**Creating a Return to Work (RTW)/Stay at Work (SAW) Program**

Making the decision to create and implement a RTW/SAW Program in your company is a huge step in the right direction to enhance your safety program. An effective RTW program sets up injured workers for success when an injury or illness occurs. It outlines how the employer is prepared to assist them through their recovery by providing modified or alternate duties that fit their current functional abilities. The RTW program outlines the RTW team, a group of people working together with the injured or ill employee, to ensure the work that is being provided is safe, meaningful, and productive.

When employees become injured or ill at work, a large part of their recovery will be feeling supported by their employer through the process. A well-designed program is key to ensuring that your employees feel comfortable returning to work and completing the tasks assigned.

Below are some definitions to explain the difference between a Return to Work (RTW) and Stay at Work (SAW) program.

**Return to Work (RTW)**: This program is designed for employees who have lost time due to an injury or illness in the workplace. The objective is to review information submitted by health care professionals and find appropriate and meaningful ways to bring the employee back into the workplace in a safe manner.

**Stay at Work (SAW)**: This program is designed to intervene early in the injury or illness and work with the employee to keep them in the workplace while they recover. Ideally, in this program, there would be no lost time.

There are many benefits to the employee and employer with an effective RTW program.

Worker Benefits:

* Maintains job security, seniority, and benefits.
* Receives the treatment needed to recover.
* Continues to perform key job skills.
* Keeps being paid regular wages or limits the amount of time collecting WCB benefits.
* Increases worker activity levels.
* Minimizes disruption to the worker’s family.
* Focuses on what they can do instead of what they cannot do.
* Maintains their confidence and helps them feel valued.
* Maintain social contact with co-workers and the workplace.

Employer Benefits:

* Maintains experienced workers in the workplace.
* Reduces productivity losses.
* Reduces costs of hiring and training new workers.
* Enhances communication between worker and employer.
* Reduces the risk of a similar incident occurring.
* Maintains morale of the workforce.
* Reduces claim costs which can reduce workers’ compensation premiums.

**Purpose of this Guide**

This guide has been developed to assist employers in creating a Return to Work (RTW) Program. You may not need to implement every piece of this guide. However, implementing some, or all the components should give your company an effective program that has a greater potential to provide you and your employees with the benefits listed above.

Some of the elements of this guide are things you can do in advance of an injury or illness, so you are prepared to handle it if it happens. By preparing in advance, you will reduce the stress on you and your employee if an injury or illness occurs. The information will be readily available for WCB and health care providers so that treatment and possible return to work options are implemented in a timely manner.

Examples of the below elements can be found on the Construction Safety Nova Scotia website: constructionsafetyns.ca. We encourage you to utilize these resources when building your program. Ensure you adapt the documents to best fit your company, so the program can be as successful as possible.

**Step One: Create an RTW/SAW Policy Statement**

The RTW Policy allows you the opportunity to express company commitment to assisting employees in a safe and timely return to work following an injury or illness. Within the policy, you may indicate what the program is, and how it will be implemented.

Identify who will collaborate to assist an injured or ill worker back into the workplace and specify their responsibilities. Identify the program goals and start to consider how they can be measured.

Once the policy has been created, ensure the employees are aware of the new program. Review the policy with them so that they can ask questions or provide suggestions on how to make it stronger. Communication with employees is critical when implementing new programs.

**Step Two: Identify Your RTW/SAW Team**

This program cannot be implemented and maintained alone. A typical team will consist of the injured or ill worker, a person designated from the company to handle the claim (may be a safety professional, human resources, or management), Workers’ Compensation Board of Nova Scotia, and health care providers (doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, chiropractors, etc.).

Develop a document that outlines what each person is responsible for throughout the process. Start with the injured or ill worker at the time of the incident. Their responsibility would be to report it immediately to their supervisor so they can begin to get the appropriate treatment.

Communication and education of all parties will be essential at this stage. We want to ensure all employees are trained on what their roles and responsibilities are if they are injured or become ill at work. Ensuring the designated person from the company understands their roles and responsibilities and knows how to work with WCB and health care providers to ensure the correct information is disseminated to the appropriate people in a timely manner is key.

**Step Three: Job Demand Analysis**

Reviewing job demands before an injury happens can save time if an employee becomes ill or injured. The information obtained can be shared with health care providers and WCB to understand what tasks fit the worker’s functional ability. This can help to identify appropriate modified or alternate duties and begin the return to work process quickly.

Each position in the company should be reviewed to determine what demand it has on the human body. While many aspects of a job can be reviewed, below are some possible considerations:

* Location of the work (e.g., office, warehouse, shop, field work etc.)
* Work alone or part of a team?
* Equipment or tools used – consider the weight, vibration, or position of body when using the equipment or tool.
* What time of day is the shift?
* What is the length of a typical shift?
* What are the typical weights that they are required to lift, push, or pull during a task?
* What positions do they need to lift, push, or pull from (e.g., floor to waist, waist to shoulder, above shoulder)?
* How often are they seated, standing, or walking throughout the course of a shift?
* How often do they need to squat, kneel, bend, climb stairs or ladders, jump, or pivot?

Maintain the job demand analysis on file and regularly review it to determine if anything has changed. For example, when new tools or equipment are brought in, this should be added to the assessment to ensure it remains relevant and accurate.

**Step Four: Create a List of Standard Precautions**

Standard Precautions are simply a list of things to avoid depending on the area of the body that is injured. This can give us a good idea of what modified or alternate duties may be assigned to the worker. For example, if someone sustains a shoulder injury, the standard precaution may be no work above the shoulder or limiting the amount of weight that person lifts to ensure we do not aggravate the injury any further.

This may be helpful with a minor injury that does not require medical attention. Using standard precautions for the injured site, we may be able to keep the employee at work while still helping him/her to recover from the injury sustained. Communicate with the employee to determine how the modified or alternate duties are feeling and adjust if they are still causing discomfort.

Standard precautions do not replace the need for medical assessment if the injury requires it.

**Step Five: Develop a List of Modified or Alternate Duties**

Creating a modified/alternate duties list in advance is ideal. Review your company’s activities and job demand analysis to determine what may be possible for modified or alternate duties. The list is going to vary from company to company, it is important to develop one that works for your company.

**Modified Duties:** adjusting the employees’ current job to accommodate the injury or illness. This should be based on a functional ability assessment by a health care professional (if available), as to not place unrealistic physical demands on the employee.

Examples of modified duties could include be allowed more breaks or performing the task sitting instead of standing. Whatever is decided, it is important to ensure duties are meaningful and productive for the employee.

**Alternate Duties:** offers the injured or ill employee with tasks that they typically would not do during their regular shift. We offer alternate duties because the task matches better with what they can do based off their functional ability. Whatever is decided, it is important to ensure the duties are meaningful and productive.

Create a form that will outline two weeks of a modified or alternate duty plan that can be reviewed with the RTW team. Update this form using the information from the most recent functional ability assessment every two weeks, this will allow everyone to be on the same page as the employee recovers from their injury. Ensure the supervisor is involved in the process so that they are aware of the potential changes to work.

**Step Six – Functional Ability Form**

A Functional Ability Form is completed by a health care provider. It summarizes the assessment to determine what restrictions may need to be put in place to protect the worker as they recover from their injury. This is an important document to guide the return to work process. The Functional Ability Form helps assign employees productive, meaningful duties that align with their functional ability and can accelerate recovery time.

WCB Nova Scotia uses a Physical Abilities Form (Form E), and health care providers can complete this form following an assessment. The form focuses on what the injured worker can do safely and lowers the chances of sustaining additional injury or aggravating a pre-existing one. This form should be updated every two weeks to re-evaluate progress. Form E can be shared with the employer and WCB as a method to communicate the worker’s current abilities so appropriate modified or alternate duties can be planned.

**Step Seven – Communication Log**

Unfortunately, some claims may take longer than we would like due to the severity of the injury. Communication is key throughout the management of a claim and staying in contact with the injured worker is important. Creating a communication log can help keep the company organized with what was discussed, when the conversation happened, and who was involved during discussions.

When an employer maintains regular contact with the employee, it often helps in the recovery process. This shows the employee the company cares about their wellbeing and wants them to return to work when they are physically ready. Having that social contact improves morale, keeps employees informed of what is happening in the workplace, makes them feel connected, and increases the likelihood of returning to work in a timely manner.

**Step Eight – Partner with a WCB Approved Service Provider**

WCB Nova Scotia has a list of approved service providers throughout the province. You can search the WCB database of approved providers and contact local clinics to generate a partnership with them. The database can be found at <https://www.wcb.ns.ca/Health-Services/Service-Provider-Directory.aspx>. The benefit to prior contact is if an injury occurs and you already have a relationship with a provider, you may be able to get in for an assessment the same day or up to 72 hours after the injury.

Did you know that in 2019, 65.2% of all lost time claims in Nova Scotia were the result of a strain, sprain, or soft tissue injury? These types of injuries have caused employers and employees significant amounts of financial strain.

WCB Nova Scotia has a “Direct Access to Early Assessment of Strains and Sprains at Work” program which allows an injured worker with a suspected strain, sprain, or soft tissue injury to call an approved service provider and receive an assessment in less time than it will take to go to a physician. Typically, an employee can get into the clinic within 72 hours of the injury. This is an incredible opportunity to have the injury diagnosed and a formal plan to return to work quickly.

**Step Nine – Implement the Program**

Construction Safety Nova Scotia is here for you if you want assistance in starting up your RTW program. Our trained Occupational Health and Safety Advisors can work with you to develop and implement your program.

Once you have your program set up, you will need to implement it. The plan needs to be communicated to all employees, supervisors, and managers so they understand their roles and responsibilities in helping to implement the program. Give them the opportunity to provide suggestions for improvement and be involved in the process.

Regular communication of the new program is essential for it to be successful. Talk about it at toolbox meetings, health and safety committee meetings, or any other opportunity you have. The more informed employees, supervisors, and management are about the program, the more likely it is to be successful.

**Step Ten – Measure the Programs Effectiveness**

Maintain statistical records to measure the success of the program. Recording key statistics such as number of injuries, types of injuries, number of days lost, and number of modified workdays can help identify any opportunities for improvement with the safety program or the RTW program. Make any necessary adjustments, and ensure any changes are communicated to all employees.