School: ATEC – Student Townhall
Course: Return to Work and Absence Management Best Practices
Faculty: Todd Holt, Deputy Executive Director, Texas State Office of Risk
Management (SORM)
          Helena LaFleur, Enterprise Risk Management Consultant, Texas State
     Office of Risk Management (SORM)

Summary

The "Student Townhall on Return to Work and Absence Management Best Practices," facilitated by Todd Holt and Helena LaFleur of Texas SORM, focused on effective strategies for supporting employees in returning to work (RTW) and managing absences. This interactive session allowed participants to discuss experiences, share ideas, and explore best practices for building supportive RTW programs.

Holt began by sharing his personal experience with a medical absence, emphasizing the importance of maintaining connections with employees during such periods. This experience highlighted the need for a well-defined RTW program that recognizes and supports the emotional, social, and professional needs of employees during their recovery. The conversation introduced the concept of "Return to Site" as an alternative to "Return to Work," acknowledging that employees might be absent for various reasons beyond workplace injuries, including medical conditions, family emergencies, or maternity leave. This broad perspective aims to create a more inclusive RTW program, one that prioritizes employees' overall well-being and fosters a culture of empathy and inclusivity.

A critical part of the discussion centered on proactive absence management, emphasizing that an effective RTW program requires strong organizational support from top management. Holt and LaFleur pointed out that companies should establish a culture that values employees by offering meaningful engagement and setting clear expectations for RTW from the outset. Involving senior leadership helps to create an environment where returning employees feel valued and integrated, fostering a supportive culture and mitigating the financial impact of turnover.

Operational strategies were also discussed, including the use of customizable RTW plans that can be adapted to individual circumstances. Templates, checklists, and consistent communication were highlighted as useful tools for managing the complexities of RTW, ensuring legal compliance, and clarifying expectations for both employees and supervisors. LaFleur shared examples of resources such as a "bona fide offer letter" to clearly outline job duties, working hours, and any accommodations needed for returning employees. Providing employees and supervisors with clear,

actionable steps helps build a structured RTW process, which benefits the company and supports employees' smooth reintegration.

The townhall also addressed the importance of engaging employees and maintaining communication during absences. This engagement can be as simple as weekly check-ins to help employees feel connected and valued, reducing feelings of isolation and anxiety. The facilitators noted that communication should be tailored to the needs of the employee, with some requiring more frequent interaction than others. Furthermore, they highlighted that supervisors should receive guidance on maintaining these connections and how to support employees without compromising privacy or overstepping boundaries.

In summary, the townhall underscored the value of a holistic, empathetic approach to RTW and absence management, promoting a culture where employees are viewed as valued members of the team, even during absences. Through proactive planning, clear communication, and sustained engagement, organizations can create effective RTW programs that support the employee's recovery journey while maintaining productivity and reducing turnover costs.

Learning Objectives
1. Understand best practices for Return to Work (RTW) and absence management within organizations.
2. Explore the benefits of engaging employees throughout the absence and return-to-work process.
3. Learn strategies for building and maintaining a supportive RTW culture in the workplace.
4. Gain insights into proactive absence management practices that reduce turnover and associated costs.
5. Identify methods for integrating RTW processes into company policy and training programs.

Primary Takeaways
1. Maintaining active engagement with employees during their absence helps them feel valued and reduces feelings of isolation.
2. An effective RTW program needs support from top management to build a culture that values employees.
3. Having clear expectations, role modifications, and structured RTW plans can prevent costly re-injury and ensure smooth reintegration.
4. Regular, empathetic communication is essential to support employees' physical and mental well-being and aid recovery.

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5. Utilizing checklists, templates, and consistent communication can aid in managing compliance and policy adherence effectively.

Course Outline

1) Introduction to Return to Work (RTW) and Absence Management
   a) Purpose of RTW and Absence Management Programs
   b) Importance of Proactive Planning in RTW

2) Benefits of RTW Programs
   a) For Employees
      i) Promotes Whole-Person Healing and Well-being
      ii) Reduces Financial and Emotional Stress During Absence
   b) For Employers
      i) Retains Skilled Employees and Reduces Turnover Costs
      ii) Maintains Workflow and Reduces Disruptions

3) Organizational Culture and Support
   a) Role of Management in Establishing RTW Practices
      i) Setting Expectations for RTW from Day One
      ii) Building Empathy into the Organizational Approach
   b) Creating an Engaged Workforce
      i) Keeping Absent Employees Informed and Connected
      ii) Providing Mental and Emotional Support to Absent Employees

4) Operational Strategies for RTW Programs
   a) Developing Clear RTW Plans and Expectations
      i) Outlining Temporary Job Descriptions and Responsibilities
      ii) Defining Hours, Pay, and Accommodations
   b) Ensuring Legal Compliance and Involving Key Departments
      i) Engaging HR, Legal, and Medical Professionals
      ii) Considering ADA, FMLA, and OSHA Guidelines

5) Communication and Employee Engagement
   a) Importance of Regular Check-Ins with Absent Employees
      i) Reducing Feelings of Isolation and Anxiety
      ii) Reinforcing the Employee's Value to the Organization
   b) Supporting Supervisors and Managers in RTW Efforts
      i) Providing RTW Training and Resources
      ii) Establishing Clear Guidelines for Manager-Employee Interactions

6) Conclusion and Best Practices Summary
   a) Emphasizing Engagement and Communication for RTW Success
   b) Continuing to Evolve RTW Programs Based on Employee and Organizational Needs

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