



Research on the Reality of Return-to-Work Support

(Research Report No.156) Summary

[Key Words]

Return-to-work support, employees on leave, medical institutions, return-to-work support program, re-work support*, follow-up

*(In cooperation with a doctor in charge and other persons concerned, support is provided including coordination for return to work, improvement of daily rhythm, preparatory work experience (called "rehabilitation work"), and development of the workplace environment to accept a disabled worker.)

[Points for Practical Purpose]

- We hope that this report will be used as basic data for return-to-work support for employees on leave of absence due to mental health disorders at medical institutions and companies.
- We would like this report to be used as a reference for companies to consider measures to be taken for employees on leave due to mental health problems and effective follow-up methods after their return to work.

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National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation

1 Authors (in writing order)

TANAKA Ayumi (Research Manager, Research Group on Support for Persons with Disabilities, National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation)

MURAKUKI Yoichi (Researcher, Research Group on Support for Persons with Disabilities, National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation)

MIYAZAWA Shiho (Researcher, Research Group on Support for Employers, National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation)

YODA Takao (Senior Researcher, Research Group on Support for Employers, National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation)

2 Research Period

FY 2018 through FY2020

3 Composition of the Research Report

Part 1: Current Status of Return-to-Work Support Programs Implemented by Medical Institutions

Part 2: Current Situation of Follow-Up for Those Who Return to Work after Re-work Support, etc.

Part 3: Current Status of Corporate Initiatives for Leaves of Absence and Return to Work

Part 4: Survey on Resources outside the Workplace Used and Measures Taken by Companies upon Returning to Work (Survey on Returned Workers)

Part 5: Conclusion

Appendix

4 Background and Purpose

In this study, we set the following three objectives in order to examine the real situation of return-to-work support at medical institutions and companies for those on leave due to mental health problems from various perspectives.

- ① Information that Contributes to the Rearrangement of the JDSP Curriculum and to the Improvement of the Effectiveness of Re-work Support

Research the contents of return-to-work support programs implemented by medical institutions, and obtain information that will contribute to the rearrangement of the curriculum for Job Design Supporting Program (hereinafter referred to as "JDSP") implemented by Vocational Rehabilitation Center in National Institute of Vocational Rehabilitation (hereinafter referred to as "Vocational Rehabilitation Center") and to the improvement of the effectiveness of return-to-work support for persons with mental disabilities (hereinafter referred to as "Re-work Support") implemented by Local

vocational centers for persons with disabilities (hereinafter referred to as "Local Centers").

② Effective Follow-up Approach for Those Returning to Work

Investigate the content of follow-ups by the organizations and measures taken by companies for those who have returned to work after completing Re-work Support at Local Centers or return-to-work support programs at medical institutions, and examine effective ways to follow-up on them.

③ Understand the Latest Situation Regarding Corporate Measures for Employees on Leave

In order to facilitate the studies of how to provide Re-work Support for those on leave in vocational rehabilitation in the future, understand the latest situation regarding the measures taken by companies for the employees on leave.

The background for each objective is as follows.

(1) Objective ① "Information that Facilitates the Rearrangement of the JDSP Curriculum and Improves the Effectiveness of Re-work Support"

The JDSP provided at the Vocational Rehabilitation Center has developed and added various support techniques to its programs, but over the past 15 years, the components of the curriculum have become diverse, making it complex and difficult to understand the overall picture of support, the aims and effects of each program, and how they relate to each other. Therefore, it is thought that it is necessary to reexamine each support technique of JDSP from the perspective of effectiveness, reorganize the curriculum as a whole, and add new findings and information in order to make the program in the most suitable form for the current users.

On the other hand, the number of medical institutions implementing return-to-work support programs has been increasing in recent years, and investigating the details of these programs can lead to the discovery of new insights and perspectives that can be used as reference for implementing the JDSP. It is also meaningful for the rearrangement of JDSP curriculum. In addition, Local Centers where JDSP support techniques have been disseminated will also benefit in terms of gaining hints on how to improve the effectiveness of their support.

(2) Objective ② "Effective Follow-up Approach for Those Returning to Work"

After the completion of Re-work Support at a Local Center, follow-up is conducted by continuously monitoring the status of adaptation to the workplace, taking into account the condition and characteristics of the person returning to work, and collaborating with the attending physician as necessary. Both employees who have returned to work and companies that have used the follow-up program have commented on the importance of follow-up after returning to work in order to prevent people from taking another leave of absence or resigning. In the light of this, it has become necessary for Local Centers to examine what kind of follow-up would be effective for those who have completed Re-work Support.

For that purpose, the status of follow-up by local centers and medical institutions that provide

re-work support, etc., as well as measures taken by companies, are to be analyzed, and follow-up approaches that are effective for those returning to work to smoothly resume work and continue working are to be examined.

(3) Objective ③ "Understand the Latest Situation Regarding Corporate Measures for Employees on Leave"

In order to ensure the smooth return of those on leave to work and to prevent recurrence or relapse after return to work, companies are practicing a variety of measures, and the details of the measures taken by companies are continuously being reviewed. On the other hand, there has not been much research on the utilization of resources outside the workplace and what kind of support is expected by companies. It is important to know the status of utilization with resources outside the workplace of the company in order to examine the return-to-work support in vocational rehabilitation institutes. In addition, in order to utilize resources outside the workplace effectively, it is necessary to take into account the company's system for returning to work and the measures the company is taking for those on administrative leave. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the measures taken within the workplace and the use of resources outside the workplace comprehensively.

5 Method

In order to clarify the three objectives above, this research was conducted from various perspectives.

(1) Questionnaires and Hearings from Medical Institutions (Corresponding to Objectives ① and ②)

Questionnaires were sent out to medical institutions (181 institutions) that belong to the Japanese Association of Re-work for Depression. In addition, in order to understand the detailed status of the responses, we selected five medical institutions from among those that responded to the survey and indicated that a hearing survey was possible, and conducted hearings. In addition, hearings were conducted with three organizations that are providing return-to-work support programs for persons with developmental disabilities.

(2) Questionnaires for Local Vocational Centers for Persons with Disabilities (Corresponding to Objectives ②)

Questionnaires were sent to 48 local centers. (Including Tama Branch Office.)

(3) Questionnaires and Hearings with Companies (Corresponding to Objectives ② and ③)

Questionnaires were sent to all 3,740 listed companies in Japan at the time of the survey. In addition, among the listed companies that responded to the survey, we conducted interviews with six companies that were willing to cooperate in the on-site hearing survey and were believed to be providing return-to-work support for returning to work by utilizing resources

outside the workplace. In addition, a similar hearing was carried out with one company which referred to other literature, utilized EAP and had fewer employees. Furthermore, we conducted hearings with two EAP companies that we obtained information through interviews with companies and one company that is implementing a return-to-work support program on their own.

(4) Questionnaires for Those Who Returned to Work (Corresponding to Objectives ② and ③)

Three copies of the questionnaires were mailed to each of the 15 companies that expressed their willingness to cooperate in the survey. The staff member in charge of each company handed the survey to each "employee who returned to work after a leave of absence in the past year by utilizing a return-to-work support program offered by an external resource".

6 Survey Content

(1) Objective ① "Information that Facilitates the Rearrangement of the JDSP Curriculum and Improves the Effectiveness of Re-work Support"

A. Summary of the Survey Results

The characteristics of the return-to-work support programs identified in the survey of medical institutions were as follows.

- A high percentage of respondents indicated psychological education and cognitive-behavioral therapy as the top three major programs among the return-to-work support programs offered by the responding medical institutions.
- In group work, the themes and methods were diverse. Among them, about half of the group works assumed an environment similar to that of a workplace or decided on the division of roles among the group members due to their awareness of "return-to-work support." The common aims of these group works include the realization of different perspectives and ways of thinking by interacting with other people who are also on administrative leave due to mental health problems, and learning how to act properly in the group and how to approach others.
- Many medical institutions were also engaging in SST and assertion training that focused on improving the patients' communication skills. The themes varied.
- In the case of "work training," there were cases in which participants performed tasks similar to those they used to perform before their leave of absence or to those they expect to perform after returning to work, and cases in which participants followed the same time schedule as in the workplace. One of the characteristics of the various programs was that they were designed with the participants' post return to work in mind.
- The name of the deliverable depends on the medical institution ("Relapse Prevention Plan," "My Manual," "Instruction Manual for Myself," etc.). There was a case in which

participants were asked to write a deliverable that summarized what they would be like after completing the program, with an eye on returning to work.

- There were several opinions that, during the program, it is difficult to collaborate with the companies where the users work. On the other hand, among the medical institutions we conducted hearings with, there was one institution that conducted interviews for returning to work by three parties: the medical institution, the company, and the patient in the latter half of the program.

B. Considerations

Given the results of these surveys, the following are the results of discussions on how to rearrange the curriculum of JDSP at Vocational Rehabilitation Centers and how to improve the effectiveness of Re-work Support at Local Centers.

- It was suggested that the unique strength of vocational rehabilitation agencies is that they can continuously develop and implement career- and workplace-oriented programs utilizing their expertise and knowledge in vocational rehabilitation.
- Regarding vocational rehabilitation organizations' support for returning to work, it is important to continue to provide professional support to employers based on the tools developed by JDSP and the experience of supporting employers gained through vocational rehabilitation activities. In such a case, the advantage of vocational rehabilitation agencies as a support for returning to work can be exploited by utilizing services other than return-to-work support, such as support provided by job coaches.

*(In order to assist persons with intellectual disabilities and persons with mental disabilities in smoothly adjusting to the workplace, the centers dispatch job coaches to workplaces to provide direct and professional support to such persons and their employers based on individual disability traits.)

(2) Objective ② "Effective Follow-up Approach for Those Returning to Work"

A. Summary of the Survey Results

An overview of the results of each survey revealed that most of the Local Centers and medical institutions with return-to-work support programs were conducting follow-ups.

Most of the follow-ups at the Local Centers were conducted on an individual basis (interviews, phone calls, e-mails, letters). Differences in the number of programs provided depended on the timing of implementation with more programs being provided before returning to work than after. In addition, about 80% of the Local Centers provided follow-up support to companies after the users returned to work. The objectives of follow-up support for companies included advice on preparing to accept employees returning to work and implementing work arrangements such as limited work hours.

On the other hand, the follow-up support by medical institutions was primarily focused on

providing programs such as group programs and specific psychological programs. Considering the specific activities described in the open-ended questionnaire, we believe that the objective of the follow-up by medical institutions is to prevent recurrence and another leave of absence by confirming whether what was learned in the return-to-work support program is being applied in the workplace after returning to work and examining how to deal with new issues that arise after returning to work.

Most of the companies also implemented some measures for employees who returned to work. The most common measures taken by companies for employees returning to work were, in descending order, "restriction or prohibition of overtime and holiday work," "reduction of working hours," and "periodical interviews." The most common support received from resources outside the workplace after returning to work was "consultation when in case of bad condition" for employees who returned to work and "advice on readjustment to the workplace (characteristics of the employee on leave and how to accommodate them)" for companies. Several companies stated that the post-return-to-work support from these resources outside the workplace were effective in preventing another leave of absence and settling into the workplace.

Furthermore, according to a survey of employees who had used resources outside the workplace to return to work, although the number of responses was limited, all of them responded that the program for those who had completed support (returned to work) was effective, saying, "It gave me an opportunity to objectively assess my own condition. As for effective measures received from the company after returning to work, many respondents answered "periodical interviews" as well as restrictions on working hours and work activities.

B. Considerations

Based on the survey results, the following three points are suggested for effective follow-up.

- a Periodic Consultations with the Person Returning to Work Performed by Resources outside the Workplace or the Staff of the Company

It was evident that there was a great deal that could be accomplished through consultation, such as relieving the person's anxiety, gaining an objective understanding of their own condition, and resolving problems at an early stage.

- b Provide Opportunities for Communication between Returned Employees

During the follow-up group discussions, some participants commented that a sense of camaraderie was fostered among those who had shared the common experience of taking a leave of absence, so that they did not have to face their real workplace problems alone, but could get advice and gain insights from the stories of other participants.

- c Support for Companies Provided by Resources outside the Workplace

In the company survey, a certain number of respondents said that the post-return-to-work

support they received from resources outside the workplace was effective in preventing another leave of absence and settling into the workplace. It seems that the follow-ups conducted by companies would become more effective by receiving advice on how to prevent another leave of absence from resources outside the workplace with expertise. It is desirable that local centers continue to provide support to companies after their return to work, such as advice tailored to the conditions of the companies.

(3) Objective ③ "Understand the Latest Situation Regarding Corporate Measures for Employees on Leave"

A. Summary of the Survey Results

a Measures Taken within the Company Systems and Workplaces

From the questionnaire survey on the companies, 98.3% of the companies surveyed had a leave system, etc. applicable to personal injury and illness with mental health problems, and 66.3% of these companies had employees on leave with mental health problems, etc. as of the date of response. With regard to the measures taken for employees on leave during the leave period, the corporate questionnaire survey and the hearings indicate that "periodical contact, status check, and consultation" by phone, e-mail, face-to-face meetings, etc. are implemented in many cases. Looking at the difference in the rate of implementation of the measures by company size, the overall trend was that companies with more than 300 employees (large corporations) had a higher rate than companies with less than 300 employees (small and medium-sized businesses). In particular, there was a significant difference in the implementation rate of measures taken during the leave period, such as "recording and sharing of daily rhythm chart" and "encouraging the use of resources outside the workplace. A significantly high percentage of these measures were performed by professionals such as public health nurses, occupational physicians, and occupational health staff.

b Utilization of Resources outside the Workplace

The company questionnaire survey indicated that the large corporations use resources outside the workplace more than the small and medium-sized companies. In the open-ended responses to the company questionnaire survey and in the hearings, opinions regarding the provision of information on resources outside the workplace and the benefits and challenges for each institution were brought up.

Regarding the expected effects of resources outside the workplace, the most frequently cited effects in the survey of employees who returned to work were "understanding and dealing with the causes of leave," "preventing another leave of absence after returning to work," and "learning how to cope with stress and fatigue" (Table 1). In the corporate survey, "recovery of mental health problems of those on leave" was the most frequently cited concern in medical institutions and the second most frequently cited concern in Local Centers (Table 2). The

findings suggest that both employees who returned to work and their companies are looking for support that helps in recovering from mental health issues. In addition, "recovery of the work performance of the absentee" and "improvement of the communication skills of the absentee" were also frequently mentioned by companies, but these were not selected so often in the survey of employees who returned to work.

Table 1 Returned Workers' Expectations for Resources outside the Workplace

	Expected Effects (n=12)	Selection Rate
1	Understanding and dealing with the causes of leave	83.3%
	Prevention of recurring leave of absence after returning to work	
	Mastering how to cope with stress and fatigue	
2	Recovery of work capability	41.7%
	A better understanding of the disease and one's own symptoms	
3	Coordination with workplace	33.3%
	Interacting and exchanging information with other users	
	Attending seminars on cognitive behavioral therapy, SST, etc.	
4	Interaction and information exchange with other users	25.0%
5	Improved communication skills	16.7%

Table 2: Firms' Expectations for Resources outside the Workplace

Medical Institution Return-to-Work Support Program (n=53)		
	Expected Outcomes/Supports	Selection Rate
1	Recovery from mental health disorders	79.2%
2	Recovery of work capability of employees on leave of absence	54.7%
3	Improvement of communication skills of employees on leave of absence	43.4%
4	Counseling and advice for employees on leave and those who have returned	37.7%
	Services to prevent another leave of absence	
5	Elucidation of the causes of disorder and leave of absence and hints for corporate measures	28.3%
Re-work Support at Local Centers (n=55)		
	Expected Outcomes/Supports	Selection Rate
1	Recovery of work capability	69.1%
2	Recovery from mental health disorders	60.0%
3	Improvement of communication skills of employees on leave of absence	58.2%
4	Counseling and advice for employees on leave and those who have returned	52.7%
5	Elucidation of the causes of disorder and leave of absence and hints for corporate measures	50.9%

B. Considerations

Based on the above results, the following points were examined.

a Measures Taken within the Workplace

As for "periodical contact, status check, and consultation," which was implemented by many companies, the survey of returned employees showed that it was "helpful," and previous studies have indicated that it is effective in preventing another leave of absence and readjusting to the workplace.

As for the "recording and sharing of daily rhythm chart," which was found to be effective in preventing another leave of absence in the previous study, the implementation rate of the

measure differed depending on the size of the company. The "recording and sharing of daily rhythm charts" is a measure that is often administered by specialists such as public health nurses, occupational physicians, and occupational health staff, and may be difficult to implement in small and medium-sized companies that do not have professional staff.

When implementing measures in the workplace, it is essential to collaborate with internal staff such as supervisors and HR/labor personnel, if the company has professional staff members.

b Utilization of Resources outside the workplace

When companies use resources outside the workplace, it is necessary to obtain information on the details of the support provided by each external resource and determine whether it is appropriate for the company and the employee who is on administrative leave. The features, benefits, and challenges of the services and support provided by each organization may not be accessible to small and medium-sized enterprises, especially those without professional staff. Hence, it is necessary to further disseminate information on resources outside the workplace and make them more readily available. In addition, in order to allow companies to determine whether the services provided by these organizations are beneficial to them, it will be necessary to provide more concrete and specialized information, such as what kind of support can resources outside the workplace provide, in a user-friendly manner.

Regarding the expected effects of resources outside the workplace (Local Centers and medical institutions), the survey indicated that there were some contents that were common to both the company and the returned employee, and some contents that were highly expected by the company. The common factor was supports that would help in recovering from mental health issues. Also, companies' expectations were high for support in work performance and communication skills for those who returned to work. This result indicates that companies consider the job performance and communication skills of returning employees to be a challenge when they return to work, while returning employees do not necessarily think so, suggesting a difference in perception between companies and returning employees.

7 Relevant Research Outputs

Guidebook for Employment Management of Persons with Mental Disabilities, 2021

* In March 2021, the "Guidebook for Employment Management of Persons with Mental Disabilities," published in February 2012, was revised to include a column to introduce recent topics related to employment of persons with mental disabilities.



Guidebook for Employment Management of Persons with Mental Disabilities