

Burnt out? How your employer can help you return to work for the better

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The working world can be a pitiless one, as competition in the marketplace can put significant pressures on employees. Relentless

deadlines, shrinking resources and shifting priorities all take their toll on employees' well-being and mental health. In my home country of Belgium, [more than two thirds \(66.4%\) of individuals on disability for psychological reasons had cases related to depression or burn-out.](#)

These worrisome statistics reflect broader trends across OECD countries, where nearly half (47.6%) of workers with [mental-health](#) problems have been absent from the office in the past year, compared to just [over 30% of those without such issues.](#)

Bringing returning employees (gently) back into the fold

[Studies](#) show that employees who return to work after a mental health-related absence have a high risk of relapse, particularly within the first year. For instance, [90% of relapses occur within three years, with significant numbers occurring within the first 12 months.](#)

A successful reintegration strategy not only helps employees return to their roles but also ensures they remain engaged and productive in the long term. For firms, this involves creating a supportive environment that addresses both the immediate needs of the returning [employee](#) and the ongoing challenges they may face.

Reintegration: Not just between employees and employers

Successful reintegration depends on many factors, but one is crucial yet often overlooked: the dynamics between a returning employee and his or her colleagues.

For the returning worker to be successfully reintegrated, it's essential for

her or his coworkers to understand the importance of their providing support. This understanding is not easy to obtain, because the return-to-work process often involves measures that may appear as "privileges" to others.

Often, returning employees initially work [part-time](#), have tailored work arrangements, and stressful or demanding tasks are limited. If all this happens after a long period of absence—which often increases the pressure on remaining colleagues—it immediately becomes clear that open communication about the returning employee's reintegration with the "whole team" is vital.

A key aspect is managing expectations: if it is unclear to the team what they can and can't expect from the returning colleague in each stage of the reintegration, friction can result. This can be exacerbated when the returning colleague and employer seek—for good reasons—to respect the work limits that have been set for the reintegration.

That's why it's very important to communicate the reasons behind these measures to the team all the while respecting medical privacy. Managers ought to frame these adjustments as necessary for the long-term health and productivity of the employee and the organization, which ultimately benefits all involved.

This also requires clear communication about the returning employee's capabilities and limitations. Colleagues should be informed about the expected pace of reintegration and the importance of supporting their peer. Also think about the best process for work assignments: after an absence caused by stress, it's often wise to have tasks delegated by the employee's direct supervisor rather than making him or her available to all team members.

Part of an overarching reintegration policy

Many companies still don't have well-developed and sustainable reintegration policies. My advice is a good starting point and will work even better as part of the overarching and taboo-lifting absenteeism policy outlined below:

- **Develop an overall supportive culture:** cultivate a workplace culture that values mental health and recognizes the importance of supporting colleagues returning from mental health-related absences.
- **Provide training:** Help managers and team members learn the required skills. These can include recognizing signs of mental-health issues, providing support, and fostering an inclusive environment. Managers play a pivotal role, as their attitudes and actions can significantly influence the success of reintegration.
- **Promote open communication about individual needs:** Transparency helps build trust and reduces stigma, particularly when an employee temporarily leaves the workplace. After his or her return, regular meetings and feedback sessions during their reintegration help ensure that any issues are promptly addressed.
- **Implement flexible policies:** Adapt policies to accommodate the needs of returning employees, such as flexible working hours or gradual increases in workload. Tailored work arrangements help returning employees ease back into their roles without overwhelming them.
- **Leverage peer support:** Colleagues who have gone through similar experiences can offer valuable insights and emotional support, helping to normalize the challenges associated with returning to work after a mental health-related absence.

Strategic necessity

Sustainable reintegration is not only a matter of compassion but also a strategic necessity for employee retention and organizational resilience. By focusing on supportive colleague dynamics and addressing the unique challenges of reintegration, European company leaders and HR professionals can significantly enhance their retention efforts.

Understanding and implementing effective reintegration strategies will lead to healthier workplaces, lower turnover rates, and ultimately, a more robust and committed workforce.

The responsibility for successful reintegration extends beyond the individual and their direct manager to the entire organization. Creating a supportive, understanding, and flexible workplace environment is key to ensuring that employees not only return to work but thrive in their roles.

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