

Episode 61:

Returning to Work Safely After Injury

Host: Ken Rayner

Guest: Sarah Knight



Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Ken Rayner:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host Ken Rayner. On this episode of the podcast, we're joined by Sarah Knight, manager of the Return to Work program at the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, also known as WSIB. In general, it's a good practice to treat requests for accommodation the same, as ultimately providing a safe and appropriate accommodation for injured and ill people to return to work improves their recovery outcomes and helps your business.

Ken Rayner:

Excellent. Okay. Return to work on its own seems pretty straightforward. You have a worker, they go back to work. But we're talking about a return to work program. That's more all-encompassing. Really, Sarah, can you explain a little bit more about what a return to work program is?

Sarah Knight:

A return to work program is an established set of guidelines and procedures to follow whenever an employee requests accommodation following an injury or illness. Think of it as a roadmap for getting someone back to safe and suitable work. This program should be designed with early and safe return to work as the guiding principle. It should have some parameters around how and when return to work conversations are initiated, and how and when updated functional ability information is gathered and by whom.

The needs of each individual business will help shape a program that suits them, as there's no one size fits all. There are however some features that are in common in most return to work programs, such as a guiding set of policies to help determine who gets paid, when, how much, and how that is determined. And whether or not that's through an insurance provider or if it's the employer themselves. You may also want to set parameters around how and when return to work conversations happen, and how you keep track of progress towards recovery.

You may also want to have guidelines like how to handle communication with someone who has a disability. Is there a central point of contact, or is it managed on the individual team level? How is the contact made? Is it over the phone? Do you have a schedule of meetings? Or are you holding meetings in-person or virtually?

You may also want to have an established set of accommodations or modified work tasks that you can use to accommodate people on the fly. You can have these bundled by area of injuries or physical demands to make it easier to identify what needs to be offered when something comes up.

Ken Rayner:

All right, fantastic. Okay, let's talk about maybe who's involved. I think it's fairly common sense that we

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Ken Rayner:

All right, fantastic. Okay, let's talk about maybe who's involved. I think it's fairly common sense that we have a worker and an employer, both of those entities would be involved, parties would be involved in the discussions. But I'm sure there's other parties that get involved in discussions about a Return to Work program. What should be involved in developing that specific return to work plan? What are some of those responsibilities and those parties that are involved, Sarah?

Sarah Knight:

Yeah. This is very dependent, again, on the specific needs of the business, and of course of the person who was injured or has an illness. The goal is to support collaborative conversations and meetings with

anyone involved. The injured or ill person, the employer of course, but also their healthcare partners, insurance providers, and maybe representatives.

With respect to responsibilities, businesses have a duty to accommodate the needs of their employees to the point of undue hardship under that aforementioned Human Rights Code. This is an overarching responsibility for all disability accommodations. In addition, if we're talking about a work related injury, the business may have more specific obligations under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act*. Those would depend on the business' classification, their size, length of employment relationship.

You really just need to understand that under the WSIA, both the employer and the employee have responsibilities. They have responsibilities to communicate with each other and with the WSIB, to participate in return to work activities and to report any changes to the WSIB as they come up. The injured or ill person also has to participate in any healthcare activities that are deemed necessary by us, the WSIB.

For non-work related injuries or illnesses, the employees' responsibilities are outlined by your disability management policies. Your policies might want to include things like the responsibility to provide updated medical information as needed, the responsibility to maintain open communication, participation in return to work planning, and reporting any changes to their employer. Again, this is going to be up to each individual business, but those are general guidelines.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah. I love the communication piece. As I understand, it's incredibly important for the employer and the employee and WSIB all to be coordinated through this process. And be aligned in terms of where everybody is in the steps, and how people are progressing, and things of that nature. I can appreciate that that's a very important part of the process.

Sarah Knight:

Yeah. Communication is always key.

Ken Rayner:

Now, WSIB must play a part in this process, Sarah, because they have a manager who oversees a program called Workplace Return to Work Program. Why don't you tell us about what WSIB does to assist the employer and the worker with a successful return to work?

Sarah Knight:

One hundred per cent. We first help to identify what that injured or ill person is able to do. We look at their functional and/or cognitive abilities after that work related injury or illness. We then provide the business or the employer with that information to help in return to work planning, especially if you do have an established Return to Work program. As a business, if you need some help in determining whether potential jobs or tasks are suitable, we can also have a specialist in return to work visit your business to help review their pre-injury job, take a look at modified work, and also the work environment in general to make sure that accommodations are in place. They can also make recommendations to help that person return to work safely and develop a plan.

We also have a variety of assessments that we can call on as needed. These might include things like ergonomic assessments, functional work capacity assessments, transferable skill analyses in the circumstance where a person isn't able to return to their pre-injury job on a permanent basis. And of course, the WSIB Health and Safety Excellence program is also here to help businesses develop those comprehensive programs that serve as a backbone to a healthier and safer workplace. This can include developing that ever-useful Return to Work program.

Ken Rayner:

All right. Hey, Sarah, one thing. If somebody is not one hundred per cent recovered, can they still come back to work?

Sarah Knight:

Absolutely. In fact, research shows that people recover better and faster when a safe and suitable return to work plan has been implemented. Work is part of a robust recovery program. It serves as a form of treatment because having a regular routine and safe activities that match a person's level of function improves their mental health, it improves their physical recovery, and it provides emotional and social support.

The key is just making sure that those work tasks that they're performing match their abilities and don't make their condition worse. Working together with the employee and their healthcare provider to identify work that can be safely performed is really important for a sustainable return to work. Ongoing collaboration will help guide that progress. And as always, in the case of a work related injury or illness, the WSIB can step in to provide those extra supports and resources as needed.

At the WSIB, we use a guiding principle for return to work called "better at work". It guides our approach to case management, and is reflected in many of our policies and programs. The better at work approach is built on four key principles. The first is work is important to overall wellbeing. The second is that early intervention is key. The third principle is that return to work enhances recovery and is part of the rehabilitation process. The fourth principle is that there are barriers to work and they're often inappropriately medicalized. Not everyone can return to work immediately following an injury. But early conversations and discussions of the better at work principles can help return people to safe and suitable work and improve their health recovery.

Ken Rayner:

Excellent. I know there's a reference there that we will put up on the IHSA podcast site from WSIB. That's fantastic. That makes a lot of sense to me. That was great, Sarah.

Now, we've talked about a return to work and we've talked about an employer needs to do, some of their responsibilities, the worker responsibilities. WSIB, how they can help. What would, in your mind of the manager of this whole program, what does a successful return to work process look for all the workplace parties involved? Is it possible to get a success across the board from everybody?

Sarah Knight:

Wow. That's a big question. A successful return to work process is going to look different for every business, it's going to look different for every person whose injured or ill. I can provide you a generalized example. But again, remember, this is just a generalization. It is going to be case-by-case different for everyone.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. We're not going to be able to do a quote from, "Sarah says this is the one and only perfect way to achieve success for all parties." I got it. It's generalized, 100 per cent. Okay.

Sarah Knight:

This is the one, this is the one. Ideally first, in a scenario where somebody has an injury or an illness, they would report that to their supervisor right away. It could be non-work related, as you said. Shoveling the snow or salting the ground, or now in the summer, lifting up those bags of soil. Or it could be work related. Since I'm here from the WSIB, in my example, it's work related.

The supervisor in this scenario would fill in any necessary reporting forms. They may have an internal incident report, and of course the Form 7. Then they're going to let the injured or ill person know that they would be able to provide accommodations for them to be able to return to work safely. This is where that Return to Work program comes into play. The supervisor would look at the modified work options available and identify those that seem to be most likely suitable based on the area of injury. They would let the injured or ill person know what tasks they can perform and what work would be available to start.

Then the employee would be able to take this information with them when they go seek medical attention. They can review this information with their healthcare provider, and their healthcare provider can complete the Form 8 or a functional abilities form to help identify the functional abilities, the things that this person can do. The employee then brings that information back to their supervisor and they would work together to come up with a mutually agreeable plan for return to work. The specifics of that plan are going to be very dependent on a number of factors, such as the nature of injury, the recommended treatment plan, and the availability of work.

Let's say in our example, the person's physiotherapist recommends a gradual increase of work duties over the next eight weeks while the person attends treatment two times per week. The employee and their supervisor would then put together a plan for that. If they need help, they might tag in the WSIB and have a Return to Work Specialist come in. That Return to Work Specialist would go in, help out put together a plan, and then the injured person follows the plan, brings regular updates from their physiotherapist to their employer and to the WSIB about their recovery progress. They may need to work with their supervisor to make some adjustments as needed. But at the end of the plan, the employee would be back to their regular work duties. That's the ideal scenario.

Ken Rayner:

Wow! I can't believe it, Sarah. We have ... You, not me. You have essentially explained the Return to Work Program in essentially less than 15 minutes. I've got a really good understanding of return to work. You've explained it in terms of responsibilities for the workers and the employers, how WSIB assists,

what a successful program looks like. That was fantastic. Thank you so much for joining us on the *IHSA Safety Podcast*, Sarah.

Sarah Knight:

You're very welcome, Ken. It's been my pleasure.

Ken Rayner:

All right. Thank you to the listeners to listening to the *IHSA Safety Podcast* and this series showcasing the services offered by WSIB. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel, and visit us at ihsa.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

Announcer

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