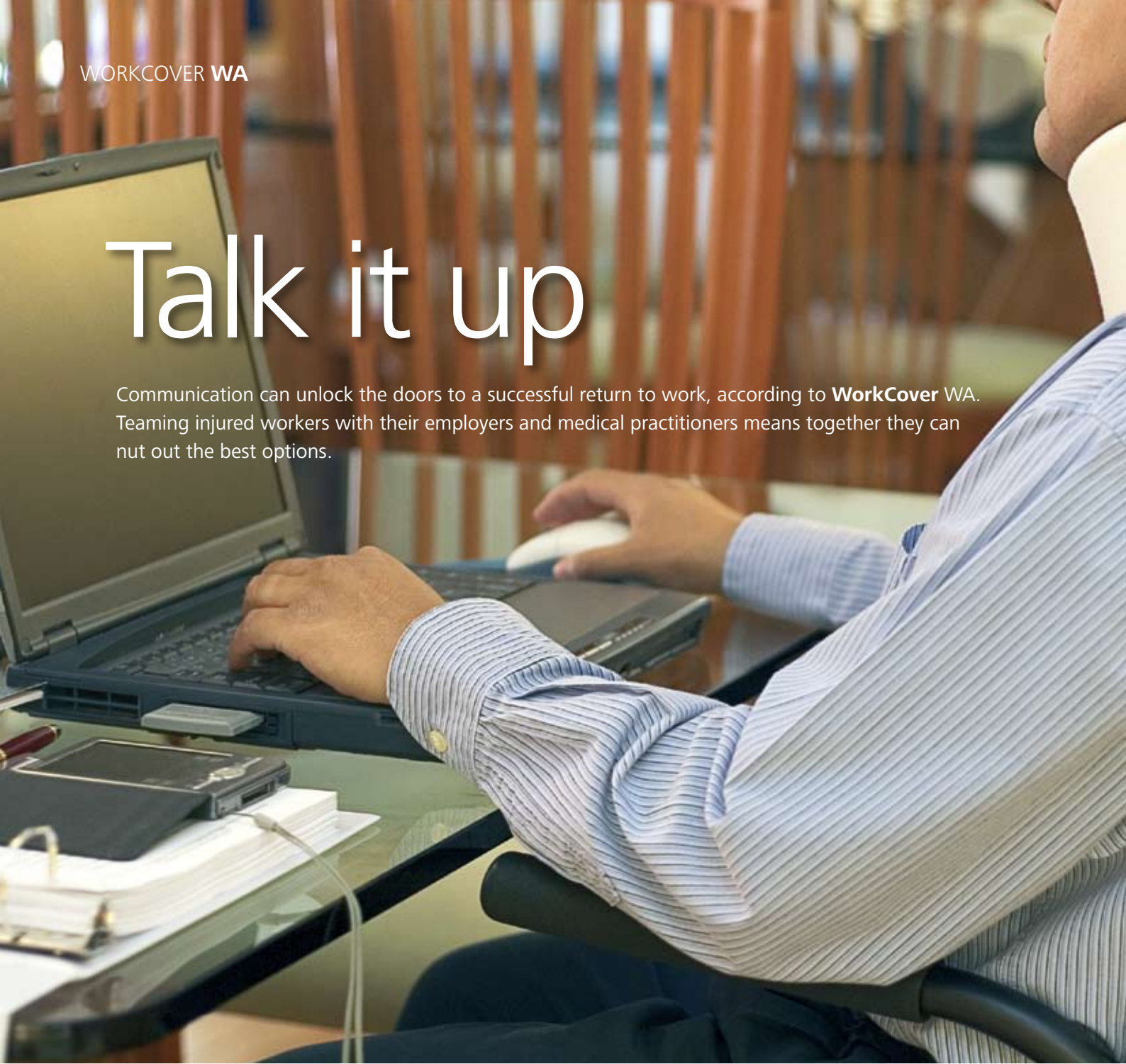


Talk it up

Communication can unlock the doors to a successful return to work, according to **WorkCover WA**. Teaming injured workers with their employers and medical practitioners means together they can nut out the best options.



Providing a supportive and well-structured work environment is the key to ensuring injured workers can successfully return to work during their recovery and is likely to assist with reducing the costs of workers' compensation claims for employers.

"Returning to work is seen as the most important outcome of the injury management process not only because it actively helps an injured worker in their recovery, but it is considered to be the best therapy" said WorkCover WA acting chief executive officer Lyn Anderson. Recent research from WorkCover South

Australia has proven that getting an injured worker back to work quickly is crucial in achieving a full return to work, especially considering that: after six months absence, there is a 50 per cent chance that an injured worker will return to work; after 12 months absence, this drops to 25%; after two years, there is virtually no chance the injured worker will return to their workplace.

With this in mind, early intervention includes a range of simple actions that employers can provide, such as ensuring the injured worker has appropriate medical treatment and that the recovery and return

to work options are discussed between the worker, employer and treating doctor.

Getting back to work faster

"Workers' compensation payments for construction and mining reached almost \$20 million and \$11.6 million respectively in 2006–2007 with more than 80% of these costs related to lost time claims of 60 days or more," Ms Anderson said.

"Considering this, it makes sense to try and determine how an injured worker can slot back into the workplace and undertake meaningful duties sooner. Employers keen to minimise the cost of



“ It makes sense to try and determine how an injured worker can slot back into the workplace and undertake meaningful duties sooner. ”

occupational health and safety staff, union representatives and work mates to provide a supportive work environment that allows the worker to be supported and feel valued.

Some employers may feel unsure about how to assist an injured worker in their return to work and what alternative duties would be suitable, without aggravating the injury – approved vocational rehabilitation providers (AVRPs) can assist.

Ms Anderson suggests that “while most return to work programmes can be developed and implemented by the employer and treating doctor, AVRPs can be called in to provide a range of services including programme co-ordination or establishment of a return to work programme with another employer, if needed. They can also help in other ways, such as assisting with identifying suitable duties or even helping to organise a completely different job that better suits an injured workers return to work needs. These options support the injured worker to return to work successfully.”

Team effort

With the diverse range of health professionals that can be involved in an injured worker’s recovery, it is important that health care providers, employers, insurers and workers collaborate in the return to work process.

In most cases, health care providers liaise directly with the injured worker; yet a closer relationship between providers and the employers results in the employer being more likely to introduce changes to help the injured worker return to work during their recovery.

WorkCover WA understands that some employers need information and support with the return to work process and can assist with queries on 1300 794 744 or visit www.workcover.wa.gov.au for information and downloadable forms. ■

absences due to injuries and illnesses can be proactive by speaking with the treating doctor after the first consultation and identifying alternative duties to return the injured worker to work quickly.”

Consequently, communication is a key element, and an employer can help the treating doctor by providing as much information as possible on the worker’s role and potential for modified duties in the workplace.

“Having a return to work plan that clearly shows the worker that they can return to work with modified duties is critical,” states Ms Anderson. “This gives the injured

worker greater self-esteem, access to a social network, keeps their skills up to speed and allows them to earn an income.”

Don’t let frustration set in

Injured workers interviewed in 2006 reported feeling inadequate, frustrated and depressed following their injury because they could not contribute to their family’s well-being. Trying to avoid extended absences from work therefore makes workers happier as they feel productive.

So, it is also important to involve co-workers in discussing the worker’s progress, including human resources,