



Safe Work and Return to Work Awards

Shane Webcke, Queensland Safety Ambassador

Safe Work and Return to Work Awards example entry Category eight – Injured worker achievement award

1. Describe your injury.

(Please note that the below has been submitted by Protech following discussions with Ellie and also based off our knowledge and records of the circumstances since Ellie joined Protech. We understand that these Criteria 1 through 5 would normally be completed by the nominee / injured worker and would be written from a first-person perspective, but under the circumstances we did not wish to distract Ellie from her ongoing rehabilitation and her commitment to work.)

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Ellie applied for work with Protech in January 2018, possessing a 5-year work history in hospitality and a 2-year history in hairdressing before finding a labouring role in the Toowoomba region. She enjoyed labouring as she was outdoors, and she expressed a goal of developing her own business in the design and construction of tiny houses.

Ellie commenced work with Protech in February 2018 (following our Protech Certified recruitment process and inductions), as she was deemed to be a great fit for Protech and our civil construction client. She demonstrated a keen interest in building her capabilities and knowledge in both the construction and mining sectors, and she exemplified an engaged and determined woman in a non-traditional role.

Ellie contacted Protech in May 2018 to advise that she was 14 weeks pregnant, therefore a plan was put in place to allow her to continue working safely during her pregnancy (with an advised due date in November 2018). Ellie performed casual work for Protech on our civil construction client's site during this period before being offered a civil traineeship – which she accepted – and her advancement became official on 2 July 2018.

HISTORY OF INJURY

On 6 July 2018, Protech received a call advising that Ellie had been involved in a motor vehicle accident. It was later reported that the accident was a single vehicle accident where the vehicle struck a tree. Ellie received multiple injuries which resulted in a high amputation of her left leg, the loss of her unborn baby, and multiple fractures to her right leg.

2. What was the impact of the injury on your life?

As a result of injury Ellie had to:

- Relocate her home to Toowoomba, to a home that could be modified to accommodate the wheelchair.
- Undergo extensive psychological adjustment counselling.
- Be involved in ongoing prosthesis trials and training.
- Learn how to walk again, requiring extensive work to retrain her brain to accept two limbs again. This challenge remains to this day, but Ellie is committed to achieve.
- Ongoing exercise and physical therapy weekly, including a hydrotherapy program.

Protech recognises that despite Ellie's manifest efforts and achievements, she has also learned to deal with the sacrifice of a number of her goals and dreams along the way.

We have stayed in contact with Ellie consistently since her injuries. Staff members from our Springwood office, Maree Bearham – Account Manager and Simon Gibson – Business Manager SEQ, have continued our face-to-face, telephone and text message contact with her during her years of rehabilitation and have remained close to this case, all supported

by Adrian Baker – General Manager QLD. Maree in particular has on occasion travelled to Toowoomba to socialise, support, and encourage Ellie as she coped with all the challenges these injuries have caused.

Protech's commitment to supporting Ellie back into the workplace has not wavered during the years of her rehabilitation and we are proud that this commitment was led and facilitated by our Executive Team.

3. Return to work

RETURN TO WORK PROCESS

The key to successful return to work is to identify the appropriate occupations that will provide future career options. Ellie had been working with her National Injury Insurance Scheme Queensland (NIISQ) Case Managers – who we feel are the unsung heroes of injury management and/or return to work) to complete some basic computer skills. These included learning Word and Excel, and she successfully finished and became certified.

The consultation began in August 2020: all key parties involved in Ellie's rehabilitation came together in August 2020 to work through some issues that would need to be considered to identify the correct options for Ellie.

It was agreed:

- The timing was right for Ellie to return to the workforce.
- Ellie had shown her commitment by completing her basic computer skills.
- Employment options were discussed at length specifically looking at what Protech could offer – we looked at our back-office operation and recruitment tasks but the issue with most of these tasks was that they were mostly conducted in our Springwood office which is 1.5 hours' drive from Ellie's home in Toowoomba.
- Protech was not a good option due to location, but it was agreed that the back-office tasks, such as payroll, accounts payable and administration, were the right type of roles to consider, as they offered future employment options to Ellie and would not restrict her to any one business type or model.
- We ruled out a number of return-to-work options that had been discussed in the past, as we were focused on tasks that could be performed in a wheelchair.

The outcome of this meeting was presented to our People & Culture / Human Resources team, led by Natalie Stewart – Group General Manager, People & Culture.

Our General Manager QLD, Adrian Baker, then approached one of our clients, RoadTek, to see if they would consider Ellie for a traineeship as they are located in Toowoomba, close to home for Ellie, and in an industry sector that Ellie had already expressed interest in joining.

Charlie Fetoai, our Business Development Manager for our GTO clients and Apprentices & Trainees, arranged a client meet-and-greet for 25 November 2020 between Ellie and Jason the Operations Manager at RoadTek, where discussion took place around pathways into a traineeship. It was agreed that this would start working one to two days per week and Jason from RoadTek also followed up with relevant parties to ensure that the building was adequately wheelchair-friendly and that they could accommodate the pathways plan.

This process required worksite assessments to be conducted by the rehabilitation team supporting Ellie and it was agreed that a return-to-work date would be arranged, starting Ellie on a few days per week.

On 10 December 2020, Ellie returned to work through Protech at our client's RoadTek location, working on a return-to-work plan working 2 days per week.

4. Overcoming barriers

Ellie has experienced a number of barriers throughout her rehabilitation and her return to work, primarily the physical challenges associated with the nature of her injuries and the psychological challenges associated with the losses she has endured and the adjustments she has had to make to accommodate her injuries and living arrangements.

Following her motor vehicle accident, Ellie spent months in hospital where her rehabilitation began. Her amputation was high up on her left leg due to the extent of her fractures, which makes the physiotherapy requirements more challenging, as well as the suitability of prostheses at various stages throughout her return-to-work journey.

Ellie has had to learn how to navigate her environment using her wheelchair, relocate to a more suitable home for wheelchair access, arrange house and bathroom modifications from local contractors, obtain her driver licence, undertake further education for administrative work, and maintain consistency and focus – all while undergoing a sometimes-exhausting schedule of physical and psychological therapy.

Ellie has worked extensively with her psychological and rehabilitation teams to come to terms with her losses, including her unborn baby, her left leg, her mobility and independence, and her ability to work outdoors in the same manner as before her accident.

With her mammoth efforts and dedication, Ellie has focused on training her brain to control both legs again and she continues to work on trusting her prosthesis to support her in standing and walking, with a recent trial walk on a ramp being particularly confronting. Protech, along with Ellie's medical and rehabilitation teams, acknowledge that the site of Ellie's amputation makes the prosthesis outcomes harder to control than for amputations just above the knee, and she is currently equipped with her second prosthesis.

Ellie's stump is significantly higher on the upper leg than most, meaning that any weight gain or loss in her thighs can impact the comfort, efficacy, and safety of her prosthesis – but as with most of the barriers she has encountered thus far, she is committed to overcoming them and becoming ambulant and self-sufficient.

Education had also been a previous barrier for Ellie to overcome; with her history of hospitality work and bartending, hairdressing and labouring, Ellie knew that she would likely have to expand her skillset into administrative and clerical support suitable for her current physical restrictions, so she completed a course in Microsoft Word and Excel, paving the way for her current role as a Project Management Support Officer (L2 Admin) with RoadTek Toowoomba.

Something that Protech and Ellie's NISQ Case Manager at the time were concerned would be a barrier – finding a suitable job placement for Ellie's return to work – has proven to be absolutely surmountable. We met as a group to discuss various role options, initially under the assumption that Protech might be Ellie's best and quickest hope for a placement, therefore we discussed Recruitment and WH&S roles that might be done from the Protech office. The closest permanent Protech office to Ellie's home in the Toowoomba region is based in Springwood, so unfortunately the distance and travel time made an internal Protech role unsuitable. We wanted to ensure that Ellie was in a team environment with supportive people to guide and mentor her, so working from home was also not the best option.

Protech's General Manager QLD – Adrian Baker – made enquiries with the Toowoomba depot of our client RoadTek to determine if they might accommodate the provision of a pathway into a traineeship for Ellie within their organisation. We are immensely proud and grateful that RoadTek recognised Ellie's potential value to their existing team structure and promptly made arrangements to have the office and facilities assessed for wheelchair accessibility and safety. They have also committed to commencing a Certificate III in Business traineeship when Ellie is ready for additional work and study hours.

Protech would like to take this opportunity to recognise and express our gratitude to Jason Dallinger, Operations Manager at the Toowoomba office of the Department of Transport & Main Roads – RoadTek, for facilitating Ellie's return to work so efficiently and for remaining in contact with Protech regarding Ellie's progress, achievements, and areas for improvement. The commitment shown by Jason and all RoadTek stakeholders, including management personnel and Ellie's immediate work colleagues, has been second-to-none and has exceeded our (already high) expectations of RoadTek's commitment to diversity, inclusion, the engagement of Toowoomba locals, and improving individuals' and the community's prospects by implementing upskilling and training programs.

Ellie, too, often expresses her thanks and appreciation – not without a small touch of humility and embarrassment – to Protech, her rehabilitation teams, and her RoadTek supervisors and colleagues for the moral support and encouragement she receives from such a dedicated network of people all committed to helping her achieve her goals. Ellie associates her return to work and her work-related accountabilities with the greatest chance of success in overcoming her current limitations, so her triumphs truly are building upon one another.

5. Benefits experienced from return to work.

Ellie's return to work in December 2020 was a major milestone for her, both professionally and personally, but it was not without its own set of challenges. After the initial elation of working with new and friendly people in an altered role and environment, Ellie experienced a few weeks of struggling to prioritise her attendance at work. When Maree Bearham and the Protech Injury Management team organised a meeting with her to reiterate how her work efforts were intrinsically linked to her rehabilitation progress and her independence, it set off a renewed sense of dedication to her role, and she hasn't looked back since.

The advice that Protech would give to people experiencing their own challenges in returning to work following an injury is to value the exceptional efforts of your medical, rehabilitation, employer, WorkCover, NISQ and other support networks, and to trust in the process – even when progress seems to be taking a long time or you experience setbacks.

Protech's Injury Management team – led by our National Workers Compensation Manager, Margaret Smith – strives to educate all Account Managers and other internal staff members regarding the importance of doing everything we can to facilitate return to work outcomes. We recognise that we play a critical part in empowering injured workers to return to work so as to regain control of their lives, make decisions for themselves with fewer limitations, and increase their potential earning capacity by learning new and broader skills and staying engaged in the workforce.

Ellie has stated that her return to work was a wonderful experience, due in no small part to the welcome she received from her RoadTek colleagues, who all made her feel part of the team. She has expressed that the additional education she undertook to prepare for her return to work was challenging but immensely rewarding, and she often mentions the kindness of others and how those small gestures have made her return to work so much easier.

It is often said that one of the most frustrating aspects of recovering from serious injuries is feeling that you no longer have control over the choices that guide your life; sometimes people can feel as if their decisions are being made by a panel of 5 or 6 other people. They're all well-meaning, of course, but if you don't have control over your own daily life then it's difficult to feel a sense of accomplishment in your own achievements.

Protech always aims to discuss and agree upon various options with injured workers, and this has been particularly important for injuries like Ellie's, where the recovery timeframe is longer than average. Ellie feels that her return to work and her continuing rehabilitation progress have allowed her to regain her decision-making capabilities and her self-sufficiency.

Ellie's new-found independence was made possible by her commitment to learning new skills in a different field to her previous work history, becoming more familiar with computer programs and technology in general, improving her organisation and scheduling skills, and – we can't forget her 'key' to freedom if you will forgive the pun – regaining her driver licence. Ellie drives herself to work and appointments most of the time now and we couldn't be prouder of her. But Ellie being Ellie, wouldn't you know it? She's keen to show us what else she's capable of; she has mentioned more than once, "I can do more."