

Return To Work

A Manager's Guide

Returning to work following an absence due to illness or injury can often be the most critical phase of an employee's recovery. How an employee handles the transition back to work may influence whether or not their return to work will be successful. Fortunately, there are many things managers and employers can do to help facilitate a successful return. Creating a positive and supportive work environment might lead to shortened disability periods by helping to make the transition easier, and offering a sense of stability for the employee.

This guide outlines things you can do to help support your employee's return to work. It provides key information you may want to consider in advance of your employee's return, on the day of the return and throughout the gradual return to work period.

How do I prepare for my employee's Return to work?

- Once a return to work plan has been established contact the employee shortly before to confirm the date and time of their return.
- Suggest a meeting at the start of the work day to go over the return to work plan as well as any changes that may have taken place in the workplace during their absence. Depending on the circumstances and the complexity of the return, you may want to have Human Resources present at the meeting. Be sure to inform your employee if Human Resources will be attending and why.
- As the manager, you play a critical role in your employee's return to work. Maintain an open and honest approach which will allow your employee to assess their personal situation and decide what, if anything, may (or may not) be communicated to their co-workers regarding their return to work.
- Workplace accommodations should be implemented if needed. This would include confirming that there is a workstation and meaningful work for the employee's return.
- Educate co-workers on the employee's return to work plan and dates, including impact on workloads/job duties for those affected.

How do I handle the employee's first day back?

- Make it a positive experience. Welcome the employee back and remember that they may need a period of adjustment.
- During the meeting, if previously agreed upon with your employee, discuss how you have educated coworkers for the return to work (including any impact on workloads/job duties).
- Help to ensure the employee understands their privacy rights.
- Review the return to work plan.
- Outline your expectations regarding workload, job duties and performance.
- Update the employee on any changes in the workplace during their absence, any key events/activities that are taking place and how you will assist them in getting up to speed (e.g., training, time to review materials, shadowing).
- Discuss an agreed upon process to evaluate the return to work plan regularly with the employee. For example, have brief scheduled check-in periods every day for the first two weeks with a formal review at the end of each week. Following that, check-in periods can remain daily or become less frequent if the return to work plan is going well.
- Agree upon a plan for addressing issues proactively as they may arise.





Don't forget!

- Contact your Human Resources representative if you have any questions.
- Promote a supportive and welcoming workplace.
- If required, arrange for access cards to the building/office.
- Arrange for computer/workstation access, including access to any programs, folders and systems required for the employee to perform their job.
- Workstation set-up. Verify that the employee has access to all materials required to perform their job.

What does the employee need from me?

- Understanding of their situation and acknowledgement that returning from an absence can be difficult for a number of reasons.
- Privacy. Details are confidential and it is up to the employee to determine if they want to share this information and with whom. If the employee has voluntarily provided confidential information about their medical condition or any other personal information, you must not share this with others without the employee's explicit consent.
- Structure (a defined process). Make sure their workload, job duties, tasks and performance expectations are aligned with the scheduled return to work plan (e.g., if the employee is working part time, don't expect them to handle a full time workload).
- Support. Help the employee gradually shift back into work as outlined in the return to work plan. Verify that the pace works for the employee. Often, returning to work is part of the employee's recovery.
- Problem solving to address any issues that may arise, anticipated or unanticipated.
- Flexibility. Their medical condition may fluctuate throughout the return to work before stabilizing and flexibility may be important to a successful full time return to work. Throughout the return, ask the employee if they have everything they need.
- If you feel the return to work is not working out it may be that the employee's needs and the working conditions have changed over time. If the accommodation does not seem to be resulting in your employee adequately performing the essential duties of their job, talk with them about your concerns so you can accurately assess the problem. If they say they cannot perform the essential functions of their job without further accommodation, contact their Manulife Financial Case Manager (or Rehabilitation Specialist if one is assigned) for further guidance. They may need to reevaluate the employee's work plan.

Operational best practices

- Lead by example. You can support an employee's return to work and encourage higher morale and better output from your team by demonstrating that you trust, respect and value a co-worker who has been on disability leave.
- Be direct in communicating that harassment and discrimination are not acceptable. Also communicate the importance of respecting the employee's privacy regarding why they may have been absent from work.
- Don't be surprised if fellow employees approach you with questions about the returning employee, or complaints about the accommodations they may see as special treatment. Be prepared to answer questions but maintain privacy and confidentiality.
- If you hear employees discussing the details of the individual's illness, you need to talk to them and let them know it is inappropriate. If these conversations reveal discriminatory attitudes or could be seen to constitute harassment, appropriate disciplinary measures should be taken.

What kind of accommodations can I offer and be expected to make?

The purpose of accommodations is to help remove return to work barriers for individuals with disabilities. Accommodations should be assessed on an individual basis. They should meet the employee's needs as they relate to their medical condition and be based on the resources available to you as the employer.

Accommodation examples may include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Hours – graduated return to work, flex time to attend appointments, balance work/life, non-standard breaks during the work day.
- Duties – modification of work tasks (e.g., the amount of lifting required, breaking complex tasks into simpler components), elimination of non-essential tasks during the return to work, allowing extra time to complete tasks.
- Modification of work environment – lighting, noise or other distractions.
- Supervision – changing the way direction is provided (e.g., in writing or allowing employee to tape record), including frequency and complexity, prioritization of tasks.
- Additional training or coaching – providing a buddy system for additional support.

A “one size fits all” approach will not work. We believe that the accommodation for each situation should be assessed accordingly and with the assistance of a Manulife Financial Case Manager or Rehabilitation Specialist if necessary. Remember that as an employer you have an obligation to help provide appropriate workplace accommodations.

For more information...

- Human Resources and Social Development Canada
www.hrsdc.gc.ca
- Insititute for Work and Health
www.iwh.on.ca
- Mental Health Works
www.mentalhealthworks.ca
- Canadian Human Rights Commission
www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca



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