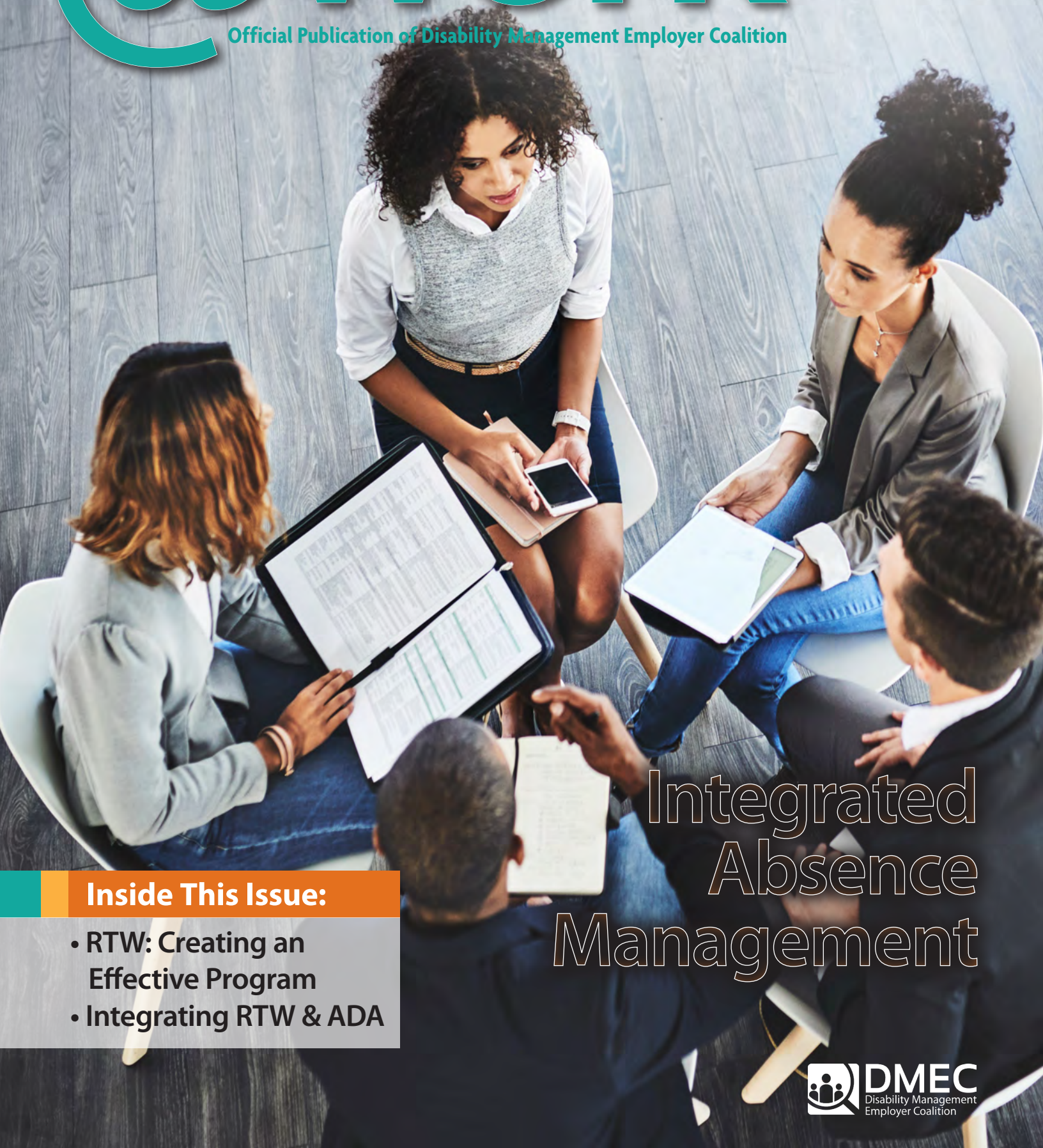


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Integrated Absence Management

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By
Sonja R. Teague, CPDM
VP Integrated Absence
Management
ESIS

Return to Work: *Creating an Effective Program For Any Type of Absence*

Given all the leave options available, it's no surprise that in the last 10 years, an average of 2.7 million U.S. employees missed work each month due to an illness, injury, or to attend a medical appointment.¹

As employers assess the impact of absence on their organization (see Figure 1, "The Cost of Absence by Category" on p. 10), they are looking for ways to help injured or ill employees safely stay at work or return to work as soon as they are medically able. This reduces absence

program can also help avoid fines and boost employee engagement, morale, and productivity.

An effective RTW program requires up-front investment of time and resources, plus well-managed execution, to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Foundational Elements

A good RTW program has three foundational elements: policy, functional job assessments, and a transitional duty job bank.

"Giving (supervisors) a voice in the (program) design can help eliminate friction in the RTW approval process and provide support for using identified modified-duty tasks."

costs and turnover as employees stay engaged with the workplace. Return-to-work (RTW) programs have been used for decades to reduce the duration and costs of absence from occupational injuries. Workers' compensation studies show that RTW programs can reduce employee absence by an average of three to four weeks.² Imagine the advantages for employers if that program is extended to all employee absence, regardless of the cause. An added benefit is that a good RTW

RTW Policy

The policy communicates the company's intent to help injured or ill employees return to work as quickly as possible, as well as the process to be used. To secure buy-in for your policy, recruit key stakeholders to the process, including employees, supervisors, human resources (HR), and an executive. Including employees in the policy design team ensures quicker acceptance and helps identify potential tasks for transitional or modified duty. Supervisors should also be included as they will be the frontline



Figure 1: The Cost of Absence by Category

%	Category
22.1%	Total direct and indirect cost of absence as a percent of payroll
15.4%	Direct cost of paid time off as a percent of payroll
82%	Employers that use overtime to cover employee absence
47%	Employee absences covered with overtime
29.5%	Perceived employee productivity loss due to employee absence
15.7%	Perceived supervisor productivity loss due to employee absence
50%	Increase in voluntary turnover due to stress tied to absence

Sources: Society for Human Resource Management, in collaboration with and commissioned by Kronos, *Total Financial Impact of Employee Absences in the U.S. (2014)* and *Total Financial Impact of Employee Absences Across the United States, China, Australia, Europe, India, and Mexico (2014)*.

administrators of the program. Giving them a voice in the design can help eliminate friction in the RTW approval process and provide support for using identified modified-duty tasks.

Functional Job Assessments

Functional job assessments focus on “essential job functions.” This program component includes:

- A detailed description of the tasks involved in performing the job (e.g., sitting, walking, lifting, bending, pushing)
- Information on the frequency, duration, and timing of critical job activities (e.g., three times a day, four hours at a time, hourly)
- Conditions in which the job is performed (e.g., outdoors in heat and cold, damp conditions, noisy environment)
- Physical and mental requirement for the job (e.g., lift 50-pound boxes, record and assess readings from a variety of sensors)

Functional job assessments allow healthcare providers to understand the requirements of the employee’s job and manage a treatment plan to support RTW. Providers also need to understand the physical capacity demands of a job so they can determine when to release the employee to work with any required work restrictions. (See Figure 2, “Sample HR and Functional Job Descriptions” on p. 11.)

Transitional Duty Job Bank

Employers have various strategies to support transitional duty work. In our experience, the most effective strategy utilizes a job bank of modified-duty jobs that:

- are temporary;
- an employee can perform safely during recovery;
- comply with any work restrictions from the medical provider; and
- help the employee transition back to work before recovery is complete.

Transitional duty jobs can be a modified version of the employee’s regular job, such as lifting 25 pounds instead of

50, or using a lifting device. Another example is structuring the job to allow the employee to sit for some or all of a shift instead of standing or allowing shorter shifts.

Alternative work, a completely different job, is another way to create transitional duty positions. To identify alternative work options, ask managers what jobs they wish they had the time or resources to do.

Having a predetermined set of options makes it easy to find a good solution for a specific situation that doesn’t interrupt a manager’s normal responsibilities to set up the modified-duty alternative. The exercise of developing the job bank also makes it easier to create modified-duty jobs if you need a customized solution to accommodate a specific employee’s needs.

Managing Your RTW Program

Budgeting for a case manager on staff, or contracting for one, is a long-established best practice. Case managers can work with providers and injured employees to ensure that the right RTW solution is implemented efficiently.

Often providers don’t understand

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how RTW programs function. Case managers can proactively communicate RTW goals, functional job requirements, and transitional duty options to facilitate releasing an employee to work. In addition, case managers will consult established disability duration guideline resources to help providers understand expected recovery timelines and how transitional duty jobs can shorten the employee's time away from work for a particular injury. Sharing information like this helps negotiate a faster release to work from healthcare providers.

Case managers also understand the recovery process for injuries and can help providers coordinate recovery time with light-duty options. A broken leg may take up to 12 weeks to heal, but after two weeks, the worker may be able to work from a wheelchair or just handle desk duties. Many employees spend more than half of their waking hours at work; helping employees efficiently return to workplace friends and routines often supports faster recovery compared to longer home stays.

Finally, case managers communicate with recovering employees to keep them focused on RTW. Case managers help the organization retain its commitment to RTW as well, through their interaction with line managers.

ADA Compliance

ADA requirements apply to both WC and non-occupational RTW options and job accommodations, including those governed by the Family and Medical Leave Act. Failing to offer RTW options to all employees — not just those with WC claims — can be considered a form of discrimination and a violation of the ADA. Failure to follow ADA regulations can create an additional exposure for a company; a single mismanaged case involving ADA non-compliance can cost \$500,000 or more.

Figure 2: Sample HR and Functional Job Descriptions

Warehouse Picker/Packer

An HR job description for this position may include such items as:

- Fulfill customer orders in a timely fashion.
- Select items on customer order form.
- Securely pack items in appropriate-sized box(es).
- Securely seal and accurately label box(es).
- 7th grade reading level to work from printed lists.

A functional job description may include such physical capacity details as:

- Walk through a 50,000-square-foot warehouse for an 8-hour shift with three 15-minute breaks and 30 minutes for lunch. Shift may extend to 12 hours during peak season.
- Find and select items:
 - items range in weight from 0.5 to 50 pounds;
 - items are stored on shelves ranging from floor level to 15 feet;
 - climb ladder as needed to reach items on higher shelves;
 - bend down to lower-level shelves and lift items; and
 - lift items and place in cart for transport to packing station.
- Prepare items for shipping:
 - stand at 40” tall packing station table on anti-fatigue mat and pack items in boxes and seal boxes;
 - lift boxes weighing between 0.5 and 50 pounds; average weight is 25 pounds;
 - lift boxes up to 12 x 36 x 24 inches between 12 and 36 times per shift; average box size is 8 x 16 x 12; and
 - move boxes from packing station and place on a conveyor belt located behind the worker.

Two main considerations for ADA compliance are following the prescribed interactive process and offering reasonable accommodations.

Interactive Process

Employees with an ADA-qualifying condition or disability have a right to a reasonable accommodation under the ADA.

The ADA requires an “interactive process” to identify an accommodation that effectively “enables an individual with a disability to enjoy equal employment opportunities.” The employer and employee are expected to communicate openly and in good faith to explore possible solutions.

The interactive process begins as

soon as the employer becomes aware of an issue or situation that may require a reasonable accommodation. The burden of initiating the process lies on the employer. The employee does not have to specifically ask for a reasonable accommodation. Rather, the employer is expected to recognize if an accommodation may be needed.

Some simple best practices can help employers follow the ADA interactive process:

- Immediately contact the injured worker to initiate the process. The discussion should cover all benefits or rights to which the employee is entitled (e.g., WC, STD, ADA), an RTW goal and strategy, and any barriers to overcome.
- Discuss and document essential

functions, along with other functions the employee may be able to perform (i.e., for an alternative-duty job).

- Obtain work capacities and restrictions from treating provider(s), including the reason for the restriction and its duration. Some providers specify unnecessary restrictions, but once they understand the intent to protect the worker, they may modify restrictions to support RTW.

- Research and evaluate possible accommodations and the employee's ability to work with the accommodations.

- Select a reasonable accommodation and make a formal offer of work based on the chosen accommodation.

- Implement and monitor the accommodation, proactively addressing concerns and adjusting the accommodation as the employee recovers.

These best practices are straightforward, but particular actions or omissions can compromise the interactive process and lead to fines. Pitfalls to avoid include:

- Failing to document communications, conversations, and agreements with the employee

- Insisting that an employee be "100%" healed or recovered before returning to work if reasonable accommodations exist to support transitional work

- Unjustifiably claiming an employee's medical restrictions pose a safety risk to evade the accommodation process. Risk management colleagues can provide solutions to help craft an effective accommodation. Remember that a team member's absence can jeopardize safety: replacement workers may not fully apply safety processes, and team members may be tempted to take unsafe shortcuts when struggling to meet production goals.

- Failing to recognize a request for accommodation or delayed response. To avoid this, build a strong partnership in which frontline managers are comfort-

able reaching out to HR for insight and assistance in managing absence and RTW.

- Violating confidentiality concerning medical information obtained during the interactive process or asking for more information than legally allowed may generate compliance issues or costly litigation.

Reasonable Accommodations

An employer's obligation to provide a reasonable accommodation is mitigated by the employer's right to select an accommodation that does not impose an "undue hardship... requiring significant difficulty or expense" when considered in light of a number of factors, including:

- The amount, length, and frequency of leave time required

- Possible flexibility in scheduling the leave

- Predictability of intermittent leave

- Impact of the employee's absence or other accommodation on coworkers, operations, and the company's ability to serve customers and clients appropriately (which may vary significantly by company size)

Accommodations need not be complex or costly to be effective. Some common accommodation approaches include:

- Providing or modifying equipment or devices

- Job restructuring or re-engineering

- Shifting some responsibilities to other employees

- Part-time or modified work schedules

- Reassignment to a more suitable vacant position

- Adjusting or modifying examinations or training materials

- Changing or enhancing policies (e.g., to allow service animals)

- Providing readers and interpreters

- Modifications making the workplace accessible to and usable by people with disabilities

- Offering limited unpaid leave so

the employee can complete recovery and return to productive status

Conclusion

Building an effective, ADA-compliant RTW program takes time and effort from many stakeholders across your organization. The results, however, will be worth it. Your organization can significantly reduce the direct costs of employee absence. Just as important, you can reduce the impact of absence on productivity, litigation rates, morale, safety, and quality.

To be effective, your program needs to be ready to go when you need it. Having an established program with a formal policy, a bank of transitional-duty jobs, case managers who can facilitate communication and provider buy-in, and an established interactive process helps your company to focus on bringing absent employees back to work from day one of an absence or to prevent an absence altogether. And along the way, you will be reducing friction points, improving the employee experience, boosting morale, and helping employees return to being productive and feeling valued.

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