

healthyworking

A workplace wellness update

How can I support my employee's return to work?



SUPPORTING AN EMPLOYEE'S RETURN TO WORK

Coming back to work after a short or long-term disability can feel daunting for both the employee and manager. Your employee is probably feeling uneasy about getting back in the swing of things and may be concerned about any changes made to their role or workload while on leave. All of this is that much more difficult if they're struggling with ongoing physical or mental health concerns. These fears can have a dramatic impact on your employee's productivity and make it hard to ease back in as an active member of the team.

Disability leave is a naturally difficult subject and because many managers are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, they end up doing nothing at all. You may not have any knowledge of why the worker was on leave, or they may have discussed their health condition in great detail with you. Regardless of how little or how much you know, it's up to you to help your employee re-enter the working world. Ignoring the return to work, or underplaying its impact may not only be perceived as unsupportive, but can also negatively affect the whole team. By following the tips below you can help keep the lines of communication open, ensure your employee is able to do their job and move forward safely and successfully.

As a leader, you play a critical role in your employee's health and well-being and can help make the transition as smooth as possible.

Stay in Touch

Although many managers are hesitant to contact employees while they are on leave, in many cases, it's actually a critical step to helping the employee feel supported and connected to the organization. Just make sure the conversations are focused on the individual's well-being rather than their position or tasks at work.

Regular contact, when it's possible, will not only make your employee feel valued and missed, but can keep their connection to colleagues and the workplace strong. It should also help to relieve any anxiety around the eventual return to work. Just make sure you're not contacting the employee too regularly or else you may end up exerting some unintended pressure on the worker to come back before he or she is actually ready to do so.

Be the Support

Once your employee is given the go ahead from a health professional to return to work, you should be involved from day one. Lead by example and do whatever you can to make the adjustment easier. Make sure you:

Have a chat. Welcome the worker back, discuss how responsibilities were handled during their absence and if there have been any changes to the role. Identify whether adjustments need to be made in the workplace to help them successfully complete the tasks at hand. Again, keep the conversation focused on job performance. This is also an opportunity for your employee to open up about any concerns or issues, while giving you a chance to offer your support and empathy.

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Work with your employee to define any issues that might impact day-to-day responsibilities.

These tips will help me support my team.



Seize the opportunity. Your employee's return is actually a great time to get the whole team together to talk strategy. Consider a team lunch or a fun outing for some team-building. Don't focus on your returning employee and instead look to where you're headed as a team. You should, however, acknowledge that you're grateful to have your employee back. You can also provide colleagues with advice on how they can help make the transition easier for their newly returned colleague. Just be very careful: If the employee has chosen to share details with you, never release information about the worker's health condition to colleagues without that worker's permission.

Be accommodating. Returning workers may need you to modify workstations, duties and hours to meet their new needs. Offer flexible options like returning to work part-time and gradually increasing hours, working from home, temporarily reduced responsibilities, access to a rest area, etc. Set timelines for these modifications but be prepared to change the plan along the way. Depending on the illness, you may need to consult the employee's physician, occupational therapist, disability management case manager or other health professional to help you fully understand what the employee can and can't do.

Maintain high expectations. While you will need to be patient as your employee reintegrates, this doesn't mean you should allow for missed deadlines, poor work quality or regular absenteeism. Set realistic goals and standards for the employee to work towards and regularly review progress. Try not to give preferential treatment and be wary of how the rest of your team perceives the situation. You may consider asking the individual for permission to keep everyone updated on his or her condition. If it's a cancer recovery, for example, colleagues will likely want to offer their support in any way possible.

Returning to work after a long absence can be a very stressful and uncertain time. Although it's uncomfortable to talk about personal problems, ignoring their existence or seeming disinterested in helping the worker adjust will only make it harder for the employee to re-connect with their work and team. But by acknowledging challenges and addressing the employee's concerns before they grow into bigger problems, you can ensure a smoother transition, maintain productivity and boost the morale of your whole team.

Check In and Evaluate

Some managers make the mistake of returning to "business as usual" after an employee's return, but he or she may need assistance for the next couple of months. Communicate an open-door policy so the worker is comfortable approaching you with any concerns and schedule regular meetings to discuss needs and the challenges of adjustment. Look out for signs your worker is having trouble coping—like social isolation, unimpressive results and negativity. Don't *assume* the employee is okay because they haven't requested your help lately—*ask*. Also, if your organization has a support program, remind the worker that confidential help is available to help work through adjustment challenges.

If you've made changes to the work environment, workload or adjusted the job role to better suit the employee's abilities or condition, you should periodically evaluate how well these changes are working. Speak with the employee and make sure the accommodations you've made are helping with productivity and discuss whether or not other changes are necessary. Also, speak with colleagues on the team to find out how everyone else is managing with any reassigned tasks or additional responsibilities.