



Barriers to Return to Work

A Research-to-Practice Brief From RETAIN Technical Assistance Provider

Common RTW Barriers

This brief presents key research highlights of four return to work (RTW) barriers that injured or ill individuals commonly experience: injury characteristics, individual perceptions of injury and other psychological characteristics, health care and rehabilitation issues, and workplace issues. This brief also provides an overview of strategies for overcoming these barriers.



Common RTW Barriers: Key Research Highlights

- **Injury characteristics.** The nature and severity of injury can impact RTW outcomes.¹ Joint and muscle injuries and musculoskeletal diseases are common injuries associated with prolonged absence from the workforce.² The location of an injury (i.e., hands) can also influence the duration of workforce absences, particularly if the body part injured directly impacts the person's ability to do their job.
- **Individual perception of injury and other psychological characteristics.** Individual perceptions of injury can inhibit RTW, even if the injury itself is not considered serious.³ Injured or ill individuals who rate themselves as having poor health and high levels of pain are less likely to RTW.^{3,4} Mental health is another psychological factor that can impede RTW. For example, mental health factors such as depression were found to be negatively associated with RTW after occupational injury.⁵
- **Health care and rehabilitation issues.** Health care and rehabilitation interventions can improve RTW outcomes,^{6,7} and a lack of access to beneficial medical and rehabilitation services may contribute to long-term absence from the workforce. A lack of physician awareness in RTW strategies could also be a barrier.⁸
- **Workplace issues.** Workplace issues can inhibit RTW.¹ For instance, injured or ill workers who do not have supportive supervisors are much less likely to RTW in a timely fashion.^{9,10} A lack of co-worker support has also been associated with prolonged work absences.^{11,12} Similarly, workplace accommodations such as ergonomic adaptations¹³ and the availability of modified work tasks¹⁴ facilitate RTW – however, workers may face barriers if accommodations are not available.

Overcoming RTW Barriers

Helping injured or ill individuals RTW requires strategies that address both individual-level physical and psychological factors as well as workplace-level factors.^{1,15} In addition, a coordinated approach among all stakeholders is essential. Communication, cooperation, and common goals among the injured or ill individual, health care providers, and supervisors/co-workers are critical to the success of RTW outcomes.¹⁵

Strategies to Address Physical and Psychological Barriers

Health-focused interventions can improve RTW outcomes by addressing both physical and psychological factors related to pain and function. These interventions can take place in the workplace and often include exercise, cognitive behavioral therapy, physical therapy, psychological therapy, and occupational therapy.¹⁶ However, health-focused interventions stand to benefit from better coordination and communication between the workplace and health care providers.¹⁶ RTW strategies that include workplace visits from health care professionals along with other comprehensive occupational health care interventions have been shown to be effective for improving RTW outcomes.¹⁷ One work disability management approach is to leverage a small network of health care providers to address both the physical and psychological needs of injured or ill individuals.¹⁸

This can be achieved by bringing together a multidisciplinary team consisting of nurse managers, physicians, therapists, and other relevant practitioners to develop a treatment plan for each worker.¹⁸ Although health care providers can play a role in managing the physical and psychological factors of ill or injured individuals, they are often not trained on how to communicate with employers.⁸ Because of this, RETAIN states should consider employer communication strategies when designing training for physicians, which may include using more accessible language when speaking to nonmedical personnel.⁸



Key Highlights

- Health-focused interventions can help injured or ill individuals overcome physical and psychological barriers.
- Service coordination interventions between the workplace and health care providers are crucial for delivering effective RTW services.
- Training physicians on how to communicate with employers may help injured or ill individuals overcome barriers.

Strategies to Address Workplace Barriers

Employer policies and practices are factors in reducing long-term work absences, so it is important for employers to establish policies and practices that improve RTW outcomes.¹⁹ For instance, work modification interventions are effective strategies in facilitating RTW and can reduce the number of lost work days by half.²⁰ These strategies include accommodations such as providing modified duties, revised working hours, ergonomic adjustments, and access to assistive technology.¹⁶ Employers that foster a positive and safe environment,

Key Highlights

- Work modification interventions can help facilitate RTW.
- Supportive conditions at work (i.e., support from co-workers and supervisors) can improve RTW outcomes.
- Establishing relationships with Vocational Rehabilitation professionals can improve the chances of RTW.

nondiscriminatory and inclusive leadership, social support from supervisors and co-workers, and workplace flexibility also encourage better RTW outcomes.¹⁹ Research has shown that supportive conditions such as social support and sense of community are especially important for successful RTW outcomes and require encouragement from both co-workers and supervisors.²¹ Encouraging supervisors to involve co-workers in the RTW process, to help plan, monitor, and evaluate progress may improve

RTW outcomes.¹ For instance, a supervisor may identify key co-workers to receive education on the ill or injured worker's condition and accommodation provisions. This strategy provides co-workers with a means to express both ideas and concerns in ways that create both trust and goodwill with the injured worker.¹¹ Establishing partnerships with vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals is another effective RTW strategy. Injured or ill individuals are more likely to RTW if they are required to participate in VR.⁶ The sooner VR takes place, the greater the chance for successful RTW outcomes.²² In addition, workers experience better RTW outcomes when their physicians work directly with VR providers.²³

Key Highlights Recap

For injured or ill individuals, long-term absence from the workforce can lead to depression, substance abuse, and reduced quality of life. There are a variety of barriers that may influence a worker's ability to RTW, such as their injury characteristics, perception of injury, health care and rehabilitation issues, and workplace issues. Working with physicians and other health professionals on health-focused strategies will help injured or ill individuals overcome barriers, especially if these barriers are related to physical and psychological factors. Likewise, work modifications and interventions, along with support from co-workers and supervisors, can be effective strategies for resolving workplace barriers and facilitating RTW.

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Endnote

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