# Reading Between the Lines

DELVING DEEPER INTO DISABILITY MANAGEMENT ISSUES CAN HELP EMPLOYERS REDUCE COSTS AND EMPLOYEES OVERCOME BARRIERS THAT MAY PREVENT THEIR RETURN TO WORK. **BY NEIL RANKIN**

Most employers understand that disability costs are directly proportional to the number of claims and the duration of each claim. But that's only part of the equation: employers also need to consider the psychological variables that impact claim frequency and duration.

For example, consider the following scenario. Jane is a 45-year-old assembly line worker with chronic back pain. Occasionally, her manager asks her to work overtime, and she has used her condition as an excuse not to participate. Due to the size of the plant, it is very difficult for the company to produce without having most staff on hand. With a large order pending, the call goes out to all employees. Jane calls in sick due to back pain and remains off work for six weeks, returning to work when the overtime shifts are no longer required.

How would your company handle this situation? How could you enhance your disability management program to improve the outcome?

### Psychological Barriers

It's important to recognize that, in the scenario described above, Jane has a completely different perspective than her manager. She believes that working additional hours will exacerbate her condition and fears that her pain will become unbearable. She becomes stressed and insecure about her job, and she views her manager and the company as unaccommodating. Jane, therefore, delays her return to work for as long as possible.

This outcome could have been avoided if Jane and her manager had communicated better. Openly discussing Jane's concerns would have helped Jane realize that her manager is willing to work with her to address them.

### Timely Intervention

The "call in sick" scenario isn't new, but identifying and addressing these issues before they become conflicts is critical. Managers should ask themselves: Are employees experiencing stress at home or at work? Are they required to perform repetitive activities that could be automated or reduced? Are we proactively managing issues that could result in employees calling in sick or becoming disabled?

### Unengaged Employees

Employers can play a significant role in changing the mindset and behaviour of unengaged employees. Key questions for employers to ask include: What strategies, processes and best practices are in place to make employees feel more engaged? What are we doing to empower employees? Encouraging employees to share their ideas will make them more committed when the company needs them most.

### Data Collection and Analysis

There are many tools to help employers identify trends and potential absenteeism issues. Managers should seek out support from the company's human resources department for information on absenteeism trends, including workers' compensation claim statistics, employee assistance program (EAP) trends and available support services.

### Implementation

Disability management issues vary significantly by organization, but here are some general initiatives for employers to implement.
- Create and document a formal policy to help managers handle disability claims.
- Educate managers about do's and don'ts when an employee is off work due to disability.
- Educate employees about benefits programs (e.g., EAPs) to help them receive support before the issue escalates into a disability claim.

### Evaluation

Once you've implemented these initiatives, you'll want to determine their impact on reducing claims. Track claims experience not just in the implementation year, but also over previous years. Look at the evaluation stage as an ongoing improvement process, rather than as a one-time event.

Managing people is never an easy task. But proactively addressing return-to-work issues can help reduce absenteeism and disability costs, resulting in greater productivity for the employer and happier, healthier employees. **BC**

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