

RETURN-TO-WORK GUIDE

For Managers

When an employee returns to work after an extended leave, regardless of the nature of that leave, the transition warrants careful planning and support from the workplace. Your role as the employee's manager is an especially important one. This handout is intended to guide you through that process. It begins with general considerations for all leaves of absence, and then presents some special considerations for different types of leave.

General return-to-work guidelines for managers

Consult with your human resources department

Discuss your role in the transition, your organization's relevant policies, the employee's legal rights, and any benefits or resources available to them.

Protect confidentiality

Remind the employee that information regarding the reason for their leave is confidential and will not be shared by you or the company. It is the employee's decision if they choose to share information about their leave with their co-workers. Your HR department can provide guidance on your company's policies regarding privacy.

Schedule a back-to-work conference

When the employee returns to work, it's helpful to schedule a meeting on the first day of their return. In addition to you and the employee, consider any other personnel who need to attend the meeting, such as someone from Human Resources. Use the time to welcome the employee back and let them know they are valued by the organization. Ask about any needs and concerns they may have about the transition. Tell them about any changes in their job expectations.

Consider a transition period

If there have been changes in the department and the employee needs to learn new processes, consider a transition period that could include retraining. An employee may have special needs when they return to their job. Your HR/benefits department can provide you with guidance on any special requests made by the employee or their doctor when they return to work.

Offer a private space if possible

Depending on the return-to-work issue, an employee may need a private space to go to for personal needs. Employees sometimes need a few minutes alone to decompress or make a private phone call. This is especially important if employees work in an open area where they lack privacy.

Observe co-workers' responses to the returning employee

Some staff may have been required to cover the employee's absence or may have to make changes when the employee returns. This could result in their feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or even resentful. If you notice any employees having difficulty, ask for their views and how you can help make the changes go as smoothly as possible.

Monitor work performance

You will want to convey an attitude of confidence in your returning employee's ability to succeed in their work. At the same time, you must also monitor their performance to make sure they are able meet their job expectations.

If a returning employee is not meeting performance standards after a reasonable time, it is your job to intervene. Focus on their performance, not on the nature of their recent leave. Problem solve with them. Ask what they need in order to get the job done. If the problem persists, you may want to call the EAP for a management consultation with an Employee Assistance Consultant (EAC) to develop an action plan.

Provide extra support and structure

If you think an employee might benefit from extra support during the transition period, consider the following options:

- + Schedule regular meetings with the employee. Use the time to check in on how their re-entry is going.
- + Ask what the employee needs. Let them know you are interested in helping.
- + Offer lots of positive reinforcement. Tell employees what they are doing well.
- + If an employee is having difficulty with job tasks, you may want to provide additional structure. For example, employees who are having difficulty with concentration may benefit from:
 - Breaking large assignments into smaller steps
 - Demonstration of how to do a task
 - Learning strategies to deal with distractions and interruptions
 - Identifying work priorities

Review available resources

Depending on the employee's situation and the company's resources, you may be able to offer the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Lifestyle Management Programs, a 24-hour health information line, and/or Work/Life support resources. Give the employee information about these programs.

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Maternity and paternity leave

Returning to work from maternity or paternity leave can pose a variety of challenges for employees. It helps to have a supportive manager. Consider the following:

- + Relying on childcare while working can be difficult for employees. They may want to call their childcare provider or use an app to check during the work day.
- + Review workplace policies regarding time off for children's illnesses, children's doctor appointments, and caregiver cancellations.
- + The new parent may lose sleep due to the baby's needs. With an infant they may be adjusting to new schedules in their personal lives and may have an increase in overall stress.
- + Be aware of the needs of mothers who continue to breastfeed after they return to work. Consider the following:
 - Provide a private area where they can express milk and break-time to do so.
 - When feasible, also provide a place to wash breast-pump equipment and a refrigerator for storing the milk.
 - Check with your HR department for guidelines on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. This act mandates that employers provide exempt employees:
 01. Time to express milk at work for one year after the child's birth
 02. A place to express milk, other than a restroom, that is shielded from view and free from intrusion by co-workers and the public

If an employee approaches you and needs help, you can offer the EAP as a resource. If your company has Work/Life services with Cigna, the EAP can offer names of childcare providers in their area, emergency daycare resources, articles on parenting a new baby, and many other Work/Life resources.

Bereavement

When an employee loses a loved one, their world is changed. Returning to work is sometimes difficult for them. It can also be uncomfortable for their manager and co-workers, who may be unsure how best to respond to their loss. The most helpful approach is to focus on the bereaved person's needs rather than any discomfort you feel.

Remember that grief takes time and is very individual. There is no set time span for grief to be over or a set way for a person to grieve. It's not a simple, "just get on with it" process. Though an individual's bereavement leave may be over, their grieving process may still be going on.

Here are some suggestions for helping employees who are returning to work after a loss:

- + Acknowledge the loss and convey your sympathy. You could simply say "I'm sorry for your loss." If you wish, you could do something in remembrance of the deceased, such as send flowers or make a donation to a cause.
- + If the employee feels like talking, be available and be a good listener. You can't take away someone's pain but you can help by sharing it. It's okay to talk about the deceased if the employee indicates they want to talk.
- + Be aware that people who are grieving go through many different emotions, often in the same day. Shifting moods and emotions are part of the normal process of grief. At times, you will not see any outward signs of grief and may think the person is not affected by their loss. This isn't necessarily true. The following responses are descriptions of what you might see when someone is dealing with grief:

Shock, disbelief, and denial. After the initial loss a person may experience disbelief, numbness, and shock. The mind cannot quite comprehend the loss. It doesn't feel real. This reaction helps to soften the blow until the person is able to deal with their loss.

Anger, depression, and despair. When the reality of the loss sets in, a person often experiences intense feelings of sadness, anger, and despair. They may become disorganized, confused, and have difficulty concentrating. They may also have physical symptoms, such as tightness in the chest, headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue. Anger may surface without an apparent cause.

Detachment. The person may appear preoccupied, withdrawn, and quiet. They may lack a zest for life.

Understanding and acceptance. This is a time of reorganization. The person begins to reconcile the hurt and anger and find some balance in their life. They accept that things will not get back to the way they were and they begin to make new plans and establish a “new normal.” There is no set time for this to occur.

- + The grief process is an individual process; no two people grieve alike. It is not a straight, step-by-step process. Individuals can experience the above phases in any order; for example, a person may come to understanding and acceptance and then have anger or depression return for a time. Closure—learning to live with the loss—does not necessarily mean the person’s grief is done. Grief can be experienced throughout someone’s life. Important life events such as anniversaries and birthdates, as well as memories, can trigger renewed grief.
- + Check your own beliefs about grieving. Your understanding that people differ in their expression and timing of grief can be comforting to a bereaved employee.
- + Keep in mind that expressions of sympathy and support tend to taper off after the initial period of loss has passed. Keep checking with the employee. Ask how they are doing and whether there is anything you can do for them. Remember that holidays and anniversaries may be particularly difficult for the employee in the first year.
- + If the employee becomes tearful at work, offer them a private area if possible.
- + Tell them about the EAP as a no-cost resource for grief support.

Medical leave

Employees returning to work after a medical event may have special needs during the transition. (Medical leave encompasses leave for mental health and substance abuse treatment) Your human resources/ benefits department can provide you with guidance if the employee has workplace accommodations related to return to work. In addition to the General Return-to-Work Guidelines above, following are some things to consider:

- + Be sensitive to confidentiality concerns. Remind the employee that it is not necessary for them to reveal the reason for their leave to their manager or other employees.
- + The employee may need time off for doctor or counselor appointments and/or due to medical complications. Check your leave policy and be as flexible as it permits.
- + The employee may need privacy to call their doctor or therapist.
- + If an employee requests accommodations after a medical leave, consult with your human resources department about the best course of action. For example, HR might provide parking close to the worksite.

Mental Health: Following are some things to consider an employee returns from a medical leave due to mental health reasons:

- + Medical leave for mental health reasons should be treated the same as any medical leave.
- + As with other medical leave, be sensitive to confidentiality concerns. Remind the employee that it is not necessary for them to reveal the reason for their medical leave to their manager or other employees.
- + The employee might request time off for appointments with their doctor or counselor. Check with HR about options under your leave policy.
- + Offer the employee privacy for calls to doctor or counselor if possible and requested.

- + If you have an employee returning to work and you know the leave was due to suicide risk/attempt, you must respond in the same manner you would with any type of medical return. Schedule a return-to-work meeting, and let the employee be your guide in the conversation. If the employee brings up their medical condition (suicide attempt/risk), be open to the conversation. Let the employee know you are available if they should need support and the additional support available through their EAP benefit. The EAP also offers a management training titled “Suicide Awareness for Managers,” which can be presented on-site to managers for educational purposes. This seminar may be helpful if you have questions about recognizing signs of suicide.

Substance Abuse: When an employee returns from substance abuse leave, it is important to do whatever you can to help them make a successful readjustment to work. Treat employees returning after substance abuse leave the same as for any medical leave. Following are some things to consider:

- + As with other medical leave, be sensitive to confidentiality concerns. Remind the employee that it is not necessary for them to reveal the reason for their medical leave to their manager or other employees.
- + The employee might request time off for ongoing treatment. Substance abuse groups have fixed times and the employee may have few or no alternatives. However, these groups usually only last a few months. Check with HR about options under your leave policy.
- + Many individuals recover from substance abuse and resume productive work. However, relapses sometimes occur. If you observe any signs of possible substance abuse that are impacting work performance:
 - Document your observations.
 - Do not accuse the employee of using drugs or alcohol.
 - Consult with your HR department about relevant policies, including testing for reasonable suspicion.
 - Call the EAP for a management consultation. An Employee Assistance Consultant can advise you about your options, including a formal management referral or continuation-of-employment referral to the EAP.

Military Service

Returning to work after military service is a major adjustment. It deserves careful planning and follow-through by managers. Returning employees face a number of challenges:

- + They may be confronted with the career advancement of their co-workers while their own career has stalled.
- + They may feel less important or needed since the workplace has filled the gap caused by their absence.
- + Veterans may have difficulty turning off “battlefield skills” they adopted to survive in a war zone. These may include behaviors such as being on constant alert, being less able to trust others, making quick decisions without checking with anyone else, expecting subordinates to obey directives without questions and keeping emotions sealed off

When an employee returns after military service, plan a transition meeting as described above under General Return-to-Work Guidelines. Following are additional points to cover:

- + Welcome the employee back and thank them for serving our country.
- + Explain any changes that have occurred in their absence, or changes in their role expectations.
- + Ask about any new skills they learned in the military that could be useful on the job.
- + Ask if they have any special concerns. Offer relevant resources, such as the EAP and Work/Life program.

The transition from military service back to civilian life can take some time. Schedule regular meetings for a while to discuss the employee’s progress and anything they need from you. An Employee Assistance Consultant can provide additional management resources for helping returning military members, as well as information about community resources for veterans that you can share with the employee.

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