

## Back to Work Interviews

Back to Work interviews or Return to Work interviews are considered to be an effective way to managing absence according to the CIPD absence management survey in 2008. Following closely was the use of trigger mechanisms for reviewing attendance and the use of disciplinary procedures for short term absences. For long term absence, the additional approaches employed by HR are provision of occupational health support, provision of a rehabilitation programme, and the use of flexible working.

But, do back to work interviews really help shorten absence? This depends on when and how you use them

Some employers literally have a policy that says a back to work interview will be carried out on the day that the employee finally returns to work. To have a policy such as this at least ticks a box. And it makes sure that some information is gathered about why the employee has been off sick once they return.

But is that enough?

It would be good practice to have back to work interviews BEFORE the employee returns to work. This makes the approach active and not passive, and focuses employer and employee on the need to look towards a specified plan for returning to work. If you already use trigger mechanisms, then the first trigger should lead to a back to work interview - and this should be as early as when the employee presents you with their first sick certificate. This means you can start to manage the problem and ensure it doesn't get out of hand.

What to ask at an initial back to work interview:

1. Do ask after the wellbeing of the employee! It may seem obvious but a genuine concern and interest will be fully appreciated by the employee - many employees become disgruntled because people they have worked with for years don't seem to notice when they are ill.
2. Do make it clear how the person is missed and how it does have an impact on the company, but without making the employee feel terrible where they have a genuine problem.
3. Do some preparation regarding the types of work you may be able to offer the employee on a part time, or alternative duties basis, then ASK -

Are there any tasks at work you think you would be able to manage at the moment?

Is there anything we can do that would help you to return sooner? - volunteer examples of what the company can do to help out.

4. Ask for consent to speak to the GP or therapist about the particular problem - get the employee's consent in writing and specifying what condition you need information on. For example - I, Mr J. Blogs give my consent for my GP to discuss my back problem with Mr. Smith, site manager of ABC construction, in order to help provide me with suitable work duties and to establish what the company could do to help me return to work.

The actual words can vary depending on what you are able to offer the employee in terms of help and support. Include details of what you can offer in any letter or discussion, so the health professional knows what options there may be and whether there is room for negotiation.

5. Start to talk about dates - if not able to actually set a return to work date, then do set dates for subsequent meetings - that way both you and employee know exactly where you are and that the absence is not going to carry on unchecked.

6. Use the back to work interviews as a time to plan a gradual return to work, plan duties or hours week by week with a target date for return to full normal duties. Again, the employee and you know what is expected of each party to get to the target date.

Back to work interviews and return to work interviews are an excellent way to manage both short term and long term absence, and if you use them to your advantage you will find the number of long term absence cases reduce because you have nipped the problems in the bud. Those that do need long term absence due to a serious health condition will appreciate your support and understanding and both the employee and the company will feel more in control of the situation.