Practical solutions for a successful return-to-work: A hands-on workshop for employers

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Introductions

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Agenda

- Breaking down the return-to-work (RTW) journey

- Building a caring and compliant RTW plan

- Meeting the productivity mandate with a strong RTW strategy

- Q&A

- Interactive workshop

- Key takeaways

Polling question:

Where does your current return-to-work process break down most?

1 | Coordination

2 | Communication

3 | Compliance

4 | Lack of tools

5 | Manager engagement

Why this moment matters

- **High-stakes experience:** Return to work has long-term implications for engagement, performance and retention.

- **Changed circumstances:** Transitioning back to work often happens under different conditions than when the employee left.

- **The good news:** When done right, a proactive return-to-work strategy drives results:

66% of employers rate their RTW programs as very good or better at maintaining employee productivity.[1]

53%

53% of employers agree that supported returns improve workforce stability.[1]

1 Unum Market View Report, The Rapidly Evolving Leave Landscape, 2025.

Breaking down the return-to-work journey

Key phases of leave

Managing employee leave effectively requires breaking down key phases to ensure a smooth and supportive experience for both employees and employers.

Pre-leave planning

Communication during leave

RTW preparation

Re-entry

Post-return support

Common RTW pitfalls

- **Communication gaps that cause confusion**

  - Communication breakdowns between HR systems, managers and employees can lead to unclear return timelines.

  - Lack of coordination can result in employees returning earlier than expected or facing delays due to pending medical clearance.

- **Impact on workforce and operations**

  - Misalignments create unnecessary disruptions in workflow and team planning.

  - Missed opportunities for a smooth and well-supported reentry process can harm morale.

1 Unum Market View Report, Leave and Absence Management, 2025.

42% of employees have questions about the length of time available, accrual and extensions.[1]

Fit-for-duty challenges

Effective RTW processes require clear provider guidance and expert support:

- **Impact of provider notes:** Generic or overly cautious notes can unnecessarily delay employee returns.

  - Without full knowledge of job requirements or accommodations, providers may deem an employee "not fit" when a modified return is possible.

- **Role of leave partners:** Clinical and vocational specialists can help bridge the gap**.**

  - Their expertise provides insight into job demands and available support. They offer solutions to facilitate a safe and timely RTW.

The human element

The RTW transition can cause employees fear and anxiety.
Help alleviate it by:

- **Normalizing the adjustment period:** RTW can take time — recognizing this helps employees feel understood.

  - Encourage gradual transition plans that ease them back into responsibilities.

- **Providing psychological safety:** Foster an environment where employees feel secure expressing challenges.

  - Help them navigate what support may be available through accommodations or flexibility.

- **Offering mental health and wellbeing resources:** Access to counseling, wellness programs and stress management tools can help.

  - Reinforce that seeking support is valued, not stigmatized.

Compassionate leave programs make a difference

A compassionate leave program and thoughtful RTW process not only support employee wellbeing but also create a resilient workforce and a stronger business.

88%   **of employees are willing to stay with an employer that emphasizes their needs.[1]**

- 62% of employers support returnees with flexible schedules, 54% provide EAPs and 51% offer mental health resources.[2]

- 92% of employers agree that employees being supported during the leave and RTW process are more likely to stay at the organization.[2]

Building a caring and compliant RTW plan

Key components of a smart RTW program

- Secure leadership support

- Develop clear policies and processes

- Foster a return-to-work culture

- Train managers and staff

- Appoint a RTW coordinator

- Maintain detailed job descriptions

- Offer modified duty options

- Track and share metrics

Tech can streamline the RTW process

The right technology can make the return-to-work process smoother and more efficient with:

- **Digital documentation:** Provides a simple way to download and submit documents like the Fit-for-Duty form.

- **Centralized leave tracking:** Reduces miscommunications, improves visibility into return timelines and streamlines the transition back to work.

- **Real-time HRIS updates:** Keeps all stakeholders informed, ensuring accurate leave tracking and reduced delays in return planning.

- **Mobile-friendly self-service tools:** Enables uploads, benefit timelines and RTW planning — accessible anytime, anywhere.

1 Unum Market View Report, The Rapidly Evolving Leave Landscape, 2025.

72% of employers say data integration is critical to successful leave management.[1]

Meeting the productivity mandate with a strong RTW strategy

The growing pressure

As workplace priorities shift, HR teams are increasingly balancing productivity demands with employee wellbeing.

- From 2024 to 2025, the number of HR teams prioritizing employee happiness dropped from 58% to 44% while the focus on productivity jumped from 30% to 44%.[1]

- Employers must balance compliant, compassionate leave programs with timely returns while preventing policy misuse.

1 Unum Market View Report, The Rapidly Evolving Leave Landscape, 2025.

Balancing care with efficiency

A successful RTW program strikes the right balance between compassionate support and operational efficiency.

- Compassionate support ensures employees feel valued and **confident in their return**.

- Streamlined processes **reduce delays** and make transitions smoother for everyone involved.

- Technology-driven solutions **enhance coordination, tracking and communication**.

- **Expert guidance** from HR, clinical specialists and vocational experts **helps navigate complexities**.

Why it works

When return to work is handled well, it:

- **Strengthens retention** by fostering a supportive environment that encourages employees to stay.

- **Improves wellbeing** by ensuring employees feel valued, accommodated and prepared for their return.

- **Minimizes disruptions** by creating a smooth transition back to work, maintaining productivity and team stability.

- **Delivers benefits** for both employees and business outcomes through efficient, compassionate return to work.

Questions?

Interactive
Workshop

Choose a scenario to discuss in your group

1. An employee isn't ready to return on the planned date.

2. An employee is returning from a mental health leave.

3. A manager pushes back on modified duty or a flexible return schedule.

4. An employee returns from leave but isn't fully engaged or productive.

Tools and takeaways

What you can implement today:

- Manager toolkits

- Employee return-to-work guides

- Email templates and leave FAQs

Sustainability tips:

- Embed return-to-work planning into standard workflows

- Train managers and HR teams on policies regularly

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