Returning to work after absence

When someone is ready to return to work after an absence, the employer should have a procedure they follow. You can check your workplace’s absence policy for this.

Your workplace might have a policy for meeting with employees after absences.

5. After long-term absence

If there’s been a long absence or the employee has an ongoing health condition, it’s a good idea for the employer and employee to meet and:

- make sure the employee is ready to return to work
- talk about any work updates that happened while they were off
- look at any recommendations from the employee’s doctor
- see if they need any support
- if the employee has a disability, see if changes are needed in the workplace to remove or reduce any disadvantages (‘reasonable adjustments’)
- consider a referral to a medical service such as occupational health
- discuss an employee assistance programme (EAP), if it’s available
- agree on a plan that suits you both, for example a phased return to work

Making reasonable adjustments

If an employee has a disability, by law their employer must consider making ‘reasonable adjustments’ if needed to help them return to work.

Reasonable adjustments could include making changes to the employee’s:

- workstation or working equipment
- working hours
- duties or tasks

This can help:

- get people back to work quicker
- prevent any further problems

For the best course of action, the employer should take advice from:
the employee themself
the employee’s doctor
their occupational health adviser

Find out more about reasonable adjustments.

Phased return to work

A ‘phased return to work’ is when someone who’s been absent might need to come back to work on:

- reduced hours
- lighter duties
- different duties

For example after a:

- long-term illness
- serious injury
- bereavement

The employer or their HR manager and the employee should agree on a plan for how long this will be for.

For example, they could agree to review how things are going after a month and then decide to increase the working hours or duties, or they might decide they need to stay reduced for longer.

The employer or HR manager should continue to regularly review the employee’s health and wellbeing in the workplace and make new adjustments if necessary.

Pay during a phased return to work

If the employee returns to their normal duties but on reduced hours, they should get their normal rate of pay for those hours they work.

For the time they’re not able to work, they should get sick pay if they’re entitled to it.

If the employee is doing lighter duties, it’s up to the employer and employee to agree on a rate of pay. It’s a good idea to make sure this agreement is put in writing.

When there are a lot of absences or the employee is struggling

If an employer is concerned that their employee has a lot of absences or is having difficulties doing their job, they might need to look at the next steps.

For example, your workplace might use a capability or performance management procedure to help the employee. This could involve mentoring or training.
Find out more about how an employer might review sickness and absence.

If an employee is unhappy with how their return to work has been handled

If an employee is unhappy with how their return to work has been handled, they should first raise it with their employer.

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