



34 13th Ave NE, Suite B001
Minneapolis, MN 55413
612-378-2742
800-669-6442
Fax: 612-378-2789
www.braininjurymn.org
Email: info@braininjurymn.org

Practical Strategies for Returning to Work after Brain Injury

Angela L.H. BUffinton, MA, CRC, Mayo Medical Center

Returning to Work: Ready or Not

This article is written for a person who has a brain injury. Others may find it beneficial also. Following are some question to consider.

Is Everyone in Agreement?

Are you eager to get back to work? Are your family, friends and professionals more hesitant. Why does this happen? After brain injury a person typically feels like himself/herself in many ways. Working is a way to get back to daily life. Even if he/she recognizes that many of his/her abilities have changed, there is something settling about being “back.” Maybe you are feeling, things will be fine if I can just get back.

Because family, friends and professionals do not have feelings attached to your job, they may look at the situation more practically. Perhaps they see how your changed abilities could make returning to work difficult for you. They may suggest that you take your time and ease back into work. To gradually figure out what you can do well.

Where do I put this? Insight: the ability to understand a situation. Many situations at work require insight.

Are You Able to Receive Feedback From Other People?

- How do you feel when someone tells you that you’ve done a good job?
- How do you feel when someone tells you that you’ve made a mistake?
- Being able to graciously receive feedback from others can help you learn more about your strengths and weaknesses.

Using Compensation Techniques

- Compensation techniques (for example, using a calendar to help remember things) can help you to function better. These need to be used on a regular basis.
- If you still learning how to better perform some of your basic day to day activities, you will likely want to focus on improving your function in this area before you focus on returning to work.
- Are you working with professionals who can help you in returning to work?
 - Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, such as those who work for the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), can help you with returning to work.
 - The sooner after your injury you seek help, the better off you will be in the long run.
 - Returning to work successfully will be very difficult if you try to do it without help.

Vocational Evaluations

1. Vocational testing can help to identify jobs you could potentially do.
 - When completing vocational testing, recommendations are made as to which jobs match your interests and abilities.
 - Interest testing can help identify jobs that match your vocational interests.
 - Aptitude testing can help identify work skills that you perform well.

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2. Learning more about a job can help determine if that job is right for you.
 - Knowing what a job's duties are, how much education is required to perform the job, what type of environment the job is in, and how much money the job pays can help you in identifying if a job is right for you.
 - Job shadowing provides an opportunity to watch someone perform a job and learn more about it through direct observation.
 - Job trials give you the opportunity to try out a job to see if you like it and can do it.
 - Job trials are a good way to learn more about a job. They allow you to perform a real job in its actual work environment.
 - A lot of people learn that they no longer want to do a certain job after they have had the opportunity to try it out.

Setting Goals

1. Focus on achieving several short-term goals to help you reach your long-term goal. You will be more successful in returning to work if you start with learning basic job skills and work your way up.
 - It is easier to achieve a larger goal if you break it down into several smaller goals.
2. Talk with other people about your goals. Ask people if they think your goals are realistic.
 - If you are attempting to work in a job that is too difficult, you will likely not be successful in that job.
 - Many times, people can find an easier job that is related to a more difficult job that they are interested in. For example, rather than work as a Physical Therapist, a person could work as a Human Services Technician.
3. Know that it may take a long time to reach your long-term goal.
 - It takes a long time to build up the skills needed to successfully perform some jobs.
 - Some jobs don't have openings on a regular basis. Often times people have to wait and search for job openings.

Preparing for an Interview

1. Ask someone to help you practice answering interview questions.
 - Interviewing is a skill that people can get better at.
 - By rehearsing what you would tell an employer in an interview, you will be better prepared to answer questions.
2. Learn more about the company and the job.
 - Employers are impressed when people know about their company.
 - Learning more about a company helps you be better prepared in an interview.
3. Prepare a plan for how to get to where you need to go for the interview.
 - Don't wait until the last minute to make your travel plans. Make sure you know how long it takes to get to where you need to go.
 - It is best to be 10 minutes early for an interview. Arriving late makes a bad impression.
4. Make sure you dress nicely for the interview.
 - You'll make a better impression if you look nice.
 - No matter what the job is, dressing nicely is important.
 - Think about when in the interviewing process you would like to discuss your disability.
 - In order to have reasonable accommodations put into place for you on a job, you must tell the employer that you have a disability that requires an accommodation. You

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do not have to tell them what your disability is.

- There are two options for when to tell an employer about your disability. You can disclose the information at the end of the interview, or, you can wait and disclose the information at the time the employer makes you a job offer.

What is the Americans With Disabilities Act?

1. The ADA is an equal rights law. It makes it illegal for an employer to exclude someone for a job because the person has a disability.
 - The ADA is not an affirmative action law. It **does not** say that an employer must hire you because you have a disability.
2. The person applying for the job must be able to do the essential functions of that job.
 - If you are not qualified for a job, you are not protected under the ADA.
3. The ADA requires most employers to make reasonable accommodations to help someone successfully perform a job.
 - The employer is not required to provide you with a reasonable accommodation if the accommodation would cause the employer undo hardship (in other words, cost the employer too much money.)
 - Most accommodations for persons with brain injury are inexpensive.

Learn About Good Work Behaviors

1. Know what time you are to arrive, what time breaks are, and what time you can leave work.
2. Know what the dress code is for your job.
3. Learn good social interaction skills for getting along with your boss and co-workers.
 - If you cannot get along with people at work, then you will likely not be successful in your job.
 - If people are offended by the way you are behaving, they will likely not enjoy working with you.
 - Good social interaction skills must be practiced while on break as well as while working.
4. Respect your boss and co-workers.
 - Remember that the boss is in charge. You need to listen to the boss and take direction from him/her.

Other tips...

1. If you are working with therapists, tell them about your vocational goals so they can help you work on them in therapy.
 - By integrating your vocational goals into your therapy, you may be able to achieve your vocational goals sooner.
2. Return to work gradually. It will likely be overwhelming to work a full schedule when you first start back to work.
 - Start out with working just two or three hours a day. You can gradually add more time to your schedule as your work tolerance improves.
3. Help your boss and co-workers to understand more about brain injury.
 - If the people you work with know more about brain injury, they will be able to help you be successful at work.
 - Knowing about brain injury allows people at work to help you develop compensation techniques so you can better perform your job.

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4. Tell your boss and co-workers about the compensation techniques you use and how they help you.
 - This will help people to know you better and help you as best they can.
 - If you have a job coach, then he/she can help you with this.
5. Ask your boss, co-workers, or job coach for feedback on how you are doing at work.
 - This helps you to know how you are doing in your job.
6. Keep in contact with your vocational counselor. He/she can help you work through changes or rough times at work.

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