

RETURNING TO WORK & REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Most people recover completely and can resume work successfully

Talking, keeping in touch and effective planning between you and the member of staff concerned will maximise the chances of success. So will support and regular reviews at the early stages of return. You've made an investment in that individual, and in most cases, a planned return to work will be more cost effective than early retirement or having to let them go. Before the person returns to work, meet (at a location which they find comfortable) to discuss:

- Any factors at work that contributed to their absence that could realistically be changed or accommodated.
- Things you can change about the work and the workplace and those you can't.
- What's been happening at work – social aspects as well as work developments.
- The Return to Work Action Plan – see page 14.

It can be very helpful to involve another organisation in supporting the situation – for example, the Disability Employment Advisor at the local Jobcentre Plus office and some mental health NHS Trusts have a specialist vocational service (such as Workways). They can offer help and support for you and your employee. Specialist mental health charities and employment-focused organisations may also be able to assist. Visit mindfulemployer.net for details of some organisations near you.

TAKING AWAY THE PRESSURE

For **LV=**, the involvement of a supporting organisation was invaluable.



When Judith was admitted as an inpatient to her local psychiatric hospital, she was acutely unwell and any thoughts of returning to work were unimaginable. “Basic level concentration and daily functioning were very difficult for me,” she recalls. But as she improved, Judith met a patient who recommended Workways. “I built up my level of activity slowly after being discharged. The structure of appointments to keep with Workways and a workbook to work through helped with the transition back into the workplace.¹² To know that I had a third party involved took away some of the fear and pressure surrounding returning to the workplace.”

Having a family member who has bi-polar disorder, line manager Amanda felt particularly sensitive to Judith's situation. “I didn't want Judith to feel that we were ‘enquiring’ as to her health in an attempt to get her back to work for work's sake and I genuinely cared about her wellbeing,” said Amanda. “It can be difficult to get across your best intentions, so for me it was really helpful to have a third party involved that Judith trusted and felt comfortable interacting with so that we could all feel comfortable with planning a way forward.” With the agreement of Judith and Amanda, meetings with Workways planned a return to reduced hours and lighter work duties. Six months later, and Judith is working full time and on full duties.

“Judith should be really proud of and take credit for her return to work,” said Amanda. “She is a much valued member of the team and it's great to hear that she is enjoying her role and being back at work.”

“I feel as if I've never been away!” said Judith. “Workways helped with the transition of being acutely unwell to being in a position where I could manage my work duties in a supportive environment. Without the joint support of Workways and my employer it would have taken a lot longer for me to return and there was a cost saving for my company as I did not need the intervention of human resources or occupational health.”

Judith, Medical Tele Interviewer
www.lv.com

Amanda, Customer Service Manager

THE RETURN TO WORK ACTION PLAN

The Return to Work Action Plan may cover:

- Adjustments which need to be made to ease their return (see page 15 for some ideas).
- What they will say in response to the inevitable 'How are you?', 'What was wrong?' type questions they will be asked by colleagues and customers. Our **Keeping Well at Work** booklet covers these issues also.
- Visiting the workplace – taking that first step back can be a daunting one: why not invite them in simply for a coffee and to say 'hello' to colleagues. People who have been off sick because of a mental health condition may worry about how their colleagues will react – and are often surprised when they are greeted so warmly.
- **A Phased Return** In many cases a phased or gradual return to normal hours within a fixed timescale is a key way of helping your employee back to work. There is no single pattern that suits everyone. The crucial things are a gradual 'stepped' approach and regular reviews – here's an example for someone who works 30 hours per week:

Week 1 – 3 hours per day for 3 days per week

Week 2 – 4 hours per day for 3 days per week

Week 3 – 5 hours per day for 3 days per week

Week 4 – 5 hours per day for 4 days per week

Week 5 – 6 hours per day for 4 days per week

Week 6 – normal hours

At the end of the week...

Meet to Review progress and adjust accordingly

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Meet to Review progress, discuss overall situation and set next review

During a phased return, it's important that the employee sticks to the agreed hours. Hopefully, as they get used to being back at work, they will feel better – but they do need to resist the temptation to work longer hours.

- Discuss in advance with your employee any impact a phased return will have on their pay and whether or not they need to take annual leave to cover the non-working periods.
- Agree duties in the phased return – are there aspects of their work that cause more stress than others? If possible within the business demands, try and agree that in the phased return those duties are not part of their role or make some other adjustments to reduce negative impact.
- Talk about how colleagues will be told about the return and agree how they will be made aware that the employee will not necessarily be doing their full duties – the rest of the team will need to respect that and not make extra demands.
- Recognise that coming back to work will have its difficulties. The person may, for example, experience additional fatigue, sleep disturbance or worry about remembering how to do their job – and this may cause them anxiety or concern about their condition. Reassure them that these are normal responses for anyone who's been off for a while – and that it doesn't automatically mean they're becoming unwell again.

It may sound obvious, but when an employee returns to work, ensure you and the team make them feel welcomed back. Where possible, try to:

- Avoid making the person feel they are a special case – this can cause resentment both with the individual and with colleagues.
- Make sure the employee doesn't return to an unachievable backlog of work or a usurped workspace.
- Be realistic about workloads – be aware that some people will wish to prove themselves and may offer to take on too much. Instead, set achievable goals that make them feel they are making progress.

... and keep talking!

THE EQUALITY ACT 2010 & REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Equality law recognises that bringing about equality for disabled people may mean changing the way in which employment is structured, the removal of barriers and/or providing extra support for a disabled worker. The duty to consider reasonable adjustments aims to make sure that a disabled person has the same access to everything that is involved in getting and doing a job as a non-disabled person, as far as is reasonable. Employers have a positive and proactive duty to take steps to remove or reduce or prevent the obstacles a disabled worker or job applicant faces. Many people with a mental health condition will not consider themselves to be 'disabled' but the requirements of the Act may still apply.

Here are some ideas for providing the right support for people with a mental health condition:

Schedule Modification

- .. allowing workers to shift schedules earlier or later
- .. allowing workers to use paid or unpaid leave for appointments related to their health
- .. allowing an employee to work part-time temporarily (e.g. when first returning from absence)

Job modification

- .. arranging for job sharing
- .. re-assigning tasks among workers
- .. redeployment to a vacant position

Environment modification

- .. providing an enclosed office or partitions, room dividers, or otherwise enhancing soundproofing and visual barriers between workspaces to help block noise (e.g. by reducing the pitch or volume of telephone rings)
- .. offering a reserved parking space (e.g. to workers with phobias or anxiety disorders)
- .. increasing 'personal space'

Policy changes

- .. extending additional paid or unpaid leave during a hospitalisation or other absence
- .. allowing additional time for workers to reach performance milestones
- .. providing a private space for employees to rest, cry, or talk with supportive co-workers

Human assistance

- .. allowing a job coach to come to the workplace
- .. participating in meetings with the worker and his or her job coach or other vocational service provider
- .. providing mental health awareness training for managers and staff

Technological assistance

- .. providing a personal computer to enable an employee to work at home or at unusual hours
- .. providing software that allows the worker to structure time and receive prompts throughout the working day

Supervisory considerations

- .. offering additional supervisory sessions
- .. offering additional training or instruction on procedures or information
- .. offering information and training in the worker's preferred learning style

More information about The Equality Act and reasonable adjustments can be downloaded from mindfulemployer.net

Funding to cover some reasonable adjustments may be available through Access to Work – contact the Disability Employment Advisor at your local Jobcentre Plus office or visit www.gov.uk.

There's also lots of helpful information available from the Equality & Human Rights Commission (www.equalityhumanrights.com). ACAS (www.acas.org.uk) and the Health & Safety Executive (www.hse.gov.uk) have also produced valuable resources about stress at work, health and employment, related legislation and good practice.