

## Reasonable Accommodation Case Study - Gerdau Ameristeel

### Rapid Reporting and Transitional Work

The largest fabricator of reinforcing steel and the second largest minimal producer of long steel products in North America, Gerdau AmeriSteel is a major supplier of merchant bars, wire rod, reinforcing steel, collated nails, welded wire mesh, high quality cold drawn bars, railroad spikes, special steel sections, and light structural shapes. The core business involves some 4,800 employees at ten steel mills, 29 downstream operations and nine upstream steel scrap-processing facilities. Products are made primarily from one of the world's most recycled products - steel scrap - making Gerdau AmeriSteel an environmental good neighbor. The Company also supports many nationally recognized charitable organizations as well as local efforts in the areas where employees live and work. Gerdau AmeriSteel employees take an active role in seeking out and helping the people in their communities. Gerdau AmeriSteel is a majority owned subsidiary of Brazilian steel manufacturer Gerdau, S.A., a 100-year-old Brazilian based steel company.

### Best Practices

Gerdau AmeriSteel and its predecessor companies have a reputation for progressive employee education, intensive training, competitive benefits, and outcome-oriented incentive pay programs, as well as modern equipment and technology. The focus of this report, however, is on the Transitional Work process for injured employees. Mr. Todd Efird, CSP is Director of Safety and Health for Gerdau AmeriSteel. An industrial engineer by education, Mr. Efird describes the post-injury process as an extension of the Company's culture in which employees are truly the organization's most valued resource. Consistent with rehabilitation philosophy, the intent is to engage employees and meaningfully involve them in all decisions that affect them. When employees observe this philosophy in practice in terms of manifest behavior by managers and supervisors, the Company's culture of positive employee engagement is reinforced. Some specific features of the post-injury process at Gerdau AmeriSteel include the following:

- Gerdau AmeriSteel is as actively involved in the management of injured worker issues as it is in the processing and fabrication of steel products.
- When a worker is injured, there exists an explicit presumption of re-employment, until it is clearly demonstrated, for medical or other reasons, that this is not feasible.
- When an injury occurs, supportive communication with the injured employee is immediate and sustained. Following a recent accident, the injured employee was accompanied to the hospital by one of the plant EMTs and met there by his supervisor, the Safety Manager, HR Manager, Department Manager, Plant Manager, and six coworkers who remained with the injured employee and his family throughout surgery and stabilization. Mr. Efird estimates that these overt efforts account for two thirds of the success of the return to work program.

- Gerdau AmeriSteel seeks to utilize health care professionals and case managers who share the company's commitment to re-employment and the expeditious recovery and return to work.
- A strategic plan is developed for each injured employee. All stakeholders, including the employee, physician, case manager, third party administrator, safety professional, human resources professional, department management, and plant manager, are involved in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the plan.
- When necessary, the same Action Plan group evaluates and decides accommodations in a collaborative manner. Outside consultation is rarely indicated.
- Transitional employment is used on a temporary basis if the work involved is productive and meaningful.

#### Unique Best Practices: Accident Prevention

Gerdau AmeriSteel encourages rapid reporting of an injury and engages in an immediate "failure analysis process," in which matters of quality, safety, productivity, and environmental impact are carefully examined. The who, what, where, when, why, and how of the event are scrutinized with the goal of finding facts, not fault, regarding the root cause of the event. Using electronic communication to accelerate the process, a "safety alert" is issued to all locations, along with a specific Action Plan intended to prevent recurrence. That plan may prescribe personnel training, job redesign, purchase and installation of additional equipment, or an ergonomic intervention. At Gerdau AmeriSteel, managers are responsible and accountable for providing specific behavioral examples of "how" safety is valued. This is followed by immediate and positive recognition for safety enhancement measures. In this way, safety becomes part of operational values.

#### Conclusion

Gerdau AmeriSteel is an example of an organization in which disability related issues are addressed as an extension of a basic but genuine Company commitment to "Do right by the employees." In so doing, the cultural values of the organization are positively underscored. However, the business case for careful attention to return-to-work practices is not lost on the Company. Estimated cost savings reinforce the intrinsic value of the investment in this measure of progressive human resources practice.

McMahon, B., Wehman, P., Brooke, V., Habeck, R., Green, H., and Fraser, R. (2004). *Business, Disability and Employment: Corporate Models of Success. A Collection of Successful Approaches Reported from 20 Employers.* Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention.