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CASE STUDY

Industry Med

Improving return-to-work outcomes in manufacturing

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Introduction

Injury-related time off work is on the rise across many New Zealand industries. The manufacturing sector claim data is interesting – the number of annual workplace injuries has remained steady, however, the average number of days people are away from work due to injury continues to increase.

Returning to work in a supportive environment, or being able to recover while working, leads to better outcomes – physically, mentally, socially and economically. Yet a range of system-wide and workplace-level barriers often make it difficult.

This case study highlights a positive example: Industry Med's end-to-end, holistic model of return-to-work and recovery-at-work.

In a rural manufacturing setting, the case study shows what is possible when businesses, providers, and employees collaborate to enable better outcomes, and demonstrates how similar models could support businesses and sectors around the country.

Businesses play a key role in enabling better return-to-work and recovery-at-work outcomes. This requires intentional effort and collaboration with the wider system.

For employees who need to take time off work due to work-related or personal injuries, facilitating their return in a manner that supports their ongoing work and recovery helps enhance a business's productivity. For the employee, returning to work and recovering while at work can shorten recovery times and improve their physical and mental well-being.

Ultimately, this case study identifies that early access to care and working while recovering, when safe to do so, benefits everyone.



Manufacturing insight

Since 2015, the manufacturing sector in New Zealand has seen the number of workplace claims remain relatively level each year until 2024, but the average number of days off work for employees has substantially increased.

Claims by year

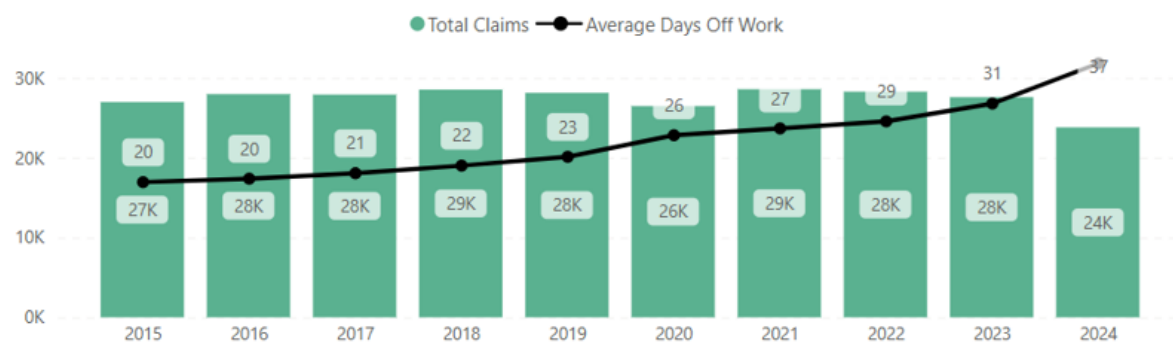


Figure 1: ACC Manufacturing new claims - ShopCare data dashboard (Includes Non-AEP claims only)

There are rising costs associated with the increasing average number of days off work in New Zealand, which affects ACC, businesses, individuals, and the country as a whole. Weekly compensation costs are a significant portion of the total cost paid by ACC.

Claims by cost

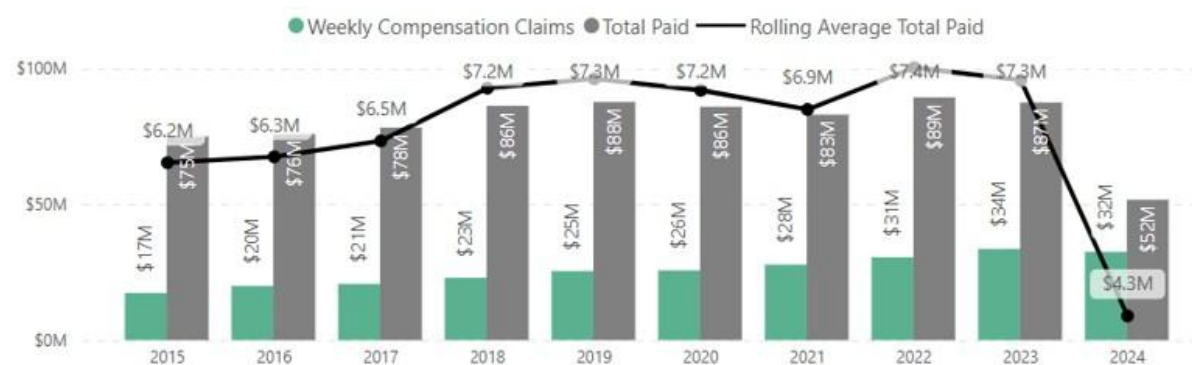


Figure 2: ACC Manufacturing claims cost - ShopCare data dashboard (Includes Non-AEP claims only)

For employees, there are direct costs, as weekly compensation may not provide them the income they need (ACC pays 80% of wages¹). There are also indirect costs, such as social isolation, career impacts and poor mental health outcomes.

For businesses, rising costs for ACC eventually result in higher levies, while decreasing costs can lessen them. Other costs may include hiring temporary staff to cover roles, the loss of valuable employee skills, which impacts productivity, and the effort required to manage the process and its consequences.

¹ How payments work. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.acc.co.nz/im-injured/financial-support/weekly-compensation/how-payments-work>



Barriers to positive employee outcomes

A range of factors influence how quickly and successfully someone can return to work after an injury. Research highlights several systemic and workplace-level barriers that are making it harder for employees to recover and return safely.

Poor collaboration across the system

Canadian researchers interviewed 97 healthcare providers and 34 case managers and discovered two key findings²:

1. **Lack of coordination between parties:** Those involved in the employee's return to work (doctors, employers, compensation providers) struggled to collaborate. Barriers included interdisciplinary and cross-professional communication; philosophical differences about the timing and appropriateness of return-to-work; and confusion among healthcare providers about the workers' compensation system. This lack of alignment ultimately affected the quality and timing of care of employees.
2. **Injured workers caught in the middle:** Injured workers often became information conduits for their own recovery, and this slowed down effective treatment and delayed their return to work.

Worse outcomes for rural workers

Other Canadian researchers examined the difference between rural and urban centres³ in return-to-work outcomes.

They found that rural workers were:

- 1.43 times more likely to still be receiving compensation after 90 days
- 1.68 times more likely to experience a second injury requiring compensation

This points to the need for more accessible support in remote areas.

Psychological safety matters

Australian researchers examined the impact of having a psychologically safe workplace (PSC) on return-to-work and recovery at work. They developed a framework that established a baseline of workplace factors underlying psychological safety at work, then interviewed 1,067 randomly selected individuals and examined their claims and compensation history⁴.

The researchers found that understanding the specific characteristics of the workplace environment could predict future working time loss associated with a medically certified workplace injury or illness. If the workplace were poor in its practices, leading to a psychologically unsafe environment, then the days lost at work and costs would be high.

² Russell, E., & Kosny, A. (2018). Communication and collaboration among return-to-work stakeholders. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 40(24), 2935–2945. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1472815>

³ Lavoie, C. A., Voaklander, D., Beach, J. R., & Gross, D. P. (2017). The association between rurality and return to work for workers' compensation claimants with work-related musculoskeletal injuries: An analysis of workers who failed to return to work within typical healing time frames. *International Journal of Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health*, 30(5), 715–729. <https://doi.org/10.13075/ijomeh.1896.00926>

⁴ Loh, M. Y., Dollard, M. F., & Friebe, A. (2024). Economic costs of poor PSC manifest in sickness absence and voluntary turnover. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 35(3), 635–648. <https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2024.42>



Conversely, if it had better practices, making it a more psychologically safe environment, then the number of days off work and associated costs would be lower. Their findings showed the cost and time off work between psychologically safe workplaces and unsafe ones were significant (Figure 3.)⁵.

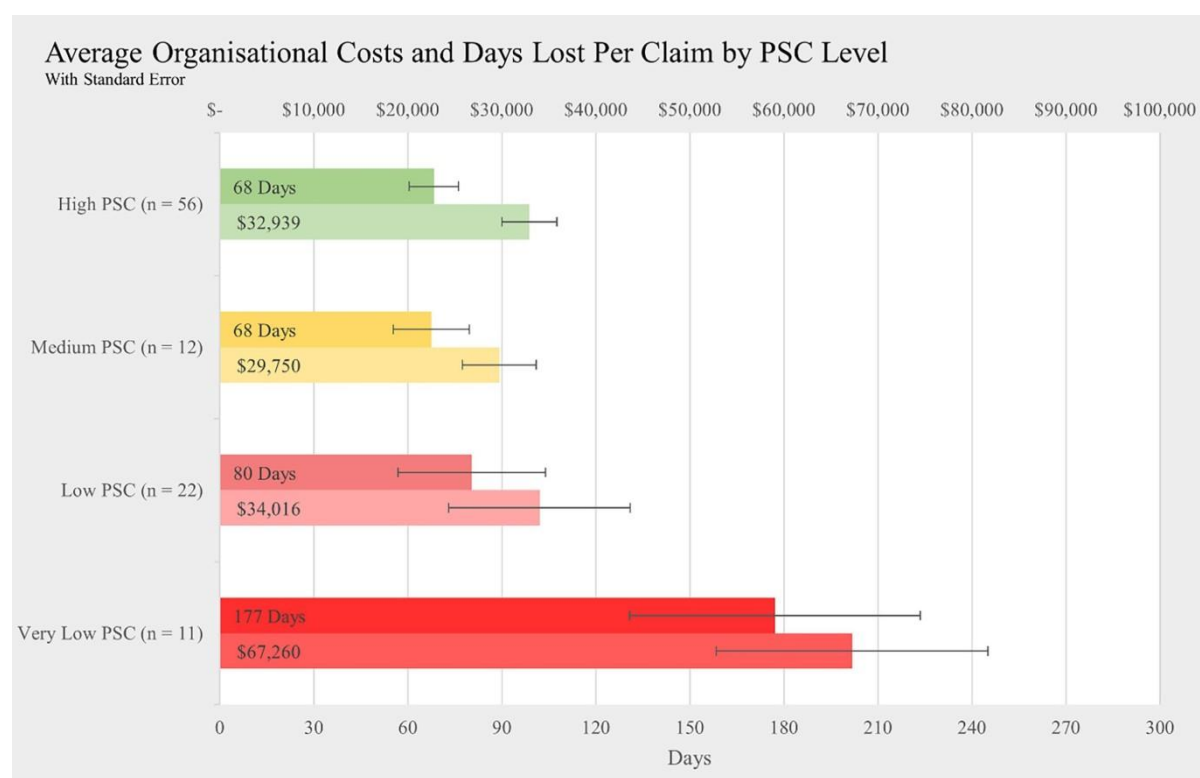


Figure 3: Average organisational costs and days lost per claim per year by Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) Level. Note. \$ are Australian Dollars (AUD); Median expenditure was AUD 36,070.

With such considerable costs for the government, businesses, and individuals, it's essential to identify those within the system who are successfully turning the tide in this area and learn from them.

Private sector innovative solutions

One company applying a variety of innovative solutions for workplace recovery is Industry Med. Industry Med, founded by Dr. Sarah Gardiner, emerged from the health centres in large paper and pulp mills in the Bay of Plenty.

These centres traditionally had company doctors and nurses providing first aid and back-to-work planning. Industry Med has expanded on this model to serve 2,500 patients in industrial sites, both in-person and via telemedicine.

⁵ Maureen F. Dollard (2024). PSC as an organisational level determinant of working time lost and expenditure following workplace injuries and illnesses. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0925753524001929>



Solutions to improve recovery outcomes

Industry Med has developed several innovative solutions to meet the unique needs of its clients. These initiatives adopted a more coordinated and holistic approach, involving injury prevention, bringing care to workers, whether rural or urban, utilising telemedicine to bridge barriers, and providing a more comprehensive, end-to-end managed process through effective coordination.

Making healthcare more accessible on site

One of the most impactful changes Industry Med has introduced is the setup of remote clinics on isolated industrial sites. These clinics provide both emergency and general practice services, significantly enhancing access to care.

For instance, at a pulp and paper industrial site with 260 workers and no local general practitioner (GP), Industry Med established a remote clinic that achieved a 38% engagement rate for GP services. This enabled workers to receive immediate care for injuries and general health issues, decreasing downtime and boosting worker satisfaction.

A unique wraparound model of care

From initial injury treatment to complete rehabilitation, Industry Med manages the entire process, including ACC documentation and specialist referrals. For example, a worker with an electrical injury received immediate first aid followed by a comprehensive rehabilitation plan that included specialist referrals and back-to-work planning.

This holistic approach ensures that workers receive continuous and coordinated care, enhancing recovery and return-to-work outcomes.

Leveraging telemedicine technology

Industry Med's virtual clinics are equipped with advanced telehealth technology to provide remote consultations and monitoring. Their video consultation capabilities and virtual monitoring equipment, enabling healthcare providers to perform thorough examinations remotely.

This includes listening to the lungs and heart, examining the throat and ears, and measuring vital signs. This technology is particularly beneficial for workers in isolated or high-risk environments, ensuring they receive timely and effective medical care.

Challenges

Operating in the private sector without GPPHO funding posed significant challenges, particularly in integrating with ACC. Industry Med had to create unique electronic solutions to align with their model. Furthermore, as pioneers in their field, they built many of their services and technologies from the ground up. This demanded a high degree of creativity and innovation, as there were no existing models to replicate.

Success stories from Industry Med

Industry Med's approach delivers real, measurable outcomes for businesses and workers. Here are a few examples that show how timely care and coordinated support make a difference.

Faster return to duties through immediate care

At a sawmill, a worker experienced a fall on site and received immediate triage via video consultation. This quick response allowed the worker to return to light duties the same day, demonstrating the effectiveness of Industry Med's integrated care model. The worker was sent for an X-ray and returned to work with a clear plan and appropriate treatment, all within a few hours. This level of timely response and efficiency is unusual.



Consistent care across multiple sites

A manufacturing company with locations in several cities partnered with Industry Med to support its workforce. By offering access to virtual clinics, the business ensured consistent, high-quality care for all employees, regardless of their location. This fostered a sense of security and well-being among employees.

Accelerating recovery with allied health providers

Industry Med works closely with physiotherapists and occupational therapists, who often book telehealth consultations directly. The benefits have been clear:

- More than two weeks saved on average, per case, for returning to work safely
- 24 – 48 hour access to medical appointments – a key factor in success
- Doctors with workplace knowledge, helping ensure advice is practical and fit for purpose

These examples show that with the right model, return-to-work outcomes can improve significantly, saving time, reducing costs, and supporting the health and wellbeing of workers.

Future vision

Industry Med envisions scaling up the model to provide company doctors to more workers across New Zealand, benefiting both employees and employers. The goal is to make access to occupational health services a standard for all workers.

This vision includes expanding remote clinics and integrating more advanced telemedicine technologies to reach even the most isolated workers. They hope that in the future, it will be normal for workers to have access to a dedicated medical team.

Additionally, Industry Med aims to expand its services to include more specialised care, such as mental health support and chronic disease management. By integrating these services into their existing model, Industry Med can provide a more holistic approach to worker health and well-being.

Conclusion

By addressing unique challenges and providing comprehensive, accessible care, Industry Med's innovative approach has significantly improved the health and wellbeing of industrial workers. Dr. Gardiner's vision and dedication continue to drive the company forward, with plans to expand and enhance their services to benefit even more workers across New Zealand.

The success of Industry Med demonstrates the potential for innovative healthcare models to transform occupational health and improve outcomes for both workers and employers.

Key takeaways

If you don't yet have a return-to-work or recovery-at-work programme in place, evidence shows the benefits of implementing one. Consider how these insights could benefit your business and people.

If you do have a programme in place, these learnings could be an opportunity to review and refine to give your team the support they need to return safely, sooner.

Find more resources and industry case studies at shopcare.org.nz.



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