



WELCOME
BACK
we are open
— PLEASE KEEP SAFE SOCIAL DISTANCE —



Returning To Work - Business Guide

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Meadowbrook Insurance Agency welcomes your business back to work!

If we can ever be of assistance to your business, please don't hesitate to contact us at **(877) 346-1721**.

Doing business these days, whether it's a global operation or small family-owned business, has changed dramatically in the era of COVID-19. There are new guidelines to follow from sanitation practices and social distancing to conducting business virtually, in addition to running day-to-day operations. Like your business, the health and safety of our employees and their families, our customers, and the surrounding community is a high priority.

This year marks Meadowbrook Insurance Agency's 65th Anniversary and we wanted to use this significant milestone as an opportunity to recognize and provide information to support businesses like yours that are adapting to a 'new normal' in these challenging times. That is why we have gathered information from our partner Zywave and placed it in this complimentary business guide. We hope it helps assist you in making decisions for your company's continuity plan and maintaining operations while minimizing the potential health risks associated with the virus for employees, customers, and partners.

Meadowbrook Insurance Agency and its partner agencies, Kleinschmidt Agency and The Protection Center, are committed to making an impact within the communities in which we work and live. We hope that the information in this business guide will help serve the needs of your company as we all get back to business.

At Meadowbrook Insurance Agency, we believe each client is unique and every situation different. Whether it's offering data to enable better decision-making, helping to mitigate rising costs, providing coverage consultation, or navigating through potential vulnerabilities, we have insights to help our clients and manage risk while maximizing their performance.

If we can ever be of assistance to your business, please don't hesitate to contact us at **(877) 346-1721**.



David N. Sheeran CPA

President, Meadowbrook Insurance Agency

5 Practices and Policy Considerations in Advance of Return to Work

1



Prolonged Remote Work

Consider augmenting existing remote work policies, or creating a new robust remote work policy that specifies which positions are permitted to telework on a more permanent basis, and the procedures for ensuring their continued success.

2



Social Distancing in the Office

Everything from the number of individuals allowed in meeting rooms to general office layout may need to be altered.

3



Screening Employees' Temperatures

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has provided guidance that allows employers to ask workers about potential COVID-19 symptoms and take their temperatures, so long as the practice is not discriminatory.

4



Use of Face Masks

Organizations should consider what types of services they provide and check with local guidance. While face masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19, they are critical supplies that should be reserved for health care workers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

5



Leave Policies

Federal laws like the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act have drastically altered the leave landscape. Additionally, many state and local paid sick leave laws have also been modified based on COVID-19-related absences. Employers must consider whether their existing policies need modification to ensure compliance with such changes.

Reopening Workplaces During COVID-19

Ready to Reopen Your Workplace?

Is your workplace:

Located in a community where local officials are not currently requiring significant mitigation?

or

An essential business?

Does reopening your workplace comply with local guidelines and orders?

Have risks of reopening been assessed?

Any "No" responses?

▼ ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼
Do not reopen.

Are Safe Practices in Place?

Increase the frequency of routine cleanings, and use recommended disinfectants on all surfaces.

Create appropriate space between employee work areas.

Set expectations for practices such as hand-washing.

Have employees wear face coverings or masks.

Ensure employees are properly social distancing.

Train employees on expected behaviors.

Any "No" responses?

▼ ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼
Establish safe practices.

Are Appropriate Policies in Place?

Create policies to protect employees in high-risk COVID-19 categories.

Create procedures for screening or monitoring employees for COVID-19-related symptoms.

Establish leave policies.

Expand remote work as feasible.

Limit business travel.

Any "No" responses?

▼ ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼
Establish appropriate policies.

Are COVID-19 Preparedness Plans in Place?

Communicate ongoing updates to employees.

Communicate frequently with local authorities.

Monitor employees for signs and symptoms related to COVID-19.

Prepare a response to positive COVID-19 tests.

Create a preparedness plan for future partial or full closings of the workplace.

Any "No" responses?

▼ ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼
Establish preparedness plans.

"Yes" to all?

▼ ▼ ▼ ▼ ▼
Open the workplace with updated practices.

Reopening a Business After the Coronavirus Shutdown

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to have an unprecedented effect on daily life, many business owners are looking forward to the future and a return to normalcy. However, even when stay-at-home orders are lifted and nonessential businesses are allowed to resume operations, there's a lot for organizations to consider before they reopen their doors. What's more, many of these considerations are workplace-specific and could be more involved depending on the industry you operate in.

To protect their customers and employees alike, it's important for organizations to do their due diligence before opening their business back up to the public following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Determining When to Reopen

While many essential businesses (e.g., hospitals, pharmacies, grocery stores and gas stations) have remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic, other operations deemed nonessential have shut down temporarily or changed the nature of their operations. Not only has this led to significant business disruptions, but, for many, it has critically impacted their bottom line.

However, we may be nearing a time when stay-at-home regulations are scaled back and all businesses are allowed to resume as normal.

The question then is: How will business owner know it is acceptable to reopen? The following are some best practices to keep in mind:

- **Review guidance from state and local governments**—The COVID-19 pandemic impacts states and regions in different ways. Just because a business is allowed to reopen in one region of the country doesn't automatically mean your operations will be allowed to resume as well. As such, it's critical to understand and review all relevant state and local orders to determine if and when your business is allowed to reopen.
- **Understand the risks**—If and when the government allows all businesses to reopen, that doesn't necessarily mean COVID-19 is no longer a threat to your operations. What's more, some businesses may have greater COVID-19 exposures than others, underscoring the importance of performing a thorough risk assessment before reopening. Prior to conducting a risk assessment, it's important to review **guidance** from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), state and local agencies, industry associations as well as your local health department. More information on conducting a risk assessment can be found below.

Again, before reopening, it's critical to seek the expertise of legal, insurance and other professionals.

Conducting a Risk Assessment

Even after the government allows businesses to reopen, firms still need to determine if it makes sense to resume operations. Safely restarting your business won't be as simple as unlocking the front door.

Before reopening, businesses should perform a risk assessment to determine what steps must be taken. While the complexity of risk assessments will differ from business to business, they typically involve the following steps:

- **Identifying the hazards**—When it comes to COVID-19, businesses need to think critically about their exposures, particularly if an infected person entered their facilities. When identifying hazards, it's a good idea to perform a walkthrough of the premises and consider high-risk areas (e.g., breakrooms and other areas where people may congregate). It's also important to consider what tasks employees are performing and whether or not they are especially exposed to COVID-19 risks when performing their duties.
- **Deciding who may be harmed and how**—Once you've identified hazards to your business, you need to determine what populations of your workforce are exposed to COVID-19 risks. When performing this evaluation, you will need to make note of high-risk individuals (e.g., staff members who meet with customers or individuals with preexisting medical conditions).
- **Assessing risks**—Once you have identified the risks facing your business, you must analyze them to determine their potential consequences. For each risk facing your business, you'll want to determine:
 - How likely is this particular risk to occur?
 - What are the ramifications should this risk occur?

When analyzing your risks, consider potential financial losses, compliance requirements, employee safety, business disruptions, reputational harm and other consequences.

- **Controlling risks**—With a sense of what the threats to your business are, you can then consider ways to address them. There are a variety of methods businesses can use to manage their risks, including:

- Risk avoidance—Risk avoidance is when a business eliminates certain hazards, activities and exposures from their operations altogether.
- Risk control—Risk control involves preventive action.
- Risk transfer—Risk transfer is when a business transfers their exposures to a third party.

For COVID-19, control measures could include cleaning protocols, work from home orders and mandated personal protective equipment (PPE) usage. Additional workplace considerations can be found below.

- **Monitoring the results**—Risk management is an evolving, continuous process. Once you've implemented a risk management solution, you'll want to monitor its effectiveness and reassess. Remember, COVID-19 risks facing your business can change over time.

Maintaining Workplace Safety Using OSHA and CDC Guidance

Once you conduct a risk assessment, you will need to act to control COVID-19 risks. Again, risks and the corrective steps that organizations take to address those risks will vary by business and industry.

Thankfully, there are a number of OSHA and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) workplace controls to consider if your risk assessment determines that COVID-19 poses a threat to your employees or customers. For instance, you should:

- **Implement administrative controls**—Typically, administrative controls are changes in work policies or procedures that reduce or minimize an individual's exposure to a hazard. An example of an administrative control for COVID-19 is establishing alternating days or extra shifts that reduce the total number of employees in a facility at a given time.

- **Utilize Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**— PPE is equipment worn by individuals to reduce exposure to a hazard, in this case, COVID-19. Businesses should focus on training workers on and proper PPE best practices. Employees should understand how to properly put on, take off and care for PPE. Training material should be easy to understand and must be available in the appropriate language and literacy level for all workers.
- **Consider engineering controls**—Engineering controls protect workers by removing hazardous conditions or by placing a barrier between the worker and the hazard. For COVID-19, engineering controls can include:
 - Installing high-efficiency air filters
 - Increasing ventilation rates in the work environment
 - Installing physical barriers, such as clear plastic sneeze guards
- **Be adaptable**—You should be prepared to change your business practices if needed to maintain critical operations. This could involve identifying alternative suppliers, prioritizing existing customers or suspending portions of your operations.
- **Create a dialogue with vendors and partners**—Talk with business partners about your response plans. Share best practices with other businesses in your communities, and especially those in your supply chain.
- **Encourage social distancing**—Social distancing is the practice of deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness. In terms of COVID-19, social distancing best practices for businesses can include:
 - Avoiding gatherings of 10 or more people
 - Instructing workers to maintain at least 6 feet of distance from other people
 - Hosting meetings virtually when possible
 - Limiting the number of people on the jobs site to essential personnel only
 - Encouraging or requiring staff to work from home when possible
 - Discouraging people from shaking hands
- Manage the different risk levels of their employees—it's important to be aware that some employees may be at higher risk for serious illness, such as older adults and those with chronic medical conditions. Consider minimizing face-to-face contact between these employees or assign work tasks that allow them to maintain a distance of 6 feet from other workers, customers and visitors.

- **Separate sick employees**—Employees who appear to have symptoms (i.e., fever, cough or shortness of breath) upon arrival at work or who become sick during the day should immediately be separated from other employees, customers and visitors, and sent home. If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19. The employer should instruct fellow employees about how to proceed based on the CDC Public Health Recommendations for Community-Related Exposure.
- **Support respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene**—Businesses should encourage good hygiene to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This can involve:
 - Providing tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles
 - Providing soap and water in the workplace
 - Placing hand sanitizers in multiple locations to encourage hand hygiene
- **Perform routine environmental cleaning and disinfection**—Businesses should regularly sanitize their facility to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some best practices include:
 - Cleaning and disinfecting all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, keyboards, telephones, handrails and doorknobs.
 - Discouraging workers from using other workers' phones, desks, offices, or other tools and equipment, when possible. If necessary, clean and disinfect them before and after use.
 - Providing disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces can be wiped down by employees before each use.
- **Continued Safety**
 While resuming operations following the COVID-19 pandemic may seem like a daunting task, businesses don't have to go it alone. To help with this process, organizations can seek the help of their insurance professionals to determine what actions they need to take to ensure their business reopens smoothly. To learn more, contact Meadowbrook Insurance Agency today.

Dear [insert employee name],

We've been looking forward to the day we'd be able to reopen our doors to our employees, and that day is coming soon. is excited to announce that our business will officially reopen [insert date]. **[Insert details about your company's reopening schedule. Sample text: We will be open for business Monday-Friday 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., with employees working staggered schedules for safety.]**

The decision to reopen our business was not taken lightly—we carefully reviewed federal, state and local reopening guidelines and considerations. After much discussion, we decided that we could reopen our doors and created a plan that will help us do so while preserving your health and safety.

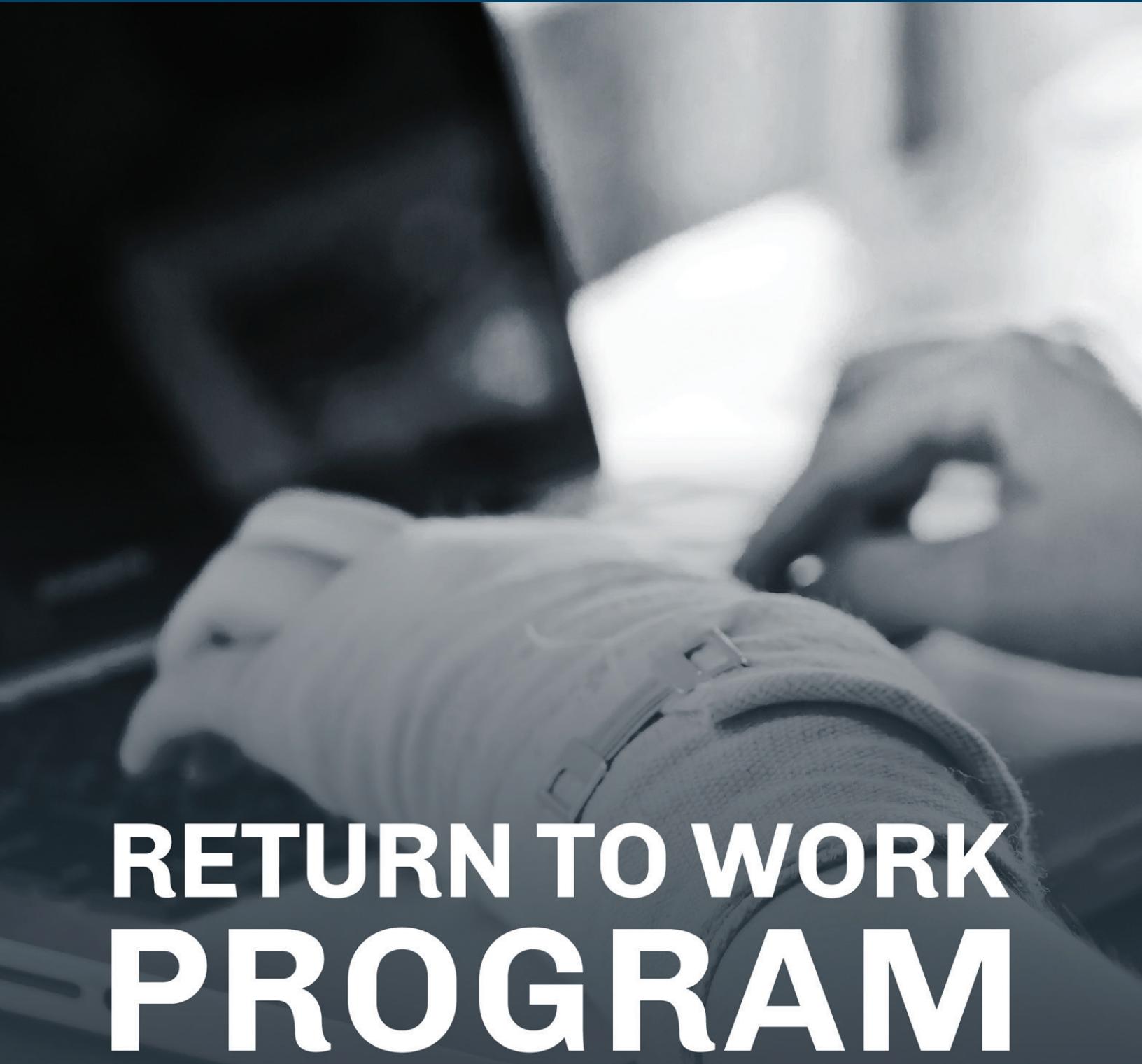
At , it is our priority to keep our employees and their families healthy, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, we will abide by governmental guidelines when possible as we strive to balance public health concerns with the needs of our business. Some notable workplace changes include the following:

[This list below features sample text regarding workplace updates. Customize prior to distributing to employees.]

- **Modified office layout**—We've updated workstations to ensure that they're suitable for social distancing protocols, closed our communal spaces and set up no-touch doors.
- **Increased office cleaning**—Cleaning crews will clean the office twice daily, focusing on sanitizing and disinfecting high-touch surfaces.
- **Updated employee protocols**—We've implemented various employee health and safety protocols that focus on social distancing, health screening and general hygiene reminders to keep our employees safe and healthy while returning to work.

is excited to welcome you back to work, and we're confident that, by working together, we can establish a safe, new normal that works for our business and employees. We feel that the plans and procedures put in place will help make your transition back to the office a success, but we want to know how our plans can be improved. Please reach out to your manager or HR with your suggestions—we'd love to hear them!

Best regards,



RETURN TO WORK PROGRAM

A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE PLAN

WHERE TO BEGIN

The following guide will help you construct an effective return to work program and create meaningful work assignments for workers injured both on and off the job. It includes background statistics to support the program, steps to take before execution, tips on how to manage the program and implementation recommendations.

STEP 01 KNOW THE FACTS.

Gather some initial information on return to work programs to learn about their potential for cost savings and about how to adapt your program for your company's needs.

STEP 02 GATHER DATA.

Ask your co-workers about their thoughts on injuries and return to work practices to determine how much work will be needed to complete your return to work program.

STEP 03 DEMONSTRATE A COMMITMENT TO EARLY RETURN TO WORK.

Make it clear that your program will be committed to the recovery process above all else.

e.

STEP 04 CREATE GOALS.

Define clear objectives for your program so that employees know what to expect.

STEP 05 CREATE A RETURN TO WORK TEAM AND DEFINE ITS RESPONSIBILITIES.

Appoint a team to provide leadership, set expectations and act as a communication channel for your program.

STEP 06 DEVELOP A WORKFLOW CHART OUTLINING THE RETURN TO WORK PROCESS.

Use a workflow to identify next steps and to eliminate confusion in the return to work process.

STEP 07 DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A JOB BANK.

Create a list of possible transitional roles for injured employees who return to work.

STEP 08 CREATE A COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION PLAN.

Make sure employees are aware of their job responsibilities both before and after an injury occurs.

STEP 09 RECORDKEEPING.

Keep a transitional duty database so you can measure the success of your program and make adjustments when needed.

STEP 10 DISTRIBUTE THE PLAN.

Make your program easily accessible to all employees, and have them sign and date acknowledgement forms to reduce your liability.

11

STEP 01: KNOW THE FACTS

Supporting your return to work program with evidence that it will help save money is the best way to convince upper management to get on board. Obviously, injured employees drive up company costs in the form of lost work days and workers' compensation costs. Studies clearly demonstrate that employees who are off work because of injury for more than 16 weeks rarely return to the workforce, and companies get stuck paying hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in unnecessary costs.

STEP 02: GATHER DATA

Before you institute a return to work program, research your company culture to understand what your employees think about injuries and returning to work. That way, after you create an official return to work program, it will be easier to evaluate and determine whether there has been a positive reaction. Get to know your company culture at all levels and from a range of perspectives. Visit worksites and talk to employees to understand how your current return to work program—or lack thereof—functions. Develop a needs assessment to determine how much work you need to do to shift company culture and practice.

STEP 03: DEMONSTRATE A COMMITMENT TO EARLY RETURN TO WORK

Make sure all levels of employees recognize that early return to work after an injury speeds up the recovery process and reduces the likelihood of permanent disability. Everyone from upper management to hourly employees should understand the goals, purpose and background on the program. There is no reason to take time to enact a program if management does not support and recognize the need.

These elements are the foundation and support for your return to work program. Spend plenty of time on these steps before moving on to create your program.

Steps 4 through 7 of this guide will go straight into your written return to work program, as they are the elements that will help you take action and establish a plan.

STEP 04: CREATE GOALS

State's purpose in creating the program and emphasize management's commitment to making it work. Keep it positive, but be sure employees understand the return to work program is a serious initiative. This is also the place in your written program to define what type of duty you offer or require—your program can revolve around transitional duty, alternate duty or both.

Example Goal Statement: 's return to work program is in place to accommodate injured workers by identifying new duties or modifying jobs to meet their physical capacities and respect doctors' restrictions. The goal is to return our employees to productive work, regular schedule and full wages as soon as possible, as they are the essential livelihood of . Because our employees are so valuable, we have both a transitional duty program, which is designed as a therapeutic tool to accelerate return to work by addressing physical and emotional limitations, and an alternate duty program, which is a placement service for workers deemed unable to perform the functions of their pre-injury job by a medical professional.

STEP 05: CREATE A RETURN TO WORK TEAM AND DEFINE ITS RESPONSIBILITIES

A dedicated return to work team is crucial to the program's success because it provides leadership, sets expectations for injured employees, acts as a communication channel between all involved parties and ensures the return to work program is being administered correctly. This team should consist of a representative from each of the following areas, and you may want to include these role descriptions directly in your written program:

- Senior management—Ensures implementation, and promotes and supports the program
- Vocational rehabilitation specialist—Serves as an expert on physical and psychosocial aspects of disability, can testify in court as a vocational expert, understands job analysis and physical capacities forms, and supervises return to work program administration

- Workers' compensation professional (either an in-house representative or someone from your insurance company or third-party administrator)—Provides medical information, problem-solving skills and general support
- Supervisor—Directly supports the injured worker's return to work by giving out the modified assignments, facilitating communication and ensuring the employee does not exceed the assigned physical restrictions
- Labor union—Promotes 's return to work program to union membership, advocates for employees and assists in planning for specific employees when requested
- Panel physician—Prepares a medical treatment plan that is safe, promotes early return to work and keeps 's program in mind
- HR department—Coordinates with the return to work program manager on employee benefits, wages, family medical leave and workers' compensation issues

The return to work team should also be responsible for creating and maintaining a transitional duty job bank, which is discussed in greater detail in step 6.

STEP 06: DEVELOP A WORKFLOW CHART OUTLINING THE RETURN TO WORK PROCESS

A crucial part of the return to work program is the process and steps involved in administration. An effective workflow chart will eliminate confusion about the program, identify proper actions for all levels of employees and serve as your action plan. Contact Meadowbrook Insurance Agency today at (877) 759-4365 to request a sample flowchart—"Return to Work Roles and Responsibilities Flowchart"—to use with your return to work program.

STEP 07: DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A JOB BANK

The return to work program manager should be the owner of the job bank. This job bank can be as formal or informal as necessary, but it is essentially a laundry list of tasks or assignments across all departments that ideally should get done but often get overlooked because of lack of staff, time or funds. However, the return to work program manager should meet with supervisors and managers to identify adequate transitional tasks. The manager can also encourage all employees to submit ideas for transitional duty tasks. The tasks in the job bank can, and should, vary by the levels of physical strain required to complete them. It might be helpful to organize the job bank both by work location and by physical demand level to find the most appropriate task for an injured employee.

Keep in mind that while the safety of the employee is the most important aspect of a return to work program, it is also essential that the transitional tasks are productive. Make every effort to keep work hours and days off consistent with the injured employee's work schedule, but also make sure he or she is aware that transitional tasks may require an altered schedule. If the transitional duties in the job bank require considerably less skill than the employee's pre-injury position, consider paying less than a full-duty rate if your state laws allow. You will pay less in payroll taxes and, at the same time, you will motivate the worker to return to full duty.

STEP 08: CREATE A COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION PLAN

To make your return to work program a success, you should have full cooperation with all parties involved. This includes the injured worker, his or her supervisor, union officials, medical providers and workers' compensation professionals. If any of these parties are not fully committed to the program, your success will be limited.

Here are some important steps to maximize the program's communication efforts:

- Provide written program descriptions and definitions and make these items readily available, accessible and readable.
- Keep job descriptions and job analyses on file for each employee in case he or she ever becomes injured.
- Review the return to work program with employees during new hire orientation and periodically throughout the year.
- Provide one-on-one sessions with injured employees to reiterate expectations and assign transitional tasks.

FINAL STEPS

The last step in implementing a return to work program is to include a way to measure your progress. Step 9 will offer suggestions on how you can manage your return to work program.

STEP 09: RECORDKEEPING

Put simply, the best way to measure the success of your program is to collect return to work data. Financial savings may be difficult to quantify, but one thing you can do is track the money you save on an individual basis for each injured employee who goes on transitional duty. Also, it will be helpful to keep a transitional duty database. This database should be used to monitor the following:

- The number of employees assigned to transitional duty
- The average duration of transitional duty assignments
- The number of employees filing new claims each month who are placed in transitional duty
- All receipts of work release to transitional duty assignments from a medical professional

STEP 10: DISTRIBUTE THE PLAN

After you create your written return to work program using these guidelines, distribute it to employees at every level. In addition to all of the steps included in this guide, be sure to include the following in the return to work program that you distribute:

- Your return to work policy, which should have a section to be signed and dated. Once signed, this policy should be returned to HR and filed for each employee.
- The return to work flowchart
- Other relevant material that may be helpful to employees experiencing work-related injuries or illnesses, including workers' compensation information

You might also consider holding a meeting to build support for the program and allow employees to ask questions. Revisit the return to work program annually to evaluate the written procedures and policies and analyze the program's success.

If you have further questions about writing or implementing your return to work program, contact the team of experts at Meadowbrook Insurance Agency.

This guide is merely a guideline. It is not meant to be exhaustive nor be construed as legal advice. It does not address all potential compliance issues with Federal, State, local OSHA or any other regulatory agency standards. Consult your licensed Commercial Property and Casualty representative at Meadowbrook Insurance Agency or legal counsel to address possible compliance requirements.

HR Insights

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Manager Outreach a Key for Return to Work

Employees on leave—whether from workplace injury, disability or leave of absence—put a financial burden on your company. Ensuring those employees return to work as soon as feasible is crucial. However, many employees struggle during a disability and the subsequent return to work process, so it is vital that companies do their part to ease this transition. One important but often overlooked role is that of the immediate supervisor.

A Tough Transition

Employees who are out of work due to disability, injury or other reason face unique challenges. They are isolated from their work life and colleagues, may be struggling to recover from their injury or illness and returning to work can seem daunting. If the injury happened on the job, they may wonder if the company is angry at them for reporting an injury. If they don't hear from anyone at work during their time away, they may feel as if no one cares if they return.

Time spent away from work can cause depression, frustration and anxiety about their looming return. Research shows that the longer an employee is away from work, the less likely he or she will return at all.

Manager Outreach

As mentioned, one of the most isolating factors for an individual away from work is silence, particularly from colleagues and the immediate manager. To keep employees feeling connected and engaged while on leave, managers should contact their direct report to check in.

Some companies and managers worry about violating confidentiality laws or invading the individual's privacy when contacting an employee out with an injury or disability. However, there are low-risk ways to reach out while complying with privacy laws—and the positive impact on the employee is often well worth it. When contacting employees out on leave, managers should:

- Wait a week or more before contacting, to allow the employee to process the situation and ease into a new routine as he or she recovers. If feasible (and/or if the employee seems open to it), maintain periodic contact throughout the leave.
- Ask how he or she is feeling, without inquiring about specific health information or diagnosis.
- Ask if the employee has talked to his or her doctor about returning to work.
- Emphasize that the manager and company want the employee back.
- Show genuine concern and sympathy, rather than just asking "When will you return?"
- Remind the individual about your company's employee assistance program, if applicable. It may help ease the anxiety and other emotions associated with this difficult



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- Keep the individual informed of company events and workplace happenings, and ask if he or she would still like to receive your company newsletter or similar information.
- Encourage co-workers to contact the employee as well, but do not offer any information about the reason for the leave.

When the Employee Returns

Managers also play an important role upon the actual return of an employee. Prior to return, the manager should inform the team about the employee's return and how it may impact their job duties. Also, the supervisor must ensure the returning individual has an adequate workstation and necessary equipment.

On the first day back, the manager should update the employee on any new hires or changes to the company or department. Assure the employee that details of his or her leave were not shared with any co-workers, and the employee shouldn't feel obligated to do so either. Emphasize that the employee's safety and health is paramount and ask that he or she tell you immediately if a task exceeds his or her restrictions.

Keep communication lines open. Have a timeline for the transitional work period and a set time for a return to full duties. Continue to inquire about the employee's well-being periodically, and adjust your return to work plan as needed. Be open to accommodations needed for the individual to perform job tasks, either temporarily or permanently.

Other Important Steps

Return to work is truly a team effort, including the employee, manager, HR, employee's physician and often an insurance representative. It is important to have an established return to work program to help ease this process for employees and detail the responsibilities and role of each member during the process. Make sure your disability carrier has a proactive return to work strategy as well, to aid in the transition.

Make sure your job descriptions are clear, include all job requirements and also offer ideas for transitional work for employees returning after an injury or illness. Use this to

Transitional duties or temporary job reassignments should be encouraged, and the employee should not face any loss of pay. The entire process, including the employee's time away and return, should be handled professionally and respectfully. It is important that all employees have a sense that reporting an injury or disability is okay, that the company cares about them and that the company will do what it can to ensure a positive return to work and successful transition back to full duties.

Employees who undergo a successful and positive return to work experience are likely to be more loyal to the company and have higher morale in their jobs. Conversely, mishandling this process can cause employees to feel unhappy, betrayed or even not return. Maintain your employee talent and foster an environment of caring and positivity by creating and operating an effective return to work program—and make sure the direct manager plays his or her key role for each employee facing a return to work situation.



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Improving Virtual Meetings

There's no denying that virtual meetings have become a workplace norm. Several factors fueling that growth include access, price and need.

Most laptops, tablets and smartphones have built-in webcams and microphones so employees can dial in to a virtual meeting from anywhere and at any time. These technology advancements have created affordable and easy-to-use tools to help businesses—both small and large—stay virtually connected. Web-based technology will continue to advance to keep virtual communication attainable and meet business needs.

The demand for virtual meetings increased as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic closed offices, introduced social distancing and halted business travel. As the COVID-19 threat shifts and offices reopen, virtual meetings will continue to be a viable way to conduct business with employees, customers and other stakeholders.

Virtual meetings require more planning than in-person meetings to be effective. This article explores common challenges and best practices to help meeting leaders drive attendee engagement, acceptance and commitment to action.

Common Challenges

Virtual or not, meetings can be hampered by problems such as insufficient planning, lack of engagement and insufficient follow-up.

Virtual meetings also come with their own unique challenges surrounding technology. Meeting attendees may have trouble accessing the meetings or using the platform. If the meeting leader is unfamiliar with features or capabilities—like screen sharing—they may waste meeting time while learning on the fly.

Technology and computer problems may be out of one's control. With any meeting, the facilitator should be flexible and have a Plan B. For example, your video conference call may have to become an audio call or be rescheduled altogether if video was vital.

Before the Meeting

Start right to end right. To ensure a successful and productive virtual meeting, keep in mind the following steps before the meeting even begins:

- **Choose the technology**—There are many web and videoconferencing platforms available, so find the right software and features to support your business. Choose one platform and stick to it. After attendees download the platform once, it'll be easier to join meetings later.
- **Create an agenda**—Attendees may have a full calendar, so be clear on the purpose of the meeting and provide a timed agenda with topics and assigned facilitators. This will help invitees decide their attendance if they have multiple meetings at the same time. Share this prework at least 48 hours in advance.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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- **Establish ground rules**—It might be helpful to have an agreed way of working, such as stating your name before talking or muting when not speaking. This helps keep the meeting efficient and remove distractions.
- **Test the technology**—It's important to join the meeting at least five minutes early to test your connection, microphone and video.
- **Look professional**—If using video, present yourself with appropriate grooming, hygiene and attire. That means mirroring what you would wear in person and keeping in mind whether it's an internal or external meeting.

When it comes to virtual meetings, it's crucial to invest in preparedness. Setting expectations beforehand can go a long way and positively impact a meeting's effectiveness.

During the Meeting

Meeting hosts and attendees may have slightly different roles when it comes to facilitating the virtual gathering, but there are some general tips that can help everyone. Once it's time to dial in, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Choose a moderator**—This should be established in the agenda. The moderator will keep the meeting moving and engage attendees. If attendees don't know each other, make those introductions to help everyone feel connected and welcome.
- **Stick to the agenda**—The host should consider assigning a time checker to keep the meeting on track. When possible, end a few minutes early to give people time to get to their next meeting.
- **Encourage interaction**—Encouraging people to speak up, especially in a virtual setting, is not always easy. Everyone should actively be doing something to support the meeting's purpose and objective (e.g., talking, screen sharing, monitoring the side chat channel, note taking and running slides). This move transforms someone from an attendee to a participant.
- **Turn on video**—Video is effective and makes people feel more engaged because it allows attendees to see each other's non-verbal clues. That, in turn, humanizes the virtual meeting room and strengthens personal connections

- **Do not multitask**—A virtual meeting is not the time to check and respond to emails or text messages. The use of video could cut down on multitasking.
- **Expect (and accept) the unexpected**—In a remote work setting, it's not unlikely to have a crackly connection or interruptions from a barking dog or talking child. Approach those unexpected moments with empathy.

When wrapping up the meeting, provide attendees some time to ask questions or share concerns. That could help increase engagement and ensure that attendees are still present and listening. Every attendee should have an opportunity to speak, whether or not they were assigned agenda topics. Approach meeting etiquette as if the gathering was in person.

After the Meeting

Once the meeting is finished, it's important to check for understanding and share a recap of what was discussed. If the meeting was a casual check-in, there may be no need for a recap. However, if there are any outstanding action items or missing attendees, it could be helpful to send a recap to outline next steps and responsibilities. If this was a standing meeting, it might be an opportunity to share the next meeting's agenda as well to give attendees time to prepare. It's all about sharing a transparent record of work progress.

Other Considerations

There's no denying it's much easier to communicate when you can see someone's face. While it's usually recommended to always use video, if employees or other stakeholders are facing online meetings all day, a compromise can be to allow audio-only times so everyone can focus solely on what is said, and forget about how they look.

To learn more about improving virtual meetings, contact Meadowbrook Insurance Agency today.

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How Social Distancing Is Impacting Workplace Culture

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to evolve, one guideline that is likely to last beyond this year is social distancing. Employers have a responsibility to keep employees healthy and safe, and that duty is informing their return-to-work strategies. For instance, some organizations are keeping employees at home to work remotely for the foreseeable future. Other organizations are reconfiguring office layouts to lower capacity and considering safety measures like temperature checks and staggered shifts.

No matter what an organization decides, its initiatives should be true to the company's mission and values. As employers deliberate on new policies or procedures in response to the pandemic, it's important to consider how those efforts might impact company culture and vice versa.

A strong workplace culture doesn't need an actual office to thrive. True culture is based on the values that unify the workplace and employees, regardless of physical location. The pandemic continues to prove this true for many organizations that have moved the workday online.

Staying Socially Connected

Social connectivity encourages camaraderie. Humans are social creatures who crave interaction. According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey, the number one reason employees go into the office is to collaborate with other team members.

Given this, it's not likely for employees to immediately feel included in the workplace culture when they're virtually working miles apart or forced to physically avoid co-workers.

So, how can employers support and cultivate collaboration in today's socially distant workplace? Regardless of whether employees are working in the office or working from home, here are some ways to enhance workplace culture and connectivity amid social distancing:

- **Embrace flexibility** and ensure employees know their health and safety are top priorities. Continue to adapt, support employees and keep the lines of communication open.
- **Facilitate collaboration** by investing in resources such as video conferencing technology, project management tools and collaborative workspaces. The goal is to make it as easy to communicate as it was prior to the pandemic, ultimately improving employee productivity.
- **Encourage video calls** for teams or departments to regularly check in with each other. Start with once a week and increase if needed or desired by the group. Video will help employees feel connected by seeing their co-workers on a screen. The discussion doesn't need to be project-related, but can be more of a check-in to see how people are doing—especially if they are working remotely and balancing other responsibilities.

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- **Schedule virtual social gatherings** for employees to enjoy a cup of coffee, their lunch or a happy hour together. Keep these informal to preserve an organization's sense of fun.
- **Consider altering annual company events** so they can still happen. Employees often look forward to companywide events, so it's important to consider how to host them in a safe and engaging way.

Other Considerations

Organizations can design a workplace that encourages social distancing, but it must be paired with consistent policy enforcement. It's impossible to control the actions of every employee who walks through the door or to expect desk layouts to fundamentally change people's behavior.

As the pandemic continues, some Americans are reporting pandemic fatigue. That may lead to employees—consciously or unconsciously—disregarding workplace policies and acting less cautiously than they were at the pandemic's onset. As a result, morale could be impacted if employees feel uncomfortable with co-workers' behaviors in the workplace.

Today's workplace will continue to evolve just as the pandemic does. To learn more, contact Meadowbrook Insurance Agency today.

