



Manager support for return to work following long-term sickness absence Guidance



Manager support for return to work following long-term sickness absence: guidance

What is long-term sickness absence?

Long-term sickness absence is typically defined as four weeks or more continuous absence. Currently, the most prevalent conditions responsible for long-term absences are stress, anxiety and depression, back pain, coronary heart disease and cancer, with all of these predicted to increase in the years ahead.

Why there is a need to tackle long-term sickness absence

Organisational perspective:

- Sickness absence is a persistent problem for organisations and presents a major public health and economic concern.
- Dame Carol Black's 2008 review of the health of Britain's working population, *Working for a healthier tomorrow*, found the economic costs of sickness absence and worklessness associated with working age ill-health are over £100 billion a year. Her report estimated that around 175 million working days were lost to illness in 2006.
- Sickness absence costs employers approximately £11 billion per year, with long-term sickness absence contributing up to 75% of absence costs.
- While long-term absences account for only 5% of absence episodes, these absences account for over 40% of the total working time lost.

Employee perspective:

- It is now widely accepted that work is good for employee health and can help to reduce health inequalities.
- For employees, returning to work represents a return to a sense of normality, which

brings an increase in self-respect, self-esteem, mental well-being and social inclusion as well as financial stability and independence.

- Failure to return to work has been linked to poorer health outcomes for employees and potential relapses into secondary cases of long-term sickness absence.
- A timely, well-planned and well-executed return-to-work process will have substantial positive benefits for an employee's well-being and rehabilitation and could also prevent potential relapses.

While there have been significant advances in rehabilitation policies and return-to-work interventions, employees still continue to experience difficulties returning to work following long-term sickness absence. Line managers play a crucial part in the return-to-work process and in the health and well-being of their employees, so it is vitally important that they be helped to manage the return-to-work process effectively.

The importance of line managers

Line managers are important in the return-to-work process for a number of reasons:

- They are often the first contact point when the employee is unwell and does not attend work.
- They are responsible for the day-to-day management of the employee on their return.
- They are key to work adjustments and implementation of work redesign initiatives.
- They may be the first person called upon by the employee when they need to meet HR/occupational health (OH) for advice on their condition and the return to work.
- Their behaviour can influence employees' exposure to workplace psychosocial hazards (for example work demands, control, and so on) and these are likely to be felt more keenly by those returning following a period away from the workplace.
- Their behaviour can cause employee stress (or prevent additional stress), and stress or anxiety is likely to be felt more keenly by those returning following a period of sickness absence.

Recent changes

The Government has recently introduced 'fit notes' to replace the old 'sick note' system to encourage those on long-term sick leave to make an early return to work with the support of their organisation. GPs will be able to recommend that employees may be fit for work, providing that their advice on relevant action (usually in the form of practical support such as amended working hours or duties) is taken into account. This will put greater responsibility on line managers to provide appropriate support to employees to remove some of the challenges they may face when returning to work. Line managers may therefore require greater guidance from OH/HR on how best to provide this support.

What line manager behaviours are important to support return to work?

While practical workplace adjustments are welcomed by the employee, the behaviours line managers display when managing a returning employee are vital for a successful return to work and to prevent relapse. A research team from Goldsmiths University of London, Loughborough University and Affinity Health at Work, funded by the British Occupational Health Research Foundation and supported by the CIPD, the HSE and Healthy Working Lives has been exploring this issue.

The research aimed to identify both the positive manager behaviours needed and negative behaviours that should be avoided to bring about an employee's successful return to work following long-term sickness absence due to stress, anxiety and depression, back pain, heart disease or cancer. A combined qualitative and quantitative methodology was adopted, using a range of perspectives, to develop a *Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work*. The flow diagram below outlines the research process and the resultant *Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work* is provided on the following page.

STAGE 1

Identifying the manager behaviours

5 workshops with HR and OH professionals and 46 interviews with managers and employees with experience of the return-to-work process.

Data analysed to identify themes and develop the preliminary *Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work*.

STAGE 2

Developing the Competency Measure for Managers to Support Return to Work

Questionnaire developed drawing from the pool of management behaviours extracted from the focus groups and interviews in Stage 1.

STAGE 3

Trial and refinement of the Competency Framework and Measure for Managers to Support Return to Work

Distribution of questionnaire to 186 managers and 359 employees. Analysis of the results and refinement of both the *Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work* and the *Competency Measure for Managers to Support Return to Work* following factor analysis.

STAGE 4

Follow-up survey

Refined questionnaire sent back to the original employees and managers after a period of six months. Analysis to examine the reliability and validity of the competency framework and measure over time.

Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work

Examples of manager behaviour		
During the employee's absence, the manager...		
While the employee is off	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regularly communicates with the individual via telephone or email regularly communicates work issues with the individual to keep them in the loop focuses conversations more on the individual's well-being is in touch with the individual's close colleagues with regards to their health encourages work colleagues and other members of the organisation to keep in touch with the individual relays positive messages through family or friends makes it clear that the individual should not rush back to work makes it clear that the company will support the individual during their absence reassures the individual that their job will be there for them when they return prevents the individual from pushing him/herself too much to return to work
Once the employee has returned to work, the manager...		
The initial return to work	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> gives the individual lighter duties/different jobs during their initial return to work incorporates a phased return to work for the individual remains objective when discussing return-to-work adaptations for the individual explains the return-to-work process/procedures to the individual before they return explains any changes to the individual's role, responsibilities and work practices meets the individual on their first day back makes the individual's first weeks back at work as low-stress as possible
Negative behaviours	✗	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> loses patience with the individual when things become difficult displays aggressive actions questions the individual's every move goes against the individual's requests for certain adjustments to be made to their work makes the individual feel like a nuisance for adding extra work to their schedule
General behaviour	Managing the team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> asks the individual's permission to keep the team informed on their condition makes the individual feel like they were missed by the organisation encourages colleagues to help in the individual's rehabilitation process promotes a positive team spirit regularly communicates with HR/OH and keeps the individual informed
	Open and sensitive approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> is proactive in arranging regular meetings to discuss the individual's condition and the possible impact on their work communicates openly listens to the individual's concerns understands that, despite looking fine, the individual is still ill appreciates the individual's wishes has an open-door policy so the individual can always approach them with any concerns adapts their approach to be more sensitive towards the individual allows the individual to maintain a certain level of normality is quick to respond to the individual via email or telephone when they have a concern takes responsibility for the individual's rehabilitation acknowledges the impact the individual's illness has on them remains positive with the individual throughout their rehabilitation
	Legal and procedural knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows awareness of their relevant legal responsibilities understands the need to make reasonable adjustments by law follows the correct organisational procedures

Key messages for line managers

1 Clear set of behaviours

The Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work provides clear and specific behaviours that you can refer to when managing an employee's return to work following long-term sickness absence. You can use the framework to identify your existing strengths and explore where you may require additional support, guidance or training.

2 No single 'silver bullet' behaviour

A range of behaviours is important to support employees to return to work following long-term sick leave: there is no single 'silver bullet' behaviour or competency needed. It is likely that different behaviours are important at different times and for different employees, depending on the illness conditions involved.

3 Supporting return to work is about good people management

To be effective at supporting an employee in returning to work, you do not necessarily have to be knowledgeable about their illness condition. It is more important that you show good people management skills, including effective communication, sensitivity to and understanding of the individual and awareness of the context.

4 These behaviours can help you manage the 'fit note'

The Government has recently introduced 'fit notes' to replace the old 'sick note' system to encourage those on long-term sick leave to make an early return to work if appropriately supported by their organisation. The behaviours set out in the *Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work* can help you fulfil the responsibilities this will put on you.

5 Build good relationships with staff

You are most likely to be in a good position to support an employee returning to work if you have established a good relationship with that person prior to their absence. Thus part of good sickness absence is about ongoing good people management and establishing good relationships with all your employees.

6 Contact employees while they are off work

Line managers are often hesitant to contact employees while they are off work. However, maintaining contact with the employee during their sickness absence is generally both welcomed by the employee and is associated with a range of positive return-to-work outcomes. Furthermore, contact at this stage may also help to relieve the employee's anxiety regarding return to work, thereby addressing one of the barriers to return to work as reported by employees.

7 Sustain supportive behaviour

There is a need to continue displaying the behaviours relevant to supporting return to work well beyond the initial return. There can be a tendency to return to business as usual following the employee's return; however the returning employee may need ongoing support for some months following their initial return.

8 Seek support where you need it

You should look to occupational health and/or HR for support as it is likely that they will be able to provide information about the process, illness condition and work adjustments to help manage the absent or returning employee, and be available to discuss any concerns arising throughout the process.

Key messages for OH and HR professionals and employers

1 Clear set of behaviours in accessible language

The Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work provides clear and specific behaviours that you can refer to when supporting an employee's return to work following long-term sickness absence. It puts the management of return to work in an easily accessible language that you can use in discussions with the line manager. You can use the framework to raise managers' awareness of the behaviours and their importance, and to discuss what guidance, support and training the manager may need. They can also be linked to other competency frameworks and/or used to guide the development of learning and development and/or performance appraisal mechanisms.

2 Provide managers with guidance, support and training where necessary

You can use the *Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work* to help managers identify their existing strengths and explore areas where they may require additional support, guidance or training when they are preparing to manage an employee returning to work following long-term sickness absence. While some line managers may demonstrate a number of the relevant behaviours already, others may be unaware of them or not know how best to show them. You need to be ready to provide development opportunities, such as training, guidance and support, to help managers develop relevant behaviours if required. The framework can help you tailor guidance, support and training to the line manager's needs.

3 Supporting return to work is about good people management

Managers should be made aware that, in order to be effective at supporting an employee in returning to work, they do not necessarily have to be knowledgeable about the employee's health condition. It is more important that the manager shows general good people management skills, including effective communication, sensitivity to and understanding of the individual, and awareness of the context. While you can support managers with information about the employee's condition where this is helpful, it is probably more important to promote good people management skills throughout the organisation.

4 Pre-existing manager–employee relationship is vital for a successful return to work

Managers are most likely to be in a good position to support an employee returning to work if they have established a good relationship with that person prior to their absence. Thus, part of good sickness absence management is about ongoing good people management and managers establishing good relationships with all their employees. You can therefore enhance line managers' absence management by setting a positive people management culture and providing appropriate management training and development to emphasise good people management skills for all line managers.

5 The framework can help you support managers in dealing with the 'fit note'

As mentioned above, the Government has recently introduced 'fit notes' to replace the old 'sick note' system to encourage those on long-term sick leave to make an early return to work if appropriately supported by their organisation. With more pressure now being placed on the line manager during an employee's return to work, it is important that you find ways to support the line manager in shouldering this responsibility. *The Competency Framework for Managers to Support Return to Work* provides a way for you to do this.

6 Encourage managers to contact employees while they are off work

Line managers are often hesitant to contact employees while they are off work. However, maintaining contact with the employee during their sickness absence is generally both welcomed by the employee and associated with a range of positive return-to-work outcomes. You should encourage the line manager to maintain informal, non-work-related contact while the employee is absent and support them in doing this. This may relieve some of the employee's anxiety regarding return to work and so make for a more successful return-to-work process. However, you do need to be sensitive to situations where the manager has contributed in some way to the employee's health condition (for example due to work-related stress) and ensure that, in these cases, someone else takes responsibility for maintaining contact with the absent employee.

7 Consider who should support the returning employee

If the employee perceives their line manager to have been part of the cause of their long-term sickness absence (for example, due to work-related stress) then it is important that you find another person to help with the return to work or another line manager with whom the employee has a better relationship.

8 Sustain supportive behaviour

There can be a tendency to return to business as usual following the initial phase of the employee's return – for example, once the phased return has been completed. However, it is likely that the returning employee will need ongoing support for some months following their initial return. You should encourage and support managers to maintain behaviours relevant to return to work well beyond the initial return to work.

9 Be readily available

OH and HR professionals should aim to be easily accessible to line managers and ready to provide the information and support managers need. This may be guidance about the return-to-work process, the employee's health condition and the work adjustments needed by the absent or returning employee. Managers will value your being available to discuss their concerns throughout the process.

Sources of useful information

Sickness absence management

NICE guidance on long term sickness absence:
<http://guidance.nice.org.uk/PH19/>

A free Occupational Health Advice line for small businesses including advice on fitnotes:
<http://www.workingforhealth.gov.uk/Initiatives/OccupationalHealth/Default.aspx>

A free service to help keep employees at work or to return to work:
<http://www.workingforhealth.gov.uk/Initiatives/fit-for-work-service/Default.aspx>

Guidelines on return to work after operations from Royal College of Surgeons:
http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/patient_information/return-to-work/

A new single site for all things related to return to work:
<http://www.healthyworkinguk.co.uk/websiteleaflets/main>

Stress, anxiety and depression

Shift: www.shift.org.uk
Mind: www.mind.org.uk
Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health: www.scmh.org.uk
Mental Health Foundation: www.mentalhealth.org.uk
Rethink: www.rethink.org

Back pain

ARMA (Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance): www.arma.uk.net
Pain Support: www.painsupport.co.uk
Back Care: www.backcare.org.uk
Scoliosis Association UK: www.sauk.org.uk
Chartered Society of Physiotherapy: www.csp.org.uk

Cancer

Macmillan: www.macmillan.org.uk
Cancer Research UK: www.cancerresearchuk.org
Marie Curie Cancer Support: www.mariecurie.org.uk
Rarer cancers: www.rarercancers.org.uk

Coronary heart disease

Heart2Hearts: www.heart2hearts.co.uk
British Heart Foundation: www.bhf.org.uk
H.E.A.R.T. UK: www.heartuk.org.uk
British Association for Cardiac Rehabilitation: www.bcs.com/pages/page_bacr.asp?PageID=314&NewsCatID=852

Fit note guidance

www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/fitnote-employer-guide.pdf

Further information on the research

The full scientific research report relating to this project can be downloaded from:
<http://www.bohrf.org.uk/projects/rehabilitation.html>

This research was conducted by Dr Joanna Yarker and Ben Hicks (Goldsmiths, Univ London), Dr Fehmidah Munir (Loughborough Univ) and Emma Donaldson-Feilder (Affinity Health at Work).

For further details about the research project, please contact Affinity Health at Work, info@affinityhealthatwork.com

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