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**Human Resources & Health and Safety**



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Do you employ staff?

## HR Update July 2016

### The Role of Return to Work Interviews

#### What is a Return to Work Interview?

The return to work interview is one of a manager's most helpful tools for managing and monitoring employee absence. A return to work interview is a meeting held between a member of management and an employee who has recently returned to work after a period of absence. This meeting is held at the earliest opportunity, either on the day the employee returns or quickly thereafter, and usually comprises of specific questions. The purpose of these questions is to ascertain the reason for the employee's absence, whether or not they sought medical attention, and whether or not they feel well enough to be attending work. As well as these basic questions, other information can also be noted down, such as how long the employee was absent from work, or how many absences the employee has already had in that year. It may be necessary to agree to some work place "adjustments" that will help an employee settle back in to the workplace. These would be most suitable if the employee was absent from work for a significant period of time, or if the employee was in the process of recovering from surgery or a significant injury e.g. a broken bone. Any information collected in the return to work interview should then be stored confidentially in the employee's file so that it can be called upon when necessary.

#### The Benefits of the Interview

There are many benefits to return to work interviews. Firstly, they help to deter ad-hoc in-genuine

absences. If an employee knows they will have to sit down and talk to their manager about why they were absent from work, it is less likely that they will be brave enough to “pull a sickie” and will hopefully only be absent from work for a genuine illness. The interview can also be helpful in the monitoring of absence and the discovery of any potential patterns. For example, when asking the employee why they were absent it may become apparent that this is their third absence of the year relating to an upset stomach, or you may notice that they regularly suffer from a migraine on the Monday after pay day. Patterns can help you to ascertain whether or not an employee’s absence is likely to be genuine, but they can also help you to discover and explore further a potential illness that your employee may need to investigate further, with your support. In this way they are helpful to both manage and support employees.

Return to work interviews can also be beneficial for the employee – employer relationship. In some cases employees don’t often get the opportunity to sit down and have a one-on-one with their manager (unless this is the result of a disciplinary issue). The interview can be a good opportunity for the employee to open up and share personal information that they may not have been brave enough to share before. For example, an employee may be having regular absences from work because they are struggling with their workload and feeling stressed. Once a manager becomes aware of the problem, they are more able to help and support their employee, which should lead to a stronger relationship and also less absences for the employee in the future.

### Things to Remember

It is always important to be mindful of the following when conducting return to work interviews:

- These interviews are a way to investigate an absence and should not be used as a way to punish or reprimand employees.
- Medical information is sensitive and should always be confidential, so the investigation should be conducted in a suitable location and any notes taken should be filed appropriately.
- Personal feelings should be left at the door. Regardless of whether or not you suspect the employee’s absence is for a genuine or false reason, the interview should be conducted in a professional, objective, and respectful manner.
- When conducting the interview you should ensure that you have all relevant information with you such as copies of any prior return to work interviews. This gives you the opportunity to discuss the employee’s absence record as a whole.
- Discussing a person’s health can be a sensitive issue and therefore a manager needs to prepare themselves for the possibility of upset or anger.

### How Can We Help?

Return for work interviews are a small part of your larger Absence Management Procedure. If you would like us to review your Absence Management Procedure, provide more guidance on return to work

interviews, or if you have any queries relating to the subject of this e-newsletter or any other HR related issue, then please don't hesitate to contact us at [hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk](mailto:hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk).