



Tackling the not-so-simple question of what to do with injured employees.

# D U

# LIGHT T

# weight Y subject

by Marisa Peters

**W**orking in an industry that requires physically taxing work—such as heavy lifting, leaning over truss tables, repeating motions for entire shifts and so on—means that injuries are going to occur. Regardless of what safety programs are implemented, this is reality, and it must be dealt with in one way or another. The question is how it's being dealt with, and the goal is for each company's policy to be as effective as possible.

When employees are injured and cannot continue to do their normal jobs, one of two things usually happens. They may be sent home while recovering and collect workers' compensation during that time. Or, they may be given a variety of different, temporary jobs that meet doctor recommendations while they heal. This is called **light work duty**. The key is for these light duty jobs to indeed comply with physician recommendations—a requirement that isn't always easy to fill due to the rigorous nature of most jobs relating to component manufacturing.

## Light Duty or No Duty

It's because of this requirement that many employees are simply sent home, which some believe pleases neither the employee nor the employer.

"The average person—[he or she] wants to come back to work," said Bob Kalina, human resource manager at Space Coast Truss in Cocoa, FL. "Most can't live on two-thirds pay (workers' compensation rate in Florida), even if that amount isn't taxed."

Where all requirements can be met, putting injured employees on light duty work instead of telling them to stay home can benefit manufacturers in different ways. In a recent **SBC One Minute Poll (OMP)**, respondents listed saving on workers' compensation premiums and continuing to get at least partial productivity out of employees as reasons to put injured workers on light duty. There is, however, an opposite view.

Simon Evans, CEO of Bay Truss in Richmond, CA, said his employees stay home while recovering from injuries. Two of the most popular light duty jobs, office work and janitorial work, are not viable options at Bay Truss. Evans said office work isn't

possible because his injured workers usually speak little to no English. Janitorial work isn't a viable option because Bay Truss already has a janitor, and Evans doesn't consider that work to be that light anyway. Therefore, Bay Truss tells its injured employees to stay home.

"This has two benefits," Evans said. "They (injured employees) get bored really fast, and will do everything they can to get back to their normal jobs. Also, it is better for the rest of the staff's morale."

However, only 3.4 percent of poll respondents said they do not put employees on light duty—meaning 96.6 percent choose light duty. The bigger question seems to concern the type of light duty work assigned, and why.

## Debating Convention

Janitorial work is a common choice for light duty, with 29 percent of OMP respondents reporting they assign only janitorial work to light duty employees. The other 71 percent either do not ever assign janitorial work, or they assign a variety of jobs that may or may not include janitorial tasks.

OMP respondents who stick to janitorial light duty work for injured employees cited a variety reasons for doing so. Some said it is the only work they have available to offer that also fits doctors' parameters. Others said providing the incentive to get well is the primary motivation behind assigning janitorial work; employees tend to recover more quickly if they're given light duty jobs they don't particularly enjoy. And still others said janitorial work was the only light duty work most injured employees are qualified to do.

Tim Rouch, president and manufacturing manager of Gang-Nail Truss in Visalia, CA, is one of the CMs who does not include janitorial work in his light duty program. One reason Rouch gave for this policy is that janitorial work sometimes includes lifting, which may worsen some injuries. Another reason he mentioned is that janitorial work at times is perceived as punishment for getting injured, and this could negatively affect an employee's recovery time.

"The employee's physiological and psychological reaction to his medical treatment can be enhanced by the attitude his supervisor displays during the rehabilitation process," Rouch said. "Watching someone perform in a janitorial capacity is poorly suited toward that end."

Instead, Gang-Nail Truss assigns other temporary jobs, such as pairing plates—a favorite option of Rouch's, he said.

Burton Lumber and Hardware in Salt Lake City assigns office work to recovering employees about 80 percent of the time, and janitorial about 20 percent of the time, said Debbie Israelson, general manager. She also said people's reactions to janitorial work vary.

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## light duty jobs

The following list of light or modified duty jobs was compiled with One Minute Poll responses and interviews with sources.

### janitorial

- Clean bathrooms, offices, the break room, the training center or the parking lot
- Sweep plant using a push broom

### maintenance

- Paint metal rollers, awnings or line stripes
- Check fire extinguishers
- Yard work

### office

- Sales/other professional positions
- Customer service
- Update insurance certificates
- Operate switchboard
- Technical support

### other

- Perform safety audits
- Operate racker controls
- Light duty in the saw room
- Saw catcher
- Light duty at tables
- Cut small bulk for floor trusses
- Drive forklifts
- Put stickers under banded units of trusses
- Stack trusses
- Take empty lumber carts back to saw room
- Light assembly
- Sort
- Pack
- Visit jobsites
- Light duty helper on manufacturing floor
- Drill
- Block
- Run errands
- Deliveries

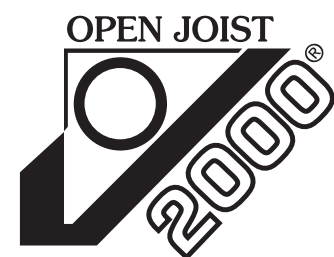
## at a glance

- ❑ When employees are injured and cannot continue to do their normal jobs, they are either sent home or placed on "light duty."
- ❑ It is important for light duty jobs to comply with physicians' recommendations.
- ❑ The key to successful recovery is to develop a program that makes employees feel valuable even if they are injured.



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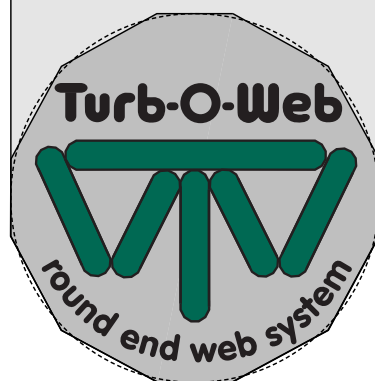
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### Light Duty, Weighty Subject

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"I think some people definitely do have a problem with janitorial," Israelson said. "I think a good number of people are simply happy we would go to the effort of keeping them working. [To those who oppose janitorial work], I usually explain that they are the highest paid janitorial specialists I know."

Golden State Lumber, in Stockton, CA, also assigns both janitorial and office work to employees on light duty. Ralph Panttaja, wall panel manager, said he thinks some people feel more valuable when assigned office work as opposed to janitorial—but that this isn't the case for everyone.

"For some people that is true, but others cannot stand working inside so they would rather do [outdoor] janitorial work," he said.

### Value & Variety

Nancy Frush, founder of Frush Ideas (a company dedicated to managing human resources, safety, workers' compensation programs and/or facilities), believes the key to a successful light duty program is developing one that makes employees feel valued. In fact, she said she prefers the term "modified duty" because, in her opinion, "light duty" sounds like it's not real work.

Frush was previously vice president of administration for H.M. Stauffer & Sons in Leola, PA, and one of the things she did for them was develop a modified work program that brought injured employees back to the plant as soon as possible.

"I wanted to develop a program that made the employees feel like they were still valuable even if they had an injury," Frush said. "I wanted employees to feel like they were respected and important."

Frush said companies should evaluate the skills and abilities of employees when choosing modified work for them to do. Looking at their résumés for past jobs, or even hobbies, may be helpful in assigning modified duty jobs. "We need to eliminate pigeon-holing people," she said.

One thing Frush recommends is having people from each department brainstorm and think of modified duty jobs they could offer injured employees. That way, those ideas and suggestions would be available the next time an employee is injured.

Duane Yurek, personnel director at Littfin Lumber Company in Howard Lake, MN, has a list of modified duty jobs requiring different degrees of physical exertion that he uses when assigning light duty work. The jobs are divided into four groups according to how physically demanding they are. Although not each listed job is always available, the detailed list serves as a good jumping off point, as well as a way to involve employees in the process.

"When we show this list to the employee, and make strong practical suggestions, they can pick things they feel capable of doing," Yurek said. "That empowerment gets them involved, and that helps it work."

### The Second Generation of Light Duty

Many OMP respondents listed light duty jobs other than janitorial work that they assign to recovering workers. Among the most popular were:

- Light duty in the saw room
- Pair/pick/pull connector plates
- Escort wide load deliveries

For more light duty tasks, please see the sidebar on page 61.

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A few of Frush's suggestions were performing safety audits, checking fire extinguishers, operating switchboards or doing customer service work. Frush said that with the downsizing and consolidation happening at some companies, there's usually plenty of work to do. "You just need to evaluate what work needs to be done, and determine who's going to do it," she said.

### Charitable Choice

And perhaps that work doesn't even need to relate to the industry. For example, Kalina is in the process of putting together a program for light duty that takes advantage of a vastly untapped work source—charities and non-profit organizations. He would send employees to volunteer at such places, and pay them their full wages for doing so. This way, employees could continue to get paid full wage, and the company can even take advantage of the fact that donating time to charities is tax deductible.

While this solution must be carefully considered from a state law and taxation perspective, it could be valuable in some cases. "It benefits us, it benefits the community, and I think there's a benefit to the employee," Kalina said.

In the past, Space Coast Truss has had to send employees home because no tasks in the plant met physician requirements. Then, as Kalina said, the employees are sitting at home and only getting paid two-thirds of what they normally make. "Light duty to a doctor often equates to no duty in a truss plant," he said. "The work is hot, heavy and hard."

One example Kalina cited is the 15-lb. rule. That is, if a doc-

tor calls for no lifting over 15 pounds, it often means there's nothing in the plant the injured employee can lift. But that doesn't mean they need to sit at home. "They may not be able to lift a 2x4, but they can do other work," Kalina said.

Work such as answering phones, writing down appointments or people's names, or unpacking clothes—to name a few. So, Kalina has been contacting organizations like local blood banks, the American Red Cross and any other charitable organizations that would appreciate vol-

unteers. So far, reactions have been positive. "I haven't established a program yet, but the response I'm getting is that it looks like it will fly," Kalina said.

### No Easy Answer

As is evident from OMP results, there are many different ways of looking at light duty and how it affects employees and companies. An added complication is that a lot can depend upon an injured worker's perspective and attitude. This means it can be quite difficult to make anyone—let alone everyone—happy.

However, attempting to assess the situation and create some type of light duty program could be useful for at least one reason. As Yurek said, providing modified work duty for employees is a way to aid in controlling workers' compensation premiums.

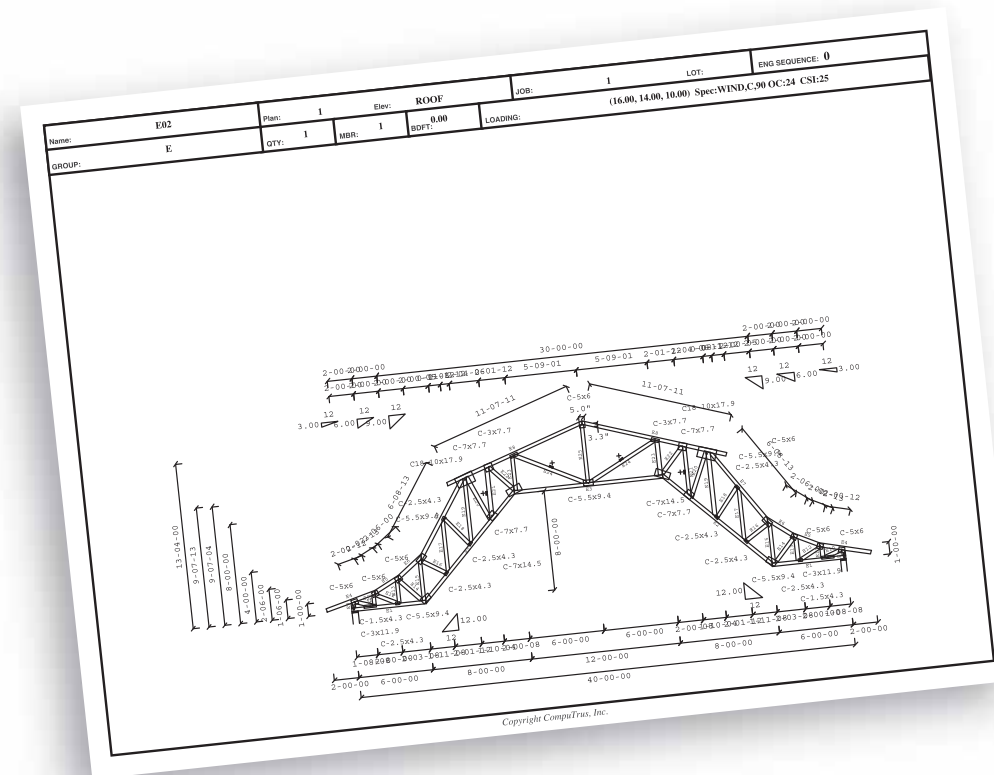
"Even though we are maybe getting only 50 or 30 percent productivity from a recovering employee, that is direct savings in our workers' comp premium," he said.

If component manufacturers do decide to implement or continue with a light duty program, Frush said one thing that should be kept in mind is that companies will have to pay employees no matter what type of work they assign.

"You're going to have to pay them either way—if you accommodate them with work that makes them feel useful and like they have a purpose, or if you don't," she said. "So you might as well make the best use of employees." **SBC**

*Thanks to Herb Hildebrand, Chuck Stillwaggon, Mike Stover, and Dan Kleczka of Casmin, Inc. for suggesting that SBC research and report on this topic.*

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