

The following is an HR guide to Return to Work Interviews

Return to work interviews are an essential tool for managing sickness absence in any organisation.

There is no legal requirement relating to return to work interviews; it is left to the individual company's discretion.

If you do decide to conduct return to work interviews you should ensure all new employees are aware of this from the induction stage. Also, build return to work interviews into your Sickness policy and procedure and refer to them within the employee handbook.

Despite the name, these meetings are not a formal 'interview', they are a conversation that should take place as soon as possible after the employee returns to work.

What is the purpose of Return to Work Interviews?

If conducted correctly, the purpose of a return to work interview is to clarify the nature of the problem (reason for absence), confirm that it has been resolved and determine whether the employer can do anything in support going forwards.

When are Return to Work Interviews conducted?

They can be conducted after any length of sickness absence, with a new mother returning to work after maternity leave or with any employee who has been absent from work for any other reason.

What are the benefit for employers?

- They tend to reduce absenteeism because people are less likely to give a non-genuine reason for absence when questioned face-to-face – they act as a deterrent,
- They demonstrate to the employee that the employer has noticed their absence,
- They make the employer aware of any issues the employee is currently having that may incur further absences and ensures support is provided.

What are the benefit for employees?

- provide an opportunity for the employee to explain their absences,
- When conducted professionally and with assured confidentiality, return to work interviews build trust and let the employee know that the business has dedicated time to understand and maintain their health and wellbeing.
- Ensures any support they may need.

How to conduct a Return to Work interview

- Welcome the employee back to work, explain the purpose of the meeting and check they are well enough to be at work and do their job,
- Take the opportunity to update them on any changes in the organisation whilst they have been off,
- If they have a Fit Note, discuss the details and any reasonable adjustments that may be required to their hours/role/location. If it says 'may be fit for some work', you will need to discuss a temporary working arrangement. For example, if the employee should avoid lifting, consider administrative duties until they are well enough to resume their full duties,
- Gain a better understanding of the reason for their absence. Determine if their absence was as a result of an outside of work influence, for example, they are run-down through having to care for an elderly relative. You may have to discuss ideas for overcoming the problem so it does not continue to affect their work,
- Review their sickness history and any patterns or trends in their absences,
- In cases where there is room for improved attendance, re-establish the organisation's expectation in terms of sickness absence, the impact on the organisation and their colleagues, and the likely consequences if their absence does not improve,
- Set a date to review their sickness record and ensure both parties have a record of the meeting and any action points discussed.

Key points to remember

- Document the meetings,
- Be prepared for the meeting: gather together relevant information, for example sickness record, pattern/trends in previous absences or previous return to work interview notes,
- Ensure that whoever conducts return to work interviews has the necessary skill and experience to do them.
- Remember this is not a disciplinary meeting – you are there to establish the facts relating to the absence and provide any necessary support.

This is a brief guide only to Return to Work Interviews. If you require any help or support on managing your sickness absence or any other HR service, please contact us today.