Preparing For A Period Of Absence And Supporting Your Return To Work

A Guide For Employees

Introduction

This best practice guide has been developed to support employees' return to work after a period of absence. It has been purposely designed with practical application for individuals and accompanies our organisational guide developed for use by line managers.

This guide therefore focuses not only on those returning from family leave (such as maternity, paternity, adoption etc.) but also those who may be returning from long-term sick leave, or a prolonged absence.

Within this best practice guide, we consider returners of any gender, returning from any type of career break, and the points below are intended to be as inclusive as possible of all.
There are nuances that should be considered, based on the individual situation, local legislation, and cultural differences. However, there are also many commonalities in principles when returning to work after an extended absence.

Why is this important?

Ensuring that time has been set aside for thought and preparation when returning to work is beneficial for both employees and organisations to align on expectations around what to expect and ensure appropriate support is in place.

On an individual level, planning your return to work can be beneficial for a number of reasons:

- Supports overall health and wellbeing, by making sure your workload and responsibilities are appropriate and manageable

- Provides the opportunity for a smoother transition, to reintroduce tasks and responsibilities and, build confidence

- Helps assess potential challenges, so that solutions and strategies can be identified and implemented in advance

- Helps to address self-doubts and niggles by having a plan for anticipated challenges and by reminding yourself of your strengths, experience, and achievements to date

Overarching themes

Plan and prepare
(Where possible), make time to prepare before your leave, for a successful handover and transition. When returning, consider your personal and professional development plans to help identify your goals and support conversations with your organisation

Communicate
Share only what you're comfortable doing. However, by being transparent with your employer, your manager is better able to understand your situation, and tailor support and solutions accordingly

Remember tools and materials can be accessed as support
Check in with your HR team, or a senior manager, to see if there are policies or processes that may be helpful to support your return. Also remember the power of your peers, networks and community groups in sharing advice and experience

Before

- How and when will you keep in touch with your employer? What types of things would you like to be updated on (e.g. team changes, social events)? What types of things would you like to share with your manager? What would you consider a reasonable frequency of contact during this time?

- Have you any concerns that may be useful to share with your manager, so that potential solutions can be discussed, or reassurance provided?

- Have you created a handover document that can support effective management of your workload whilst you are out of the business? Are there any tasks, projects, or initiatives that you're involved with that your manager may not be aware of, and needs updating on?

- Do you have an up-to-date performance review in place? Are you clear of your strengths and achievements, as well as your areas for improvement? Having this in place before a period of leave can better support a more effective return

During

Communicate
Make sure to keep in touch with your manager/organisation as discussed and agreed. If you are finding that there are barriers towards connecting that you hadn't originally anticipated (e.g. challenges in meeting in-person, or finding time to yourself when you're not distracted by caring or with personal health/wellbeing commitments), raise this with your manager, so that you can work on solutions together (e.g. having a video call, or arranging an alternative time when you have arranged care cover)

Disabilities
It is your decision as to if, and when you choose to disclose any information. However, if you think your job performance may be affected by a disability, it could be helpful to share this with your manager or HR team so that you can discuss together whether you may benefit from some adjustments. If you're not confident talking to your manager on your own, you could ask for a colleague or Trade Union representative to support you

Prepare
Make time to prepare for your return. Think about logistical elements such as options for caring support, or support for your own health and wellbeing and consider what may be helpful to support a successful return. Are there any adjustments, such as a phased return to work that could be beneficial? If so, raise as early as possible before your return date, so that discussions can take place in good time

Flexible working
You may find that more flexible working arrangements (such as working remotely, hybrid working, working part-time, and flexible start/finish hours) could help your return to work. Speak with your manager to see if there's a company policy or process you need to consider when making a temporary or permanent request

Access additional resources to gain further information
Professional advice, networks, and charities may help your transition back to work. If you have a disability or health condition, there may be government schemes (such as Access to Work in the UK) that could provide support (including grants, equipment, and coaching) to help with your return to work

Reintegration plan
Discuss and prepare a plan for reintegration back into your company with your manager including considering what training and organisation updates you may require. Continue this discussion with your manager on your return if there are additional needs you were not aware of before coming back

After

- **Reintegration plan**
Continue discussions with your manager regarding your Reintegration Plan. This will ensure expectations are met and managed on both sides and that there is open communication regarding the transition in your professional roles and responsibilities, as well as the balance in transition that you may be managing in your personal life

- **Build confidence**
Adopt a growth-mindset and identify your strengths and skills by soliciting feedback and practicing self-reflection

- **Connect**
Remember you're not alone. Speak with trusted people in your network (friends, family, peers) to hear from those who may have had experience of a similar journey returning to work. You may find it reassuring to hear from others and may find they have suggestions and tips to consider

- **Communicate**
If you are finding aspects challenging, communicate this to your manager so that they can help support your reintegration. Being proactive in raising these is a sign of professionalism not weakness

- **Share**
You and /or your life may have changed over the time of your absence. Share this with colleagues so they understand and manage their expectations of you and understand your actions (e.g. why you may not always be able to attend evening socials like you did before, or that you will need to leave your workplace by a certain time)

- **Be kind to yourself**
Returning back to work can be a big adjustment and it may take time to settle back in. Try to let go of any need for perfection that may cause you additional stress.

> " If I was to give advice to others, it would be 'give yourself the permission for space and time to transition, without the need to feel you're returning all guns blazing. "

Considerations and call to action

- Work with your manager, HR teams, peers or external consultants for support and to clarify processes and policies

- Connect with others through mentoring or peer support networks

- Coaching (e.g. career and parental) can provide you with additional skills and knowledge that will help boost your confidence

Useful resources

The following links are provided as additional reference points to support employees and organisations.

UK

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/returner-toolkit-helping-you-back-to-work/returner-toolkit-helping-you-back-to-work

https://careerreturners.com/events-and-webinars/

https://www.acas.org.uk

https://www.carersuk.org/

https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/disclosing-disability-to-an-employer

https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/

https://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/

https://workingfamilies.org.uk/

US

http://www.marchofdimes.org

https://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla

https://wrk360.com/

https://parentshelpingparents.org/

Europe

https://www.parentsatwork.com/

Preparing for a return to work

Consider the following questions when you are preparing to return to work, and discuss these with your manager, where appropriate:

Logistics

If you have been taking a lead on household chores, or caring responsibilities whilst you have been on leave, are there any chores you need to share out, or stop doing as part of your return?

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If you have caring responsibilities, establish how these will be taken care of whilst you're at work, for example:
Could your relatives offer free or low-cost help if you give them time to plan?

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If you are thinking about returning part-time, could you do a childcare swap with a friend?

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If you have a partner who works, could they work part-time or flexibly to take on more caring responsibilities?

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If you will need to pay for care, what will be the cost and how will this impact your monthly budget?
•   Childcare
•   Residential care
•   Home care

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Have you needed to attend regular medical appointments? Could anyone else support you with this?

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What are your back-up options and contingency plans?

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How will you schedule any personal care/health and wellbeing appointments?

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Are there any activities that you won't be able to do now that were part of your working life before?

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What impact may this have?

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Strengths and Skills Analysis

What are your proudest achievements?

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What are the advantages of your time away from work?

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What do your friends/family think you're particularly good at?

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What strengths do they see, which you may take for granted?

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What were some skills and strengths mentioned in your last performance review?

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What excites you most about returning to work?

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Where would you like to be in 1 year? What about 5 years?

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What skills or behaviours may you need to develop to support your transition back to work?

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What additional support or training may you need?

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