Co-workers’ experiences of work reintegration processes

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• Greetings from Armidale Australia
The current situation in WR

• WR stakeholders are: the employer, the ill or injured worker (IW), the insurer and health care providers

• Workplace interventions (modified duties & accommodations) are important for successful work reintegration (WR) (Franche et al., 2005)
Yet......

- While WR approaches are based on a biopsychosocial model, modifications/accommodations focus on medical and psychical aspects of the job (Gates, 2000)

- There is little recognition of the impact of environmental conditions or workplace social relationships on WR outcomes (Tjulin et al., 2009)
From organizational psychology literature...

- The workplace is a social environment – employees are partners in social and task interactions (Schneider, 1987)

- Co-workers have a significant influence on employee outcomes and this is independent of the supervisor (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008)
Co-worker influence

- Co-workers influence:
  - Role perceptions (what and how)
  - Work attitudes (satisfaction, involvement, commitment)
  - Withdrawal behaviours (slacking off to quitting)
  - Personal and organisational effectiveness

- Valance of influence can vary from +ve (support) to –ve (antagonism) -> differential outcomes

(Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008)
Co-workers in WR....

• Generally absent from WR policy
• May have to vary their duties to their detriment (Glozier et a., 2006)
• Their efforts are often unrecognized yet support is crucial to RTW success (WorkCover, 2009; Tjulin et al., 2011)
• Most of what is known about their roles comes from reports by other parties
Need to consider another perspective.....

A supportive workplace culture is key to making workplaces more enjoyable and somewhere that injured workers are motivated to get back to.
The work re-integration process

• What is happening from the co-worker’s point of view?
The research question

What is the experience of people working along side someone who has come back to work after injury?

- How are co-workers involved in WR processes?
- What is expected of them and how do things play out?
- What are the challenges and influences on their response?
- What might help co-workers be more supportive?
Method

- Limited knowledge exploratory qualitative pilot study
- 13 co-workers across 3 x 1.5 hour focus groups
- Open-ended questions, adding new issues arising
- Systematic iterative data analysis (to-and-fro process)
Results

• Co-workers generally understood the aim and rationale for WR procedures but had little knowledge of policy within their workplace

• *It is the sense of being accommodating...bringing someone back and still having them part of the workplace...and when they are ready, they’ll get back to their old job, you know* (Joe)
Co-workers didn’t see themselves as the party to either organize or manage WR, but many were given responsibility without control.

If someone gets injured, it's between the employee and the employer; it has nothing to do with you (Nabil)
Overall findings

Whether WR is useful and tolerable depends on:

• Quality of the WR arrangements
• Relationship with the returning worker
• Workplace culture
• Management of privacy and confidentiality/communication
WR arrangements

- Frequently haphazard
- Often left without support
- Often seemed unfair to them and the returning worker
- Duration was in issue
- Were satisfactory if tasks changed but demands were not increased

- She [the supervisor] pulled me aside and said ‘You’ve got this person coming’, you know, ‘Keep her occupied’. They [the management] didn’t even pretend to be interest; they just said, ‘Keep her occupied’...It was stressful for me. (Denise)
Quality of relationship with returning worker

• Impacted willingness to give support
• May have impacted perceptions of IW’s efforts
• Was dependent on IW being compliant with support ‘rules’*
• Affected by change in work team

• There was a pattern developed where I think he know he could get away with it, and then by mid-week he’d be like, well ‘My are is hurting’... My workload doubled and then just the stress, ‘cause he was quite, quite demanding (Joe)
Workplace culture

Responses depend on:
• Supportive/unsupportive
• Collegial
• Service or teams vs. autonomous

1. I felt is was part of my responsibility – you have to pitch in

2. I really didn’t care about the other person. I came, I filled my hours and I left, The toxic environment didn’t lead to good relationships (Heather)
Privacy and confidentiality

• Strongly impacted WR process and information exchange
• Co-workers felt left out of early contact and WR planning
• Seen as detrimental to all
  – Ill equipped to give support
  – Recommendations not sought
  – Led to rumors and speculation

• I was told ‘She’s sick’, but of course they [the manager] wouldn’t tell us what the problem was. It was very sad because she was such a nice lady... I wanted to send her a get well card or something like that. (Gillian).
Specific findings

Little or no effect when:
- Modified duties were performed for a short period of time
- There is a collective social environment (reciprocity)
- Additional staff are employed to meet overall demands
- Change to perform higher or different duties

Detrimental effects when:
- WR is implemented in a minimalist fashion
- Communication is poor
  - insufficient information
  - lack of involvement in RTW planning
- IW is placed in a new work team
## Negative impacts

- Extra work or heavier duties
- Disruption of personal work effectiveness
- Disruption of organizational effectiveness
- Disruption of workplace social relationships
- Confrontation with IW’s externalized distress
- Ripple effects
  - Psychological distress
  - Personal injury and job loss

## Identified solutions

- Replacement staff
- Effective communication
  - Understand the injury
  - Be consulted about RTW plans
  - Receive guidance on how to assist
- Ensure IW is recovered sufficiently to perform MDs
- Acknowledgment, consideration and recognition
  - Monetary or in-kind payments
Combining the literatures...

- Organisational psychology
- Traditional disability
- Business/HR
- Justice theory
From the general disability literature...

Co-worker’s attitudes towards an accommodated employee are influenced by attributes of:

• the employee
• the co-worker
• the organisation

....and legal requirements

(Stone & Colella, 1996).
Domains of influence on co-worker responses to accommodations

- Attributes of the ill or injured worker
- Features of the injury
- Attributes of the co-worker
- Features of the work environment

Co-worker perceptions of fairness of accommodations

Co-worker Behaviours

- Support (+)
- Antagonism (-)

Content (+)
- Affective
- Instrumental

Social Intensity (of the task)

Severity (-)
- Low
- High

Focal Employee Outcomes

- Role Perceptions
- Work Attitudes
- Personal Effectiveness
- Organisational effectiveness
- Withdrawal

Fig 1 Model of the influences on, nature and outcomes of responses to WR processes

Adapted from: Stone and Colella (1996) and Chiaburu and Harrison (2008)
Conclusions

• Co-workers are not a neutral party in WR procedures
• WR occurs in the context of workplace social relations
• WR is not linear or static but involves dynamic interactions with co-workers
• Formalizing the co-worker role and making the process fair to all might improve co-workers’ experiences and IWs’ outcomes
• Need to address privacy and confidentiality issues
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• New York State Workers Compensation Board. Return to Work Handbook.
• WorkCover NSW. Injury Management
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