

8 Barriers to Returning to Work

Returning to work can be both an exciting and overwhelming prospect for those who have been out of work for many months or years due to disabling health conditions. They often need extra support to be successful in resuming work, and even with help, there can be many obstacles to overcome – particularly for those with lingering or permanent disabilities who may require additional accommodations from their employer. To help shed more light on this important issue, we've compiled a list of 8 barriers disabled individuals may face when attempting to return to work.

1 The inability to perform one's previous job duties

If claimants hoping to return to work find themselves no longer physically able to perform the functions of their previous job, such as frequent walking, lifting, typing, talking, etc. they might feel a heightened sense of anxiety or despair over their ability to earn a living. Learning new skills can be physically and mentally difficult for many claimants, and many factors such as age, education, and language can influence their ability to adapt to a new type of work or an entirely different industry. The fear of failure can be a barrier to returning to work in and of itself, in addition to the limitations disabled workers may continue to face indefinitely.

2 Facing disappointment over difficulties of returning to the workplace

It's not uncommon for claimants who attempt to return to work to find themselves surprised, and possibly discouraged, by the difficulties they face in resuming their work duties. This may include the mental and physical demands of a long work day, or the need for accommodations they may not have anticipated – and which their employer may not be able to provide. Such struggles can quickly lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment, which can ultimately make a return to work attempt unsuccessful.

3 Communication obstacles

While certain workplace accommodations may not be required by law, employers being mindful of the communication obstacles many disabled workers face can make all the difference for disabled individuals looking to return to work. Examples of ways employers could help disabled employees who struggle with speech, writing, reading, or understanding their job requirements include using instructional language that is accessible for individuals with cognitive impairments, offering large print versions of manuals and training materials, and adding closed captioning to videos. It's also vital that employers recognize the importance of following cues from disabled workers to determine what methods of communication are most helpful for them. Because many workplaces are not set up with this in mind, some disabled individuals looking for work may struggle to find the right fit, or may fail to meet expectations due to miscommunication while on the job.

4 The lack of a comprehensive return-to-work plan

Returning to work is an overwhelming concept for many disabled individuals who have been sick or injured for an extended period. If their employer is not prepared to establish a comprehensive return-to-work plan that goes beyond simply when an employee will return but also details any available accommodations or job modifications, then claimants are less likely to feel prepared and supported in tackling the challenge of returning to work. Reasons for the lack of preparations may vary, as it may be difficult for an employer to make the modifications necessary to allow an injured worker to return to the job. Some supervisors know little about the technology available to assist disabled workers, or may be unwilling to modify the work environment or job duties. Additionally, smaller organizations may have limited resources or lack the experience and personnel necessary to make the accommodations that will help ensure a successful return to work.

5 The absence of accessible resources & supportive policies for employees

By prioritizing the mental and physical health of their employees, employers can establish trust and a shared set of values – all of which plays a tremendous role in successfully getting disabled employees back to work when they are ready. This involves clear, consistent, and compassionate communication throughout the length of the absence, as well as after a return-to-work attempt has been initiated. While Employee Assistance Programs and other such resources have tremendous value and should be shared, workplace programs and policies that provide teammates with relational connections and social support within the workplace are just as important to fueling a disabled worker's desire to return to work, as well as fostering an environment that supports successful returns. Some companies strongly discourage or prohibit any communication between employers and disabled workers during a time of leave – an approach that can increase feelings of isolation and further hinder the worker's desire or efforts to resume work.

6 Bias in the hiring process

Despite the existence of laws designed to protect disabled individuals seeking employment, unfortunately, personal biases can reduce disabled applicants' chances of being hired. If individuals conducting job interviews make judgments or assumptions about the capabilities of disabled applicants, they may miss out on job opportunities, or, if hired, find themselves working in a prejudicial environment. Often, such biases are unconscious, which underscores the need for regular training and supportive corporate policies, both of which are crucial to ensuring that the hiring process is truly fair and equitable to all individuals, as well as corporate compliance with disability laws.

7 Bias and/or ignorance about "invisible" disabilities

In addition to the possibility of bias in the hiring process, individuals with invisible disabilities may find themselves facing biases or unfair treatment in the workplace due to their employer's lack of understanding or empathy regarding their condition. Invisible or hidden disabilities are not immediately apparent to an observer. Examples of invisible disabilities include certain learning disabilities, or someone who has visual or audio limitations, but does not wear glasses or wears very discreet hearing aids. Workers with invisible disabilities may be denied resources or accommodations they need to successfully return to work because their employer does not believe that they have a disability. While such treatment is illegal, it can be overwhelming for workers to take legal action against their employer, thus creating situations that make them feel uncomfortable and undervalued.

8 The development of a "disability mindset"

While the myriad of challenges claimants may face when attempting to return to work can contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression, claimants may begin battling a disability mindset long before taking the pivotal step of returning to work. The months or years that may pass while an individual is out of work due to a disabling illness or injury can leave them feeling isolated, lonely, and hopeless about the possibility of change. Claimants who develop a "disability mindset" begin to believe they will never recover or be able to recapture the parts of their life they miss the most. These individuals are likely to feel skeptical that they will be accepted by their employer and peers upon returning to the workplace, which can lead them to dismiss the possibility of returning to work altogether. Communication and support from employers, colleagues, friends, and family during a time of absence is crucial to mitigating these negative feelings and maintaining hope for a positive change.