

Going Back to Work After a Period of Absence

Surviving and Thriving at Work



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Introduction

It is easy enough to get back to work when you are only off for a day or two, but if you are off for a longer period for whatever reason – like having a baby, breaking a leg or more serious illness – it can be daunting to come back and difficult to get back into the swing of things.

The longer you are off work, the more difficult it is, and there may also be things that make a return to work even more challenging, for example, if you have had to take time off through stress, or if you have ongoing health concerns.

In order to ease the transition back into work, many people have found it helpful to make explicit plans about how you can get up to speed. This toolkit provides a framework to assist individuals and their managers/ employers to do this

How to use this toolkit:

The toolkit is divided into three main sections:

1

**Things to do while
you are off work**

2

**Preparing to return to
work**

3

Starting back

Everyone of us is different, so plans need to be tailored to suit each individual. You may wish to use a different format and/or use only some of the sections we have suggested – that is fine!

- Sometimes it may be possible to anticipate time off work and make plans in advance – if you are having a baby, or going into hospital for a planned operation, or if you have a difficulty that recurs from time to time. However, you may have to take time off work unexpectedly. If this happens you may have to make plans as you go along.
- Some people may prefer to develop a plan to manage the stresses and strains of work on their own. However, it can often be helpful to involve your manager so that they can provide the support you need to make your return as smooth as possible.
- If you do agree your plan with your manager then it should be confidential between the two of you and should not appear in your staff record. However, you might want to give some thought about what to tell colleagues about the reasons for your absence and for any additional adjustments and support you may need when you return.
- In general the more specific you can be about what you will do and what your manager can do to help the more likely your plan is to be successful.

Part 1: While you are off work

When you have been off work for a while the idea of going back can seem really daunting. It can therefore be helpful to start gradually building up your confidence and stamina before actually returning.

It might be useful to think about:

1 Things you can do while you are off work, to build up your confidence and stamina.

For example:

- Set myself a daily routine - that includes 'treats' and things I enjoy
- Gradually build up my physical stamina by including some exercises in my routine
- Start building some 'work like' activities. Depending on the job this might include card reading, using the computer, or doing some DIY at home
- Don't beat myself up for having time off or being unable to do things I usually do
- Keep in touch with my manager and/or colleagues by telephone or email so I can keep abreast of what is going on

2 Things your manager can do to help

For example:

- Keep in touch every week or so by telephone or email, to see how I am doing and keep updated on what's happening at work
- Send me odd things from work that I might be interested in
- Tell me not to worry about being off
- Arrange for the team to send a card from time to time
- Remind me that I'm a valued member of the team and missed

You might also like to think about developing a **'Work Health and Well-being Plan'** to help you cope with the regular stresses and strains of work so you can prosper in your career. Speak to your Employment Specialist for more details.

**What I can do while I am off
work to build up my confidence
and stamina:**

**What my manager can do to
help:**

Part 2: Preparing to go back to work

Once you are on the mend you can start making plans for actually going back to work. You do not have to be fully 'well' before you start going back. Remember, the longer you are off, the more difficult it gets to return so it is usually sensible to start making plans and gradually resuming your duties as soon as you can.

It might be useful to think about:

1 Things you can do to prepare for going back.

For example:

- Make contact with colleagues/friends at work to find out what has been going on in my absence
- Pop into work for a visit or for lunch with colleagues
- Arrange to see my manager to plan my return
- Arrange to get hold of papers or newsletters/bulletins from work
- Make sure I have got things sorted out at home so I can focus on work when I go back without too many distractions
- Make arrangements for family or friends to relieve me of some of my responsibilities when I start back

2 Particular worries or concerns that you have about going back to work.

For example:

- My colleagues' response to my absence and my return
- Particular aspects of the job that I am worried about
- The backlog of work that will be waiting for me

3 Things that your manager can do to help.

For example:

- Explain what has happened while I have been away
- Help me to make plans about how to address my particular worries or concerns
- Arrange for a colleague to help me get up to speed
- Meet with me before I go back to plan my return - possibly on a graded basis
- Draw up a timetable for my first week back (see next page)

My plan for preparing to go back to work

What I can do:		What my manager can do to help:	
Particular worries or concerns that you have about going back to work:			
Problem/Concern	Plan for addressing each problem/ concern		
	What I can do:	What my manager can do:	

Part 3: Starting back at work

Going back to work can be difficult and many people find a graded return helpful.

There are many ways in which this can be achieved depending on the individual and the job.

For example:

- Starting back on limited hours and gradually building up
- Working from home for a while or part of the time
- Specific time to catch up on what I have missed before launching into new tasks/ projects
- Starting back with more limited duties/ responsibilities for a while and gradually increasing them
- Having extra support to do parts of the job I find particularly challenging
- More frequent supervision and support for a while
- Working particular shifts to start off with
- Working alongside someone and then gradually doing more independently
- Not working additional hours
- In order to reduce uncertainty it is often worth having a clear plan for activities and for gradually building up duties with timescales and/or review dates

My graded return to work plan for building up hours/ duties

From To/Review	
From To/Review	
From To/Review	
From To/Review	

Your first week back at work

After a period of absence, it is often the first day and the first week that are most daunting – just walking in to work on the first day can be a real challenge. Many people find that the anxiety about going back is reduced if they know exactly what will happen. Therefore it can be helpful to draw up a more detailed plan for the first week – just like you might do for the induction of a new member of staff

It might be useful to think about:

1

The things you can do to ease the transition back to work in your first week

For example:

- Arranging not to go out in the evenings and going to bed at a reasonable time
- Asking a colleague if I am not sure what to do
- Talking through how things are going - with a partner, friend or close colleague
- Making sure I take a lunch break and leave work on time
- Asking my partner to cook supper, or getting 'ready meals' or a take-away
- Making arrangements for family or friends to relieve me of some of my responsibilities when I start back

2

The things your manager can do to help during this first week

For example:

- Arrange for someone to meet me at the start of my first day back, brief me about what is going on, any changes that may have happened while I have been away and help me settle in
- Arrange for me to work with a colleague so I can get up to speed
- Encourage me to contact him/her if there is anything I am concerned about
- Touch base at the end of each day to ask me how I am doing

3

Draw up a detailed timetable for the first week

It may be helpful for this to include things like time to catch up on any backlog of work, time to meet up with key people and catch up on what has happened, and specific start/finish times

My first week back at work

What can I do to make my first week back easier		Things my manager can do to help	

Day	Morning	Afternoon
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

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