

Managing career change following injury

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KYLIE WARRY HAS WORKED IN THE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION INDUSTRY FOR MORE THAN 12 YEARS AND HAS SEEN MANY SAD AND TRAGIC STORIES OF LOSS. SHE HAS ALSO WITNESSED AMAZING STORIES OF OVERCOMING AND TRIUMPH. IT MAKES HER ROLE BOTH CHALLENGING BUT VERY REWARDING.

Imagine yourself at work when all of a sudden and without warning, you suffer an injury that threatens your entire career. It happens every day to far too many Australians. As an example, the WorkCover NSW statistical bulletin for the 2008–09 financial year, reported that "... there were 139 deaths resulting from work related injury and disease and over 133 000 employment injuries".

Injured workers experience many emotional reactions to their circumstances. They include, anger ('why me'), anxiety ('what am I going to do'), and fear ('what if I can't do my job anymore?'). These reactions along with more practical issues like paying bills, all require support, acknowledgement and treatment to assist the injured worker to rehabilitate.

As a Rehabilitation Counsellor, I primarily work with those whose injury is too significant to allow them a return to their pre-injury job role. These workers present many barriers such as:

- pain
- depression
- treatment unresponsiveness
- significantly reduced work capacities
- psycho-social barriers. These include financial pressures, a lack of family support, a poor attitude to treatment, the litigious nature of their case, and the negative and prescriptive nature of the workers compensation system; and
- poor soft skills (e.g. limited English language) that make a career change challenging.

My role is to work with all of the barriers and strengths presented by the injured worker and with a focus on their ability, support their rehabilitation into a role that suits their skills and interests; while

maximizing the amount of income they can earn.

Where it is determined that an injured worker is unable to return to work (such as someone with a persistent and chronic low back injury), my first task is to examine their existing skills, abilities and interests by doing a vocational assessment. This may take up to 10 hours of interview, assessment and research to establish options that will maximise their potential and a return to work at the earlier opportunity. This is a condition of the injury management legislation in NSW. Retraining can be utilised but it must only be if there are no other options present.

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The degree of adaption and acceptance by the injured worker to the changes he needs to make, are key to being successful. For, unless a level of acceptance is reached and a willingness to change is achieved, the challenge of a new and rewarding career can seem too

much. At times, I work with injured workers, who after many years feel they have been forgotten, undervalued by their employer and disillusioned and depressed. In all cases, it is critical to acknowledge an injured workers experience, and to work with them to identify their strengths and develop a new hope for their future.

When agreement has been reached on a future pathway, coaching, training and support is offered. This can then present another barrier for an injured worker in the form of discussing their injury with a potential employer: There is a lot of fear and misinformation amongst employers and much of this is understandable so Counsellors work hard to facilitate this process with respect, care and empathy.

A self imposed career change is difficult enough, but when it is forced upon you through no fault of your own, the transition can be very difficult. But with respect, integrity, creativity and a focus on the individuals strengths, a successful career transition following injury is possible. Yes it is challenging. It is also very rewarding when a client calls you to say "I've got the job!"

A SCENARIO

... Joe was a Traffic Controller. He was hit by a car which caused his right knee to shatter and as a result, can no longer stand long enough to perform his role. A vocational assessment found that he finished Year 10 at school and has sound literacy and people skills, and because of his knee injury, needs a job that allows him to sit for the majority of each day. This assessment identified *customer service* in a call centre, and *traffic control trainer* as likely job options—both offer mostly seated options. These options are analysed to determine which role has the most stable future and maximizes his earning potential. In this scenario, Joe was retrained to be a Traffic Control Trainer. He completed a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and was assisted to find fulfilling work using this knowledge and his experience.