

Industrial Medicine Article

I recently read an article in the PT Advance about how Industrial Rehab Programs offered by Physical therapists help employers return their injured employees safely back to work. I thought this information would be of value to share with you.

It is common knowledge that our workforce is aging. This in and of itself may contribute to the rising cost of work-related injuries. Furthermore, with unemployment rates raising to double digit figures many workers are afraid of speaking up if they begin to experience difficulties on the job, or they may rush back to work before they fully recover from an injury. This places both themselves and their co-workers at risk and exposes the employer to increased liability dangers-something no company wants to face. As such, some company directors are willing to pay for expert guidance from physical therapists that are skilled in the area of Industrial Medicine. By providing objective job analysis information to physicians and company officials, physical therapists can help these companies make better informed decisions and help workers avoid injury-again, something all employers can support.

The Problem:

Many employers do not have a formal program in place to identify employees who are at risk for work injuries. In addition to this, there is also no formal program outlined to detail return to work criteria.

The Objectives:

1. Help employers develop a formal program to identify workers who are at risk for work injuries.
2. Design a formal program to identify job analysis data so that the physical demands of an individuals job is accurately matched to their physical capabilities.

In performing countless job analyses over the years it is surprising to uncover the level of the hidden physical demands required in various jobs. There are often infrequent tasks, changing job paces, suboptimal physical environments, coworker concerns, and improperly maintained equipment and tools that can wreak havoc on worker health.

The Solution:

1. Clearly detail a process to identify workers who are experiencing injury as a direct result of work activities.
2. Outline a process to direct these employees to gain the medical attention that is needed to return the worker safely to work.
3. Provide the management and medical personnel responsible in making return to work decisions with the tools and data necessary to make informed decisions. This is accomplished through job analysis, physical capacity tests and job coaching.

Case Study:

Michigan's Wayne County employees 4,400 full-time workers in a variety of positions. They implemented a formal return to work program in 2007. Approximately 45 employees took place in the program. The goal of the program was to evaluate the physical demands of the injured employees' occupation with an objective job analysis. A patient's physician receives the analysis report so that they can match current physical capacities with required job demands. They hired their local physical therapist skilled in industrial medicine to conduct these functional evaluations. In performing these evaluations it was discovered that there were a number of uncovered physical demands hidden within the employees' jobs. These demands were not necessarily listed in the employees' job descriptions. Like most work situations, although job duties among the workers are similar, there was a high degree of worker prerogative regarding positioning, pacing, body mechanics and set-up. In these cases it is important to know the physical demands dictated by the job itself as well as how the worker chooses to perform those duties.

Doing the Job Analysis:

With a variety of workers doing a wide variety of job functions, it would be easy for one to see how difficult it would be for a physician to make a return to work recommendation without accurate job analysis data and accurate capacity measures. However, using the information contained within a job analysis report coupled with a functional capacity evaluation, a physician can confidentially place an employee either in a previous position or in a transitional job with the goal of reconditioning.

Thorough job analysis provides benefits beyond the return to work criteria. Job coaching is another avenue to promote safe workforce re-entry. Physical therapist providing job coaching can stress the principles of injury prevention, proper pacing, body mechanics, symptom management and early detection. As physical therapists skilled in injury prevention and detection, we can recommend ergonomic modifications when appropriate and seek collaboration with safety engineers and risk management divisions to maximize resources.

Presenting information to key management personnel such as disability managers can lead to company-wide initiatives designed to heighten worker safety and limit damaging work behaviors.

Return-to-work programs do more than bring valued employees back to their positions safely. They also open the doors of communication regarding disability, injury and job function. Employers take an interest in adjusting the physical capacities of a job to the potential of a work force. Disability managers make sure that employees do not stray outside their job restrictions, and job coaching reflects current safety guidelines and ergonomic principles.

The Result:

Following the implementation of the Wayne County program, managers found a new found appreciation for the difficult work performed by their employees and used the job analysis reports to reflect on safer ways for the employees to perform their work. Out of the 45 participants in the Wayne County program 42 of them returned to full duty, retired or were in litigation. This resulted in a savings tens of thousands of dollars per week in direct and indirect costs to the county.

During difficult economic times, it may seem counterintuitive to spend money to save money. But the tangible and emotional costs of employee injuries can be too much for cash-strapped businesses to bear. By spending on preventative measures and a solid return to work plan, everyone wins.

Many thanks is offered to Karen Williams for the knowledge and information she offered for this article.