

TOOWOOMBA COUNCIL

“Immediate and comprehensive response to injury results in positive outcomes”



Tips and Tricks

Suggestions from Toowoomba Regional Council to other organisations

✓ Education and excellence

Daily toolbox talks and weekly Take 5s across the business gives your entire business the opportunity to learn and grow together.

✓ Early intervention

Be proactive. Go to the doctor with the worker. Make it easy for everyone to make decisions about suitable duties by making a list of duties that are available. Be supportive of injured workers and their support systems and help them get back to work quickly and recover at work.

✓ Ask for help

Get good ergonomic assessments to keep staff safe. Ask experts to come in and give you advice on ways to make the workplace safer. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

✓ Continuous improvement

Always look for better ways to do things and involve all staff members, especially the people doing the job you want to change the most. They will have some great ideas!

The Organisation

Toowoomba Regional Council is the ninth largest local government organisation of the 74 regions in Queensland. It is responsible for a population of 157 695, with a geographical spread of 12 973 sq km and more than 10 000 kms of roads. The council employs approximately 1700 staff across the region (Toowoomba RC, 2013). Council workers complete a broad range of tasks including sedentary office based work, front desk customer service and very physical outdoor work. On occasions, event management staff are required to undertake physical tasks when setting up for events around the region, which is a variation from their usual sedentary roles. Other staff members perform physical labour, driving and site inspection roles in construction and maintenance, transport, landscaping, road works, water and waste services.

Key Initiatives and Achievements

Toowoomba Regional Council has an early intervention approach including immediate action on any reported injury requiring medical attention and the timely provision of suitable duties to promote a timely and safe return to work. From upper management through to front line workers, all staff members are trained in health and safety and understand the need to report any incident and ensure the safety of their co-workers. This has resulted in consistently lower lost time injury frequency rates than the scheme average for Local Government Workcare (Toowoomba RC, 2013).

Major Themes

Discussions with staff, rehabilitation co-ordinators, supervisors and management at Toowoomba Regional Council, as well as documentation such as the 2012-2013 Annual Report, demonstrate the Council's commitment to responding immediately when an injury occurs. Support is provided from all levels of the organisation.

The SWAT Team

Toowoomba Council's rehabilitation team's response to workplace injuries can be likened to a SWAT team's response to an emergency. All interviewees agreed that the rehabilitation team is focussed on the health and safety of each worker within the council region. Each worker reported being treated equally and with the same immediacy.

Immediate intervention is the key to success for how return to work is managed within the Council. Describing a member of the rehabilitation team one injured worker said: *“He wouldn't leave me alone, which is good, he looked after everything!”*. It is this sense of urgency and importance that has made this one of the most successful return to work teams in Australia, generating national recognition. If a worker reports an injury that requires medical attention, a rehabilitation coordinator from the safety team will be waiting at the medical centre or hospital by the time the worker arrives to ensure that the worker receives immediate attention. The coordinator respects the privacy of the injured

CASE STUDY

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Management is key

A rehabilitation team will only ever be as good as the support provided to them from above and Toowoomba Council's management does just that. From upper management to site management, safety is key. As one supervisor reported "Loss of life; you cannot put a price on that". Ensuring that all workers are able to go home at the end of the day to their families is key and the Council makes no excuses for being focussed on safety.

This is an organisation that strives for excellence in health and safety. Ensuring that there is a place for a worker at all times and making suitable duties available are all functions heavily endorsed by all levels of management. The theory is, if you look after your workers you are looking after your business.

Council rehabilitation co-ordinators observed that if you can reduce time lost or redundancies then you will reduce costs by reducing the need to recruit and train more staff as well as reducing premiums. A focus on work health and safety is not just a catch phrase; it is a strategic and financial business decision that creates an environment where employee engagement with the workplace is outstanding. This is seen through accountability and responsibility at all levels. People feel cared for and in the long run this is saving the Council money.



worker and provides support in line with their wishes. All questions about a claim are answered and, if required, family members are notified. Should the worker need to be transferred to a larger hospital for further treatment, the rehabilitation coordinator will also attend, even on weekends. This is in line with one of the key findings of a recent National Return to Work Survey (SWA, 2014), which demonstrates that employer support at the time of the injury makes a significant difference to positive return to work outcomes.

This level of service is underpinned by a code of conduct that is heavily entrenched throughout all levels of the organisation. Attendance at daily toolbox talks and weekly Take 5s (because it takes 5 minutes of training) are compulsory for each worker. The Take 5s cover a variety of topics from workplace safety to areas of health and wellbeing such as keeping your heart healthy or the effects of smoking. Each week all employees are not only taught something on a particular topic but they are then tested for competency. Onsite workers have to fill in a short test of competence and office based workers are given the Take 5 information online and tested online.

This ongoing, regular training ensures that health and safety is not only a top priority from a management perspective but also remains at the forefront of workers' minds. Workers respond positively to this training and report feeling 'cared for', adding that "Out there we are all safety officers and look after each other's back; we look after each other like we look after ourselves, even though there are two official safety officers but it's all of our jobs to look after each other". Being cared for by an employer, in terms of injury prevention and post-injury support, has found to make a significant difference to return to work outcomes in Australian organisations (SWA, 2014).

References

Toowoomba Regional Council (2013). *Annual Report 2012-2013*.

SWA (2014). *The National Return to Work Survey: The Role of the Employer and the Workplace. Australia and New Zealand: 2013*. Published by SafeWork Australia. Accessed June 2014 from <http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/swa/about/publications/pages/rtw-survey-role-employer-workplace-2013>

THE BOTTOM LINE.

Since 2009 Toowoomba Regional Council has seen a reduction in over 35% in its workers' compensation premium rate for a workforce in excess of 1700.

This translates to a yearly saving in excess of \$490 000.