

# How To Ease The Transition Back To Work

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## **Employees returning from medical leave might not be able to return to their old job, but they can still work.**

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Fortunately for me, I have never had to return to work after a serious injury. But it happens to many people every year (it's part of what FMLA, or the Family Medical Leave Act, is for). Even if you've been preparing for your return for weeks, it might not be so easy to shift back to your old work tasks. You might still be recovering from an injury and simply are not capable of doing what you used to do, at least for now.

We recommend employers develop an early return to work program to help workers gradually move into work responsibilities. The employee should contribute to the plan too, not just the employer; that makes it a good opportunity for both to communicate with one another and understand just what the employee is capable of doing at first.

## **A return-to-work plan**

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Start with a written return-to-work policy so everyone understands what's necessary to make the program a success.

Keep in contact with the injured employee's doctor, so he or she can be cleared to return to full work when it's appropriate. The employer should also give a job description to the doctor, so the doctor knows what's being asked of the employee at work.

Look at the employee's regular tasks and see what they can still do given their health conditions. For example, moving heavy loads or driving machinery may be off-limits for a while, but handling paperwork or directing other staff in tasks may still be options. The worker's full-time job can often be reduced or modified so they can accomplish a lot of what they typically do during a regular week.



Here are a few ideas for something low-stress and still helpful:

- Answer the phone, file, office work, etc.
- Assemble new employee manuals.
- Cleaning, painting, basic maintenance: Someone who can't do their normal tasks can work on these things, which are often put off in favor of more immediate work.
- Collect Safety Data Sheets for chemicals currently in a work area or plant and find SDS for chemicals that need them. (All chemicals should have an SDS, so people know how to use them correctly.)
- Maintain inventory: It's easy to lose track of small parts, tools, or raw materials if they're not all catalogued and in an expected place.

- Plan the company picnic, Christmas party, industry show booth, etc.
- Product quality checks, sorting rework or scrap, etc.
- Review safety program guidelines and see who needs training.
- Shred old files.

## **Make sure it doesn't happen again**

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Even before an employee returns to work, do what you can to make sure the injury doesn't happen again. Investigate the original incident to see what changes can be made in the workplace: more safety equipment, better procedures for avoiding injury, whatever it might be.

If it happened to one person, it could happen to someone else. The expense and effort of buying new safety gear or developing a safety plan is probably less than the cost of lost work hours and injured employees.

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