

Now make another change: Assume that at the time the report card was prepared, one of the three absences was not yet resolved. That might be the case if the report card is prepared a week after the close of the year, on which day two of the absences were known to have been resolved in five days each, but the third was still open. That third case could be open for one more day or a thousand days. So, how does it help to report an “average”?

“Last year, the median duration of disability was seven days.”

This statement on a report card is more reliable than the prior two assuming the reader remembers the difference between average and median. However, the problem with how to account for any open absences remains.

Our recommended method: return-to-work rates at milestones

By analyzing best practice standards in the United States, we have estimated that about 90 percent of lost-time work-related injuries “should” return to work within 60 calendar days. We analyzed other data on actual injuries and estimate that 70 percent of lost-time injuries result in return-to-work within 60 calendar days.

At the end of this guide, you will find tables that present our estimates of return-to-work rates at 30-, 60-, 90-, and 180-calendar day milestones.

We recommend that you construct similar tables to report your return-to-work performance. We call it the DTI Method.

If you find that from among all lost-time injuries 67 percent return-to-work within 30 calendar days, your performance is probably superior to the average in the United States. If 84 percent return-to-work within 30 calendar days, your performance is pretty much as good as it gets.

Reporting return-to-work rates by milestones is a superior report-card method for several reasons. The primary reason is that all readers of the report card will quickly understand it and not draw wrong conclusions. A secondary reason is that it is not all that hard to prepare. We have tested the preparation of this report card among employers, insurers, and managed care organizations, and it requires only common sense and a reasonable degree of care to get the report card right in format and content.

Fast feedback using the DTI Method

You can use this method to report fairly quickly on recent performance. Assume you are in mid-January and you wish to report on return-to-work performance for the prior year, using the DTI Method. In preparing the report card, you have to be careful not to report on data that are not yet available. You do not have the 60-day return-to-work rate for lost-time injuries that occurred during the month of December; the 60 days return to work rate for November injuries, the 90-day rate for October injuries, and the 180-day rate for all injuries incurred after June 30. Observing these constraints, you can report the 60-day return-to-work rate for ten months, consolidated, high/low, trended, average and median. There is much useful, reliable information you can report.

To use the full power of the DTI Method, it is helpful to include in your report cards one other figure—the rate, or percentage, of all injuries which were lost time. For instance, if you reported 40 lost-time injuries out of 100 injuries incurred last year, your rate of lost-time injuries was 40 percent. By adding this figure, you can report on how your company has performed on “remain-at-work” responses to injuries.

An alternative approach

We recommend and will briefly describe a second approach—more complex than the DTI Method, not as a substitute, but as an additional way to illuminate your company’s performance. Let us call this the “workforce productivity” method, because it captures in a few figures the loss of productivity due to absences.

To prepare a report card using this method, first calculate the total full-time-equivalent workforce employed for the defined period of time. A workforce of 100 persons who work consistently at 20 percent overtime will for a year represent 120 FTEs, or 43,800 calendar days. Now count up the entire number of lost days incurred due to disability, regardless of when the episode of absence began or if it is ongoing at year-end. Let’s say that total workday count is 1.020. That figure is 2.3 percent of total FTEs for the year. The 2.3 percent figure represents the amount of compensated labor that was lost to disabilities, simply measuring absent days.

Return-to-work rates — all lost-time worker injuries (at least one shift lost)

Performance Level	Returning in 30 Calendar Days	Returning in 60 Calendar Days	Returning in 90 Calendar Days	Returning in 180 Calendar Days
Low	45%	55%	65%	80%
Medium	50%	70%	80%	90%
High	70%	80%	90%	95%
Best Practice	85%	90%	95%	98%

Return-to-work rates — lost-time worker injuries (with at least seven calendar days lost)

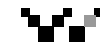
Performance Level	Returning in 30 Calendar Days	Returning in 60 Calendar Days	Returning in 90 Calendar Days	Returning in 180 Calendar Days
Low	35%	45%	55%	75%
Medium	40%	50%	65%	80%
High	55%	70%	80%	90%
Best Practice	75%	85%	90%	95%

How to Measure Return-to-Work Success



Featuring its OASIS product line, DTI provides information technology solutions for insurers, third party claims administrators and risk managers.

201 Broadway Cambridge, MA 02139
617-494-8361 617-494-1845(fax)
www.delphi-tech.com



Work Loss Data Institute

A database developer focused on workforce productivity, and publisher of Official Disability Guidelines and Employer Health Register.

500 North Shoreline Blvd., Suite 1101N. Corpus Christi, TX 78471
800-488-5548 361-883-5000 361-883-7025(fax)
www.worklossdata.com



Work Loss Data Institute



Close to two million work-related lost time injuries occur every year in the United States. Many more millions of employees miss work from personal illnesses and injuries. How well is the nation doing in returning employees to work? More to the point, how well is your company doing in controlling absences due to disabilities?

The staff at Delphi Technology Inc. have identified and scrutinized many ways for a company to measure its return-to-work performance. We have consulted with safety, disability and insurance professionals from around the world to design a report card that is meaningful, easily interpretable, and a cinch to put together. We are happy to share our ideas in this booklet.

For the examples in this booklet we usually refer to work-related absences. The methods recommended here are readily applicable to personal illnesses and injuries as well.

What workers, absences and time period to include in your analysis

Every evaluation of return-to-work success starts with identifying (1) a workforce population, (2) absences which occurred within that workforce and (3) the time period being evaluated. The workforce can refer to all of the employees of a company, or all of the employees covered by one or more insurance policies. In the former instance, you probably know or can reasonably estimate the size of the workforce, but in the latter instance you may not know the workforce size, but rather only the amount of the insurance policy and perhaps the size of the payroll. In this guide, unless otherwise noted, we assume you cannot determine or estimate the size of the workforce. This assumption will make it easier for you, as collecting data on workforce size can be a big chore.

Assume that you wish to measure the return-to-work performance of two workforces, perhaps in the same industry, but without knowing the headcount.

Let's move to selecting which absences to include in your analysis. This may appear to be straightforward, but in fact there is an incredibly large number of options. Moreover, most mistakes in measuring return-to-work success originate from either selecting an inappropriate set of absences to begin with, or failing to communicate in a report card how the selection of cases should be interpreted.

Below are four options. Think about their advantages and disadvantages.

- All absences of at least one shift. The absence may have started before or during this period of time; all that is required is for one shift to be lost during a defined time period.
- All absences of at least one shift which started and ended during a defined time period.
- All absences, again of at least one shift, which ended during a defined time period.
- All absences of at least one shift which started during a defined time period.

Which approach would you prefer? In practice, for most evaluations of return-to-work success, the last named option is superior – often the only truly reliable approach, if used repeatedly over several time periods and in comparing different workforces. As we describe our recommended methodology below, we hope the value of this approach will become clear. And, we will return at the end to the first named approach, as an interesting but harder-to-apply alternative.

We need to discuss three common ways of modifying your selection of absences. One way is to select absences on the basis of their reporting date, not their actual date. For example, let's assume you are selecting absences of at least one shift which actually began in March – ten in total, say. However, the formal reporting system reported only eight – including three that actually started in February but reported in early March, less five which were not reported until April.

It would be more accurate to select only absences that started in March, but it may be prudent to select only those were reported. Why? If you use “actual” instead of “reported” absences, you may find that your count of cases changes each time to look back at your count due to additions of late reported cases. There is no sure-fire best method – decide which is best for your circumstances and stick to it.

A second way of modifying the selection of cases is important to understand, so do not skip over this passage. You could exclude absences that fail to extend past a defined waiting period, say three or seven calendar days. Examples of waiting periods are the waiting periods that apply to almost every work-related injury, and to waiting periods in short-term disability programs. For instance, in the state of Louisiana, the waiting period to become eligible

for workers' compensation disability benefits is seven calendar days, but three days for claims accepted under the federal Longshore and Jones Act programs (injuries which occur within the maritime industries).

If you are relying on claims reports to select cases, you may likely not be able to identify cases that involve lost time shorter than the waiting period. Even if you can identify these cases within your own company, you may not be able to even guess at their frequency in other workforces, or in prior times, which you are using for comparison.

As a general rule, it is almost always better to include all cases in your evaluation, including those that did not reach the waiting period in disability duration. But rules are made to be broken. We have included later in this guide some data that can help you use only cases that go past a seven-day waiting period.

A third, commonly considered adjustment to case selection deals with relapses – failed return to work. If an employee returns to work, but goes back on to disability within a short period of time, what should you do with that case? A common solution to this problem is to treat these cases as follows. First, if a returning employee relapses within ninety days due to the original condition, consider that a failed return to work. Second, count the duration of disability as if the period back at work did not occur.

Are modified duty days to be taken into account?

If by use of modified duty the length of absences is reduced, should not days on modified duty be recognized in measuring return-to-work success? In theory yes, in practice maybe.

Modified duty not only reduces disability days, but is also viewed as speeding up the return to full functioning. However, in most workforces modified duty days are either a chore or practically impossible to count.

The issue of modified duty in measuring performance leads to another issue where theory and practice often conflict. Would it be more useful to measure, not the raw amount of days of absent from work, but the elapsed time between an initial decline in the functional status of the employee and the return of the employee to her or his original functional status? If, for instance, Mary's work performance declined remarkably several weeks before she started an episode of absence and did not return to the original level until weeks after return to work, isn't the entire

period of low productivity the proper target of measurement? Ideally, it would be very useful to measure Mary's entire experience with reduced functional status, but in practice it is extremely difficult to collect and maintain accurate records. And privacy boundaries may be breached in trying to do so. Therefore, focus on actual days of absence.

The common unit of measurement: calendar days on disability

We recommend you measure durations of absences by full calendar days lost. Thus, if a full-time worker is out of work for the entire month of August, she or he incurs 31 lost days, not 23 days which may have been the total potential workdays, or 22 days, allowing for the company's full-day picnic. Disregard overtime and part-time status of employees unless there is a substantial amount of either or both, and it is practical to account for these adjustments. (For instance, a 20-hour-a-week worker out for the month of August would incur $31 \times \frac{20}{40} = 15.5$ or 16 lost days as if on a full-time equivalent basis.) Keep it simple.

How to measure lost days: pitfalls

We are going to recommend a method of measurement that is as powerful as an acre of garlic in its simplicity and effect. But we first want to warn you about pitfalls into which all to many evaluators trip.

“We had a 90% return-to-work rate last year.”

One reads statements like this often. They appear to be easy to understand. But what does the statement mean? That 90 percent of persons who started absences in that year returned to work by year-end? Assuming that nine out of ten returned to work, were these nine out an average of one day or 364 days? These statements look good in annual reports but usually don't help in really understanding performance.

“Last year, the average duration of disability was 15 days.”

These types of statements are even more popular. They can be unhelpful or misleading, due to the “long tail” aspect of disability durations. Assume you have three absences each of five days – average duration is five days. Then change one of the three to 50 days. The average jumps to 20 days. Using an average figure does not reveal that one of the set of disabilities contributed over 85 percent of the total days lost.