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Motivation and opportunity put disabled people back to work

by Barry T. Allen

What makes disabled people return to work? Even when they cannot be completely rehabilitated and they have another source of income, many reenter the work force. What makes the difference? Motivation is the key, and opportunities offered by a capable claims support system open the door.

Motivation

Motivation can be classified into two groups: positive incentives and the lack of negative incentives.

Positive incentives include both guarantees and carrots. Guarantees assure the disabled person that no penalties exist for trying and failing to return to gainful employment. Group Long Term Disability (LTD) guarantees that the insurance benefit qualification period, called the elimination period, will not be reinstated if a return to employment, for up to a certain number of days, does not work out. And, after starting benefits and during the first six months of full-time employment, if the person is disabled again from the same or a related condition, he or she will not have to start a new elimination period.

Financial carrots are also important. One of the most important is partial disability benefits when the individual returns to either part-time employment or a full-time job paying less than the worker earned before. The combination of earnings and partial payments can be structured to be larger than the total disability payment itself. For example, Social Security will continue full benefits for up to nine months during a rehabilitative return to work.

Lack of negative incentives is often crucial. An example of a major financial

impediment to returning to work is if the combination of individual insurance, group insurance, workers' compensation, and Social Security offers the person easy initial qualification, easy continuing qualification, or a total after-tax income replacement close to or greater than pre-disability income. This occurs all too frequently. The ideal situation is for income to be somewhere between just covering



necessities and fully supporting the prior standard of living. This motivates a person to try to return to the prior standard or to better it.

Good disability programs have a different definition of disability that kicks in for continuing benefit payments after 12, 24, or 36 months. This is called the "own occupation period" for group LTD. It is important that the disabled person be aware that initial qualification does not guarantee

continued qualification. If a claims specialist tells the claimant approaching a new definition point only that there will be a later judgment, the claimant is more open to suggestions about going off disability. Just having this test in place has encouraged more people to return to work before the definition change date.

My studies have shown that the shorter the own occupation period the better. Most return to work before the benefits end. Follow-up studies of those cut off because they do not satisfy the definition of disability show that a very high percentage return to work. Those who do not return to work can appeal the decision and be reconsidered for benefits.

Opportunities

The best claim support systems maximize motivation by servicing the claimant as early as possible and maintaining contact. When a claim comes in, the first thing the claims specialist should do is to pick up the phone and make direct contact with the claimant. The claims specialist should stay in continuous contact, monitoring and encouraging all important steps for improving the situation.

This continuous involvement is vital and easy to do with proper computer support systems.

Sometimes, the Social Security backlog hurts early intervention. Social Security schedules continuing disability reviews (CDRs) that are periodic, rather than continuous. During the past few years, due to budget cutbacks, Social Security has postponed or eliminated CDRs in an effort to handle initial claims. This lost important opportunities to influence positive outcomes.

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The ability to grasp opportunities comes from continuous involvement. A good claims specialist is aware of public and private resources available and encourages the claimant to use them. Sometimes, offering to pay for a special functional capacities assessment not only proves that the last job is no longer appropriate, but indicates what type of job is appropriate or how to modify the last job to fit the person's limitations. With this information, the previous employer may make a new job available.

Involvement includes probing for what would inspire the claimant to take on new and interesting challenges. Perhaps a hobby or a lifelong interest can become a source of income if sources for support (financial or otherwise) can be arranged.

Creativity and support is often available from claims systems when specialists are empowered to work out and pay for good solutions. Such solutions save the systems money and return the disabled person to a more satisfying existence, often with equal or greater income than before.

Real-life examples

The following are a few examples illustrating these positive solutions:

- When the prior employer and the claimant could not agree about the previous car sales position that involved test driving, the claim specialist moved past the "cannot drive" stumbling block by simply offering to pay the salary of a supplemental driver.
- A person with outstanding wood-working skills received a small lump sum payment to help buy equipment and renovate the front of his building and a partial benefit arrangement to start his business.
- A former typist, who wanted to continue to type but could no longer see, received a special typewriter for the blind.
- A disabled person, who changed his hobby into a business, received a van equipped to handle his wheelchair, gaining necessary mobility.

When there is a very good chance that a group LTD claimant will not continue to satisfy the new definition of disability after the own occupation period, often he or she and the specialist can reach an early and creative compromise. This prevents the claimant from settling into a

"disabled" mind set. Sometimes a little more motivation, such as a small extra cash settlement, encourages the person to go back to work.

An example of such a motivator is a company that purchased a computer-driven embroidery machine for a person to enter self-employment.

Another is an accountant with severe burns who could not function independently nor return to his job. The claims specialist learned that he wanted to start his own business at home with his spouse delivering contracts and other materials to customers. The company agreed to pay for his personal computer, software, and some living expenses to get him started. Within one year, he was earning more than before his injury.

These typical cases are the results of caring claim services that are on top of the situations and operate in a practical and cost-effective manner. They build motivation and offer creative and promising opportunities to claimants.

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People want to stay on the job

A panel of experts, after a three-year review of U.S. disability policy, concluded in January 1996 that people with disabilities would like to remain employed and do not typically exaggerate their impairments to get benefits. They even stay on the job months or years after health problems begin and turn to Social Security disability insurance only as a last resort. These benefits, averaging about \$633 a month, usually equal less than half the worker's salary before the impairment.

The 18-member, nonpartisan panel conducted the study at the request of the House Ways and Means Committee. It made several recommendations for new programs, including vouchers for private sector employers to help people work and tax credits for disabled people.

It also recommended making it possible for working disabled people to buy into Medicare and to modify states' Medicaid programs so they do not lose health insurance when they go back to work.

More recently, in October, a report from the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) urged the Social Security Administration (SSA) to increase its efforts to get disabled people back to work. A spokesperson for the SSA agreed that the agency could do more. The GAO report noted that more businesses have begun efforts to help people with disabilities remain employed. Some 6.6 million working-age people were receiving Social Security disability benefits in 1995, and if just 1% returned to work, the nation could save \$3 billion, the report said.