

A perspective on the role and training practices of the Australian Workplace Return to Work Coordinator

Joanna Bohatko-Naismith

BOHS with Merit; MWIMOR (Newcastle)

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Environmental and Occupational
Health)

November 2017

**This research was supported by an Australian Government Research
Training Program (RTP) Scholarship**

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY AND AUTHORSHIP

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision.

The thesis contains published scholarly work of which I am co-author. For each such work, a written statement, endorsed by the other authors, attesting to my contribution to the joint work has been included.

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any other embargo.

Joanna Bohatko-Naismith

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to my supervisors, Professor Darren Rivett, Associate Professor Carole James and Dr Maya Guest for their encouragement, support and guidance with the research and in the completion of this thesis. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Professor Dimity Pond for her time and generous support throughout the GP study.

I would also like to thank the many people that have aided me throughout the course of my studies, both professionally and personally. Firstly, I would like to extend a very special thank you to my mentor, Professor Paulette Van Vliet, and to my dear friend Valerie Nie for their unwavering faith in my ability to complete this thesis. To my fellow PhD students, and especially Dr Tracy Schumacher, your camaraderie, support and laughter made this a much more pleasant journey. Thank you to all of my work colleagues at the University, in particular, Dr Amelia Reddall, John Tessier and Dr Daphne James, for their friendship and support, when I needed it most. Also an enormous thank you to Dr Samantha Ashby for generously assisting me with completing the final manuscript for my thesis. Also a special thank you to Debbie Booth for her unfaltering patience with me and my never ending challenges with endnote.

I am extremely grateful to all the participants who willingly volunteered their time to contribute to the studies, and especially to Mr Paul Mantach for his support with recruitment.

I could not have continued to complete my work without the support of my family and friends, especially my dearest friends, Tanya and Maryanne, for keeping me in touch with the outside world and providing me with small doses of sanity as required.

Lastly, I especially need to acknowledge my wonderful husband Glenn, for supporting me for so long, and in so many ways; and to my loving children, Nathan, Tayla and Katelyn for their inspiration and encouragement when I found it all too difficult.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents for always believing in me and my brothers, Edward and Michael, and providing us with solid educational foundations to pursue our dreams. I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mum, Marianna and my father Wlodzimierz (Bob) Bohatko, whom I miss every day and who would be so proud of my achievements.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY AND AUTHORSHIP	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS.....	viii
PUBLISHED CONFERENCES ABSTRACTS AND INVITED PRESENTATIONS	ix
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
ABSTRACT.....	xiii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background and Context.....	1
1.2 Aims of Thesis.....	2
1.3 Outline of Thesis.....	3
1.4 Scope/ De-limitations	5
1.5 Significance.....	6
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2.1 Chapter Overview	7
2.2 Manuscript 1.....	7
2.3 Introduction.....	8
2.4 Methods	13
2.5 Discussion.....	21
2.6 Conclusion.....	27
2.7 Chapter Conclusion.....	28
CHAPTER 3 LEGISLATIVE AND RELATED CHANGES SINCE 2012.....	29
3.1 Chapter Overview	29
3.2 Australian Perspective.....	29
3.3 Australian Jurisdictional Differences in the Role and Current Training Practices	36
3.4 Conclusion.....	51
3.5 Chapter Conclusion.....	51

CHAPTER 4 THE ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACE RETURN TO WORK COORDINATOR: ESSENTIAL QUALITIES AND ATTRIBUTES...53

4.1 Chapter Overview	53
4.2 Manuscript 2	54
4.3 Introduction.....	55
4.4 Method	59
4.5 Results	62
4.6 Discussion.....	70
4.7 Conclusion.....	75
4.8 Chapter Conclusion	75

CHAPTER 5 INSIGHTS INTO WORKPLACE RETURN TO WORK COORDINATOR TRAINING: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE:76

5.1 Chapter Overview	76
5.2 Manuscript 3	76
5.3 Introduction.....	77
5.4 Method	79
5.5 Results	81
5.6 Discussion.....	88
5.7 Limitations.....	93
5.8 Conclusion.....	93
5.9 Chapter Conclusion	94

CHAPTER 6 THE INJURED WORKERS' EXPERIENCE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACE RETURN TO WORK COORDINATOR.....96

6.1 Chapter Overview	96
6.2 Manuscript 4	96
6.3 Introduction.....	97
6.4 Methods	101
6.5 Results	104
6.6 Discussion.....	111
6.7 Conclusion.....	117
6.8 Chapter Conclusion	118

CHAPTER 7 AUSTRALIAN GPS PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORKPLACE RETURN TO WORK COORDINATOR.....120

7.1 Chapter Overview	120
7.2 Manuscript 5	120
7.3 Introduction.....	122
7.4 Methodology	124

7.5	Results	127
7.6	Discussion.....	135
7.7	Chapter Conclusion.....	139
CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....		140
8.1	Chapter Overview	140
8.2	Summary of the Findings.....	140
8.3	Limitations of the Research Studies.....	145
8.4	Implications of the Body of Research	148
8.5	Future Research	152
8.6	Summary of Thesis.....	153
REFERENCES		155
APPENDIX A	Statements of collaboration from authors	166
APPENDIX B	Supporting documents for Study 1 (Chapter 4 and 5)	173
APPENDIX C	Supporting documents for study 2 (Chapter 6).....	187
APPENDIX D	Supporting documents for study 3 (Chapter 7).....	195
APPENDIX E	Journal publications.....	215

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

The following publications and presentations were a direct result of the work completed in this thesis:

Manuscript: 1

Bohatko-Naismith J, Rivett D, Guest M, James, C (2012). A review of the role and current training of Return to Work Coordinators in Australia. *Journal of Health, Safety and Environment*. 28 (2): 173-190

Manuscript: 2

Bohatko-Naismith J, James C, Guest M, Rivett D (2015). The role of the Australian workplace Return to Work Coordinator: Essential Qualities and Attributes. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*. 25 (1): 65-73

Manuscript: 3

Bohatko-Naismith J, Guest M, Rivett D, James C (2016). Insights into workplace Return to Work Coordinator training: An Australian perspective. *WORK*. 55 (1) 29-36

Manuscript: 4

Bohatko-Naismith J, James C, Guest M, Rivett DA (2017). The injured worker's experience and relationship with the Australian workplace Return to Work Coordinator. (Under review)

Manuscript: 5

Bohatko-Naismith J, Rivett DA, James C, Pond D, Guest M (2018). Australian GPs perspectives on the workplace Return to Work Coordinator. *The Australian Journal of Primary Health* (accepted 17 June 2018)

PUBLISHED CONFERENCES ABSTRACTS AND INVITED PRESENTATIONS

1. Bohatko-Naismith J, Rivett DA, Guest M, James C. The experiences and perceptions of workplace Return to Work Coordinators: An Australian perspective on the role and current training. 6th International Forum on Disability Management, The Royal Society of Medicine, London, UK. The International Journal of Disability Management, 7(1,) Nov 2012.
2. Bohatko-Naismith J, Rivett D, Guest M, James C. Sink or Swim? The perceptions of Return to Work Coordinators. Safety 2012 World Conference, Wellington, New Zealand (2012). Injury Prevention, 2012;18 (Suppl1):94
3. Bohatko-Naismith J, Rivett D, Guest M, James C. The role of the Australian Return to Work Coordinator: Essential Qualities and Attributes. 3rd Australasian Compensation Health Research Forum. 2013; Swissotel, Sydney, NSW.
4. Bohatko-Naismith J. The role of the Australian Return to Work Coordinator, Suncorp Group Limited, Sydney, NSW, July 2012 (Invited speaker).
5. Bohatko-Naismith J. Workplace RTW Coordinators - The real 'Gatekeepers' of the RTW process - Key aspects of selection and training. Webinar Presentation for RTW Matters: A resource for RTW professionals. June 13 2017.
6. Bohatko-Naismith J, Guest M, Rivett DA, James, C. Deficient or sufficient? Contemporary Australian Return to Work Coordinator training practices. XXI World Congress on Safety and Health at Work 2017. Singapore. Short-listed for the best poster competition.

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 2

Table 2.1: Summary of findings from included publications on the workplace Return to Work Coordinator's role and training.....	17
--	----

Table 2.2: Return to Work Coordinator training: Training and accreditation requirements in Australian workers' compensation jurisdictions	19
---	----

Chapter 3

Table 3.1: Cost of work-related injuries in Australia from 1992 – 2013 (Safe Work Australia, 2015b).....	31
--	----

Table 3.2: State and Territory costs for work-related injuries in 2012/13 (Safe Work Australia, 2015b).....	32
---	----

Chapter 4

Table 4.1: Legislative requirement for Australian RTW Coordinators	58
--	----

Table 4.2: Study participants	61
-------------------------------------	----

Table 4.3: Inherent interpersonal traits and attributes.....	66
--	----

Chapter 5

Table 5.1: Study Participants	82
-------------------------------------	----

Table 5.2: Current training provisions for Australian RTW Coordinators.....	84
---	----

Chapter 6

Table 6.1 Participants characteristics	
--	--

Chapter 7

Table 7.1: Demographics	128
-------------------------------	-----

Table 7.2: Workplace RTWC contribution to the role.....	130
---	-----

Table 7.3: Contact with workplace RTWCs.....	133
--	-----

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1: Australian state and territory legislation12

Figure 2.2: Flowchart of the review process.....15

Chapter 7

Figure 7.1: Characteristics/attributes of an effective RTW Coordinator131

Figure 7.2: Barriers when communicating with RTWCs.....132

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
CM	Case Manager
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DM	Disability Manager
DS	Disability Supervisor
GP	General Practitioner
icare	Insurance and Care Australia
IFAP	Industrial Foundation of Accident Prevention
IMC	Injury Management Coordinator
IMP	Injury Management Plan
NIDMAR	National Institute of Disability Management Research
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
QLD	Queensland
RACGP	Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
RRTWC	Rehabilitation and Return to Work Coordinator
RTW	Return to Work
RTWC	Return to Work Coordinator
SA	South Australia
SIRA	State Insurance Regulation Authority
Tas	Tasmania
US	United States
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia
WRP	Workplace Rehabilitation Provider

ABSTRACT

The concept of a workplace Return to Work Coordinator (RTWC) stems from significant reforms to the Australian workers' compensation legislation in the mid-1980s, which highlighted the need for the rehabilitation of injured workers to occur at the workplace. Since its inception, the role of the workplace RTWC has continued to evolve, and contemporarily, the role has been recognised as critical in the facilitation of injured workers returning to pre-injury work duties.

The overall aim of the thesis is to identify the attributes and skills required to effectively perform the role of a workplace RTWC, and ascertain if the current training programs adequately prepare RTWCs in assisting an injured worker to return to work. Moreover, the thesis also explores their relationship with the injured worker and the General Practitioner (GP), and whether there are any associated barriers that may negatively impact on the injured worker. Three research studies and one literature review were undertaken to meet this aim.

In the first study, focus groups were conducted with contemporary workplace RTWCs to ascertain their views of the traits and characteristics required to perform the role successfully, and in addition highlight any deficiencies that may exist within current training practices from their perspective. In the second study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with injured workers, and in the third study a cross-sectional survey was undertaken of GPs, with both studies designed to gain insights into the relationships between these key stakeholders and the workplace RTWC. In particular, insights were sought from these stakeholders regarding the necessary traits and adequacy of training of RTWCs.

This thesis and its constituent studies revealed contemporary workplace RTWCs need to possess specific traits and characteristics such as compassion, empathy and patience to successfully perform the role, with an emphasis on identifying

these traits during the selection process of workplace RTWCs. The findings also revealed that a review of current training practices is required if workplace RTWCs are to be supported appropriately to facilitate a successful return to work for an injured worker. In turn, this will likely assist with the reduction of workplace disability and workers' compensation costs. The findings of this thesis should be of significant interest to regulators and policy makers, and have important implications for future research in the specific area of workplace rehabilitation.