

THE DISABILITY EXPERIENCE

WHAT HELPS
AND HINDERS
RETURN TO WORK



Researching for Solutions

As part of an ongoing research effort, Intracorp and CIGNA Group Insurance co-sponsored a study of employees who lost time from work due to an injury or illness. Conducted by The Gallup Organization, the 2001 study reflects the experience of more than 1,000 adults dealing with various benefit programs while they were out of work. The study examined how two very different benefit and communication systems — work-related and non work-related — affected the disability and return-to-work experience of these employees.

The 2001 study — a landmark look at disability experience — offers valuable findings for both the risk management and employee benefits disciplines. Results indicate that employee perceptions of and experience with the benefits process does strongly impact return to work. Employees were most likely to return to work if they felt that their communication needs were met, and if they were satisfied with how they were treated by their employer. Disability durations were twice as long for employees who were not satisfied with an employer's involvement while they were out of work.

Findings also suggest that targeting communications to certain segments of injured and ill employees can impact outcomes. When managers, supervisors and claims managers kept in frequent contact with employees, there was a greater chance of finding job accommodations that enabled earlier return to work, and employees were more satisfied with their benefit process experiences overall.



Disability and Return-to-Work Experience of Injured/Ill Employees

An Intracorp and CIGNA Group Insurance Study

The Study

- Study on disability and return-to-work experience of ill/injured employees, conducted by The Gallup Organization across 10 states from January – February 2001
- Study included:
 - ◆ 506 individuals with work-related disabilities
 - ◆ 510 individuals with non work-related disabilities (including pregnancy)

Key Conclusions

- Non work-related injuries generally result in shorter disability durations than work-related injuries
- Employees were most likely to return to work if they felt that their communication needs were met and if they were satisfied with how they were treated by their employer
- Critical considerations include:
 - ◆ **Critical moments** – Employee information needs are highest at the time of injury, when preparing to return to work, when returning to work and after 90 days' absence
 - ◆ **Critical populations** – Employees with musculoskeletal (i.e., back, knee, wrist) injuries, less workplace experience, lower incomes and disabilities with longer durations require special attention
 - ◆ **Critical people** – Supervisors and case managers can be the key to effective communication

Communication

- Employees' knowledge of how to proceed, if disabled, is higher today (70%) than in 1994 (50%)
- Communication has a direct impact on employee satisfaction
 - ◆ Prior knowledge of disability policy reduces anxiety
 - ◆ Timing and clarity are key attributes of communication that effectively address employees' financial, medical and work-related concerns
 - ◆ Additional information provided by a case manager leads to more frequent discussions of return-to-work opportunities

- Communications recommendations:
 - ◆ Tailor benefit materials to meet information needs of diverse audiences
 - ◆ Solicit feedback to validate understanding and clarify questions
 - ◆ Train frontline managers and supervisors to initiate earlier and more frequent contact during employees' disability
 - ◆ Use case management to support appropriate return to work

- ◆ Utilize case management to help meet individual return-to-work goals
- ◆ Consider an integrated approach to workers' compensation and STD/LTD administration that capitalizes on the strengths of each system

Satisfaction

- Employees' level of satisfaction affects their perception of the entire benefits process
- Employees experience greater satisfaction with their insurance company when they understand disability benefits before needing them
 - ◆ Employees with work-related injuries — and who had a prior understanding of the benefits process — scored 16 and nine percentage points higher in satisfaction, respectively, versus the overall injured population
- Dissatisfaction with the benefits process, claims handling and employer treatment is higher among those with work-related injuries
- Employees with work-related illnesses/injuries and who were satisfied with employer treatment returned to work in 63.5 days, compared to 125.8 days for dissatisfied employees
- Satisfaction/return-to-work recommendations:
 - ◆ Emphasize pre-injury/illness safety by ensuring that good safety programs are in place
 - ◆ Consider proactive ergonomic programs to reduce incidence of musculoskeletal injuries and encourage early reporting of such injuries
 - ◆ Address disabled employees' concerns about finances, medical care and job security promptly
 - ◆ Take extra steps to ensure that less tenured and less educated employees understand procedures for receiving pay and overall benefits
 - ◆ Examine current return-to-work programs to accommodate *all* disabilities
 - ◆ Strengthen relationships with injured workers who are disenfranchised through efficient employer communication and case management support

SATISFACTION AND RETURN TO WORK

Dissatisfaction Level with	Work-Related Illness/Injury	Non Work-Related Illness/Injury
Benefits process	29%	12%
Claim handling	23	9
Employer treatment	27	11

Higher percentage of those satisfied with employer treatment return to work:

Returned to Work	Satisfied with Employer Treatment	Dissatisfied with Employer Treatment
Work-related	64%	20%
Non work-related	81	9



Work vs. Non Work-Related Disabilities

Today's competitive marketplace demands maximum productivity. Employee illnesses and injuries pose a challenge to employers — one that has implications for both risk management and human resources.

Intracorp and CIGNA Group Insurance hope to provide insight into ways

that employers can balance their needs with those of their employees. To that end, Intracorp sponsored studies on work-related disabilities in 1994 and 1997, and partnered with CIGNA Group Insurance in 2001 to gain further insight by extending the outreach to non work-related disabilities. The first survey measured employee awareness of disability procedures. The second showed the importance of continual, consumer-centered disability communication with employees who were ill or injured on the job.

The 2001 survey broadened the view by incorporating feedback from employees who became ill or injured *off* the job. The study looked at how work-related and non work-related benefit and communication programs affect employees' disability and return-to-work experiences. Findings support and expand upon previous results — for example, the need for frequent, specific conversations between the employee and the supervisor or benefits manager. The findings also highlight areas where the risk management and human resources disciplines both shine — and where each department might learn from the other.

Same Diagnosis, Different Behavior

Overall, disability durations were shorter with non work-related absences, perhaps due to less severe illnesses or injuries. However, an examination of a common diagnosis — musculoskeletal injury — within both populations shows a consistent pattern. Significant differences appeared in the ways that the two groups rated employer treatment and quality of medical treatment. Satisfaction levels were much higher (83% and 90%, respectively) for employees with non work-related injuries than for those injured on the job (59% and 77%, respectively). Exhibit 1

This dissatisfaction has an impact. Those who experienced a work-related musculoskeletal injury reported an average disability duration of 122 days, in contrast with only 42 days reported by those with non work-related musculoskeletal injuries.

Exhibit 1

MUSCULOSKELETAL DISABILITY

Satisfaction Measures	Work-Related	Non Work-Related
Disability process	47%	45%
Information needs met	41	48
Employer treatment while out of work	59	83
Insurance company	56	61
Medical coverage	67	65
Medical provider's knowledge	60	69
Quality of medical treatment	77	90

Most measures of satisfaction of employees with musculoskeletal disabilities are similar for work-related or non work-related injuries. However, there are significant differences in the ratings for employer treatment and quality of medical treatment.

Different Populations, Consistent Conclusions

Despite differences stemming from the cause of the disability, key study findings were consistent across both populations. Effective communication increases employee satisfaction throughout the benefits process, which correlates with getting employees back to work more quickly — every employer’s goal. After all, the employee’s well being and ability to be productive at work ultimately impact the company’s bottom line.



Communication Impacts Satisfaction

The survey findings provide quantifiable validation of common-sense concepts that help ensure both employer and employee benefits needs are met. The first of these concepts is the idea that effective communication — both before and during a disability — has a direct impact on employee satisfaction.

Knowledge empowers employees. Communication is especially critical for employees with a high degree of uncertainty about their condition and their job security, as a result of a work-related illness or injury that results in extended work absence. Keep in mind that certain employees, including those with less education or less workplace experience, have a greater need for targeted information.

Increased Employee Awareness

The good news is that, compared to past surveys, a higher number of employees reported that they knew what to do when they became ill or injured — 70% in 2001 versus 55% in 1994. That eases some of the frustration and anxiety associated with an illness or injury. Employees who know what to do are more likely to be satisfied with most aspects of their experience. Prior knowledge of their company’s disability policy and understanding of what to do to obtain treatment was highest among employees of mid-sized companies with more than 100 but less than 1,000 employees. Benefits manuals and written notices distributed on the job are still the most frequent means of communication about benefits, followed by written communications sent directly to the employee’s home. Exhibit 2

Exhibit 2

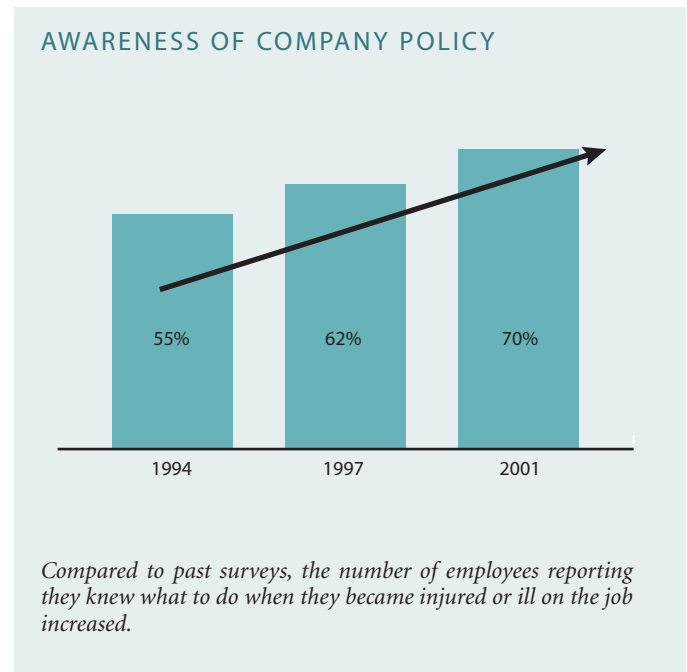


Exhibit 3

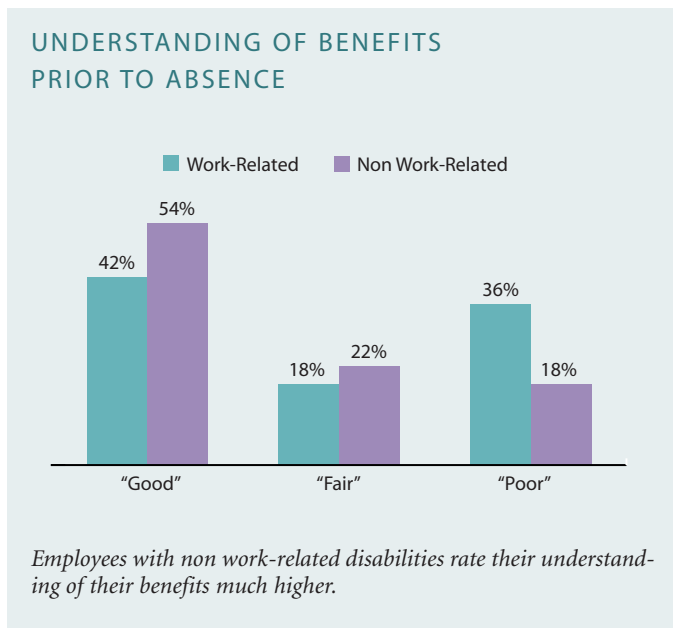
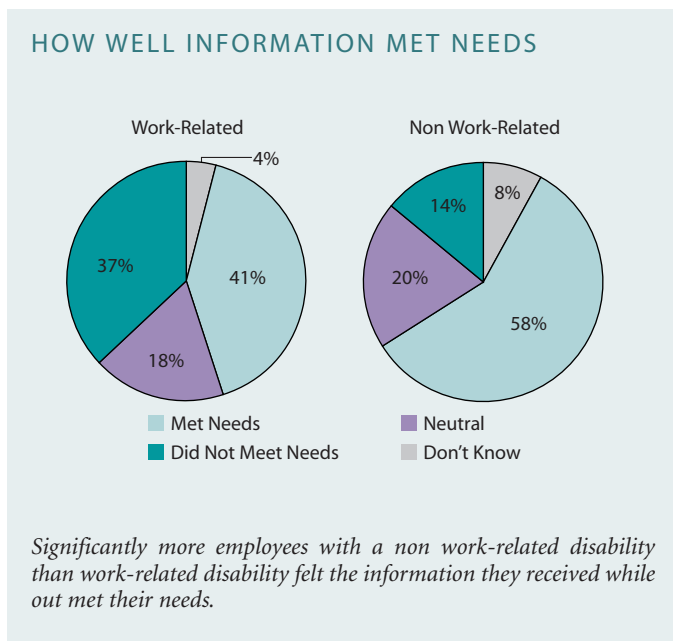


Exhibit 4



Still, communications efforts could be improved. More than half of employees with work-related illnesses/injuries and who were satisfied (54%) rated their understanding of their benefits as only "fair" or "poor." It is no surprise that 55% of injured workers also reported that they were not told how to access their benefits until after the disabling event. In contrast, 54% of those with a non work-related illness or injury felt that their understanding was "good." Nearly half of that population reported being informed of procedures prior to the disabling event. Exhibit 3

Timing and Clarity Are Critical

Open lines of communication would seem to help assure employees that their concerns — financial, medical and work-related — are addressed. But those specific issues vary in importance among different groups of employees. For instance, the examples of less tenured and less-educated employees are greater than those of other segments. On average, employees who were contacted two or three times during their absence reported greater satisfaction with the disability process than those who spoke with their supervisor only once. (Additional contact did not appear to increase satisfaction.) The average number of supervisor communications during leave was slightly higher for non work-related illnesses or injuries. Exhibit 4

The Value of a Case Manager

Brought in early in the life of the claim, a case manager can provide additional disability information about an employee's medical condition, return-to-work options and guidance on what they can do to speed up their recovery. Findings indicate that when case managers are involved, 22% are more likely to discuss return-to-work opportunities with their supervisor; similarly, 17% are more likely to discuss appropriate duties with their health care provider.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Tailor benefit materials to meet information needs of diverse audiences through multiple and ongoing channels of communication.
- Solicit feedback to validate understanding and clarify outstanding questions.
- Train frontline managers/supervisors to initiate earlier and more frequent contact (initial and just-in-time).
- Utilize case management to support appropriate return to work.
- Incorporate Employee Assistance Program (EAP) outreach.



Satisfaction Levels Color Perception of the Entire Benefits Process

If an employer has built a solid foundation through clear, targeted communication, employees are likely to have an overall higher level of satisfaction. Survey data indicates that when employees feel that they have a good understanding of their disability benefits before they need to navigate the benefit system,

they are likely to rate their insurance company higher. This was true for both workers' compensation and STD/LTD claims. The relationship between benefit understanding and satisfaction with the insurance company was most evident among workers injured on the job. When asked to rate their interactions with the insurance company, workers injured on the job who felt that they understood their benefits gave scores that averaged 16 percentage points higher than injured workers overall. Of employees with non work-related illnesses and injuries, the difference averaged nine percentage points. Exhibit 5

The importance of a good understanding of benefits becomes critical when a disability occurs. The employee's level of satisfaction colors his or her perception of the entire benefits process. The employee's perceptions — as much as the plan or the provider — affect the outcome.

Greater Dissatisfaction with Work-Related Disabilities

It's no surprise, then, that satisfaction with the benefits process is lower among those with work-related injuries or illnesses. Employees in this group often do not feel as though they understand the process. And, the nature of workers' compensation adjudication is frequently more adversarial versus STD/LTD administration. This can increase anxiety, confusion and fear and at the same time encourage dissatisfaction. Overall, employees with a work-related condition were less satisfied with their medical coverage, access to treatment and quality of their medical treatment.

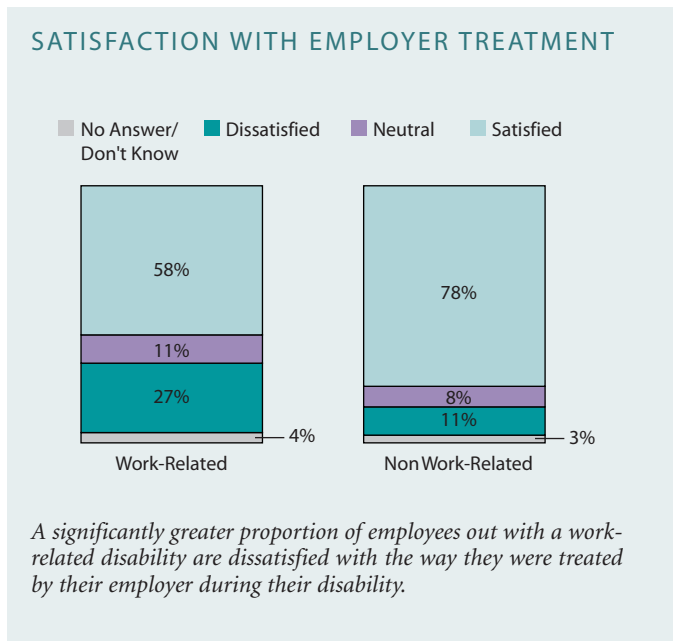
Perhaps more significant is the higher level of dissatisfaction with the disability benefits process. Nearly a third (29%) of employees injured on the job were dissatisfied, compared with just 12% of those with illnesses/injuries that were not work-related. Similarly, about a quarter (23%) of workers injured on the job were unhappy with how the insurance company or claim administrator handled their claim, compared to only 9% of those with a non work-related disability.

Exhibit 5

IMPACT OF PRIOR UNDERSTANDING

	Overall		Understood Benefits	
	Work-Related	Non Work-Related	Work-Related	Non Work-Related
Illness/injury				
Insurance company	65%	54%	N/A	N/A
Payment accuracy	57	73	71%	80%
Keeping you informed	51	53	72	64
Timely payments	57	62	69	71
Being honest and straightforward	60	75	78	86
Treating you with respect	67	80	81	87
Problem resolution	54	67	72	77

Employees who said they had an excellent or very good understanding of their disability benefits prior to their absence are more likely to rate their insurance company interactions highly.



Motivation to Return to Work

In keeping with the above findings, 27% of workers ill/injured on the job were dissatisfied with the way they felt their employer treated them during their disability, and only 58% were satisfied. In contrast, just 11% of STD/LTD claimants were dissatisfied, while 78% were satisfied with their employer's treatment. Common sense predicts that this affects an employee's motivation to return to work. Exhibit 6

In fact, among those with work-related injuries or illness, satisfied workers were three times more likely to return to work. More than half (64%) who were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way their employers treated them returned to work. Of those who were "not satisfied" or "very dissatisfied," only 20% went back to the job. The difference among those with non work-related absences was even more dramatic — 81% of satisfied employees returned, but only 9% of the dissatisfied group came back to work.

The "satisfaction factor" may also affect performance after returning to the job. Fewer than three-quarters (73%) of those with a work-related disability who claimed to be satisfied with their job prior to disability were satisfied after they returned. Ninety percent of satisfied employees with non work-related disabilities remained satisfied after returning to work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Emphasize pre-injury/illness safety.
- Ensure that good safety programs are in place.
- Consider proactive ergonomic programs to reduce incidence of musculoskeletal injuries.
- Encourage early reporting of musculoskeletal injuries through strong, proactive communication. Early case management intervention can prevent these claims costs from skyrocketing.
- Address disabled employees' concerns about finances, medical care and job stability promptly.
- Include workers' compensation communications in benefits orientation.
- Take extra steps to ensure that less tenured, less educated employees understand procedures for receiving pay and overall benefits.
- Help employees understand their employer's commitment to a safe environment.



Intuitively, it makes sense that dissatisfied employees might be less eager to return to work than their satisfied coworkers. The study findings bear this out, particularly in the case of employees with work-related illnesses and injuries. Of this group, those who were satisfied with how their employer

treated them while they were out of work returned to work in approximately half the time of their disenfranchised counterparts, 63.5 days compared to 125.8 days. In the case of non work-related injuries, satisfaction does not correlate as strongly with return to work, except in the case of employee treatment, where figures are similar to those with non work-related disabilities. Exhibit 7

As previously noted, a significantly greater portion of employees with work-related conditions were dissatisfied with the benefits process. In fact, respondents with work-related injuries scored 17 to 20 percentage points lower on satisfaction, information and communication measures. So it is not surprising that they stayed out longer than those not ill/injured on the job. For work-related disabilities, the average absence was 94 days, compared to an average of 83 days for non work-related absences.

Encouraging Return to Work

The shorter median absence for work-related injured employees may reflect one of the strengths of the workers' compensation system. Employees with a work-related disability were more likely to be offered transitional or modified duties (41% versus 28%), twice as likely to be offered training for different work and almost three times as likely to be offered special equipment than employees with non work-related disabilities. About half of the employees with non work-related disabilities were offered a modified schedule — an option available to less than a third (29%) of workers ill/injured on the job.

The study also demonstrated the importance of maintaining a return-to-work schedule that is consistent with employee expectations. Employees who returned to work as expected were far more satisfied with the disability process than those who returned earlier or later than expected. This was true for both work-related and non work-related

Exhibit 7
SATISFACTION AND TIME AWAY FROM WORK
 Average Number of Days Away from Work

Work-Related Responses	Less Than Satisfied	Satisfied
Disability process	106.5	87.8
Information needs met	119.5	72.9
Understanding of benefits	125.9	63.1
Employer treatment while out of work	125.8	63.5
Insurance company	117.1	84.7
Medical coverage	132.5	77.1
Medical provider's knowledge	127.9	76.4
Quality of medical treatment	145.0	75.4

Employees with a work-related disability and who are satisfied return-to-work significantly faster than those who are not.

Non Work-Related Responses	Less Than Satisfied	Satisfied
Disability process	90.3	82.5
Information needs met	90.6	84.3
Understanding of benefits	85.8	74.8
Employer treatment while out of work	122.5	63.0
Insurance company	78.5	78.4
Medical coverage	79.4	86.0
Medical provider's knowledge	82.5	81.7
Quality of medical treatment	62.9	87.9

For employees injured on the job, the correlation between satisfaction and return to work is not as direct as employees with non work-related injuries. However, employer treatment while out of work is significant.

Exhibit 8



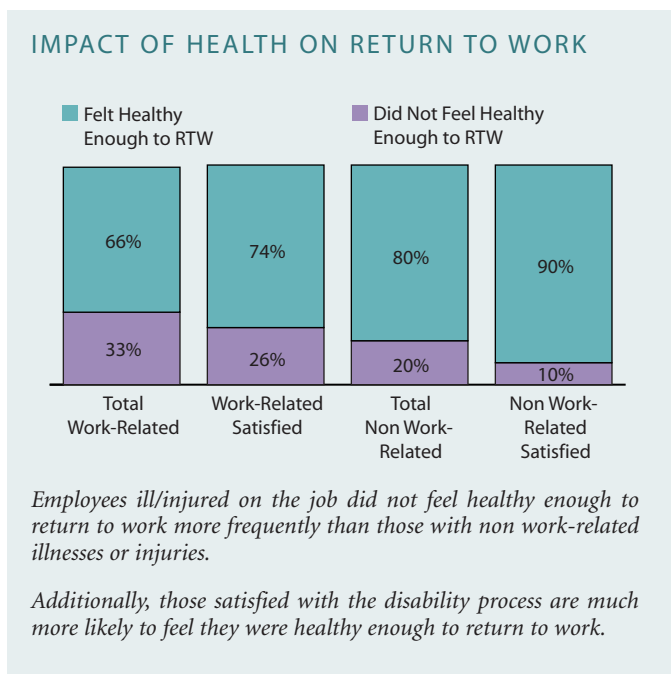
absences. It is also interesting to note that employees who returned to work sooner than expected were more satisfied than those who returned later than expected. Again, this was true of both groups.

Exhibit 8

Who Returns to Work?

In both work-related and non work-related cases, the best candidate for timely return to work is the employee who does not have a musculoskeletal injury, who feels that the employer met his or her communication needs during the absence, who was satisfied with the employer’s treatment of the disability, and who was satisfied with the medical coverage and medical provider’s knowledge of his or her job requirements. Exhibit 9

Exhibit 9



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Examine current return-to-work program to accommodate all disabilities.
- Strengthen relationships with injured workers who are disenfranchised through efficient employer communication and case management support.
- Utilize case management to help meet individual return-to-work goals.
- Consider an integrated approach to workers’ compensation and STD/LTD administration that capitalizes on strengths from each system.
- Consider a single point of contact to report disability claims, regardless of nature, to lessen agitation associated with filing workers’ compensation claims.
- Identify transitional duties and modified job alternatives.



Embracing Opportunities

After all the questions, answers and analysis, the 2001 survey provides insights into developing communication strategies that encourage ill or injured employees to return to productivity. The same strategies can likely influence employee retention. The two overall criteria that influence

return-to-work success are: 1) employers meeting ill or injured employees’ communication needs and 2) employees’ satisfaction with their employer’s treatment of them and their medical coverage.

Communication Reflects Culture

It’s important to note two details among the findings. First, larger companies shine with formal communications about benefits, but lose their luster when it comes to timely personal communication with injured or ill employees. Second, although workers injured on the job are more dissatisfied — a 20-point differential between them and other ill employees — return-to-work strategies are used much more frequently for work-related than non work-related injuries and illnesses. Exhibit 10

Workers’ compensation is characteristically more adversarial than health and disability benefits. The study provides evidence that an adversarial culture can thwart productivity and contribute to expensive turnover. The key is to make benefit delivery less contentious to influence the disabled worker’s attitude and return to work.

Three Critical Essentials

Our analysis of the data strongly suggests crafting disability benefits and incident communication strategies around three essentials:

- **Critical moments** – Findings indicate that employees’ information needs are highest at the time of injury or onset of illness, when preparing to return to work, when returning to work and when they are still absent after 90 days.
- **Critical populations** – Employees who are more prone to dissatisfaction, and who would benefit most from timely personal communication, include those with musculoskeletal injuries, less workplace experience, lower incomes and protracted disabilities.

Exhibit 10

BENEFIT DELIVERY SYSTEM

Strengths	Work-Related	Non Work-Related
Medical/benefits process		■
Information needs		■
Employer treatment		■
Readiness to return to work		■
RTW accommodations	■	

Risk managers and benefit managers both face challenges — but can learn from each other’s successes.

■ **Critical people** – Supervisors and case managers can be key to communication. Supervisors — often the sole link between out-of-work employees and the company — can address benefits and job issues; case managers can assist the employee in understanding his/her clinical status, identify return-to-work accommodations and help resolve medical or vocational issues. Either can involve EAP or other community resources to help employees better manage their disability situation.

Reap the Rewards

By reducing the anxiety that faces employees in the workers' compensation system, by involving a case manager to help the employee navigate the health care system, and by increasing use of targeted, timely communication, the likely outcome is a satisfied, productive workforce that is on the job. This balance can likely be achieved by leveraging the best practices that human resources and risk management disciplines have to offer.



Survey Methodology

The Gallup Organization contacted more than 28,000 households in 10 states¹ to screen for employees, ages 18 to 64, who had experienced a work-related or non work-related injury or illness within the previous three years for which they lost time from work and received wage replacement while away from their jobs. Survey results are based on telephone interviews, conducted from January 24–February 19, 2001, with 506 employees who reported a work-related injury or illness and 510 who reported a non work-related injury.²

Survey Demographics

Of the 506 employees with work-related illnesses or injuries, more than half (56%) were male; most (61%) were service workers or laborers and a significant majority (71%) did not obtain college degrees. Of the 510 with non work-related absences, most (66%) were female.³ Nearly half (48%) had professional/business titles, and three-quarters (75%) had attended or graduated college. Ultimately, however, age, gender, occupation and type of insurance had little impact on employees' informational health needs or disability benefits understanding.

About the Survey Sponsors

Philadelphia-based Intracorp provides health care, disability management, workers' compensation and automobile managed care solutions that prevent injuries and illnesses; ensure appropriate, high-quality health care; support claims management and reduce unnecessary medical and lost-time costs. Intracorp's services include demand and disease management, utilization management, case management, return-to-work programs, ergonomic consulting, provider fee management, provider network access and information management services. The company employs a diverse team of more than 3,400 people and operates one of the nation's largest private-sector networks of medical directors, physician specialists and nurses for review services.

CIGNA Group Insurance is a leading provider of disability, life, and accident coverage, with more than 40 years of experience. CIGNA covers more than 18 million people for group life, nearly 12 million people for group voluntary accident insurance, and approximately 6 million people for group disability.

¹Massachusetts, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, California, Florida, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Illinois.

²For results based on samples of approximately 500 respondents, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus-or-minus five percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

³Of a total of 263 women who reported non work-related absences, 37% were absent due to pregnancy.

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Two Liberty Place
1601 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19192

1.800.345.1075
www.intracorp.com



Two Liberty Place
1601 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19192

215.761.4747
www.cigna.com



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