

Best practices to support a successful employee return-to-work



When one of your employees had to take a leave of absence due to disability, it can be challenging for them, for you and for your other employees. It can also be difficult to understand how your employee returning from leave may be feeling. As an employer, you play a critical role in the success of their return-to-work (RTW) process. There are many things you can do just before, during and after an employee's return. In this handbook, we'll provide best practices and tools for achieving positive RTW outcomes.

This is an informative document only and doesn't constitute a legal opinion. We strongly encourage you to consult with your legal counsels to inquire about your legal obligations as an employer.

Now let's look at what you can do to best support your employees who are returning from a disability leave.



Keeping in touch with your employee along the way

While this guide focuses on supporting an employee returning to work, what you do before their return is equally important. As their leader, it's important that you keep in contact with them and provide continual support before, during and after their disability leave. Direct managers are encouraged to have on-going dialogue and communication to ensure their employee remains connected to the workplace and has the support and assistance they need. You'll also want to ask them what's the best way to keep in contact with them (i.e., phone, email, in-person, virtual, text message). In your touchpoints, update your employee about any workplace changes since their absence, including new team members, events, or activities. Also, ask your employee what you can share with other co-workers to respect their right to privacy. And, to ensure they have all the support they need for recovery, remind them of the access to health supports available, including workplace benefits.

STEP 1

Before your employee comes back to work

Before your employee returns, there are a lot of factors to think about:

- Plan your first return-to-work meeting in advance to reduce the stress for your employee.
- Discuss a workload plan to determine if work is compatible with their capabilities (1-2 weeks before).
- Make personalized work accommodations as needed to ensure a safe and sustained return (i.e. modified job duties, modifications to regular hours of work).
- Inform other team members of their co-worker's RTW plans and dates to be mindful of their workloads and/or job duties.
- Ensure any equipment is in place (i.e. computers, IDs, passwords, and security cards)
- Plan for any new training and/or job shadowing to help the employee transition back to work.

STEP 2

Employee's first day back

The first day back at work can be a big transition for your employee. Helping them re-integrate can sometimes be difficult and require your patience and support. You want to let them know you have their best interests at heart. There are many ways you can make this transition a positive experience.

- Meet with your employee to personally welcome them back (virtually or in person, depending on your workplace set-up).
- Review their work tasks/responsibilities and their RTW schedule.
- Make sure to validate with them that they have everything they need to start back.
- Remind them of any changes in the workplace that may have happened during their absence or on what's coming next (processes, etc.).



About accommodations

A key legal obligation related to a RTW is your duty to make reasonable accommodations for them to perform their work. This is because discrimination on the basis of disability is prohibited by human rights laws. This includes the treatment of employees in the workplace. We strongly encourage you to consult with your legal counsels to inquire about your legal duty to accommodate in the workplace.

When an employee returns to work from disability, you're legally required to make reasonable accommodations based on their health needs. The right accommodation can mean the difference between a sustainable RTW or taking another disability leave. Your employee's health care provider can confirm their current restrictions and limitations. The Disability Case Manager can then compare this with their job demands and see if there are any gaps that require accommodation support.

Accommodations – when needed – will be very job and case specific, but common accommodations include:

- A gradual RTW – through reduced days or hours. This lets an employee slowly regain their physical and cognitive abilities at work. It can also build confidence in their work abilities.
- Modified job duties that can relieve the initial mental or physical stress of a 100% return, and let employees gradually regain their full function at work.

Your Human Resources team can help you in this area. If you have unionized employees, Union representatives will also play a role in this process.



STEP 3

Employee's first week back

Now that you've welcomed your employee back to work, it's time to discuss and schedule regular check-ins to make sure they feel supported. This will show you can provide them with help if needed in:

- performing functions of the job,
- making adjustments to facilitate a sustained and supported return.
- providing accessible technology or ergonomic workspace adaptations.

Here is what you can do:

- Schedule check-in periods during the first few weeks post RTW (whether in person, by phone, or virtually).
- Encourage your employee to bring any issues to your attention as soon as possible, so you can address them as they come up.
- Remind your employee of other resources available to them during their RTW. (i.e., buddy, Human Resources, Employee Assistance Program, Disability Case Manager or Rehabilitation Consultant).¹
- Communicate with, and support, other employees and listen to any of their concerns. Make sure that you maintain the level of privacy your employee who's been on leave has requested.

STEP 4

Ongoing support post RTW

It's been a few weeks or months since your employee came back to work. You want to monitor and evaluate the RTW process with all key stakeholders. This is to ensure the success of the whole process or to see if it still needs to evolve.

- Adjust your processes if something isn't working.
- Follow your legal obligations, and work to build inclusive best practices if that's not already the case.
- Foster a culture that's supportive of employee mental and physical well-being.

¹ Employee Assistance Program (EAP), Disability Case Manager (DCM) or Rehabilitation Consultant (RC) at Sun Life.

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Resources

Use these free online resources to help you develop the fundamentals of various workplace health strategies. Health strategies can play an important role in keeping employees healthy and at work.

Support for employee health and recovery



[Mental Health Strategy Toolkit](#)



[Mental health training videos for managers and employees](#)



[Musculoskeletal Strategy Toolkit](#)



[Workplace Benefits DE&I playbook](#)