

Return-to-work expectations and workplace supports for injured workers

EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF PEOPLE UNDERGOING VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION.

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Why we did this study

Long-term work disability can arise when there are issues in the return-to-work process following an injury. Although the physical impact of an injury is important, research suggests that psychosocial factors are some of the most important influences in return-to-work outcomes. A better understanding of psychosocial factors will help clinicians to be able to address them in vocational rehabilitation. We wanted to examine two specific psychosocial factors in the New Zealand context: return-to-work expectations and workplace supports.

How we did this study

- We talked to workers who had experienced a musculoskeletal injury within the past 12 weeks and had not yet returned to their normal working roles.
- We explored their experiences and perspectives of workplace supports and expectations of returning to work.



- 4 males, 1 female
- age 21-57 yrs

What we found

We identified four inter-related themes which were found to influence how return-to-work expectations and workplace supports may affect return to work outcomes :

Systemic factors affect how support is provided

Several “systemic” factors had a bearing on how support was provided to the worker. The way processes associated with workers compensation were carried out affected how support was provided in individual workplaces. Workplace support was also affected by factors such as the type of work and the size, structure or work tempo of a company.

Trust underpins workplace supports

Trust between the worker and the company played an important role in the provision of workplace supports. Trust was found to be influenced by a range of factors such as how visible the worker’s injury was to others, the worker’s perceived value to the workplace and even by the worker’s past experiences of the company’s health and safety practices. Such factors were reported to have an effect on the level of trust present in a situation, thus impacting the provision of workplace supports.

The influence of medical providers

Medical staff were also found to have an influence on workers’ confidence in getting back to work. The actions of medical providers at the time of the injury and at various stages during the course of recovery affected workers’ return-to-work confidence. In general, providing services that took each individual’s workplace culture and relationships into consideration was important in supporting return to work.

Workplace supports can shift confidence and expectations about return to work

A wider effect of the “systemic factors” and “trust” themes described above was that not only did they affect the supports workers received, these supports also affected workers’ confidence in being able to get back to work.

What you can do

Download full findings ...

Christopherson, R. M., Fadyl, J. K., & Lewis, G. (2020). Return-to-work expectations and workplace supports in New Zealand: injured workers’ perspectives. *Disability & Rehabilitation, Early online*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2020.1776775>

Full Masters thesis can also be found [here](#)

As an employer ...

- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of your company in terms of providing a work-supportive environment for an injured worker
- Recognise that trust is crucial in providing a positive environment for return to work. This includes trusting management to support the workers, trust between colleagues, and trust that the injured worker is genuine in their needs.
- Be aware that actively providing support to an injured worker can increase their confidence in returning to work after an injury.

As a vocational or healthcare provider ...

- Understand that the worker’s own confidence or expectancies about returning to work influence their return to work, and that past experiences in the workplace and workplace culture is likely to affect this.
- Ask about workplace relationships, size and structure of the organisation and workplace rhythms, and consider how this might influence how you engage with the employer
- Recognise that return-to-work confidence is likely to be influenced by interactions with yourself and other healthcare providers.