

# Viewpoint: Build an Integrated Absence and Disability Program

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Employee absences, due to disability, injury or sickness, can have a detrimental effect on an organization's bottom line. According to [a study by Mercer](#), an HR consultancy, the total cost of incidental and extended disability absences borne by U.S. employers comes to 8.7 percent of payroll. Included in this total cost is lost productivity.

## Problems and Solutions

Employee absences and disabilities can be addressed through return-to-work (RTW) and stay-at-work (SAW) approaches. To begin building an integrated program, these three fundamentals should be considered:

- **Employee assistance programs (EAPs).** An EAP offers short-term counseling to employees and their family members, helping them to deal with personal problems that adversely impact their work, health and overall well-being.
- **Health advocates.** An advocate—usually a registered nurse—can help employees navigate the health care system's complexities. Their services can include answering questions about a bill, explaining complicated medical terminology, helping find a doctor to perform a particular surgery or negotiating fees.
- **Job accommodations.** Simple solutions often can help an employee with a physical or mental health condition to safely recover at work. Accommodations can include ergonomic interventions and certain temporary job modifications, such as hours of work, work location and duties.

## Implementing the Program

In addition to the fundamentals above, elements of a successful integrated program can include:

- **Designating one person to be in charge.** It is important to put an internal HR manager in charge of all workers' compensation and nonoccupational programs that manage absence and disability. This individual should act as the primary liaison with all external providers.
- **Ensuring supervisors' support for job accommodations.** According to a 2010 [Integrated Benefits Institute \(IBI\) survey](#), when employers were asked to identify the practices that were the most important for managing their workforce's health and productivity, a transitional RTW program was one of the most highly rated. Examples of RTW approaches include modifying an employee's hours of work, work location or workstation.
- **Deploying an on-site consultant.** Having a disability management professional, such as a nurse or vocational rehab specialist, in the workplace can help to integrate disability management with a company's culture. Together with the HR team, the consultant works collaboratively to identify opportunities to keep employees who may be at risk of absence and disability on the job, and to get those out on leave to return to work sooner.
- **Offering on-site medical services.** Employer-based medical clinics and pharmacies help employees receive treatment for conditions at their workplace. These services are attractive to employers who want to improve employee health and productivity as well as reduce employee time away from work.
- **Outsourced absence management.** Outsourcing management of disability leaves can address the complexities and challenges employers face in ensuring compliance with leave-related regulations.

## Achieving Results

An integrated program for managing absence and disability—incorporating an EAP, health advocate, job accommodations and other elements—can:

- **Improve the productivity of a workforce** by reducing absences and presenteeism.
- **Reduce direct and indirect costs** by getting employees back to work sooner and keeping them productive on the job.
- **Increase employee satisfaction** and produce a happier, stronger workforce.

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