

## Light Duty, Good or Bad?

There are lots of “lites” available today, light salad dressings, and ice cream. And for many companies light duty gives them the same lack of satisfaction that they experience personally from all those light products. But what is the real story with light duty?

Some companies are enthusiastic about their light duty programs. They will find a job for anyone who is still breathing. They don’t want lost time and they don’t want to have to pay people to stay home. Too many lost time cases and your WC rates go up.

On the other side of the fence are the companies who simply will not have people in the building that are restricted in any way. They will tell you that restricted workers affect the morale of other employees. They’ll tell you it’s too much trouble to find appropriate light duty work, or that they’ve looked and they just don’t have light duty.

So, where is the answer to the light duty question? It lies, of course, between the two scenarios described above.

Some of this is impacted by legislation, usually at the federal level. The ADA or Americans with Disabilities Act differentiates between *essential functions* of a job and those functions that are not integral to the job requirements. If you have to screw a widget on a machine every 20 seconds, that’s pretty essential to your job. If you have to get a new tote of widgets twice a day and renew your stock, not so much.

So what about the employee who is injured? How do company decisions about light duty affect them? Let’s take your average employee. They get hurt on the job. They’re in pain and they’re probably angry at someone.

So now they’re hurt, and you’ve sent them to Riverview WorkMed. They’re seen for their, let’s say, back injury and they come back with lifting restrictions. No lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling more than 15#. Their job is to screw on widgets but there are those 30# totes twice a day. You tell them you’ll let them work and have someone else load the totes. The vast majority will be grateful for the accommodation. They actually come to work to make money so they can care for themselves and their families. Being off work, even on comp, costs them money.

To the company, restricted days count as lost days for OSHA. So let’s say your company decides that you’d just as soon send restricted workers home as place them. So, the widget assembler goes home until his weight restrictions come off. What happens then?

Well, for the company, they are now making workforce adjustments. Some use such opportunities for cross training, but in most cases it means you have someone being moved from their regular job, and often several someone’s being moved. So, now one is injured and at home, and several are acquiring new skills. So they lie on the couch, watch daytime TV and take pain pills. They decondition their entire body while their back slowly gets better. When the back is better the rest of them is not quite up to installing widgets every 20 seconds. So, they go to conditioning for a while, and they’re usually off for that.

Most employees are creatures of habit. They get up and go to work 5 days a week and think nothing of it. Have you ever gone on vacation for 2 weeks and have that first day of work following be so hard to get up for? Try being off work for 6 weeks for a sore back and then having that first day of work.

People have a psychological connection to their workplace. Part of what maintains that is being there. They see their buddies, talk to each other, have lunch and do worker type stuff together. Being off work, particularly for an extended time, can break that psychological connection. If an employee is off work for 6 months there's only a 50% chance that they'll ever go back to work. Longer than that and the odds are worse than even.

So, what does the ideal light duty workplace look like? Based on many years of occupational health experience it looks like this.

- ❖ Workers who are released with restrictions are placed with those restrictions. Restrictions have to be written so they are meaningful. What does "No Lifting" mean? How do they dress themselves? Same with no bending. Providers have to provide restrictions that make sense. If they don't ask them to be more specific.
- ❖ All employees are aware of the light duty program and that management supports it.
- ❖ Supervisors work with the employee, the medical provider, and comp reps to find appropriate placement.
- ❖ If the employee's department can't place them, another department can pick them up, but the department where they work still pays them. Who wouldn't take a free person for a while?
- ❖ HR, comp reps, and safety people should work with the medical providers. We're all after the same goal, returning workers to work safely. Don't be afraid to call. A recent employee was given a no climbing restriction, basically that means no ladders. The employer asked if he could climb into his machine. That was fine in this case, so they could work him with his restrictions.
- ❖ Almost every department has at least one pain in the backside project they've been putting off. Sorting through files, sorting out parts, inventory, there's always something even severely restricted employees can do. Some will love it, most won't, but at least they're working.

Finally, here are some last thoughts.

- ✓ Occupational Health Practitioners know that patients get better faster if they're still working. If they absolutely cannot work for the safety of the worker or other employees they'll tell you. Otherwise they'll release the patient with restrictions.
- ✓ Keeping employees at work while they recover means they heal faster, are happier, and remain good employees. No, you don't have them report with a book and sit in the cafeteria, but working with restrictions, even fairly stiff ones, is better for the employee than not working.
- ✓ It is part of the supervisors' job to place people for work. The same is true of employees with restrictions. It's the supervisor's job to find them something they can do.
- ✓ Restricted duty is good for the company. It will, in the long run, cut comp costs, lower training costs, and result in better workforce morale.

- ✓ Employees who work in facilities where there is no light duty will sometimes not report injuries because they can't afford to miss work. This often results in more serious injuries which can result in longer periods of treatment and lost work time.
- ✓ Things that get measured get fixed. The best way to avoid restrictions is to avoid injuries. You should be tracking your injuries and working to make your workplace safer. That's everyone's job, from the CEO on down.