

# Return to Work Program

## Frequently Asked Questions

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**August 1, 2012**

### **What is Return to Work?**

Return to Work (RTW) is an integrated, supportive and coordinated approach to recovery following illness or injury. Employees get back to work in an assignment that meets their medical restrictions during the recovery period. Return to work is supported by university leadership. Similar programs can be found in other areas of campus and the health system.

### **Why is Return to Work important?**

Best practice and research consistently show that the longer an ill or injured employee is off work, the more likely the employee will never return to work. Employees who are out of work for more than 12 weeks have only a 50 percent chance of returning. As the length of time away from work increases, the likelihood of returning to work is reduced. After more than one year, the chance of return to work drops to *less than 10 percent*.

### **What are the overall benefits of a Return to Work program?**

When successfully implemented, RTW programs help reduce both lost work days and lost productivity. Staffing and productivity can be more easily maintained. Coordinated and consistent practices for return to work are important in reaching these goals.

### **What are the potential benefits of a return to work program for employees?**

Data shows that early and safe RTW enhances both psychological and physical recovery by supporting the recovery of temporarily restricted employees and encouraging them to be productive contributors to the U-M community. An early return to work allows employees to preserve accumulated paid time off or extended sick time. Transitional assignments can also help staff members develop new skills. Return to Work can be a potential income opportunity for those who have exhausted paid time off benefits.

### **How does the process work?**

Cases of non-occupational or workers' compensation illnesses or injuries are first managed by WorkConnections. Information on the WorkConnections process is available on their website. <http://www.workconnections.umich.edu>

Once restrictions have been designated, the RTW coordinator will work with the home department to identify transitional work. If work is not available in the home department, employees may work in a different area of Facilities and Operations until restrictions are lifted.

### **What is transitional work?**

Transitional work is an assignment within an employee's restrictions that is done for a short-term period (up to 90 days) in either the home or alternate department. This could be either a modified version of work within the normal classification or unrelated work that meets the employee's restrictions.

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**If an employee is offered a transitional assignment through the Return to Work program is he/she expected to accept it?**

Yes, employees are expected to return to work when a transitional assignment has been identified that meets the employee's restrictions.

**An employee has been out due to an illness or injury but is well enough to work with some restrictions. What can the supervisor do to facilitate his/her return to work?**

Returning to work in the home department is a priority. Supervisors/managers are expected to seek creative solutions within the department. If the employee's regular work cannot be modified to meet restrictions, managers should look for alternate work within the larger organizational unit. Examples are data entry, filing, and inventory work.

**I am an employee who has been told by my doctor that I have reached maximum recovery but will no longer be able to perform the duties of my position. What are my options?**

If your regular job cannot be modified to meet your restrictions on a long-term basis, the transitional assignment will come to an end because you are no longer making your way back to full duty.

You will be encouraged to apply for other positions in Facilities and Operations and at the university for which you are qualified and that you can do within your restrictions. The RTW coordinator may also recommend university and community resources to assist you.

These situations are handled on a case-by-case basis. There is no established pool of light duty jobs for this situation. There is no guarantee of employment and the university will not create a new position that meets your restrictions.

**Who is the RTW contact for Facilities and Operations?**

The Facilities and Operations RTW program is coordinated by Val Palazzolo of University Human Resources. She works with WorkConnections and the departments to identify transitional work. If you have questions about your own return to work process, check first with your department human resources liaison.