Manager toolkit: Supporting return to work after illness or absence

A practical guide for employers to plan phased, safe and supportive returns after sickness or health-related absence.

Preparing for the return

A little preparation makes the first week back smoother and reduces uncertainty for everyone.

Checklist (pre-return)

- [ ] Agree on a suitable time for a return-to-work conversation
- [ ] Review any medical/fit note guidance
- [ ] Identify essential duties vs tasks that can wait or be adjusted
- [ ] Consider possible adjustments (hours, duties, location)
- [ ] Prepare a draft phased return plan to discuss, not impose
- [ ] Arrange a quiet, private space for the conversation
- [ ] Decide when and how progress will be reviewed

Legal reminder

Under the Equality Act 2010, long-term or substantial health conditions may be legally recognised as disabilities.

This means employers must consider reasonable adjustments to remove or reduce barriers.

You are not expected to be a legal expert - showing that you've listened, explored options and acted reasonably is key.

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Return-to-work conversation template

A supportive conversation sets the tone for the whole return. Use this template to guide the discussion.

Opening

- Welcome back
- Explain that the purpose is to understand what support is needed and agree on a manageable plan

Suggested questions

1. Is there anything you feel we could do to support you?
2. How are you feeling about returning to work?
3. Is there anything that might make the return easier or more manageable?
4. Have your health needs changed recently?
5. Are there tasks or responsibilities that feel difficult right now?
6. What would a realistic first week/fortnight look like for you?
7. Are there any worries we can address together?

Agree together

- Key tasks to focus on
- Adjustments needed (temporary or longer-term)
- Hours and schedule for the first phase
- Support available (check-ins, adjustments, equipment, flexibility)
- Review dates

Close

- Summarise what's been agreed
- Reassure that the plan is flexible and can be adapted.

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Phased return plan outline

Use this simple structure to map out a manageable, step-by-step return.

Employee details

Employee name

Role

Manager

Start date of phased return

Phase one (week one–two)

Hours/days

Responsibilities

Adjustments in place

Phase two (week three–four)

Hours/days

Responsibilities

Adjustments in place

Phase three (if needed)

Hours/days

Responsibilities

Adjustments in place

Review points

Date one

Date two

Notes / agreed changes

(Record small updates so expectations remain clear.)

Example adjustments

You don't need complex policies – small, reasonable changes often make the biggest difference.

Hours and scheduling

- Later start/earlier finish
- Temporary reduction in hours
- Split shifts
- Alternate days on-site

Workload and duties

- Prioritising essential tasks
- Reducing physical demands
- Pausing non-essential projects
- Reducing customer-facing duties

Location and environment

- Hybrid or partial remote working
- Quiet space for breaks
- Temporary parking or accessible access routes

Support and communication

- Short daily or weekly check-ins
- Clear expectations on workload
- Regular adjustment reviews
- Shared action plan with agreed boundaries

Quick reference: manager do's and don'ts

Do

- Keep communication open and supportive
- Agree on plans together
- Review regularly and adjust when needed
- Focus on wellbeing as well as workload
- Keep light records of what's agreed

Don't

- Rush the return because work is busy
- Assume capacity based on past performance
- Ignore fluctuations in health
- Treat the phased plan as fixed
- Share health information without consent

A successful return to work is built through small steps, steady communication and shared expectations. This approach keeps your team supported, confident and able to contribute sustainably.