

Good Work Design: Supporting return to work



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Returning to the workplace after being off work for any reason can be challenging

Many people will need support, including those with psychological or physical illness and/or injury.

All managers and supervisors are required to support their team members to return to work, but great managers take the time to get it right.

Why it matters

Research shows that returning to work after illness or injury delivers many benefits for workers and their employers.

Good work is good for health and wellbeing and participating in good work promotes recovery. Generally, people don't need to be 100% recovered to return to work. Staying at work during rehabilitation or making a timely return to work can help your worker's recovery. It will also reduce costs and disruption in your team.

You can apply many of these strategies to support people who are returning from other absence such as carer's leave, parental leave or study leave.



How it's done

Managers have the most influence. Research shows managers and supervisors who are responsive to their employee's needs, treat them fairly and are supportive, greatly aid their successful adjustment to work.

Supporting someone to return to work is about showing genuine concern, making adjustments and encouraging the team to be supportive too.

For more information see [Practical tools to support supervisors](#), [How managers can support worker mental health](#) and [Recovery and return to work resources](#).





Take the time to get return to work right



1 Communicate early and regularly

Great managers keep in touch while their employee is off work.

- Reach out to ask how they are and take cues from your worker about what to talk about. Some may not want to talk about their injury or illness. Having a more general chat shows your team member that you are concerned for their wellbeing.
- Don't say when you expect them back at work but do reassure them that you are looking forward to having them back, when they are ready.
- Make contact as early as possible and keep in regular contact while they are away. Check your employee's preferences for future conversations and be guided by them on how that will occur, for example, a phone call every two weeks.

2 Consider your team

- Consider how the person's return will impact the team. What will you tell the team, will there be a change in the workload and do other team members need more support?
- Remember to respect privacy and ask your worker what they want you to tell the team.

3 Work with the Return to Work Team

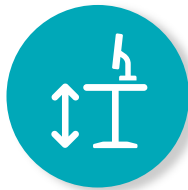
Facilitating return to work is a team effort. It can involve others like the person's GP and other treatment providers, a rehabilitation case manager, a workplace rehabilitation provider, and the insurer/claims manager.

- Ask the person what support they need from the workplace. Also seek guidance from other members of the Return to Work Team and consider the advice from the person's GP on their work capacity, suitable duties and adjustments.
- Work together as a team and keep the focus on what the person can do, not what they can't.

From the outset, it's important to reflect on your relationship with your team member. If there are difficulties, including communication issues, you should provide an alternative contact who the employee is comfortable talking with.

When your worker's return to work is getting close:

- think about what work needs to be done and when it needs to be delivered
- let them know they have been missed and you are looking forward to having them back
- ask them about their work capacity and how the workplace can support their transition back
- involve the Rehabilitation Case Manager and/or the Treating Health Practitioner, if needed.





Physical, psychological and attitudinal barriers



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4 Plan and prepare

Before they come back:

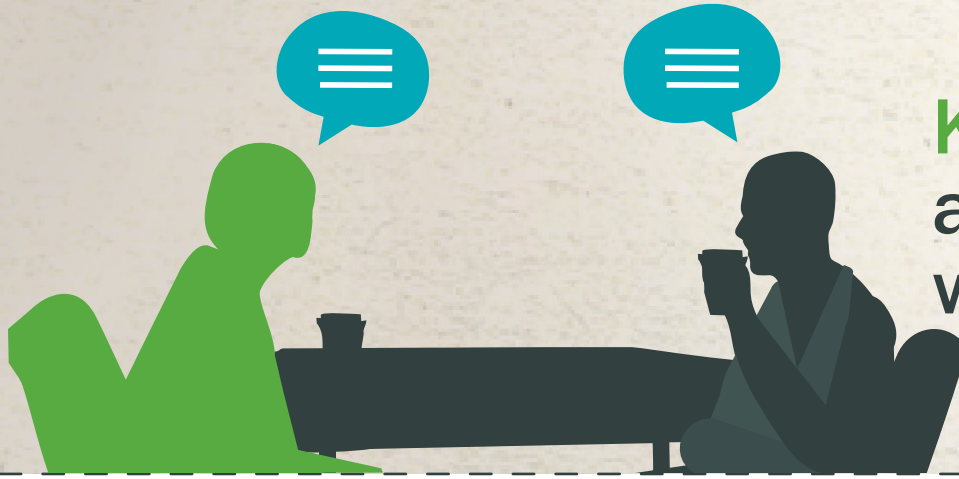
- Understand your organisation's policies and procedures on return to work and seek guidance on next steps and timeline.
- With your employee, contribute to the development of a sustainable return to work plan that is put together by the Return to Work Team. Include shared expectations and measures to minimise identified risks.
- Remember that progress for recovery and return to work is not always linear and can involve multiple attempts. For example, in a case of psychological injury, your team member may have episodic mental ill health and need ongoing support from you.

Great managers understand that people returning to work from injury or illness are at higher risk of further harm to health. The process can be stressful and people are more vulnerable when their confidence has been impacted by their experience and/or condition. It's critical to effectively manage psychosocial and physical risks at work.

5 Provide adjustments

Often there are physical, psychological or attitudinal barriers that can make returning to work harder. Examples include: stairs at work, anxiety about reinjury or negative assumptions of co-workers. Help your employee overcome these by providing adjustments, for example, flexible work, ergonomic equipment or reallocation of work.

- Make sure they return to good work that doesn't aggravate their injury or condition.
- Talk to your worker about what would help and what good work looks like for them. Ask questions like:
 - 'What do you need from me to do your job?'
 - 'What is working in your job? What is not working?'
 - 'Are the work demands manageable for you?'
 - 'Do you feel you have the skills and support that you need to comfortably do your job?'
 - 'What are your work relationships like?'
 - 'What are the things that need to change to make your work good work?'
 - 'What support and adjustments can we make?'
- Help the person to feel in control by giving them as many choices and opportunities as possible to direct and drive their own return to work. For example, they could write their own wellness plan that identifies what does and doesn't work for them in the role.
- Be flexible and think creatively with your worker to find solutions. This may involve activities outside their usual role.



Keep talking about what is working well

6 When they return

- Welcome your employee back to work.
- Talk about any important information or activities that occurred while they were away.
- Reassure them that you will help them to make a sustainable recovery, while giving them space to control their return to work.

7 Check in

Regularly check in to find out how your worker is going. Keep talking about what is working well, what isn't working well and what supports need to be adjusted.

What a person can do at work can change over time. Plans and support may need to be adjusted. You can do this by:

- being responsive to any concerns raised or changes proposed by your worker
- reassuring them that you are committed to being flexible
- asking how they have adapted to their new working arrangements, how they feel they are progressing and whether there is anything else they need
- reviewing workplace adjustments with the person and changing as needed.

Supporting a team member back to work can and should be a positive experience that strengthens working relationships.

How will you support your team member to return to work?

Remember that supporting return to work is not just for people who have experienced injury or ill health. Anyone returning to work may need your help to successfully adjust.

