly and well-thought-out plan is essential to the success of the system. It is important that those who are tasked with administrative functions are competent and diligent in carrying out their role. Closely monitor the roll-out of the system in order to quickly identify any potential problems or gaps and address these in a timely fashion.” (CSA Z1011:20) To implement an effective WDPP it is important to have the infrastructure and resources to fulfill key obligations as well as work disability preventative and protective measures such as:

- health promotion and education;
- review of extended health benefits;
- health and safety inspections;
- incident and investigation reporting;
- early detection process for workers at risk of work disability;
- proactive availability of information and resources;
- early accommodation;
- absence identification; and
- early contact with injured or ill workers.

Accommodation:

Accommodating workers in a SAW or RTW process can significantly reduce work disability. Here are some guiding principles for employers in creating SAW and RTW plans:

- Respect your workers privacy and focus on functional information that will guide accommodation.
- Have a process for early intervention with appropriate resources to support your workers
- Offer your worker information about resources for recovery, stay at work and return to work
- Support timely and appropriate access to treatment for your workers, including offering [Direct Access to Physiotherapy](#)
- Ensure appropriate and timely communication and collaboration with your worker and other relevant stakeholders. Remember, any communication must respect your workers privacy and dignity.
- Ensure that your worker understands the roles and responsibilities of all relevant stakeholders

The Importance of Early Work Connection:

A strategic and proactive approach to helping workers stay at work or return to safe and productive work as soon as possible following an injury is the key to preventing unnecessary work disability. A WDPP enables employers to be prepared and ensures that modified or transitional duties and/or graduated work schedules are available to help workers continue to be at work while they are recovering from injury or illness.

The longer a worker is out of the workplace, the more complex recovery can become.

Research supports that workers who stay at work doing safe, modified or transitional work following an injury, recover more quickly. This also protects workers against the negative consequences that can develop when away from employment for prolonged periods. Studies show that the longer workers are off work, the less likely they are to return to work. Being away from work increases the physical and psychological impact of workplace injury.

The CSA standard is clear that Transitional/Modified duty programs that result in SAW or RTW are a crucial component of the WDPP.

Early Work Connection can be facilitated by:

- creating a process for reporting injuries/illness at the workplace and seeking medical attention (physician, physiotherapist, and chiropractic assessment) as soon as the injury occurs. Injured workers can access timely assessment and treatment through WCB's [Direct Access Program](#) ;
- creating a list of comprehensive modified/transitional work options that focus on the worker's abilities and offers safe and appropriate duties as early as possible following the injury/illness;
- communicating regularly with the worker, and collaborating with them when developing modified/transitional work plans. Developing a RTW plan is not something that we do FOR a worker, but something we do WITH them.

It is important that supervisors maintain regular and respectful communication with workers while they are off work, while they are performing transitional/modified work, and after they have returned to their full duties.

Creating generic plans based on the key job functions for each job or group of jobs is a solid starting point that can be individualized to meet the needs of a recovering worker, based on functional or psychological limitations and restrictions.

If your worker cannot perform regular job duties because of an injury or illness, the WCB will work with employers, workers, and treating health care providers to formalize a RTW Plan. The plan will outline how the worker can safely return to meaningful work.

Options for a RTW Plan include a gradual increase in hours over a period of time, exposure therapy, transitional or modified duties, identification of other suitable work, or work conditioning to build strength and stamina. The plan is individualized and unique to each worker.

Modified/Transitional work can include:

- changes in job tasks or functions (for example: less bending or lifting);
- changes in workload (hours/day, schedule);
- alterations to the work area and environment (office/shop) or the equipment used;
- work normally performed by others;
- cross training or job shadowing;
- work that needs to be done, but you currently do not have an employee assigned to it.

When considering a task for modified or transitional work it is important that you consider whether the task is:

achievable – given your worker’s injury, are they physically or psychologically able to do the task

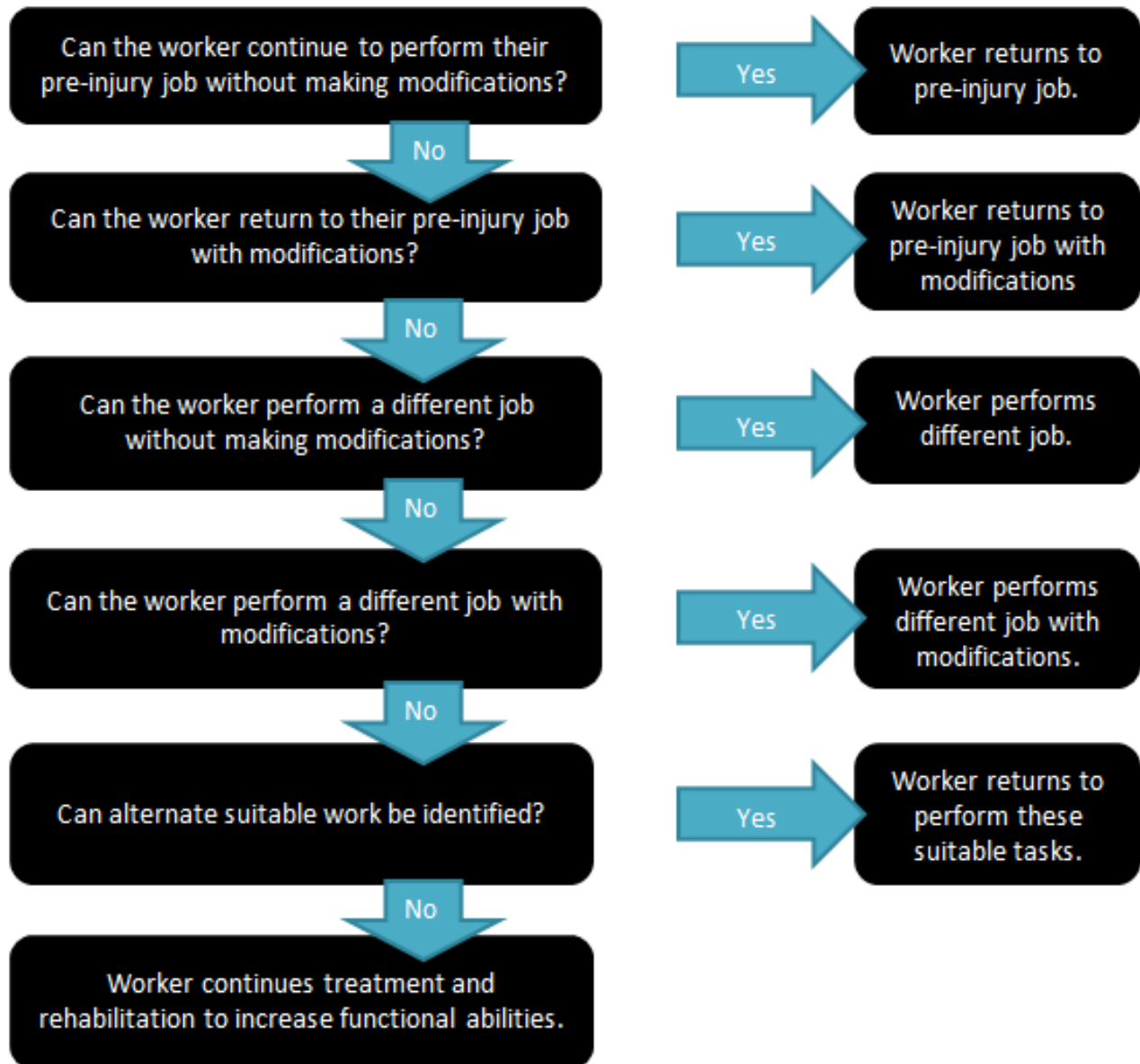
constructive – your modified/transitional work plan should contribute to your worker’s skill development and return to full duties

safe – your modified/transitional work plan should not endanger your workers recovery or the safety of others

productive – your worker’s duties should be meaningful to the organization



To identify modified or transitional work, follow the steps below:



At each step, review the job demands and compare to the worker’s current abilities. Identify the barriers that prevent SAW or RTW and determine if you can implement modifications to overcome the barrier.

Recovery at work is a collaborative process between workers, employers, and health care providers. Following a “work as therapy” approach helps people recover faster and return to work and normal life sooner.

If possible, try to identify duties that maintain the worker’s connection to their usual work area

You can also take the following steps to support recovery:

1. *Talk with the worker as soon as possible.*
Make contact soon after the injury or illness to inquire about the workers wellbeing and offer your support. The relationship workers have with you and their supervisor(s) is the key to a successful RTW and a faster recovery.
2. *Ask the worker what duties they can do.*
Be flexible, and plan modified/transitional duties together. Consider what would be safe and suitable for the injury or illness. To support recovery, the duties must be achievable, safe, productive/meaningful and constructive.
3. *Document the plan.*
Give the worker a copy of the plan and send a copy to WCB. The worker should share and discuss the plan with their health care provider to get recommendations for safe activities that could help the recovery.
4. *Collaborate with the worker and their health care provider.*
Let them know what modified/transitional duties are available for the worker. Encourage everyone to focus on what the worker can safely do. Meet with the worker at regular intervals. Collaboratively develop a RTW Plan that progresses the worker back to full duties and full hours. Modify the plan as needed. Check to be sure there is a progression toward full regular duties.
5. *Keep the worker connected to the workplace.*
It helps recovery. Include injured or ill workers in staff meetings, special events, training or even coffee with co-workers to keep them involved and connected to work.

The Importance of Good Communication

When a workplace injury occurs, employers must report this to the WCB within 3 days of being informed of an accident. This responsibility is outlined in the [Workers Compensation Act](#) . You must understand what is required of you during the claim process and assist your worker to SAW or RTW safely. Getting an injury or illness assessed by a health care provider as soon as possible, is a crucial component of preventing work disability. If you need assistance determining the best type of assessment, WCB can help.

SAW and RTW plans require consistent and accurate internal communications among workers, managers/supervisors and worker representatives. Collaborative communication enhances the relationship between the workplace, treating health care and rehabilitation service providers and WCB case workers.



An effective communication process should include:

- Orienting new workers to your organization’s injury reporting process;
- Taking advantage of WCB’s Direct Access program to ensure timely assessment of the workplace injury;
- Discussing SAW and RTW options (modified/transitional duties, ease back) with the worker and the worker’s health care providers to facilitate a safe and timely return to work;
- Scheduling regular check-ins with workers throughout the recovery and RTW process;
- Maintaining regular contact with WCB staff to ensure you are up to date on the current SAW or RTW plan;
- Maintaining contact with workers who are off work as a way of ensuring an ongoing connection to the workplace.

This guide provides best practice in work disability prevention. There are also legislated responsibilities that employers must meet. Section 86 of the [Workers Compensation Act](#) lays out responsibilities related to employers cooperating in return to work. The Act states:

An employer shall cooperate in the early and safe return to work of a worker injured in his or her employment by:

- a) contacting the worker as soon as possible after the injury occurs and maintaining communication;
- b) providing suitable employment that is available and consistent with the worker’s functional abilities and that, where possible, restores the worker’s pre-injury earnings;
- c) providing the Board the information it may request concerning the worker’s return to work; and
- d) doing such other things as prescribed by the regulations during the period of the worker’s recovery.

Medically Necessary Work Disability

Of course, some people do need a longer period of time away from work as part of their recovery. They may have serious injuries requiring hospitalization or surgery, have sustained a psychological injury as a result of exposure to trauma, or a need for frequent, complex medical treatments. Even in these cases, returning to some type of work in some capacity, as soon as possible, helps with recovery and the overall health and wellness of the worker, and reduces the incidence of injury recurrences. In some cases, a return to a workers pre-injury work following an injury or illness may not be possible.



Employers have further responsibilities under Section 86 of the Workers Compensation Act regarding their duty to accommodate workers who are injured or ill. Some important excerpts are:

86.1 Obligation to *re-employ*

Where a worker:

- a) has been unable to work as a result of an accident; and
- b) has been employed by the employer, at the date of the injury, for at least 12 continuous months, the employer shall offer to *re-employ* a worker in accordance with sections 86.2 to 86.11

86.5 Accommodation of work or workplace

An employer shall, to the satisfaction of the Board and in order to fulfil the employer's obligations pursuant to sections 86.1 to 86.11, accommodate the work or the workplace to the needs of a worker who requires accommodation as a result of the injury to the extent that the accommodation does not cause the employer undue hardship.

The duty to accommodate injured and ill workers in the workplace is not an option, but a requirement under Canadian federal and provincial laws. The Canadian Human Rights Commission indicates that when an employer is approached with a request for accommodation, they are expected to:

- determine what barriers might affect the person requesting the accommodation;
- explore options for removing those barriers; and
- accommodate to the point of undue hardship.

STEP 4: Monitor, Evaluate and Continually Improve

“Monitoring and evaluating enables the organization to identify successes, opportunities to intervene, reduce risks and increase efficiencies. It also ensures effective implementation of your program and enables continual improvement.” (CSA Z1011:20)

This can be achieved by:

- Setting targets, tracking performance, and analyzing effectiveness
- Ensuring availability of ample financial and human resources
- Gathering data
- Creating an improvement process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A HEALTHY WORKPLACE



An important defense against work disability is to create an organizational culture that promotes Healthy Workplaces. Creating an organizational culture that promotes health and wellness will be a key to the success of your WDPP.

Research shows that workplaces demonstrating a caring attitude for the health and wellness of their workers are likely to have greater success in positively impacting the socio-economic cost of disability.

Workplaces that promote health and wellness and have programs in place to support this, have actively determined the needs and interests of workers and have involved them in the development. Effective programs are characterized as having leadership commitment, and results-orientated strategies for motivating all parties to participate. These workplaces also equip their workers with ongoing support to maintain healthy lifestyles.

Critical to the success of a WDPP are the structure, design and effectiveness of an organization's accident prevention and safety programs. Safety policies and procedures must be top priority for both workers and management. In progressive organizations, there is a close relationship between all parties in the execution and administration of safety and wellness initiatives.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Workers Compensation Board of PEI understands the importance preventing work disability and the positive impacts a Work Disability Prevention Program can have on Island workplaces.

For more detailed information on how to plan, design, implement, and maintain a best-practice work disability prevention program please consider investing in the CSA's Work Disability Management System [document](#), CSA Z1011:20.

The [Work Wellness Institute](#) also has some excellent free resources and e-courses for employers on how to support workers returning to work after injury or illness.

Need help or don't know where to start? Please call us at 902-368-5680.

