

Return to Work Project

Summary

Project Background

The main driver for this project was the NSW Commission of Audit Report, 4 May 2012. The report recommended that WorkCover and SICorp jointly prepare instructions clarifying the following:

- The injury case management function that is to be performed within agencies and how this complements and differs from the function performed by the TMF Claims Agents;
- The appropriate qualifications that agency injury case managers are required to hold; and
- The optimal number of injury case managers that should be employed by agencies by applying relevant benchmarks.

Executive Summary

Interventions involving a Return to Work Coordinator (RTWC) result in shorter durations of disability for injured workers and lower costs for employers. The workplace based aspect of Return to Work (RTW) coordination is considered to be the most important component in achieving successful RTW outcomes.

A literature review of Australian and international research was undertaken and TMF agencies were consulted via surveys, focus groups and interviews to gather information on each aspect of the project. In addition to this TMF workers compensation claims service providers were interviewed, and professional organisations and other state government jurisdictions were all consulted on current practices. To confirm the findings gathered from the consultation process, four agencies that are performing consistently better than the TMF average were interviewed and their experiences and practices were documented as case studies and included in the project.

The RTWC role, as the central facilitator of services to assist injured workers to return to work was found to be crucial to achieving positive RTW outcomes and the skills capability of persons performing that role were found to be significant contributors to success. In particular the ability to communicate, cooperate, educate and support all stakeholders through the RTW process.

However, RTWCs do not operate in isolation and their achievement of return to work outcomes is influenced by a number of factors in the environment in which they operate. A well structured return to work program that is integrated with health safety and wellbeing, and an organisational culture that supports RTW and empowers injured workers will enhance injured workers' recovery and return to the workplace.

Project Findings

Key findings identified in the project were:

- The RTWC role is crucial to achieving positive RTW outcomes and benefits from an increased focus on communication and cooperation, education and support
- There are defined roles for the agency and claims service provider that are complementary in the RTW process
- Collaboration and communication between agencies and their claim service providers are essential for successfully performing their complementary functions. Duplication of effort was found in medium and large agencies

- WorkCover NSW requires all staff performing the RTW function within an organisation to complete a WorkCover approved 2-day Introduction to Return to Work Coordination course
- The qualifications and skills of RTWCs vary greatly
- There are knowledge, skills and attitudes critical to achieving successful RTW results
- Current professional development opportunities for RTWCs are few in number and focus primarily on technical knowledge and skills
- There is neither an optimal number of RTWCs nor a benchmark caseload number
- A range of factors need to be considered when determining caseloads

Recommendations

Key recommendations made as an outcome of the project are:

- Strengthen the claims service provider role in the management and use of the Business Profile as part of the NSW Treasury Managed Fund Workers Compensation Claims Manager Service Level Agreement with Agencies.
- Establish a capability based recruitment package for the role of the RTWC aligned to the NSW Public Service Commission Recruitment and Selection Guide.
- Create a capability building model to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for TMF agency RTWCs.
- Develop a principles based guide for allocating optimal caseloads, including a strategic planning process and operational tool.