Return-to-Work Coordinator Competencies
As the costs of medical care for injured workers have soared, along with the indirect costs of employee absence, the role of the return-to-work (RTW) coordinator has become increasingly vital. Yet there’s been little research about which competencies, i.e. knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors, RTW coordinators need to succeed in the role. The Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety conducted a study to help identify this core set of competencies. The results have implications for every organization that hires and/or depends on someone to coordinate RTW to help manage medical and disability costs.

A critical role

The importance of RTW coordinators in helping injured workers return to their jobs as soon as feasible has been well documented. “Our research has consistently shown that interventions that include a workplace component produce better RTW outcomes than those interventions that focus solely on medical care,” says Glenn Pransky, M.D., M.Occ.H., director of the Institute’s Center for Disability Research. “The active involvement of RTW coordinators is often critical to the success of these interventions.”

RTW coordinators are hired by insurance companies, third party administrators, large employers, and healthcare providers to expedite and smooth an injured employee’s transition back to work. Others find themselves in this role as part of an HR function. Coordinators may have backgrounds in human resources, physical therapy, or nursing, but many have learned on the job. Their responsibilities include identifying and addressing barriers to an employee’s return, facilitating work accommodations so the employee may be able to return sooner, designing and implementing the RTW plan, coordinating with all stakeholders, and making sure the plan stays on track.

“This study grew out of the idea that, if organizations can identify the competencies possessed by successful RTW coordinators, they may be able to adjust their hiring and training practices to improve their RTW outcomes,” Pransky says. In theory, he adds, that would lead to lower costs and improved productivity.

### Costs of employee absence

**Direct Costs:**
- Insurance premiums
  - Medical
  - Workers compensation
  - Short- and long term disability
- Salary continuation/sick leave
- Any other benefit continuation during absence, e.g., pension contribution

**Indirect Costs:**
- Overtime
- Job accommodations
- Replacement workers and training
- Recruiting costs

**Other considerations:**
- Employee burnout/stress
- Higher error rates
- Missed deadlines
- Lost business
**Study scope**

The study was conducted in two parts. In the first, 75 RTW coordinators participated in focus groups in which they identified and ranked competencies for RTW coordination. The second part was a survey of coordinators, completed by more than 220 respondents, in which they ranked the importance of the competencies identified by the focus groups. Participants in both parts of the study represented a wide range of types of organizations and RTW-related work areas.

**Results**

The study’s most important finding was that “non-technical” competencies were rated much higher than “technical” ones. The highest rated competencies either reflected personal characteristics or specific skills related to the unique issues that arise when coordinating among the many stakeholders involved in the RTW process. Even in cases in which the RTW coordinator also manages the injured worker’s medical care, competencies such as medical evaluation skills were viewed as less important than these non-technical competencies.

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<tr>
<th>Evidence-Based Principles for More Effective Return-to-Work Coordination</th>
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<tr>
<td>■ Effective communication with injured workers is required to identify problems and possible solutions</td>
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<td>■ Identifying risk factors early leads to improved RTW outcomes</td>
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<td>■ Insightful empathetic conversations with injured workers are more effective than scripted questions</td>
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<td>■ Time is short and the window to achieve successful RTW closes quickly</td>
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<th>Putting the results to work</th>
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While the study had a relatively small sample size and is not the last word on the subject of RTW coordinator competencies, its results provide an interesting new view of what makes a coordinator successful, a view that organizations with someone in the role of RTW coordinator may want to incorporate into their selection, training, and development practices.

**Selection**

The focus groups recommended that organizations hire individuals who possess the inherent qualities rated as important to a coordinator’s success. They suggested that these traits make it easier for RTW coordinators to acquire the other competencies necessary to succeed in the position. For instance, someone who possesses traits such as perseverance, open-mindedness, and patience may be more likely to relate well to the different personality types involved in RTW coordination and instill confidence and trust in their coordination abilities.

Hiring organizations may find it difficult, however, to test for such traits through a formal application process. “Given that many of these traits are somewhat inherent, and might be best evaluated through direct observation,” Pransky says, “the selection process should focus on job history, past performance, and the results of a face-to-face interview with an experienced RTW coordinator.”

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**The following were among the highest rated skills and attributes:**

- Respecting and maintaining confidentiality
- Listening
- Ability to communicate well in person and in writing
- Ability to relate well to a wide range of personalities
- Effective problem-solving

**Unless the RTW coordinator is also managing the injured worker’s medical care, the following competencies were among the lowest rated:**

- Medical evaluation
- Knowledge of treatment efficacy and best practices
- Evaluating co-morbidity impacts
Training
Focus group participants discussed the fact that many of the unique aspects of the RTW coordinator’s role, such as knowledge of workplace policies, laws and practices, and insurance procedures, can be easily learned. “This reinforces the idea that, in order to succeed, it’s more important at the outset for RTW coordinators to possess the right set of inherent skills than to know all the ins and outs of healthcare and insurance procedures.” Pransky says.

Development
Study participants were in general agreement that key RTW coordination skills could only be acquired by on-the-job training, mentorship, supervision, and feedback. These skills include the ability to evaluate RTW barriers and devise solutions and the ability to direct a group effort to achieve RTW. “Though formal training in ergonomics and labor relations issues might provide a coordinator with additional skills,” Pransky says, “the study found that negotiation, problem-solving, and communication skills were more critical to success — and these were best developed through mentorship by experts.”

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