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Preparing For A Period Of Absence And Supporting An Employee's Return To Work

Employer's & Manager's Guide

Produced in association
with Antonia Katsambis,
Independent HR Consultant

Introduction

This best practice guide has been developed to support employers help their employees return to work after a period of absence. It has been purposely designed with practical application for line managers in mind. We would encourage you to discuss this guide with your company's leadership and HR teams (where in place), so that it can be contextualised for your organisation and local market.

Additionally, you may find this guide a useful catalyst to open discussions within your own organisation, facilitating more meaningful conversations to increase employee wellbeing and engagement.

Our aim has been to consider the totality/wholeness of the situation and embrace inclusivity. 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.

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 managing a situation where an employee may be out of the business for a period of time.

Why is this important?

It is important from both a moral and a business perspective to consider, plan, and communicate clearly around any period of absence and subsequent return to work for employees. Ensuring that a wide range of employees are supported in returning to work after a period of leave, ensures that organisations are able to:

- **Create inclusive environments, that help the most diverse workforce thrive**
- **Create competitive advantage, to attract and retain the best talent**
- **Increase employee wellbeing and engagement and in the case of sickness, reduce the potential for further absence**



Overarching themes

Be aware of local legislation, this varies from country to country.

There are commonalities in our approach when supporting employees manage a period of absence from work in terms of emotional support and some administrative tasks (e.g. transition plan, ways of keeping in touch, discussions around ongoing career progression etc). However, there will be important differences depending upon the country your organisation is based in, that will need to be reflected when considering your approach (e.g. cultural, legal, length of time away from work, administrative).

Treat everyone fairly, but remember everyone's experience is different.

Having clearly communicated policies and processes it is important for clarity and consistency in approach. However, to best support individuals and their needs, organisations need to allow for flexibility within their policies and processes. Ensure that there is two-way discussion around what is helpful and what could work for the individual and the organisation (both before and after leave). Consider what has happened previously in similar circumstances in the organisation, so that you can act in a consistent way, share useful guidance and support (whilst maintaining confidentiality), and update your processes where necessary based on previous feedback. Discuss and agree on an overall approach and more granular detail, then make sure to deliver on it to keep trust and support engagement.

Do not make assumptions about what an individual may be feeling, or may need.

Be wary of your own unconscious bias. In all situations, work with the individual on what their needs are and then discuss how this may balance and work with the needs of the business to find a fair solution.

Provide flexibility where possible.

Often, employees who are taking or returning from a period of leave will need to attend follow-on, related appointments (e.g. medical) or have changed life commitments (e.g. childcare). Where possible, provide flexibility in time and working location, and support employees to manage their time, so that they can manage these scenarios (without feeling guilt or pressure for doing so).

Be aware of intersectionality and that multiple layers of group identification may be at play.

For example, scenarios are often not isolated to one situation, but can often overlap. e.g. maternity and sickness or disability. Make sure to clearly indicate where adjustments are agreed, or a different policy or process is in place, so that it is clear what steps are being taken.

If part of a larger agency network or organisation, remember that you may have tools and materials in place as a central support.

Check with your HR team, and where relevant, signpost other employees towards these documents to share knowledge.

Before

- How and when will you keep in touch? What should each party communicate and update on? What frequency of contact is reasonable during this time?
- Have you created an intentional offboarding plan and schedule? You may want to consider:
 - Who is going to take on this individual's workload. If so, is there a handover in place?
 - Has the plan been communicated with all stakeholders (where relevant)? (e.g. clients, agencies, suppliers)
 - What will be communicated to the team and when?
- Is there clarity in which policy/process is being followed and are both manager and employee aware of what steps are being taken?
- Has the individual got an up-to-date performance review in place?
- Do not assume that because the individual is going to be taking a period of leave, their priorities have shifted, or that this is no longer relevant.

"Before I left for maternity leave, I was hugely engaged and attached to the agency and was quite worried about losing connection. I had a discussion with my manager before my leave, and we agreed that they would update me on team and business changes whilst I was out. Unfortunately, this wasn't followed through and it resulted in a loss of trust and connection - I felt 'out of sight, out of mind'."

During

- Make sure to keep in touch in the ways and in line with the timelines you agreed on before the period of leave. Consider what is 'reasonable' and remember that the level of communication will depend on an individual's needs and outlook. This may also change, once they are on leave, so remain flexible. This said, some updates (including any potential redundancy or reorganisation plans, promotion opportunities or other relevant vacancies) are critical for you to communicate to employees on long-term absence. Just remember to consider taking a sensitive approach towards these updates, to avoid causing the employee any undue stress or concern around job security whilst on, or after their return from leave.
- Do not assume that the employee does not want to, or cannot, attend social events. Provide the opportunity for them to accept or decline activities such as Summer off-site company meeting, Christmas parties etc.
- Where a return-to-work date is identified, discuss whether a phased return may be helpful. For example, is it possible to work some 'keeping in touch' days (where applicable, depending on local legislation), or for the employee to initially return with a more flexible working pattern (e.g. part-time working hours, or different working pattern). When discussing these options, ensure that these returning days are structured and meaningful and are clearly communicated with relevant team members. Also, ensure that they are realistic and that they have the opportunity for a soft launch, rather than being thrown straight into the deep end during their initial return.

After

- When thinking about reintegration, agree on how the individual will be ‘re-onboarded’. What has changed whilst they’ve been out? Do they need to go through similar training as new starters?
- Be flexible, consider short-term transition plans as well as longer-term ambitions. Consider whether a staggered return is appropriate so that they do not return to full responsibilities immediately. Ensure expectations of individuals and colleagues are managed appropriately, if they do not return to full responsibilities, ensure appropriate delegation of the additional work
- Create intentional re-onboarding plans and schedules.
 - IT set-up (reactivate accounts, making sure all updates to equipment have taken place)
 - Supportive handovers
 - Update on business changes
 - Update on team changes
- Agree at what point you will set future goals (taking into consideration the performance review they had before their period of leave)
- Ensure that there is a handover between managers/HR where there may be, to ensure consistency in understanding, approach, and support that can be given
- Returners may have ongoing caring responsibilities to consider and may be looking to balance their professional and personal lives. Provide flexibility where possible and communicate what policies, processes, and structures are in place that the individual can access for support (e.g. Parental Leave, Compassionate Leave)
- Help to create an inclusive and flexible environment, not only through clearly communicated policies, but also via role modelling. Employees who feel there are poorly communicated performance expectations in place, may put themselves under undue pressure, which could lead to poor mental health
- When looking at a return with ‘reasonable adjustments’ (e.g. in situations relating to disability), or a change in scope to the individuals’ previous role, ensure there is personal care and flexibility, whilst also remembering the formalities:
 - Job description
 - Salary review and impact
 - Career progression
 - Objectives
 - Review points

“When I returned from leave, due to a new health condition I was not physically capable of returning to the same role as before my period of leave. My agency was really flexible and worked with me to find an alternative role and working pattern. We put a transition period in place so that I could build things up. The only advice I would give others facing a similar situation would be to make sure that if any changes in role take place, transparent discussions also take place around any impact on salary, performance expectations and future career progression.”

Considerations and call to action

Work with HR teams, or external consultants to consider the experiences of your own workforce

- Ensure that you have clear policies and procedures in place which are also flexible enough to meet the specific needs of individuals. Ensure these are easily accessible to your team members and managers
- Provide training to managers who are likely to work with the returners, on both the administrative practical steps and psychological aspects of transitions to work
- Train the wider team on the challenges faced by those returning to work, including all areas of the organisation in the discussion, to avoid creating silos
- Ensure senior management are aware of the business case for supporting returners and find a senior sponsor to advocate and lead internal initiatives moving forward
- Establish mentoring or peer support networks, to role-model successful returners within your organisation and provide peer-support
- 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.acas.org.uk>

<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/managing-return-to-work-after-long-term-absence/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employer-guidance-helping-people-return-to-work/employer-guidance-helping-people-return-to-workwww.gov.uk>

<https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/>

<https://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/>

US

<http://www.marchofdimes.org>

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

<https://wrk360.com/>

<https://parentshelpingparents.org/>

Europe

<https://www.parentsatwork.com/>

Guide templates

The templates below are offered as a starting point where existing organisational templates may not exist to support better discussions between employees and their manager/employer.

In all scenarios:

- Ensure that you have prepared for the meeting, gathering any relevant information required in advance, so that it can be as useful as possible
- Clarify for the employee that whilst you are taking notes, this is an informal meeting, intended to ensure they are supported effectively and appropriately
- Organise a quiet and private space, where you won't be disturbed
- Make sure that you greet the employee warmly to make them feel at ease and supported
- Use fact-finding questions without being too intrusive - make sure that you actively listen to their responses
- Confirm that the matters discussed are confidential and will only be disclosed where necessary for legitimate business needs, such as payroll and health and safety
- Speak with your local HR team, or senior management for additional support where required, including information regarding any organisational processes and/or policies

Upcoming Leave



Employee's Name	
Manager's Name	
Expected Leave	
Anticipated Time Out of Office (if known) Discuss with the employee how long they anticipate being out of the office, so that you are able to plan most appropriately for their period of absence. NB. Make sure to consider any legal obligations arising from local employment legislation and do not apply unnecessary or unlawful pressure to the employee.	
How/When We Will Keep in Touch and What Things We Will Update Each Other On Consider and agree whether you will arrange a regular or recurring meeting for you to keep connected, or whether these will take place ad-hoc. If so, how frequently will these happen? Will they be in-person or virtual? What topics are most appropriate for each party to update on?	
Policies, Resources and People That May Be Helpful Are there any policies that may be helpful for the employee to be aware of considering this situation? If so, provide the employee with copies of the company's policies and procedures that may be helpful, e.g. Sickness Absence, Compassionate Leave, Parental Leave, Employee Assistance Programme.	
Agreed Next Steps Are there any agreed actions that need to happen? When will you next speak?	

Keeping in Touch Discussion



Employee's Name	
Manager's Name	
Date of Discussion	
Key Employee Updates Has the employee shared anything that is important to note and capture?	
Key Organisational Updates Are there any key organisational updates for you to share with the employee (e.g. team changes)?	
Policies, Resources and People That May Be Helpful Are there any policies that may be helpful for the employee to be aware of considering this situation? If so, provide the employee with copies of the company's policies and procedures that may be helpful, e.g. Sickness Absence, Compassionate Leave, Parental Leave, Employee Assistance Programme.	
Agreed Next Steps/ Date of Next Discussion Are there any agreed actions that need to happen? When will you next speak?	

Returning From Leave



Employee's Name	
Manager's Name	
Expected Return Date Consult with the employee, find out when they plan to return to work, and set their official return date.	
Role Discuss and agree any changes to the employee's role or terms of employment before their return, and provide an updated job description where relevant. NB. Make sure to consider any legal obligations arising from local employment legislation.	
Compensation and Benefits Re-instate any compensation or benefits that may have been suspended or reduced during period of leave.	
Logistics Arrange for equipment to be available for the employee to use from their first day back at work. If working within an office, ensure there is an appropriate workspace available and set-up for their return. Arrange to greet the employee and welcome them back to the workplace.	

Checklist for Managing Return from Maternity Leave

(modified from a template offered via CIPD HR Inform)



<p>Return Date</p> <p>Consult with the employee, find out when they plan to return to work, and set their official return date.</p>	
<p>Policies</p> <p>Provide the employee with copies of the company's policies and procedures which apply to parents (e.g., the right to request flexible working, parental leave, and time off to deal with emergencies).</p> <p>Should they apply for flexible working, consider the application in a timely manner.</p>	
<p>Role</p> <p>Discuss and agree any changes to the employee's role or terms of employment before their return, and provide an updated job description where relevant.</p> <p>NB. Make sure to consider any legal obligations arising from local employment legislation.</p> <p>If temporary maternity leave cover was arranged, start preparations for the end of the temporary employee's contract, ideally allowing for a short handover period.</p> <p>Discuss the employee's workload. Give consideration to a 'phased return' to normal duties if this would be beneficial.</p>	
<p>Annual Leave/PTO</p> <p>Calculate if the employee has any outstanding or accrued annual leave/PTO. Consult the employee about when they wish to take leave they are owed.</p>	
<p>Benefits</p> <p>Re-instate, or if necessary compensate for, any benefits that were suspended during the maternity leave period.</p> <p>Give the employee information about any parent or child benefits offered by the company (such as childcare vouchers or an on-site nursery). Make sure the employee knows how to access these benefits.</p>	

Return from Maternity Leave Cont.

<p>Breast-feeding</p> <p>If necessary, arrangements for breast-feeding facilities should be made available to the employee (including a suitable rest area).</p>	
<p>Compensation</p> <p>Ensure their salary is calculated correctly (including any adjustments due to Flexible Working request) and an annual salary review has taken place.</p>	
<p>Logistics</p> <p>Arrange for an appropriate work station and equipment to be available for the employee to use from their first day back at work. Where possible, it is a good idea for the employee to return to the work station they had before they went on maternity leave.</p> <p>Arrange to greet the employee and welcome them back to the workplace.</p>	
<p>Internal Communications</p> <p>Inform the employee's colleagues of their return to work date.</p>	
<p>Training and Development</p> <p>Arrange any training necessary for the employee to be fully competent in their duties. This may include training they have missed while on maternity leave, re-training, or training for new duties.</p> <p>Undertake a formal appraisal at an appropriate point. If an appraisal is due immediately after the employee's return, agree an appropriate timescale for it to be rescheduled to.</p>	
<p>Additional Support</p> <p>Offer the employee access to any support schemes that exist, such as buddying, counselling and training, or consider setting up support mechanisms.</p>	

