

Return to Work Considerations: Suggestions for Supervisors

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Sometimes an employee may be out of work for an extended medical reason such as surgery, chemotherapy, mental health, chemical dependency treatment or the death of a loved one. One of the things about all of these life events and the time away from work is that when an employee returns, their personal or family world may have changed dramatically. Also, depending on the length of absence or, as in the case of chemotherapy, a long-term intermittent absence, their coworkers or workplace may have appreciably changed. When an individual is returning to work after a significant life experience, regardless of the circumstances, it seems important to utilize the following steps:

1. Build in a "return to work" meeting with the employee on their first day back. During this meeting it will be important to welcome the employee back as well as provide the employee with as much information as possible about how work duties may have changed. It is also helpful to ask about any current or anticipated re-entry challenges so that they can be addressed readily and directly.
2. Ask about what information the person wants shared and whether or not the employee would like you to share this information. If the returning employee appears to be sharing too much personal information to a point that has a negative impact on coworkers or the workplace, it is important to meet with the employee and set limits on this behavior.
3. Expect that there may be requests for further FMLA or Reasonable Accommodation and those circumstances will be unique to each person. As much as reasonably possible, while still respecting confidentiality, talk with the work group about any changes (e.g. the person's work schedule) and how the work will still get done.
4. Keep in mind that one element employees report appreciating is being asked about their current status as well as the impact of the life event. Employees have indicated that it helps in feeling valued as a person and not just as a part of the business needs.

Though these are basic steps, they are sometimes skipped because a supervisor is concerned about prying into someone's personal life or may be concerned about how an employee will respond. In this situation it is important to state the intention of the conversation and make it clear that the goal is to make the transition back to work as smooth as possible for everyone. One employee that we heard from spoke of the need to feel compassion as well as the business agenda when she returned to work. Managing an employee's return to work is also about managing a relationship.

As the returning employee, a coworker or a supervisor, if you have a return to work situation that you would like assistance with, please give EAP a call at 1.800.550.MCIT.

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