# Co-workers' experiences of work reintegration processes
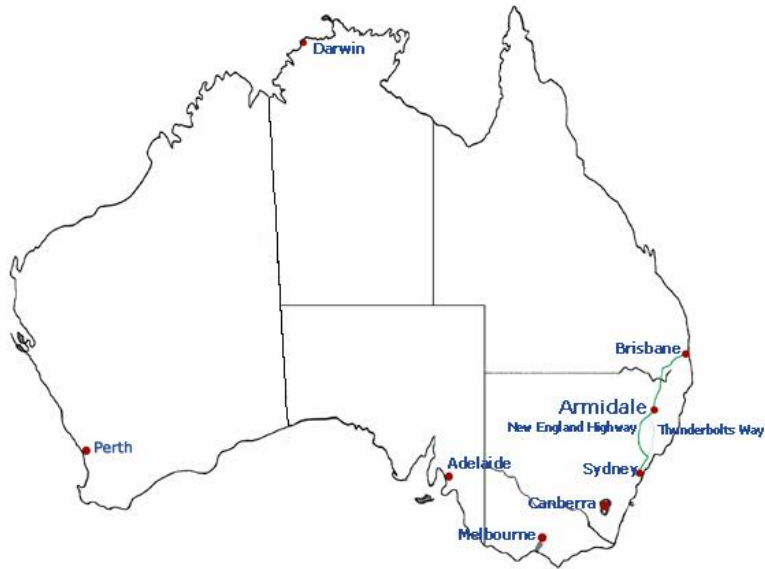
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# University of New England
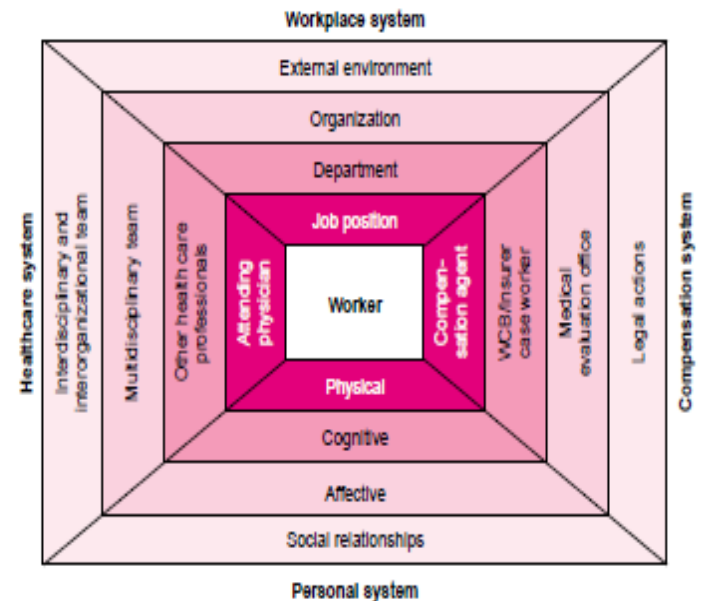
- Greetings from Armidale Australia

# Campus wildlife

# 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)



. Disability prevention management model. WCB = Worker's Compensation Boards.

# 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)
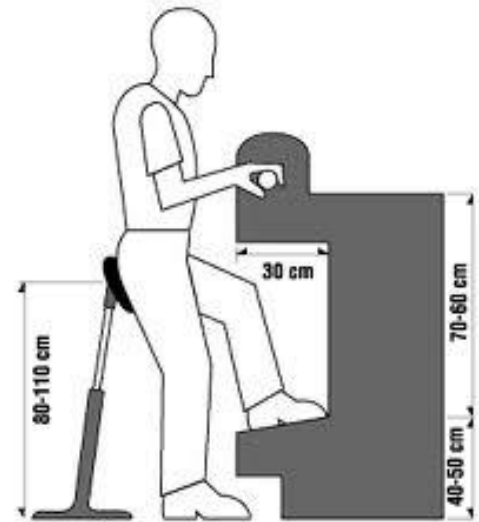
# From organizational psychology literature…

- 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…..



INJURY MANAGEMENT

Making it Work

A supportive workplace culture is key to making workplaces more enjoyable and somewhere that injured workers are motivated to get back to.

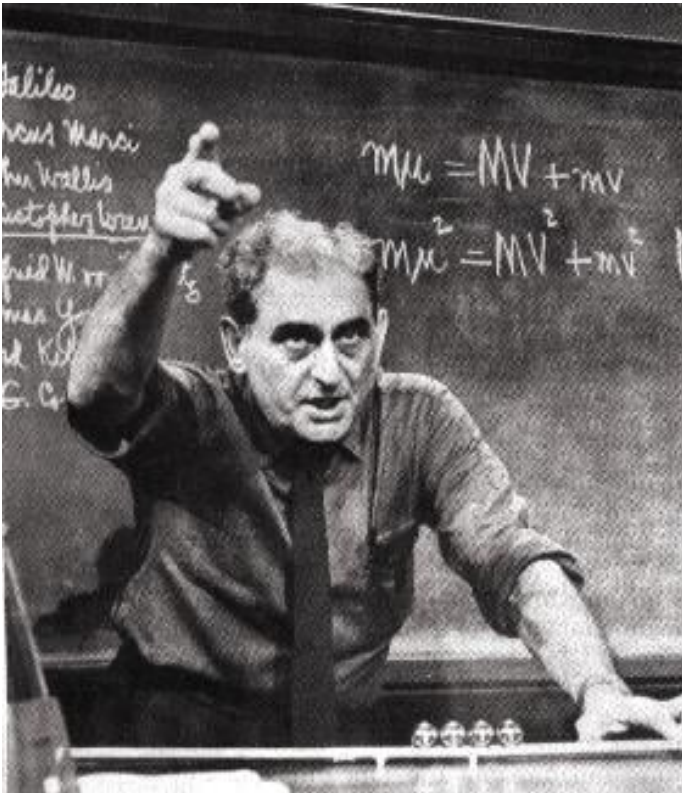Copyright © 2011 Jennifer Miller
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# The work re-integration process

- 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
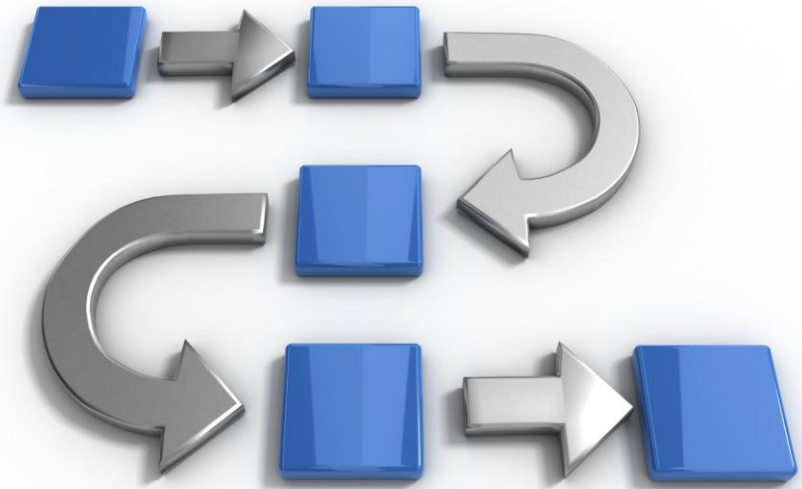
- Limited knowledge exploratory qualitative pilot study

- 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)

# But not responsible...

- 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

- 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)

- 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).

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## 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

# Impacts and solutions

## 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

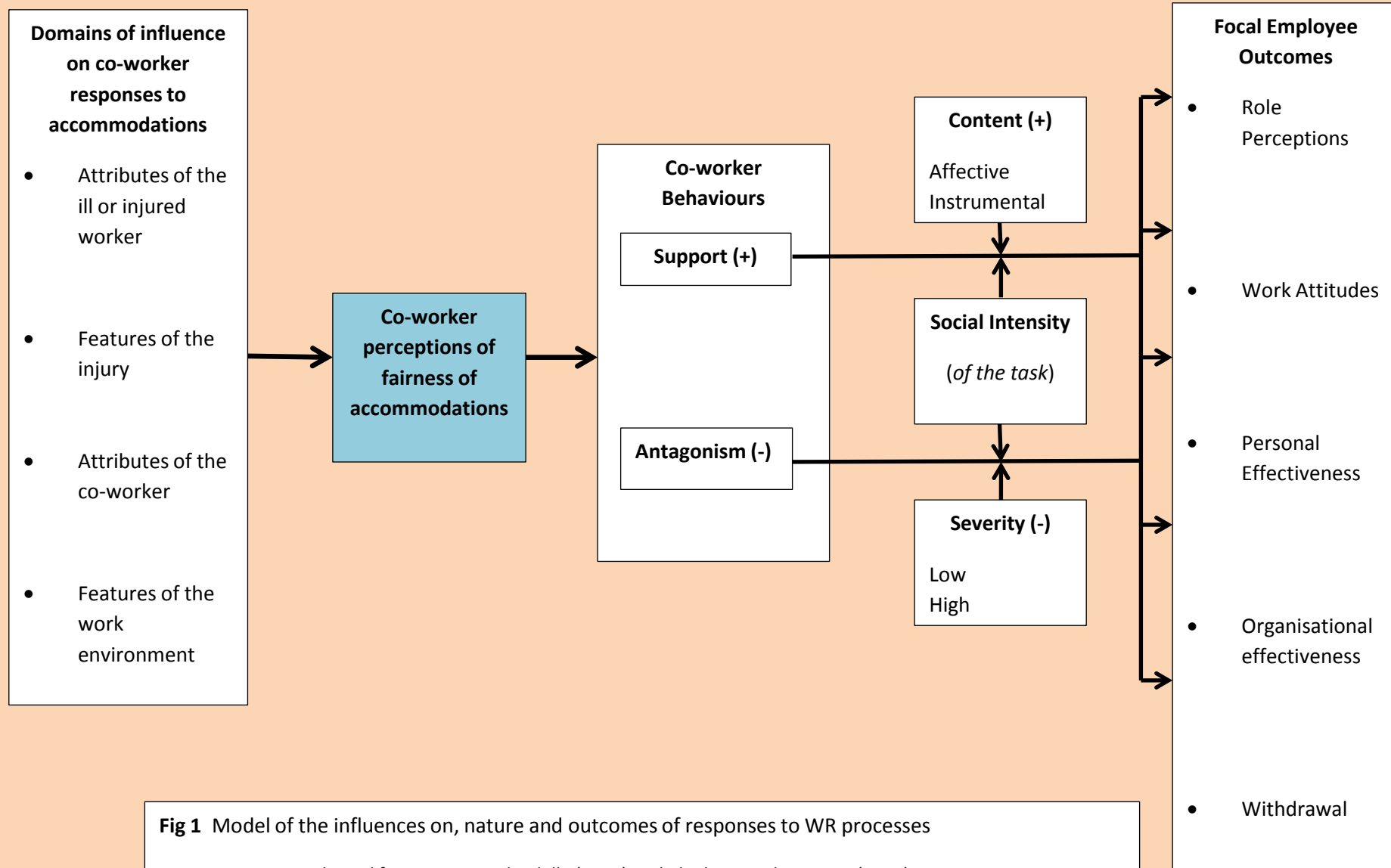- Organisational effectiveness

- 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)

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# 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 <u>fair</u> to all might improve co-workers' experiences and IWs' outcomes

- Need to address privacy and confidentiality issues

# Thanks and acknowledgement

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