



RETAINWORKS 2026 ECHO:

A Health Navigation Model for
Supporting Employment

Thursdays, March 5 - April 30 | Noon - 1 PM CST

**RETAIN
WORKS** | Retaining
Employment
and Talent After
Injury/Illness
Network





April 23, 2026

Best Practices for Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Care Navigators

Kellen Jacobs, DPT

Rehabilitation Manager, Norton County Hospital,
Norton, KS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Participants will be able to:

- Describe the role physical rehab has in return-to-work clients.
- Explain how rehab can help bridge the gap between medical system and employer.
- Understand how rehab therapist can foreshadow healing and return.
- Understand the importance of a good work restriction

**We want to hear
from *you*!**

*Please take a moment to
respond to the poll*



How Can Rehab Assist in the RETAINWORKS Return-to-Work Philosophy?

- PT/OT/ST
 - And assistants/techs/registration staff
- Easing anxiety and tension
- Build Rapport
- Champion the patient
- Gauge interest level
- Harness the tools we have at our disposal



A PT/OT Perspective (Our Tools)

Tools

- Luxury of time!
- Repeated 30-60 min. treatment sessions
- Sometimes multiple times per week
- Several weeks
- Diagnostic & corrective

Tools

- Education, explanation
- Body, Dx (“he said something was wrong with my rotary cup, or my discs are degenerating”)
- Healing process/protocol
- Pain management, prognosis
- Homework: Attending PT/OT sessions are recovery becomes the injured person’s new job

**We want to hear
from *you*!**

*Please take a moment to
respond to the poll*



How to Best Support Return-to-Work

Patient Side

- Start early
 - From eval get to know job description (also what they really do)
 - Understand employer flexibility
 - Understand patient work role/need
 - Gauge importance of return to work for employer and employee

Employer Side

- Certain levels have different restrictions. Independent worker, state level job
- What's allowed inside the fence
- Helps to understand a little bit of safety rules at job. (example: 3 points of contact)



Restrictions and Accommodations

- Does it make sense? To employer
- Is this a reasonable ask? To employee and employer?
 - Some of this may depend on role/importance.
 - If the employee is 1/100 employer might not have/offer as much wiggle room as if they are 1/1!
- Sometimes my remark of having an employee back at 50% is better than having you back at 0% even for a limited shift.
 - That makes them feel special and helps to build patient rapport.
 - They know they are important! Who doesn't want to feel important?

Work Restrictions

- Because we really get to know our patients and their position, we can write decent work restrictions
- Again, this is a blend of protocol and work description
 - Are there reasonable accommodations
- Specifically Vague:
 - Don't paint yourself in a corner.
 - What does a 10lb restriction do for a patient's ability to work?
 - What exactly does that mean? (total or with affected extremity)
 - Seated rest breaks, stretch breaks?
 - 4 or 6 hour shift available?
 - Standing desk? Stool? Any other adaptations?
 - Think about how they get to their work or workstation?

Sometimes it Takes a Middle-Man (or Two)

- Having a relationship or knowledge of employer and being able to blend that with surgeon's protocol is paramount
- Good time for de-escalating language!
- If employer and employee know what to expect it helps a lot.
- Timelines for healing/progression, again this goes back and interweaves with importance of role. (e.g., at 4 weeks you can..., at 8 weeks you'll be able to...)
- This is always a blend of what the surgeon/doctor will allow and what the employer will allow
- Sometimes both can/will budge, sometimes one or the other will, sometimes neither. Relationships help! MDs, Employers
- And...sometimes work rules won't allow for it (safety, et)



Enter Nurse Navigator/PT/OT

- We have the luxury of time
- We really get to spend some time getting to know the ins/out of our patient, their job description and then what they really do at work. (Because surprise, surprise! job description and actual work are not always the same)
- We are afforded time for lots of questions and answers which allows us to better advocate for the patient, and sparks deeper questions
- The employee often knows many work arounds for their job already, or we can help suggest modifications



Thank You for Your Time and Attention!

Any questions over anything that I have covered?

Or questions in general?