



# Vitality

An EFAP Newsletter for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



## Supporting Successful Return to Work

As a manager, part of your responsibility is to ensure that work the employee would have performed is still completed while they are away.

With maternity, parental or even short medical leaves, the timing and reasons for an employee's extended absence are generally well understood and straightforward to accommodate. The entire team may rally around the employee, sometimes showing support with small gatherings making him or her feel valued. As a manager, the obligations may require you to hire a contract role to backfill for the employee who is away, or redistribute the workload to cover things off.

In scenarios where employees have been absent for extended periods resulting from treatments for addiction, mental health disorder(s), and/or physical injuries, the factors and considerations to take into account are often more complex and require careful planning on your part.

Employees with addiction and mental health disorders often go through their days with impaired thinking and functioning and this has a direct effect on productivity within Canadian businesses. Annual losses attributed to mental illness have been valued at \$50 billion each year. Yet only 34 percent of employees report having access to services and tools at work that will help them with mental health issues. With 1 in 5 Canadians experiencing a mental health or addiction problem in any given year, employers play an important role in helping workers address their health.

— Statistics Canada



## Challenges and fears: Why returning to work is different in these cases

Even though greater public awareness and resources to address addiction and mental health related illnesses increase each year, many workplaces are still lagging when it comes to developing effective supports for employees who are seeking treatment. Those who have access to a wider range of professional solutions that target all employees, including leaders, often have a greater success when re-introducing employees to the workforce.

## It starts at the top, long before an extended absence occurs

The attitudes expressed in a company's culture greatly influence the decision-making and behaviours of everyone involved. Employees are seeking support from all levels of leadership as well as their co-workers. In some instances, observed behaviour and exposure to beliefs prior to an extended leave can affect how an individual feels about returning. As a manager, you need to be honest about the climate in your organization. Appreciate that your awareness of what the employee is going through and acknowledging how this can create anxiety prolonging their absence is important.

Although a person may have great appreciation for the time and support offered by the organization through formalized programs including tools and resources, the thought of returning to work may still be unnerving. Individuals often encounter additional barriers when concerned with workplace rumours or assumed leadership perceptions.

As a manager you play an integral part in creating an environment of understanding, compassion and respect, and combating workplace frustrations, judgement and insensitivity. Your efforts illustrate and reinforce that addiction and mental health conditions are legitimate illnesses.

## What managers can do

Exploring programs and resources and looking for tools that will help in creating a welcoming, respectful working environment is a great initial step. Confidence and knowledge will increase and improve the experience for everyone involved. Fundamentally, you must demonstrate and cultivate trust to make all employees feel safe, and express a willingness to discuss sensitive topics more openly. As a manager, you realise that each employee is unique and may gain comfort and trust at different intervals. Creating and conveying team goals and beliefs as a best practice forms a baseline from which all employees can determine when, where and with whom they are comfortable sharing things.

## Important aspects to keep in mind:

- Keeping private information confidential – if you are unclear about whether someone considers something private, ask them. Each employee has a right to privacy and should have no doubt that their situation will remain confidential.
- Demonstrating respect and confidence in someone's abilities – not making assumptions, but rather, being supportive in the discussion with the person. A task you interpret as a stressor may be something that makes the employee feel valued and accomplished. So let them tell you how they feel about their work.
- Realizing that everyone has strengths and weaknesses-- and those individual attributes -- for all employees -- should be considered to create a sustainable healthy workplace.

## Here is an overview of the basic steps managers should take when preparing for an employee's return to work:

1. Create a file to capture notes, dates, times, readings and references. Document who the intended audience is for each piece to ensure you don't send sensitive information to an incorrect party.
2. Under the guidance and approval of the assigned person managing the employee disability absence, reach out periodically to the employee. Work with them to understand their perceptions so you can plan accordingly.\*
3. Work with the employee on arrangements and accommodations, where medically appropriate.
4. Keep the employee's co-workers informed, but maintain the employee's privacy. Allow the returning employee to lead when determining what information is appropriate to share.
5. After returning to work, be sure to check in regularly with the employee. Continue to monitor and adjust, and look at the work group holistically, avoiding undue stress or attention on the individual returning.

## A different perspective on accommodation

When employees ask for unique accommodations, it's an indication that there is a healthy level of comfort in open communication and conversation. Accommodation requests are a good thing! Think of them in the simplest of terms. At any time, an employee may need a certain type of chair, time off for care, or a special piece of equipment to help alleviate discomfort or strain. Having a discussion with that employee and arranging for medically appropriate solutions can make the employee appreciative and more productive over the longer term.

Similarly, employees returning from an extended absence for addiction or mental health disorders may share information about things that can help make them feel comfortable and reduce their stress.

**These could be related to:**

- Increasing or decreasing interactions with people or customers
- Removing or reducing exposure to certain tasks
- Avoiding consistent and prolonged repetition in tasks
- Carefully managing workload for a period to allow dedicated focus
- Trading tasks or getting support from colleagues

Be willing to listen and look at all options that can help foster success, show commitment, demonstrate understanding, and offer support. This helps create a positive environment that offers stability so they can continue to focus on their recovery and avoid a work-related relapse.

**Checking in to alleviate pressure**


Managers need to understand the legislative obligations around assisting an employee in returning to work. Obtaining necessary information while maintaining the employee's privacy is important in ensuring you are protecting your company's interests. Resources such as the Government of Canada's Return to Work Plan are helpful tools in understanding employer and employees responsibilities.

When addiction and mental health is part of the focus of planning, sometimes managers need reassurance and additional information to be able to make decisions in the best interest of the returning employee and the business. Specialised assessment tools, such as one-on-one interviews between a professional clinician and

the employee, psychosocial evaluations, rehabilitation counselling, substance abuse screenings and treatment recommendation reports, are a few of the services you may call upon to ensure a successful return to work for both employee and the organization. These will help protect the employee and employer, and can be used in situations where court involvement is required.

Once the employee has returned to work, one of the best and easiest things you can do is to offer encouragement, support, and kindness. Scheduling checkpoints every few days and asking "Is everything okay?" can help someone feel valued and listened to. Honest conversations about workload and addressing any concerns around challenges being experienced as the employee continues to recover, demonstrates your ongoing support and sincerity. This allows the employee the best chance to return to work feeling like the best version of him or herself.

*\*Review your company policies to ensure you are compliant before engaging with employee*

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