

Reference document

Post-disability return to work



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Introduction

At any given time, a large percentage of the Canadian workforce is on leave from work due to illness or injury, and no organization is immune to this phenomenon.

In fact, almost one in three workers will experience a disability-related work stoppage during their career. In most cases, this is not by choice and is not planned by either the person on disability or their employer. Furthermore, this period away from work puts all sorts of stress on the two main concerned parties: the employee and the employer.

According to the Canadian Medical Association:

Prolonged absence from one's normal roles, including absence from the workplace, is detrimental to a person's mental, physical and social well-being. Physicians should therefore encourage a patient's return to function and work as soon as possible after an illness or injury, provided that return to work does not endanger the patient, his or her co-workers or society. A safe and timely return to work benefits the patient and his or her family by enhancing recovery and reducing disability. Through improvement of health outcomes, a safe and timely return to work also preserves a skilled and stable workforce for employers and society and reduces demands on health and social services as well as on disability plans. (*The Physician's Role in Helping Patients Return to Work After Illness or Injury*, 2010)

Myths

Many myths persist about those returning to work post-disability. Some examples:

- An employee on disability cannot return until they are 100% better
- A person who has experienced disability will never be able to perform their work like they did before
- It is better to avoid talking to the person who is returning to work after a disability and wait for them to come to you during their first few days of work

These beliefs are false. However, it is important to have a clear understanding of the situation and the applicable strategies to ensure a successful return to work for the worker in question. It is also important to dispel these myths if you are an employer, colleague or other person involved in a disability case.

The disability cycle

Each absence from work follows a cycle that can be broken down into four periods.

Before the disability period

These are the months or weeks in which the person's first symptoms appear. These early signs of disability may or may not be directly related to the person's work. However, they are often very noticeable to those around them.

During the disability period

Depending on the nature of the disability, the person on disability may become withdrawn. Their medical condition could also impose functional or cognitive limitations on their daily life. They may turn down invitations, give up hobbies and rarely contact their workplace. Depending on the situation, isolation from the workplace can be harmful and provoke anxiety once the person returns to work.

While returning to work

This is generally an unstable and uncertain period for the worker. Their perceptions will have likely changed due to all the advice they have received, changes implemented in the workplace and the effects of their treatment. They may even feel like they are starting a new job if they are returning from a prolonged absence or significant changes have taken place at work. For these reasons, the employee must be given time to adjust in order for their reintegration to be successful.

After returning to work

With proper preparation and favourable conditions for reintegration, the worker returning to work post-disability will find their bearings and rhythm again, usually gradually, after a few weeks. If the position they hold is new or adapted, they will adjust to the changes with the support of their team and their supervisor.

Major impacts of a disability

On the employee

The person affected by a disability must cope with such challenges as isolation from the workplace and a multitude of physical or psychological symptoms, as well as significant changes to their day-to-day activities. A person who is disabled for a period of several weeks or more is at high risk of losing contact with their workplace, forgetting their work routines and even their role at work over time.

On the employer

The employer either has to go without a resource or replace that resource for an often indeterminate period. They are frequently uncertain about the disability-related absence and must confront the impacts of the absence on human resource management and their organization's performance. The employment relationship can thus become weakened, consequently complicating the disabled worker's timely reintegration into the workplace for both parties.

Obstacles and symptoms

Returning to work after a disability is a different experience for each person. However, many obstacles and symptoms are encountered in the majority of cases, such as:

A feeling of shame and guilt

The person feels like they have let down their work team, supervisor and organization. They know that their absence was inconvenient, and they may need to be reassured and reminded that this kind of absence could happen at any time and that the organization was able to deal with it.

Reduced mental endurance

When they return to work, a person on disability may feel and exhibit residual symptoms such as a lack of concentration and attention, forgetfulness, and mental fatigue. These symptoms are normal. Returning to work is a practice run that allows the worker to have a better

understanding of where they stand while at the same time improving their functioning. Full recovery from a disability occurs during and after returning to work.

Loss of confidence

When an employee is away from the workplace for a while, they may question their expertise and skills. They might remember a time when their tasks seemed easy and they were able to work at a fast pace. When the worker returns to work, they will thus need a period of adjustment in order to find their bearings as well as update their knowledge.

Performance anxiety

A worker who has been away from work usually has a higher level of anxiety than their colleagues. They know that those around them at work are watching them and may even be assessing their level of efficiency. In situations like these, they could become hypervigilant in performing their duties in an attempt to regain their colleagues' and their employer's trust. A worker may even worry that they will lose their job when they return to work. The employer can thus communicate some long-term objectives to the employee to make them feel that their job is not at risk. This is an efficient way of reassuring the worker.

Reduced sleep

A worker returning to work following a disability period is most likely dreading the first few days. They are thinking and worrying more than usual and may get less restorative sleep or experience insomnia. It should come as no surprise if the worker looks tired when they come back, even if they were away for a long time and seemingly had lots of time to rest.

Fear of relapse

When a worker returns to work, they often worry that their illness or injury may reappear or be aggravated when faced with the demands of their job. It is normal and may even be warranted to worry about this, as the functional recovery phase is often still in progress during the return to work and may be vulnerable to the risk of relapse in some cases. This is why it is important for the concerned parties to properly prepare for the worker's return and supervise the worker, in order to reduce that risk and ensure the continuity of their return to work.

While some employers maintain regular contact with their absent employees, others prefer to wait until the return to work to reconnect. Given the above-mentioned obstacles, however, it is strongly recommended that the absent employee and their employer maintain regular contact from the start of the disability leave. This way, the employer will be kept updated on the evolution of the medical situation, and the eventual return to work will be made easier. Research has actually shown that the duration of disability leave is significantly reduced when this contact is maintained.

Furthermore, the challenges of returning to work increase considerably with time, and the statistical probability of returning to work diminishes proportionally. Steps should therefore be taken to facilitate the return to work as soon as the employee on leave is functionally able to do so. Thus, in order to increase the chances of the employee successfully returning to duty, the most promising approach involves good planning by the manager and the active participation of the employee.

Strategic planning for the return to work

As soon as the employee's condition suggests a return to work is possible, there needs to be a preparatory meeting between them and their employer. In unionized workplaces, a union representative may also be involved. This meeting is an opportunity to establish guidelines to respect and set out both parties' expectations for the weeks to come. The overall work climate will benefit from this clear alignment between the parties. A few of the benefits of such a meeting are:

Clarifying expectations

If there is no clear communication of each party's expectations before the return to work, there could be disagreements and tension. For this reason, sharing both one's personal expectations and those of the organization allows the concerned parties to establish the guidelines that they will follow and respect (objectives, approaches, best practices, etc.).

Reducing the risk of relapse

A worker who has been on disability will most likely return in the same work context as before they were on leave. The concerned parties should thus be able to discuss beforehand any potential contributing or triggering factors at work so that the disability does not reoccur, or to investigate and rectify issues that could cause a relapse.

Trust

As mentioned earlier, a worker returning from long-term disability leave may be worried and need reassurance from their manager or an influential member of the organization. Should the worker be questioning their importance or their employment relationship, a meeting will often provide an opportunity to set the record straight and quell their concerns.

Accommodation

The priority should typically be to return the employee to the position they held prior to the absence. In this way, the employee can return to their routines, workplace and coworkers. If this is not possible, however, other alternatives are to return the employee to:

- A modified job in the same workplace
- A different job in the same workplace
- A similar job in a different workplace
- A different job in a different workplace

Upon returning to work, the employee may struggle with temporary or permanent functional limitations noted by a health professional. In that case, the employer must do their best to accommodate the employee so that they can offer satisfactory work performance without compromising their health and safety or that of others. According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, an employer has a duty to accommodate the specific needs of employees so that they can perform to the best of their potential.

However, the duty to accommodate has its limits. An employee's right to equality must be balanced with an employer's right to manage a productive workplace. Generally, employers should look at situations involving the duty to accommodate on a case-by-case basis, since each will have unique circumstances. There are certain circumstances under which an employer is not required to provide accommodation, as in cases of undue hardship.

Here are a few examples of proactive actions that may be considered in order to ensure the return to work is made under favourable conditions:

- A workstation evaluation
- An analysis of the job's physical or psychological requirements
- A flexible schedule
- More frequent breaks
- Telecommuting
- A workstation adjustment
- The temporary modification of certain tasks and responsibilities
- Ergonomic equipment
- Training

Roles and responsibilities

Employee

- Provide their employer with a document signed by their physician authorizing their return to work, including any applicable limitations
- Act in good faith during the process of preparing and executing the return to work
- Adopt a positive attitude; be open to their employer's suggestions and offers of help
- Seek out any needed assistance from the available resources
- Share their concerns and problems with the concerned parties
- Accept the collaboration of their colleagues and supervisors

Employer

- Stay in contact with the employee during their disability leave
- Take action as soon as the employee announces their return to work
- Actively involve Human Resources and the union, if applicable
- Plan a meeting with the employee before their first day of work, as well as time for an adequate update depending on the length of their absence
- Set realistic objectives during the return-to-work period
- Foster a welcoming atmosphere for the employee upon their return; before the official return-to-work date, inform the work team of the employee's return so that they receive a proper welcome back
- Provide the employee with all necessary work equipment (office, passwords, telephone, tools, etc.); do not make them feel like their return to work has been rushed and is disrupting operations
- In the event of a request for temporary or permanent accommodation, ask the employee for additional medical information to justify the request
- Assess the return to work on a weekly basis and properly document its progression
- Make arrangements for regular communication, with meetings and feedback; place greater emphasis on what is going well

Conclusion

An employee's post-disability return to work is not a step to be taken lightly. The better the best practices described in this document are respected, the greater the chance that the worker's return to both work and health will be successful. Additionally, the message sent to other workers in the organization, who are paying close attention to how their colleague's return to work goes, will have a very positive effect on the work environment and their commitment to the organization.

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