

YVR's Return to Work Program

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OVERVIEW

The Vancouver Airport Authority is the community-based, not-for-profit organization that manages Vancouver International Airport (YVR). YVR is proactive about its health and wellness efforts and has worked towards improving their return to work program. While YVR does not have a high occurrence of leaves, there is a significant cost and impact that each leave can have on the workplace and the employee concerned. There are many benefits to a successful return to work program including: retaining experienced workers, engaged employees, better productivity, and reduced costs.

OBJECTIVES

YVR has an integrated approach to health and wellness that is preventative in focus. As part of the overall strategy, the return to work program aims to:

- Prevent injuries and illnesses to the best of their ability.
- Focus on active rehabilitation for those that do experience injury or illness.
- Ensure the return to work experience is positive for the employee.
- Integrate strategies into an employee's return to work, to help prevent further leaves.

APPROACH

YVR works to ensure the return to work process is proactive, and reduces stress for all parties, particularly for the employee involved. An active management role supports a reduction of the unknowns and questions often associated with return to work programs.

YVR's approach to return to work includes:

- Working closely with the employee, medical practitioners and managers from the beginning of the process.
- Ensuring the employee understands the services that are available and have a good understanding of the process as a whole.
- Giving employees guidance on how they can ease their own return to work.
- Supporting employees with a mutually beneficial return to work plan.

- Connecting with employees upon their return and providing flexibility and modifications available as needed.

Working with Multiple Stakeholders

YVR found that a successful return to work program involved bringing in and involving multiple stakeholders at the beginning of the process. Working closely with four main parties -the employee, the manager, the Health & Safety team, and medical practitioners, ensures that YVR can support a sustainable return to work program.

Ensuring Employees Understand the Process

Throughout this process, YVR found that one of the biggest causes of stress for an employee going on leave was a lack of understanding of the process of returning to work, the services available to them, and unanswered questions about the return to work process. To alleviate stress and provide all the information employees require, the manager and Health & Safety team maintain regular communication with any employee using the Return to Work Program.

Giving Employees Guidance

YVR works closely with employees to provide guidance on how employees can support their own return to work. Employees are often keen to come back to work, but are not always sure about how they can contribute to their return. Between medical practitioners, the manager, and the Health & Safety team, this guidance is discussed with the employee and they are encouraged to contribute ideas.

Supporting Employees in Creating a Plan

Employees work with YVR to create a return to work plan that benefits all parties involved. Once an employee has recovered and is preparing to return to work from an injury or illness, medical practitioners provide work restrictions and/or limitations (physical and/or mental) and weigh in on the return to work planning. The plan, including modifications and limitations, is discussed with the employee, the manager, and the Health & Safety team, so that the work space is adjusted as needed to best support the employee.

Checking in Once an Employee Returns to Work

To support returning employees, YVR management will check in on the employee and ensure that any required supports or accommodations have been provided to help them have a successful return to work. Examples of supports and accommodations can include: physical modifications, modified hours of work, gradual return to work and providing time to attend medical appointments.

OUTCOMES

Anecdotally, YVR has received feedback about the positive experience that employees have in returning to work. Sick leave data has stayed stable, despite an increased workforce. Graduated Return to Work (GRTW) plans remain consistently successful with little failure or repeated GRTW attempts. The return to work process is audited annually through a WorkSafeBC sponsored health, safety and injury management systems review program and receives an outstanding score each year.

LESSONS LEARNED

There were many lessons learned in the process of improving the Return to Work Program:

Advertising Challenges

It can be challenging to advertise the program and ensure people know about it given the nature of the program. Managers also need to be aware of the program, and how it can support their teams. In order for the program to be effective, multiple stakeholders need to be aware of how to best utilize it.

Need to Dig Deeper than the Initial Medical Certificate

Often the initial medical certificate contains very little information, and does not focus on how the employee can successfully overcome the illness or injury and return to work. With the employee's permission, YVR aims to bring together stakeholders (such as the employee and medical practitioner) to understand how best to support the employee. Digging deeper than the medical certificate allows YVR to prioritize the employee's interests upon his/her return to work.

Flexibility is Key

One size doesn't fit all – and flexibility is key to a successful program. YVR learned that being flexible in how to approach each situation contributed to a successful outcome for the employees involved in the program.

NEXT STEPS

YVR is working to gather data on the program and analyze it to make improvements. Similar to other processes, YVR tries to explore efficiencies by standardizing certain elements without compromising flexibility. An excellent pool of medical and paramedical professionals is available to assist the staff with the return to work process.