Rehabilitation: return to work, planning and support

Rehabilitation is a process to help individuals return to, or remain at work following a period of absence, or if they are experiencing a health issue that may affect their ability to work. The complexity of the process can be influenced by the nature of the absence, the level of incapacity and the type of role the individual is employed to undertake.

There is also the consideration of the ongoing health of the individual and barriers, such as environment and logistics, which may create challenges to overcome. The steps below give an overview of the considerations in return to work (RTW) planning.

Step 1

A conversation will take place with the employee and often their employer, discussing the nature of their job, details of their illness/injury and how this has impacted on their functionality. An understanding of the job role is essential as well as accommodations that can and cannot be considered when supporting the individual back into the workplace, (such as working from home, changes to environment etc).

Step 2

Medical recommendations from treating clinicians should be considered within the return to work planning. If a Rehabilitation Consultant or Occupational Health Clinician is creating the return to work plans, it may be helpful, in some more complex cases, for them to liaise directly with a treating clinician to better understand the nature of the condition and treatment, and the impact this will have on return to work planning. It may also be in order to seek advice, guidance or strategies to help with managing the return to work process.

Step 3

Access to appropriate resources related to the medical condition should be considered in the RTW plan to assist both the employer and employee. For example the 'Access to work' (www.gov.co.uk) website, can assist with special equipment, adaptations in the work place or assistance with travel to and from the work place.

Step 4

Return to work plan is drafted and tailored to the individual's needs, with achievable work objectives to be set by the employer. The structure of the plan should not only fit the needs of the individual but the business as well. Risk assessments should be considered in the plan as well as how progress will be monitored.

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Step 5

Any performance or work-related issues should be explored by the employee and their line manager and an approach agreed for resolution where at all possible, prior to the implementation of any graded return to work plans to ensure its success. Openness in communication is essential and any performance management processes should be placed on hold until the graded return to work has been completed. This situation should be made clear to the employee from the outset.

Step 6

A call or meeting with the employee and employer, often together for a holistic discussion, with the Rehabilitation Consultant is arranged in order to discuss and agree the proposed plan and clarify the expectations, boundaries and responsibilities. A clear agenda should be set out and the opportunity given to raise questions or concerns as well as alternative strategies.

Step 7

Implementation of the plan moves forwards and communication becomes key to assessing progress, pitfalls and needs. Any adjustments can be considered, and made if necessary, to keep the plan on track. The Rehabilitation Consultant will organise this periodically with the employee, their line manager and/or a HR representative.

Step 8

Relapse prevention (absence) is addressed and a management plan is agreed to identify risks and prevent relapse. This can include input from treating practitioners.

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