RETURNING TO WORK AFTER LONG-TERM ABSENCE POLICY

For all staff in Education and Training Boards Ireland

Contents

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) recognises the importance of supporting employees who are returning to the workplace after a long-term absence.

1.2 Employees who have been absent due to illness/injury returning to their full-time regular duties may require a gradual return to regular duties and hours.

1.3 This policy outlines our commitment to ensuring a smooth and successful transition for employees resuming their roles after an extended absence.

2. PURPOSE

2.1 The purpose of this policy is to establish clear guidelines and procedures that facilitate a positive and supportive reintegration process for employees returning from long-term absences.

2.2 The Line-Manager/Director/Human Resources and the employee have a shared responsibility for facilitating the employee to return to work as soon as they are ready to do so and for making the employee's return to work a success.

2.3 For this policy, long-term absence is defined as any absence lasting more than four consecutive weeks.

2.4 Any other forms of leave will be categorised as extended absences and are allocated to staff in line with current policies and legislation.

3. ELIGIBILITY

3.1 This policy applies to all our people in ETBI and seconded to ETBI who have been on long-term or extended absences.

4. MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION WHILE ABSENT

4.1   ETBI recognises that every leave situation is different and that maintaining contact with the employee during the absence is important. Human Resources (HR) and the employee will agree on how best they will keep in touch early in the absence and what mode of contact is preferred (i.e. email, phone, letter, text). HR will agree with the employee on what information about their absence should be shared with others to avoid misunderstandings and to respect confidentiality.

4.2   HR will provide the employee with details of the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), absence policy and terms, including pay they will receive.

5. BEFORE YOU RETURN TO WORK

5.1   Notify the HR department of your expected return to work as soon as is practicable indicating any support and/or adjustments you may require to return to work safely.

5.2   If you are absent on long-term sick leave you may be required by the HR Department to provide a medical certificate from your General Practitioner, confirming that you are fit to return to work. This requirement is on a case-by-case basis.

5.3   The HR Department will ensure that expert advice from the Occupational Health Professional has been sought where necessary before the employee returns to work.

5.4   The HR Department will make the necessary arrangements for the employee to have a return-to-work conversation with their line manager.

5.5   The HR Department will support the employee and manager during the immediate return-to-work conversations and on an ongoing basis on return.

6. RETURNING TO WORK MEETING WITH LINE MANAGER

6.1 During the return-to-work conversations it is important that the employee and line manger agree a return-to-work plan particularly if equipment or adjustments may be required. The plan should include any changes to the employee's roles and responsibilities, key work priorities, work adjustments, timeframes for the phased return, when and how managers and employees will monitor and review, and what action should be taken. The conversation should include questions or concerns from either party. Sometimes these conversations happen during the first week the employee is back to work.

6.2 As a manager, you are not entitled to employee's medical information. If the employee shares any medical information, you must maintain confidentiality of that medical information and forward any medical forms to the HR department.

The areas for discussion at this meeting can be found in **Appendix A**.

The return-to-work form will be provided in Zoho People to record the main points of the meeting. It is the responsibility of the line manager to ensure that the staff member is aware that there is no obligation to discuss their absence, work-life balance, previous illnesses or health concerns but that it can be helpful to ease the transition back to work.

7. TRAINING AND SUPPORT

7.1 **Training Updates:** If there have been significant changes to the employee's role or the organisation during their absence, relevant training and support will be provided to ensure the employee is up-to-date and well-prepared. This will be identified at the Return-to-Work meeting.

7.2 **Ongoing Support**: If there have been significant changes to the employee's role or the organisation during their absence the line manager will schedule regular check-in meetings with the staff member for as long as is necessary. These check-in meetings will also take place if the person is returning after a period of illness even if there have been little or no changes to the role and responsibilities.

8. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

8.1 **Flexible Hours:** We acknowledge the potential need for flexible working hours as employees transition back to the workplace. Requests for flexible hours when the staff member has been on sick leave will be considered on a case-by-case basis and agreed upon at the Return-to-Work meeting. A written request must be sent to the HR Department and approved by the relevant Director, line manager and HR/IR Governance Officer.

8.2 **Accommodations:** Employees requiring reasonable accommodations due to health-related issues resulting from their absence will be provided with appropriate support and identified at the Return-to-Work meeting. This accommodation will be in line with equality legislation. A written request can be sent to the HR Department for reasonable accommodations prior to your return to work or they can be decided upon by both parties at the return to work meeting. Theses accommodations are approved by the relevant Director, line manager and HR/IR Governance Officer.

9. CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

9.1 All discussions, meetings, and documentation related to the employee's return to the workplace will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and in compliance with applicable privacy laws.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 We are committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive work environment that accommodates the needs of employees returning from long-term absences. This policy aims to provide a framework for effective reintegration and successful return to work. ETBI values the contributions of all our people and is dedicated to their continued success.

11. REVIEW OF POLICY

11.1 There will be a review of this policy two years after its introduction or earlier if deemed necessary by ETBI management.

APPENDIX A - RETURN TO WORK

Welcome Back:

Begin the meeting by welcoming the employee back and expressing your appreciation for their contribution to ETBI.

Role and Responsibilities:

Review the employee's job role and responsibilities to ensure they have a clear understanding of what is expected upon their return. Discuss any changes or updates that have occurred during their absence. Discuss how they will increase the quantity and complexity of the work over time during the first couple of weeks or as long as is required if a phased return has been identified.

Training and Updates:

Inquire if the employee requires any training or updates to catch up on changes that have taken place in ETBI or their department during their absence.

Flexible Work Arrangements/Accommodations:

Discuss the possible requirement for flexible work arrangements and or accommodations, if applicable, and determine if the employee needs any adjustments to their work schedule or location.

Staff Development:

Discuss the employee's goals previously outlined in the PMDS and add or change them as necessary. Explore opportunities for growth, and development within ETBI.

Feedback and Suggestions:

Encourage the employee to share any feedback, concerns, or suggestions they may have about their role, the team, or ETBI in general.

Support Networks:

Inquire about the employee's support network within and outside ETBI. Discuss the availability of mentorship, coaching, or other resources.

Open Communication and regular check-in.

Outline the next steps, this will include regular discussions to review how the returner is managing their work and health. Open communications and regular check-ins will help to prevent further absence and will ensure that appropriate support is provided and, where necessary, address capability and workability issues early. This will become less frequent over time.

Conclusion:

Thank the employees for their time and participation in the meeting. Reiterate your support for their successful return to the workplace and assure them that ETBI is committed to their well-being and professional growth.