Returning to work following an absence can often be the most critical component of your employee’s recovery. A timely and safe return to work can help injured staff and faculty recover more quickly. This guide outlines steps you may take to help make your employee’s return to work smooth and successful. It provides information on actions you may want to consider before they return to work, on their first day back and throughout their return to work period. Participating in the Return to Work Program will not only benefit your employee’s health but may also help boost morale and productivity in your department.

**Key concepts to help you successfully manage a return to work**

**Work is a key part of the recovery.** Gradually incorporating work demands into your employee’s recovery may help to improve their chances of staying healthy. Work may benefit their overall health by providing structure and routine, social interaction, physical and mental stimulation and a sense of accomplishment.

**Returning to work may require an adjustment period.** Your employee may not be able to fully perform the physical and mental demands of their job in the same way as prior to their medical absence. Their attending physician may recommend a temporary accommodation to help your employee gradually reintegrate into the hours and duties required for their job. The Return to Work and Disability Management Office is keen in working with you, your employee and their physician to find a suitable accommodation while they are still recovering from an injury or illness.

**A team approach to a RTW program works best**

The team generally includes the employee, the supervisor, the Return to Work Coordinator and when requested by the employee, their Union or Association Representative.

**Stay connected and keep lines of communication open**

To help make your employee’s return to work successful, it is important that you stay connected with your employee while he/she is off on sick leave. Talk to him/her about how you can support and facilitate their return to work. Arrange for regular Return to Work meetings with your employee and the Return to Work/Disability Management Coordinator (RTWDMC). The purpose of these meetings is to:

- review medical information and the return to work plan and to understand how you will evaluate success and address issues
- discuss things like workload, job duties and performance to make sure your expectations and your employee’s expectations align
- address problems early so they don’t negatively impact your employee’s recovery
- identify if there are workplace factors causing problems and to proactively address these with your employee and come up with solutions together
- discuss any assistance or reintegration time/resources that you may be able to offer within reason
- encourage your employee to get back into a regular work routine.
- review your employee’s return to work plan on a regular basis. A gradual return to work is intended to be temporary.

**What you can do to assist your employee with their return to work after an injury or illness?**

1. Request your employee to provide you with a medical clearance to return to work in advance of their return to work date. This will allow you to make any arrangements necessary to facilitate their return to work. It may include scheduling of other staff, procurement of special equipment, etc.

2. The medical clearance to return to work must clearly outline any limitations and/or restrictions of the duties and/or hours and the length of time that your employee will require to return to work. The Attending Physicians’ Statement Form is a useful tool for your employee’s physician to provide all the information necessary for their return to work. You may access a copy at: [http://www.sfu.ca/human-resources/forms/index.html](http://www.sfu.ca/human-resources/forms/index.html)

3. Attend regular Return to Work meetings with your employee and the Return to Work/Disability Management Coordinator (RTWDMC). The purpose of these meetings is to:
   - review medical information and the return to work plan and to understand how you will evaluate success and address issues
   - discuss things like workload, job duties and performance to make sure your expectations and your employee’s expectations align
   - address problems early so they don’t negatively impact your employee’s recovery
   - identify if there are workplace factors causing problems and to proactively address these with your employee and come up with solutions together
   - discuss any assistance or reintegration time/resources that you may be able to offer within reason
   - encourage your employee to get back into a regular work routine.
   - review your employee’s return to work plan on a regular basis. A gradual return to work is intended to be temporary.
TIPS

- It is important that you address problems early. If there are workplace factors that may affect or exacerbate your employee’s condition, talk to the RTWDMC and develop strategies to deal with these.
- Remind your employee to advise their attending physician that the University has a Return to Work Program and that in most cases modified duties and/or hours are available. Talk to the RTWDMC to help you draft an Offer of Modified Duties Letter to your employee.

Does your employee require a temporary workplace accommodation?
The purpose of a temporary workplace accommodations is to help remove return to work barriers thus allowing your employee to return to work as soon as possible. Temporary accommodations are assessed on a case-by-case basis supported by satisfactory medical information. Accommodation examples may include the following:

- Hours: non-standard work week and/or non-standard breaks during the work day.
- Duties: modification of work tasks; re-assignment of tasks during the return to work; allowing extra time to complete tasks.
- Modification of work environment: lighting; workstation; equipment; etc.

What is your role as a manager?
You play a critical role in your employee’s return to work. Maintain an open approach.

- Sometimes your employee may not feel comfortable disclosing the details of their health problem. Find a balance between his/her privacy and trying to understand their situation.
- You are entitled to know how your employee’s medical condition affects his/her ability to work, including his/her prognosis to return to work—this will allow you to make appropriate operational decisions. Your employee is entitled to keep his/her specific diagnosis and/or treatment confidential.

What should you tell your employee’s co-workers?
Details of your employee’s absence are private and confidential. Only the employee can determine whether or not he/she wants to share this information, and with whom. If you are unsure of the best approach, talk to the RTWDMC.

Is your employee’s medical information confidential?
Your employee may choose not to share his/her medical information such as diagnosis and treatment with you. Therefore, your employee has the option of providing his/her medical information directly to the RTWDMC. The RTWDMC will then share the doctor’s feedback on work limitations and restrictions, prognosis for recovery, prognosis for return to work and specific needs for work accommodation with you.

Where can you go if you need more support?

- Return to Work/Disability Management Office
  
  Dennis Leung, Coordinator  
  Ph.: 778.782.9498
  
  Harro Lauprecht, Manager  
  Ph.: 778.782.6698

  Confidential Fax: 778.782.6873

Some helpful online resources:

- www.sfu.ca/human-resources.html  
  (SFU Human Resources Department)

- www.mentalhealthworks.ca  
  (Mental Health Works – a great resource for tools, tips and information on mental health and the workplace)

- http://www.iwh.on.ca  
  (Institute for Health and Work – a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, protecting and improving the health of workers)

  (Public Health Agency of Canada)