

Job Retention After Brain Injury: Why It Makes Sense

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re·ten·tion

[rə'ten(t)SH(ə)n]

NOUN

1. the continued possession, use, or control of something:
2. the fact of keeping something in one's memory:



Job retention should not feel like this

I love how there are two definitions of retention, and one involves memory.

Think back to the first day of your current job. Do you remember how you felt? Did you know exactly what was expected of you and how to perform all your job duties? Did you feel competent after one month? How about three months? A year? Now, imagine how you might feel if something happened, and you had to start over. Would you feel more comfortable returning to your old job, or something completely new? Would it make you feel more comfortable to return to work surrounded by those you already know, even if your job duties changed?

If you owned a business, how much time would you want to spend training a new employee? Wouldn't you rather keep the employees you have already invested energy in to training, even if it meant spending a little more time with them on relearning or adjusting to current job duties? Employees whose work habits you already knew?

If you are a community rehabilitation provider, isn't it much easier to help someone keep the job they had? It might require being more responsive in terms of time and energy, but in the end, the person you are serving may feel more confident and comfortable returning to work than they would be in a new job or a new setting.

If you're a vocational rehabilitation counselor, doesn't it make more sense to help your consumer step back into their same or similar position than to start over? Aren't a few weeks of assessing and guiding more cost effective than retraining? Wouldn't this be a more successful "case" for you in terms of wage average at closure?

Job retention can mean that:

- The business hasn't lost a valued employee.
- The employee hasn't lost their livelihood or some of their sense of self after a traumatic event.
- There's an immediate economic advantage to the community.

I remember the first day of my first "real job". I knew I had education and a number of related skills, but many of my new tasks were unfamiliar, and I kept wanting to remind my boss that I was new, that she should not expect too much at first, and to keep her expectations low. I didn't have the experience necessary to demand a higher starting wage, and I was surrounded by coworkers that started as helpful

strangers. Eventually, though, these strangers became trusted colleagues and friends. I had the skills I needed to be competent and could then advance into positions that paid better and made me feel more valuable.

For most of us, our jobs are part of our identity and our independence. Work helps us feel productive and socially connects us. It provides for our needs and those of our families. What happens when a career train jumps its tracks?

The Case for Retention

About 70% of individuals who have a brain injury (BI) are of working age, and 1/3 of all BI happens to adults of working age who were already employed. We know that brain injury can negatively affect work. We also know that people with BI are employed less often, and when employed, often have difficulties in meeting the physical, cognitive or psychosocial demands of the workplace.¹

Brain injury is a unique and often chronic challenge, where a person may lose the ability to learn new skills, or transfer old skills learned into a new environment. Causes include vehicle crashes, falls, sports/recreation, intentional violence, and medical issues such as strokes, aneurysms, or even covid-19. Brain injury is unlike other disabilities in that it happens suddenly and often in the middle of someone's career trajectory. What happens to their job in the meantime? Can they return to it? If they can, there is much less personal disruption than having to start over in a new field with a new job and new expectations. Even if a person needs to change jobs, it is generally better if they can remain with the same business.

What does job retention do for business? When people with BI are able to return to work, the threat of lowered productivity and cost due to unfilled positions and hiring and training replacement staff is reduced.² Many supervisors are happy to help a valued employee step back into a former or similar work role, especially in today's work climate.

Are Systems Designed to Respond?



Each state has Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services. VR counselors help people with disabilities go to work or return to work. However, there are often large caseloads and significant paperwork to manage, making it difficult for a VR counselor to spend time with each and every case, or to be able to respond quickly to someone's needs if they are at risk of job loss. There might not be staff with experience or training in working with someone with a BI, and this is a critical point to knowing how to ensure the best interventions.

Response Times Vary

About 50% of all State VR agencies have policies to address job retention services. Agencies are very aware of the importance of timely service delivery to persons needing job retention services. Some

states have protocols in place that include “rapid response” to persons needing retention services, as well as informal policies to facilitate prompt eligibility determination. Approximately 55% of agencies attempt to expedite eligibility determination more quickly for job retention cases than for other cases. About 18% of state agencies have different procedures for job accommodations, such as assistive technology, and purchasing. Timeliness of eligibility determination and acquisition of assistive technology need to happen quickly. Job retention cases typically require the vocational rehabilitation counselor to work with someone at the consumer’s job site.

With regard to job retention, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) regulations state that individuals eligible for VR services who are at “imminent risk of losing their jobs” will be prioritized for service delivery. Those at risk of losing their jobs may be exempt from states where wait lists have been initiated based on disability severity.³ States want to provide timely and helpful supports.

How Do We Make This Happen?

Here are several recommendations that will help to ensure that timely and comprehensive supports are in place to assist both employees at risk for job loss and businesses trying to prevent job loss:

- Understanding that businesses need timely assistance in order to avoid interruptions in workflow, and to be able to provide goods and services without undue hardship.
- Instituting sound agency protocol for a rapid reaction to threat of job loss for a person with BI.
- Training that is specific to the challenges and needs of a person with BI for business and for VR, which makes a world of difference in services.
- Staff that are designated to assist with job retention, allowing the VR counselor to be able to respond quickly when someone is in jeopardy of job loss.
- A rehabilitation engineer or technology specialist who can recommend, install, or even create the right accommodations in the workplace as quickly as possible to help a person with BI remain employed.
- A counselor or job coach who can support a person’s emotional or social challenges, or sudden changes in the workplace during or after work hours.
- A business relations consultant or placement specialist who can help a business understand how cost-effective retention can be. They can serve as a liaison between business and VR, and assist with any accommodations dialogue and adjustments that might be needed when a person returns to work.
- Most importantly, the person with BI can best help the VR counselor and the business understand their unique needs. Throughout the entire retention process, a tailored employment framework should be the guide, placing the individual’s talents and desires at the top of the list. Employment is negotiated that matches the person's skills, contributions, and interests.



A point in the right direction

Best-Practice Strategies

Brain Injury can create a sudden need for supports in order to maintain employment. It is important to assist both the business and the employee, and to address barriers that impact a person's ability to perform tasks in the current position. Below are several steps to consider implementing to ensure optimal outcomes for job retention:

- Implement a person-centered practice across all strategies, geared at placing the individual's needs and wishes at the top of the list, guiding staff and business towards suitable return-to-work goals.
- Solid and comprehensive assessment of a person's current skills and challenges. Pay attention to both job-related challenges and those that can affect employment like stamina, behavior, and social skills. This might include an abbreviated or full neuropsychological assessment (to assess a person's cognitive and functional strengths and challenges), or a functional capacity evaluation (to compare a person's health status, and any limitations to the demands of the job and the work environment).
- Neutral, direct discussion with the person with BI about current strengths and challenges impacting current employment.
- Job analysis with rehabilitation engineer, VR employment staff and the employer, and provision of accommodations on the worksite.
- Reasonable Accommodations dialogue with the employer, and training/awareness of how the impact a hidden disability like BI can have on job function.
- Adjustment of a job description based on accommodations dialogue and assessments.
- Review of recommended changes with the employee.
- Provision of BI counseling and support during and after adjustments.
- Consideration of alternate positions at the same business if current position is not working.
- Encouragement of feedback from the employer and employee after return to work and assisting with additional changes needed.

With just a few adjustments, we can help make someone's life completely different, and help them jump right back on the tracks!



References:

1. Alves DE, Nilsen W, Fure SCR, et al. *What characterises work and workplaces that retain their employees following acquired brain injury?* Systematic review *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 2020;**77**:122-130.)
2. <https://constanttherapyhealth.com/brainwire/improving-the-chances-of-returning-to-work-after-brain-injury/>

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