The do's and dont's of welcoming an employee back after a mental health leave

A return to work after a mental health leave can be daunting for the returning employee and coworkers alike.



Here are a few suggestions to make this transition a smooth one:

Do: Stay in touch with the employee throughout the mental health leave

Work is a core part of our lives. Not only do we spend a major portion of our lives at work, it can provide meaning, relationships, and an important part of our identity. When taking a mental health leave, employees may miss those connections. Stay in touch by sending an occasional email or forwarding a favourite trade journal along with a brief note. Keep your messages upbeat and pressure-free as you don't want to cause undue stress. For example, you might send an article along with a note that says, "Thought you'd find this article about same-day shipping interesting as you've been predicting this for years."

Do: Evaluate the fundamentals

According to Mental Health Works, a project of the Canadian Mental Health Association (Ontario), a successful return to work after a mental health leave depends on three fundamental principles:

- Neither the work nor the employee's presence poses a risk to the employee or others in the workplace
- Meaningful work can be accomplished with appropriate accommodations
- The workplace is welcoming and free of harassment and other factors that could delay or hinder recovery

Don't: Intrude

Remember, you don't need the details of the diagnosis or treatment plan – and your employee most likely wants privacy. What you do need to know is how you can help the employee successfully return to work.

Do: Ask what the employee needs

Determining the level of work and any accommodations requires communication between you, the employee and possibly, the employee's treating physician. Again, you don't need the reasons behind a request. You simply need to know what would help the employee. If the request is reasonable, by all means, make it happen.

Don't: Make assumptions

It's easy to make assumptions about an employee's return to work. For example, you may assume that the employee won't want to interact with others or may need constant supervision. Alternatively, you might assume that a return to work signals the employee is ready to assume all previous duties. Everyone’s situation is different, so keep that in mind when setting expectations.

Do: Work together to create a reintegration plan

Is the employee eager to get back into the workplace full-time or is a gradual transition a better choice? A frank conversation with the employee is in order. Discuss goals, ask about favourite tasks, and draw up a plan together.

Employees can and do return to work after a mental health leave. Your role is an important one in helping employees successfully resume their duties in a positive and productive environment.