

Reasonable Accommodation Case Study – Northwire, Inc.

Proactive Injury Management with Return-to-Work Goal

Northwire Inc. (NWI, established in 1972) produces custom wire and cable products for medical, industrial, and various specialty markets. The company is a service-oriented, attribute driven company whose product development is driven by customer needs, problem-solving analysis, and solution oriented engineering. Northwire's manufacturing facility was designed to maximize production efficiency and allow for future expansion.

Vickie Jensen, NWI's Human Resource Manager, reported that the company has a strong belief that values built on people, excellence, customer service dedication and FUN are the keys to achieving success. These concepts are reflected in the following core values:

People: We care about people. We all need to grow, have meaningful jobs, be treated with respect, be recognized for the work we do, and be paid fairly.

Excellence: Northwire's standards requires a focus on high productivity, attention to details, continual improvement, innovative methods, drive and commitment.

Customer Service: At Northwire, we hold our customers in high regard. We also value fairness and honesty in our business.

Dedication: We value loyalty and commitment

FUN: We believe that fun at work is an important trait of a highly effective and successful company. The link between fun at work and employee creativity, productivity, morale, satisfaction, and customer service important in a company's success.

Best Practices

Northwire's progressive "employee oriented" philosophy is evidenced throughout their human resource management policies and practices. Of particular note is the company's commitment to employee training, proactive injury management, and attention to the physical well being of workers.

Proactive Injury Management: Northwire's company policy states that employees are to be treated like family". The philosophy is clearly evidenced throughout the company's injury management policies and practices. Supervisors and colleagues are encouraged to treat fellow employees as if they are their brother or sister and approach safety and injury management practices from that perspective.

Returning an injured employee to work in the shortest time possible is their goal with steps immediately taken following an accident to see that this happens. This applies to both work-related and non work-related injuries.

The injured workers immediate supervisor collaborates with the Human Resource Director to maintain open communication with the employee.

The company's insurance carrier is asked to assign a case manager for each injured employee to coordinate the return-to-work program.

Job safety analysis information outlining the physical requirements for each job is shared with the treating physician. Photos and videotapes are also provided by outside consultants to obtain accurate, detailed information on which to base work restrictions. Customized light duty assignments are developed for the injured employee based on their unique skills and limitations. Light duty assignments are open-ended to allow for an orderly return to maximum performance.

"Adjustments" to the work site or job duties are developed to accommodate for temporary or permanent restrictions. Northwire chooses to use the term adjustments to avoid the stigma that often accompanies the term accommodation. Examples of adjustments that have been made include assigning a "helper" for the employee, redesigning the workstation, and re-engineering the production process.

Alternate employment within the plant is an option for injured workers, this option has not been used as all injured employees have returned to their previous job title. Proactive safety policies and practices are in place to minimize lost time injuries. As a result, no lost time injuries have been reported and only one OSHA reportable injury for the first seven months of 2003.

Hiring: Historically, Northwire has provided employment opportunities for applicants with disabilities who are able to complete the essential job functions. As mentioned earlier, outside consultants are hired to conduct formal job safety analyses of every production position in the plant. This documented review of the physical demands of jobs is used in the hiring process to identify qualified workers and to train new employees. Applicants with disabilities who are able to complete the documented essential functions of a job are hired on the basis of their qualifications. Once employed, workers with disabilities are provided with extensive training and promotional opportunities and have access to workplace "adjustments" to maximize their employment potential.

Northwire maintains a positive working relationship with the Projects With Industry Center staff at the University of Wisconsin-Stout to recruit qualified applicants with disabilities. Furthermore, Vicki Jensen, NWI Human Resource Manager, is a long-standing member of the Projects With Industry Business Advisory Council and is actively involved in the development and evaluation of activities designed to identify and/or create employment opportunities for workers with disabilities.

Unique Best Practices

Northwire's commitment to the health and safety of its employees is evidenced through the following activities:

- A Certified Industrial Hygienist was contracted to conduct comprehensive air quality assessments to establish baselines throughout the plant. When changes are made to the physical environment additional assessments are completed to maintain up-to-date information.
- A Certified Rehabilitation Technologist was contracted to analyze production processes and suggest modifications that would decrease exposure to injuries.
- A Certified Ergonomist was brought in to conduct a review of existing workstations and to suggest modifications to enhance safety and reduce injuries.
- A Manufacturing Engineering student from UW-Platteville was hired as an intern to upgrade storage and handling of hazardous materials and address noise abatement issues.

Summary

Northwire is a progressive, employee oriented company that provides employment opportunities for workers with disabilities as part of their normal hiring, training, and promotional process. New and existing employees with disabilities are simply members of the team and treated in a way that is consistent with the published key value that states: "We care about people".

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.