

Absence Management and Return to Work Info Sheet

Managing absence is one of the biggest challenges facing employers. In order to ensure that the employee is supported, it is important to ensure that the 'Return to Work' process is managed appropriately.

As such, there are three types issues to consider:

- Lateness
- Short Term Absence
- Long Term Absence

The management of absence should always adhere to the guidelines set down in the company's absence policy.

Return to Work – Lateness

High levels of 'Lateness' can significant impact on the productivity, profitability and culture of the company. The 'Return to Work' process is the first step in addressing persistent timekeeping issues.

- When the employee notifies the company that they are running late, the employee should be referred to the absence policy to ensure that they are aware of their timekeeping responsibilities
- When the employee gets to work, where possible they should meet with their manager when they arrive
- The manager should ask the employee:
 - The reason for the lateness
 - All lateness for the year to date should be reviewed and it should be ascertained if there is a pattern forming.
This should be a simple review of fact and should not be conducted in an accusatory manner
- If there appears to be an excessive level of lateness (e.g. 3 instances in fewer than 6 months / 5 instances in fewer than 12 months), the employee should be advised that any further absence may result in the matter being referred for disciplinary review.
In this instance, the details of the Return to Work interviews can be used to support the disciplinary investigation.

IMPORTANT

The manager must take the time to consider the employees responses. If there is an issue in the employee's personal or professional life that needs additional consideration the company should seek to offer an appropriate level of support.

Return to Work – Short Term Absence

High levels of short-term absence can be very disruptive and have an immediate impact on the productivity of the whole team. In this scenario, the 'Return to Work' process is the first step in addressing persistent absence issues.

- On the first day of absence, the employee should be referred to the absence policy to ensure that they are aware of their responsibilities
- When the employee returns to work, their manager should request that they attend a return to work meeting within 24-hours of the employees return from absence
- The manager should ask the employee:
 - Have they fully recovered?
 - What was the reason for the absence?
The employee may be hesitant to elaborate but it should be explained that you are only asking to make sure that their personal circumstances are not going to impact on them or the team, such as in the case of an infectious disease/illness
 - Is the employee fully fit for duty?
If the absence has been for more than two weeks, the manager may consider requesting a 'Fit to Return Certificate' from the employees GP, particularly in cases where the reason for absence was due to infectious disease/illness.
 - All absences for the year to date should be reviewed and it should be ascertained if there is a pattern forming.
This should not be conducted in an accusatory manner and should be a simple review of facts.
 - If there appears to be an excessive level of absence e.g. 3 instances in fewer than 6 months / 5 instances in fewer than 12 months, the employee should be advised that any further absence may result in the matter being referred for disciplinary review.
In this instance, the details of the Return to Work interviews can be used to support the disciplinary investigation.

(Please ensure to update the Company absence policy if this process is to be utilised)

IMPORTANT

The manager must take the time to consider the employees responses. If there is an issue in the employee's personal or professional life that needs additional consideration the company should seek to offer an appropriate level of support.

Absence Management & Return to Work – Long Term Absence

Returning to work after a long illness can be a daunting prospect, sometimes compounded by a loss of confidence and potentially hampered by a slow recovery after medical treatment.

A proactive approach to absence management is the key to ensuring that employees return to full duty as quickly and efficiently as possible.

When employees have been on extended periods of absence, there may be a requirement for support structures to be implemented upon their return to ensure that they smoothly reintegrate into the workplace.

It is important to consider that some medical conditions may be considered a “disability” within the meaning of the Equality Acts and consequently employers have an obligation to make reasonable accommodations to working arrangements to facilitate an employee’s successful return to the workplace.

To successfully support an employee during a Long Term Absence and ensure an effective Return to Work, the following steps are advised:

Managing the Absence

Good communication is the first step in planning the employees’ return to work. Once the employee has been identified as Long-Term Absence (as per company policy), regular absence review meetings should take place between the manager and the employee (every 4 – 6 weeks).

These meetings should not be ‘work focused’ and only the details relating to the prognosis and the absence itself should be discussed. Periods of absence need to be given enough time to run their course.

At these meetings the following should be discussed:

- How is the employee feeling?
- What is the reason for the current absence?
The employee may be hesitant to elaborate but it should be explained that you are only asking to make sure that their personal circumstances are considered appropriately.
- Has the employee’s doctor indicated a timeline for recovery?
- What steps is the employee taking to move towards a period of wellness?
- It should be confirmed if there is anything that the company can do to help in speeding up recovery or facilitating the return to work.
- What steps the company are taking to support the employee?
- The employee should be encouraged to discuss their prognosis with their doctor.

- If their doctor makes a recommendation for changes to be made, the company should give it due consideration and ascertain whether it is feasible.

If the employee is seriously ill and it is not reasonable for them to attend absence management meetings then they should be postponed until a later date, more suitable.

Where the company is not satisfied with the information being provided by the employee's medical advisors, they should seek independent verification from a qualified Occupational Health provider ("Company Doctor"). If there is a conflict of opinion there may be a requirement to recruit a third professional for further review.

Return to Work

Once the employee is nearing full health, there should to be a final Absence Review meeting to discuss the Return to Work details:

- The date the employee is returning to work
- The hours they are working
- What supports the employee will need
- How these supports will be provided
- What duties the employee will do when they initially return and over the following weeks and months as they recover
- Details of regular reviews (for example weekly meetings) with the line manager to discuss progress and any issues the employee may have on return to work
- Details of how and how often the employee's work performance and the effectiveness of any supports they are provided with will be evaluated.
At a minimum, a review of progress and of supports should take place every two months
- If the employee has been away from their role for a protracted period they may need to be retrained on key tasks.
Employees should also be notified if there have been any policy or system updates.

Reasonable Accommodation

Throughout the Absence Management and Return to Work process, in the event that the employee identifies that there is a difficulty with returning to full duty the company must give due consideration to any requests for support to enable the employee to return to their role.

It is crucial that companies consider all of the options available to them. While it might be assumed that a request is not feasible, the company must take action and verify whether or not the request is possible to implement.

If the company does not take the time to investigate the Reasonable Accommodation, they may be found in breach of the Employment Equality Act.

Where a request for Accommodation has been made the company should develop a 'Job Profile' of the employee's position and request that the employee's doctor completes to identify the individual's needs.

The first thing to establish is if the tasks associated to the role are still suitable following the absence. The discussion on fitness to return to work should consider:

- What range of duties the person can and cannot do during the recovery period or beyond?
- If it is identified that there is a need for review of the role it may be necessary to consider 'Job Modification', where possible
- Phased return to work. This is a structured plan to allow the employee return on a part time basis initially with an incremental increase of hours until the employee returns to their contracted hours. This usually takes place over a 4 – 6 week period and must be agreed in advance of being applied
- The supports the person needs to return to work
 - Flexible work hours, for example, a person starts work later and leaves work later
 - Amendments to work duties such as substituting different tasks to replace those which have now become difficult
 - Physical adaptations made to the workplace, such as, installing a ramp, and putting in accessible toilets
 - Changes to a person's workstation, such as, a different desk and chair
 - Assistive technologies or adapted work equipment, such as special keyboards, telephone headsets and screen readers that convert computerised information to speech

Research shows that typical accommodations have modest or no costs.

See further reading below for resources to guide on government support for employee disability.

Phased Return to Work

The term 'phased return to work' embraces the idea of returning to work gradually, in stages, before an employee can complete all of their normal tasks and/or is able to work all their allotted hours and days. It includes any level of work, from a couple of hours, to a few days a week, but relies on an agreement between the employer and employee. Each employee's situation is different, so solutions need to be flexible and well planned, including regular reviews of the arrangement and an agreed date to return to their normal hours/duties.

An ideal phased return to work should include:

- A gradual build up towards the employee's usual hours and duties that begins with hours of work that are manageable for the employee at the current stage of their recovery.

- A timeframe that may be as little as one week and not usually more than 4-6 weeks, unless the employee has a condition with long-term fatigue issues.
- Consideration of work timings that may support a return to work where there is some flexibility, for example hours that allow an employee to avoid a commute in rush hour traffic.
- Duties during the phased return that are beneficial to the organisation but that allow the employee to be confident in their return (an example of this may be removing the requirement for business travel initially, or direct customer facing work depending upon the health issues).
- Review timeframes so that the line manager and employee can adjust, where necessary, or ensure all is on track.

Employers are being increasingly encouraged to be open-minded about the potential benefits of an employee returning to work early, on reduced hours or changed duties. But they need to be aware that the way a member of staff is treated while they are off work through illness will have a profound effect on how they view the company, their colleagues and, ultimately, how successfully they return to work.

Work Related Stress

In the event that the company is advised that the absence relates to “Work Related Stress”, it is advisable that the company are proactive in supporting the employee.

The Absence Review meeting should include a discussion about the items that are identified as stressors and if possible a resolution should be sought in the first instance.

If it is not possible to come to a resolution the employee should provide the employee details of how to enact the Grievance process and issue a copy of the Grievance policy / Company Handbook.

The company may also want to consider offering an Employee Assistance Programme in this instance to support the employee and if the matter develops into a Long Term Absence, the company should consider sending the employee to an Occupational Health practitioner.

Early intervention is the key to avoiding a protracted Absence for the employee and an Employee Relations complaint for the employer.

Contact

Member Services – HR
e: HR@ISME.ie
t: 01-6622755

Further Reading:

National Disability Authority www.nda.ie

Employer Disability Information www.employerdisabilityinfo.ie

Enable Ireland www.enableireland.ie