



The WSIB experience demonstrates that workplace disability management can secure the future for disabled individuals, reduce employer costs, reduce insurer liabilities, and improve productivity.

A Story of Return to Work Transformation at WSIB



The Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board's (WSIB) vocational rehabilitation (VR) program was in trouble in 2008. Rates of return to work (RTW) had been steadily declining for over a decade, driving almost 7,000 injured workers a year into the labour market, following a vocational rehabilitation program. Only about 35 percent had a job six months later. Clients were dissatisfied with the quality and outcomes of their RTW and VR experiences. Employers were concerned about rising costs. The WSIB was alarmed by cost and outcome trends going in the wrong direction. Recovery and RTW are listed in the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act as a key purpose for the existence of the WSIB, so something had to be done.

A sound foundation for reform had been laid just a year earlier with the implementation of a new service delivery model that introduced staff specialization, streamlined adjudication, evidence based RTW and recovery case management, and renewed attention to process and outcome measures throughout the "life of a case".

The Labour Market Re-entry (LMR) program had replaced the previous VR program in 1997. A key feature was the activation of vocational assessment and planning once RTW with the Injury Employer had "failed", and the worker was unemployed. On average, LMR began two years after injury, when discouragement, permanent impairment, and even depression had set in. All of the services were outsourced, with WSIB monitoring and paying the bills. The majority of clients were placed in private career colleges in training for low wage service jobs. They expressed that they didn't feel that they were being given meaningful input into their own vocational planning, and "went along" because they had no choice. LMR costs doubled over the decade, despite poor and declining employed outcomes.

The WSIB, with the help of KPMG, undertook a thorough root cause analysis, and conducted a global leading practice review. Not surprisingly, many of the leading practices are embedded in the approach to Disability Management promoted by NIDMAR, the



International Disability Management Standards Council (IDMSC) and recently by the International Social Security Association (ISSA) in their RTW Guideline.

A work reintegration strategy was developed, based on these leading practices: focus on ability; employer accountability for work reintegration; worker input and choice; employer and provider incentives aligned to work reintegration; reduction of long term client dependency; enhanced case management; and professionalization of work reintegration staff.

In practice, the strategy translated into even greater focus in service delivery case management on RTW. Almost every part of case management is now infused with expectations of contributing to recovery and RTW. More than 300 work reintegration professionals (RTW and Work Transition Specialists) were hired as the former LMR program was replaced with a WSIB delivered program, and WSIB moved from being a passive player to an active one. These staff members are encouraged and in some cases required to qualify for CDMP, CRTWC, or VRP credentials. Significant in-house training and continuing education is also provided.

Early intervention to activate ability means RTW discussions beginning on the day of claim registration. Maintaining the employment relationship between the worker and their employer is a mantra, with employers expected to fulfill their duty to accommodate or face penalties, and the worker and union are expected to actively participate in the process.

RTW coordination, in the workplace, is provided by WSIB specialists usually within three months after the injury, and continues until it's clear that no accommodation is suitable. Retraining is available for a new job with the injury employer. For those needing retraining, greater input and choice is available, including first choice access to public college programs and their academic success advisors, as well as a new job placement service. New, practical vocational pathways were created in recognition of the diversity of injured workers, and to assist in creating a plan that makes sense to them.

New fee structures for health care and work reintegration providers pay for results, not just activity. A robust program measurement and evaluation capacity is in place, and relentless attention is given to continuous improvement in service timeliness, quality and outcomes.

The results of the strategy speak for themselves.

- In 2013, WSIB staff made 26,000 visits to Ontario workplaces to coordinate and negotiate RTW (note 1)
- 92% of all injured workers who lose time from work are back at work within one year, the best RTW results of workers' compensation organizations in Canada (note 2)
- There were approximately 2 million fewer productive days lost due to occupational injuries, in Ontario, in 2012 than in 2009 (note 3)
- Early RTW coordination resulted in almost 85% RTW in 2013 (note 4)
- Work Transition Services achieved 51% RTW with the injury employer in 2013 (note 5)
- The rate of employment for injured workers who completed retraining was 70% in 2013 (note 6). This is compared to about 35% under the prior program!

And, importantly, significant proportions of both injured workers and employers are satisfied with the services (note 7).

- Employer surveys for the fourth quarter of 2013 found 89% overall satisfaction with RTW coordination services (RTW Specialists) and 88% with Work Transition Services
- Worker surveys found 79% of workers satisfied with RTW services and 84% with Work Transition services

These solid outcomes have been achieved while WSIB health care and wage loss payments have dropped.

The WSIB experience demonstrates that workplace disability management can secure the future for disabled individuals, reduce employer costs, reduce insurer liabilities, and improve productivity. It's a true win-win-win.

NOTES:

- 1) *WSIB Data Centre*
- 2) *WSIB Data Centre*
- 3) *WSIB Data Centre*
- 4) *WSIB Data requests*
- 5) *WSIB Data requests*
- 6) *WSIB Data requests*
- 7) *WSIB Data requests*