

## Returning to work after brain injury: Information for employers

Providing the opportunity for an employee to return to work after a brain injury makes a positive contribution to their rehabilitation, retains valuable knowledge and experience within your business and fosters a supportive workplace culture for all employees.

### What is a brain injury?

A brain injury refers to any damage to the brain that is acquired through accident/trauma (eg car accident, assault) or illness (such as a stroke, brain infection, lack of oxygen etc).

**The effects of brain injury are different for each person**, depending on how severe the injury was and which parts of the brain were affected. The brain controls everything in our body: our thinking, memory, movement, strength, co-ordination, speech, vision, mood and behaviour. An injury to the brain can affect all or just some of these aspects. The brain has some capacity to recover over time; most of the recovery occurring gradually for up to 2 years following the injury.

Some changes will be obvious (e.g. walking with a limp, paralysis of one arm), but many are not visible (e.g. poor memory, mental fatigue, changes to vision, difficulty tolerating loud noise). Sometimes people experience changes to their personality, which may be subtle (like being more talkative), or more noticeable (like difficulty controlling emotions).

*Brain injury is complex: the injury impacts on each person differently and changes over time as recovery occurs.*

*Working with a brain injury is even more complex with the interplay of injury and job demands.*

How well a person manages at work depends on the demands of their job. One position may require physical strength, co-ordination and balance; where as another position has higher demands for cognitive skills like planning, problem solving and communication.

### What is the timeframe for return to work (RTW)?

There is no “best time” to commence employment after acquiring a brain injury. Keep in touch with your employee and their family following their injury and be guided by the medical team about their readiness to commence work. Once back at work, the pace and duration of the RTW program will vary for each person.

### What is done before a person commences work?

A vocational provider will assist you and your employee, commencing with:

1. Workplace assessment – assessing the physical and cognitive job demands and environment to determine how the brain injury may impact on the employee working in their usual role.
2. A Return to Work Plan – also known as a “suitable duties plan”, outlines the proposed duties, hours and supports for the employee to resume work. This plan is developed by the employer, employee and the vocational provider with input from the treating medical team. There may be a number of plans, gradually stepping up the duties and hours towards the set goal.

### What support will the employee require when they are back at work?

Adjustments to the work role will vary from person to person. Typical adjustments in the ‘return to work plan’ may include:

- Start on reduced hours and increase gradually over time
- Work on non-consecutive days, if possible, and gradually build to consecutive days
- Allocate tasks that are most familiar to the person
- Schedule more demanding tasks in the morning
- Use diary, checklists and written notes to aid memory
- Increase the level of structure within tasks and the work routine
- Reduce distractions in the work environment, this may include working in a different location
- Schedule regular feedback that is timely, sensitive and specific, and that is reinforced over time
- Avoid time-pressured work, initially
- Reduce scope of responsibilities, e.g. not to supervise others in the initial period
- Initial supervision of work tasks to assist with readjusting to the work routine
- Regular rest breaks to reduce fatigue.

### How is the Employer supported?

The provider will guide you through the Return to Work program:

- Providing information regarding the employee’s condition and rehabilitation
- Visiting on site to implement strategies with your team
- Assist with contingency planning, to inform options if the plan is interrupted or changes unexpectedly.

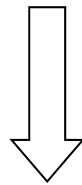
***Once the employee is back at work, the employer is responsible for workers compensation, wages and entitlements as per standard employment practises.***

# Summary of the RTW Process

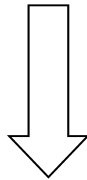
## Stage of RTW

## Key actions

Preparing for work



Returning to work



Concluding rehabilitation and  
planning for the future

- Early discussions between employer, employee and rehabilitation providers.
- Rehabilitation assessments and activities continue
- Workplace assessment and planning RTW
  
- Suitable duties commence
- Work hours and duties upgrade according to the plan
- Onsite implementation of strategies
- Any required adjustments to the plan are discussed and arranged
- Regular feedback is provided to all parties
  
- Determine when job stability has been achieved
- Conclude the RTW program and determine any outstanding issues
- Withdrawal of the Vocational Provider
- Arrange ongoing supports if required - internal and external to the company

## Examples of Return to Work Experiences

**Instructions for this section (please delete before you print):** Please choose the most relevant example(s) and delete those not relevant

**Name:** Brian

**Employment:** Casual Retail Sales Assistant (clothing)

**Details of injury:** car accident causing severe brain injury, resulting in fatigue and cognitive problems (slower speed of thinking, difficulty holding concentration for long periods and keeping track of multiple tasks at once).

**Goal:** Resume pre-injury position on part-time hours with the following adjustments:

Do not allocate shifts during busy periods

10 minute break every hour

Use the store ipad to record notes and reminders

Focus on customer service on the floor and avoid cash register duties initially

**Progress:** Brian commenced work 5 months after his injury. He gradually upgraded from 8 hours per week to 30 hours per week over the course of 4 months. He found work tiring, requiring more sleep. He was allocated a "buddy" to support his learning of cash register duties as this was new to him. He met with his manager fortnightly to discuss how he was going.

**Outcome:** Brian was back working his usual casual hours after 4 months.

**Name:** Peter

**Employment:** apprentice carpenter (employed by a house builder)

**Details of injury:** fall at work sustaining brain injury and fractured shoulder. Peter had difficulties with speech (finding the right words and articulating clearly) though this was improving. He also developed epilepsy so was unable to drive. The shoulder injury healed well.

**Goal:** trial working as an apprentice carpenter

**Restrictions and strategies in the initial period:**

Work part-time (Mon/Wed/Fri of 4 hours)

Workmates provide transport or use public transport where possible

Work only on houses after 'lock up' stage (ie not on construction sites)

No climbing ladders or working at heights

No use of heavy machinery or power saws

**Progress:** Peter worked within the above arrangements for 12 months but was unable to progress to completing his apprenticeship due to the restrictions related to epilepsy (including part-time work and no climbing and use of machinery). He was frustrated by only doing simple tasks and so decided to change careers.

**Outcome:** Peter obtained work at an apprenticeship centre, co-ordinating on-site assessment of apprentices.

**Name:** Jason

**Employment:** Storeman

**Details of injury:** Fell from his skateboard causing severe brain injury, resulting in mild incoordination and balance problems; difficulty with memory and with managing frustration.

**Goal:** Commence suitable warehouse duties and gradually upgrade to full pre-injury duties.

**Tasks:**

Picking order

Dispatching orders

**Restrictions and strategies in the initial period:**

No use of forklift

Supervisor to check orders before dispatched

15 minute seated rest break every 2 hours

Complete one order before commencing the next

Mark off each item picked in the order.

**Progress:** Jason returned to work 7 months after his injury at 8 hours and worked up to 25 hours per week across the initial 3 months. He resumed driving forklifts after passing the forklift test. Jason was always keen to step up his work hours but after a while found it hard to keep up the routine. He had trouble with fatigue and developed headaches. It was agreed to drop back to 20 hours per week and maintain this for 6 months before upgrade more gradually.

**Outcome:** Jason upgraded to full-time work with the same employer after 18 months.

**Name:** Judy

**Employment:** Accountant with a large pharmaceutical company

**Details of injury:** Brain aneurysm resulting in slowed speed of thinking, difficulty planning/problem solving and poor memory. Judy had not worked for 12 months; had lost confidence and experienced fluctuations in her emotions.

**Goal:** Trial completing her pre-injury position as an accountant on a part-time basis

**Plan:**

Judy will only manage accounts for one section of the business

Meet with manager each morning to discuss priorities and organise work schedule

Use daily checklists

Manager to check work for accuracy

**Progress:** Judy found it difficult to manage the complexities of her accounting role and after 6 months the opportunity arose for her to trial the role of accounts payable clerk (a role she held for 10 years before completing her accounting degree). This work was more routine and procedural.

**Outcome:** Judy was re-employed as a part-time accounts payable clerk, 3 days per week.