



AP PHOTO/MATT FLOURKE

A LIGHT duty assignment, outside of an injured workers' typical arena, can make all of the difference in a successful transition back to work.

working full bore.

Oftentimes, that means providing light-duty assignments within an employee's own department. Workers can go from stocking shelves at a retail store, for example, to overseeing inventory tracking instead. Other times, it means moving to a different department for light duty. And sometimes — such as in the case of Pitney Bowes — it means volunteering off-site.

However it's done, transitional work can minimize workers' comp spend and get people back to full duty faster.

"Being active and returning to some normal routine helps them recuperate faster — physically mentally and psychologically," said Frances Ford, co-founder ReEmployAbility, a third-party vendor that coordinates volunteer transitional assignments for employers.

She recalled the story of a double amputee who used volunteer work as a reason to get up every morning and acclimate back into society.

"He was thrilled; he got to go somewhere every day and interact with people," said Ford. "It got him through a catastrophic injury."

But what if a worker aggravates the injury while volunteering off-site? That can leave an employer open to serious liability concerns, said Sean Brady, president of Brady Risk in Huntington, N.Y.

"You own that claim. If you endorse that work outside your supervision, you could be prolonging that claim," said Brady. "When an employee is outside of your supervision and you allow them to do that and they aggravate the injury, you could be prolonging the claim."

"Volunteering is great but it's fraught with perils," he continued. "In theory, it sounds great but in reality I'd be concerned."

So far, Pitney Bowes hasn't had anyone aggravate their injury while volunteering, and Mitchell said they trust ReEmployAbility to match the recovering employees with volunteer positions that do not require labor restricted by their doctors. Mitchell said the company also checks in on volunteering employees to make sure restrictions are being met.

"It's the same [risk] as if they were at home. We don't put them in any job with any greater risk than they'd have in their own environment" or on light-duty within Pitney Bowes, said Mitchell.

Ford said the rate of injury aggravation across all of the organizations she works with is very low. "They are supervised. There is oversight. These are very sedentary positions," she said.

## CROSSING DEPARTMENTS

At TravelCenters of America/Petro Stopping Centers, a company that runs 240 rest stops in 41 states and Canada, transitional duty has been part of the organization's return-to-work plan for more than 20 years. Typically, an injured employee will take on a light-duty assignment within their own department. A server or cook in a restaurant can transition to doing light prep work for buffets or working as a cashier. About 10 percent of the time, however, they are moved to jobs outside of their specific departments.

"A truck mechanic may help prep food or roll napkins in a restaurant," said Julie Gerda, TA

## Summary

- A successful transitional work program can significantly cut workers' comp expenses.
- Companies are advised to have clear policies surrounding the back-to-work transition period.
- Experts warn of those employees who take advantage of the "light duty wave."

# Managing the Transition

A transitional period of light-duty work — or even off-site volunteering — may help injured workers get back to full-duty faster. *By Jared Shelly*

The woman spooning out meals at the homeless shelter. The cashier at the local thrift store. The man handing out brochures at the museum ... while you may think they're just like any other volunteer, they may actually be employees of large organizations who are transitioning back to work after suffering injuries.

Employees on workers' comp at Pitney Bowes are offered the option of doing volunteer work as a transitional assignment as long as the physical demands of the volunteer job are light enough to comply with their doctor's restrictions.

Workers get paid their full salaries rather than workers' comp pay, which varies from state to state; they get back into the routine of getting up and reporting for work; and they get a chance to do some good in their communities.

Instead of having them sit at home on the sofa watching "The Price is Right" and reruns of "Gilligan's Island," they can get their mind and bodies back to the rigors of the workday. The typical transitional volunteer position runs about six weeks.

"We absolutely believe being productive leads to a successful recovery and transition back to work," said Hilary Mitchell, director of employee

health absences and total rewards at Pitney Bowes, a Stamford, Conn.-based mail and document management company.

The company started partnering with Tampa, Fla.-based vendor ReEmployAbility on its transitional volunteer program more than two years ago because it simply didn't have light-duty assignments for some employees. For example, workers in the company's mail-sorting facility have physically demanding jobs bundling and carrying mail after they sort it — but lighter-duty jobs in that department are scarce.

"Someone who can't sort and lift mail can work in a museum passing out brochures or work as a receptionist at a local facility," said Mitchell. While fewer than 50 employees have participated in the transitional program, they seem gratified by being a part of the program.

"We get some very nice comments," she said. "They say they never had the opportunity to do volunteer work like this. It's very gratifying."

The Pitney Bowes program is just one example of how more and more companies are offering transitional assignments to help workers as they shift from lighter work accommodating an injury to

Petro's manager of safety, noting that employees working in transitional capacities are paid their full salaries.

The sheer variety of jobs at a typical rest stop puts TAPetro in a unique position to offer transitional assignments. The rest stops have restaurants, gift shops, auto repair facilities, gas stations and other amenities — which means a wide assortment of jobs.

“With a wider range of jobs, we can fit the modified work specifically to the restrictions given by a doctor,” said Gerda. “Injured people often suffer from depression. They don't see

friends, they just feel disconnected,” she continued. Getting them back to a routine of communicating with customers and co-workers can help them get their mojo back.

Whether it's off-site volunteering or cross-departmental light duty, companies need to protect themselves. The most effective way is to have clear policies in place with no exceptions, said Brady. It's also a good idea to call it “temporary transitional duty.” Otherwise, the accommodations could be deemed the new normal of employment.

Also, employers must make sure

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they get clear instructions from doctors detailing the patients' restrictions as they recover from their injuries.

“When you start making accommodations, you go into a very dangerous area,” said Brady.

“All the sudden, they like this new accommodation because they get paid the same but they do less work.”

Also be careful, he said, that a job description doesn't change with a collective-bargaining agreement.

It's also important to make sure that Family and Medical Leave Act absences run concurrently with workers' comp. That way, an employee won't be inclined to take FMLA leave after workers' comp runs out — leaving a company without its employee for even longer.

Carl Cincotta, principal at Integro Insurance Brokers in New York, said that, in the last 20 to 30 years, companies have been transitioning to workers' comp insurance that has higher and higher deductibles. That has made for a paradigm shift where employers realize they'll have to pay higher deductibles if workers get hurt — leading to a greater focus on reducing injuries and introducing transitional assignments as a way of getting them back to full duty faster, said Cincotta.

“Employers are now more involved, in part, because it's their loss dollars versus the carrier's — and that's a good thing,” he said. “The more involved an employer is at the local level rather than just at the corporate level will be beneficial to all parties.”

Companies also need to make sure that light-duty assignments don't last too long.

“You need a clear process for elevating that person back to full duty,” he said. “You don't want them riding the light-duty wave.”

Cincotta said he supports companies that use transitional assignments in an employee's existing department. However, moving people to different departments can prove challenging.

“I'm not sure you can transition outside of your primary skill set, it depends on the individual,” he said. “You also run the risk of additional, or an exacerbation of, injuries because someone has been trained for a different role entirely. But the right employer with the right procedures will be able to manage that process.”

While companies often fear that injured workers may exaggerate their conditions to get extra time at home, Cincotta doesn't think that's the case.

“By and large, the workforce wants to be at work, especially in today's economic conditions. They want to be productive. For the most part they want to show up at their job,” he said. “It gives them a sense of self-worth and it's a social event as well.”

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