

Return to Work for Long Term Absent Employees

Deliverable 6.1

Employers Good Practice Guide

RETURN Project

Work Research Centre Dublin

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Introduction

This document sets out the elements of good practice in relation to the reintegration of people who are long term absent (LTA) from work due to health problems. It is targeted at employers in particular, but may also be used by other stakeholders involved in the process of reintegration to identify and promote good practice in the area.

Of course, effective reintegration practices have benefits for both the individual and the society at large, as well as for the employer. Such benefits include reduced stress, improved income prospects for the individual and reduced costs, expansion of the labour market and promotion of participation in the labour market for society as a whole.

This Guide focuses on three main elements of good practice from the employers perspective. These are:

- Policy for reintegration
- Infrastructure and resources
- Reintegration strategies

However, before examining these areas in detail, it is important to set out the context within which good reintegration practice can take place.

What is Long Term Absence ?

This Guide is concerned with the reintegration of people who have been long-term absent from work for health reasons. There is much debate about the precise definition of long-term absence, but expert opinion surveyed by the RETURN project has defined LTA as being absent from work for more than 6 weeks on a continuous basis. People who are absent for more than 6 weeks have much higher chances of never working again when compared to those who are absent for less than 6 weeks.

What is reintegration ?

Reintegration refers to the process of ensuring that employees who have become long-term absent are returned to work in a timely and safe manner. This process involves a number of activities, including medical rehabilitation, vocational rehabilitation, which generally take place outside of the workplace, and the range of activities which take place within the workplace which enable the employee to work at a suitable job in a suitable work environment.

Why is reintegration important?

- *The costs of LTA are high and rising* - LTA has many costs associated with it – human financial and societal. For the employer there are direct costs associated with lost production and productivity and the indirect costs associated with replacing workers with disability and administration. For the individual, there are both health and financial costs while for society at large there are considerable costs associated with income replacement, treatment and rehabilitation as well as those associated with the loss of human potential to society. These costs are high and rising, as the workforce ages.
- *LTA from work accounts for the majority of days lost through absence* - even though short term absence constitutes by far the majority of spells of absence from work, LTA accounts for by far the majority of lost days. Effective early reintegration practices considerably reduce the numbers of lost days and their associated costs.

- *The ageing of the workforce increases the probability of LTA* - The workforce in Europe is ageing rapidly, and older workers are more likely to suffer health breakdowns. However, this process is not inevitable – health breakdowns can be prevented and effective reintegration practices can ensure that people who have had health breakdowns can return to work in a meaningful and productive manner.
- *Equality legislation requires equal treatment of people with disabilities* - Recent legislative developments in the area of equality requires workplaces to be free of discrimination against people with disabilities. This provides a legislative boost to the process of reintegration.
- *Reintegration works* – recent evidence from a number of countries strongly suggests that early reintegration of people with disabilities works, once it is done in a timely and safe manner. This helps reduce both the human and financial costs associated with LTA for all of the stakeholders concerned.
- *Fulfilment of equality policies* - by retaining staff who have become ill or injured, employers can help meet the requirements of equality policy
- *Corporate social responsibility* - reintegrating staff who have become ill or injured contributes to corporate policies of social responsibility and to the improvement of the public image of the employer
- *Reduction of insurance claims* - a good reintegration policy lessens the chances of employees making insurance claims in situations where employer liability is an issue. This can reduce the costs of claims, the associated legal costs and can help reduce insurance premia as well.
- *Improving public image* - Good reintegration practices benefit the organisation in terms of the image it portrays to the workforce and the general public.
- *Consistent with Quality management* - Good reintegration policies are both consistent with and an important part of the Quality Management process within organisations. They help improve the 'human' part of the production process.
- *Improvements in productivity* - Effective reintegration promotes productivity not only by having workers return to work earlier, but also by reducing replacement costs for workers who don't return to work.
- *Improvements in HRM practice* - Good reintegration policy improves the practice of HRM and contributes to an improved industrial relations atmosphere within the organisation.

Benefits of reintegration

The benefits of enabling the timely and safe reintegration of people who have become long-term absent from work for health reasons are clear. They include:

- *Retention of valued staff* - In these days of high labour turnover, employers can retain valued staff even after they have become ill or injured through effective reintegration processes
- *Reduction or elimination of replacement costs* - if employers can retain ill or injured staff they automatically eliminate the need to hire new staff

What can the employer do ?

Employers and HRM managers in particular, play a key role in promoting the early and timely return to work of employees who have become long term absent from work due to illness or injury. They can do so in a number of ways, by

examining their current policies in the area and creating new ones if appropriate, by examining the infrastructure and resources they have for managing the return to work process and by examining the reintegration strategies used to monitor and control the process.

This Guide outlines key recommendations in each of these areas and by following these recommendations, employers can ensure that the reintegration processes for which they are responsible for work in an efficient and effective manner.

However, it is useful to examine the sequence of events which usually occur following a serious illness or injury to an employee. This process of reintegration activities provides a framework for understanding what the employer can do to promote effective integration.

The process of reintegration

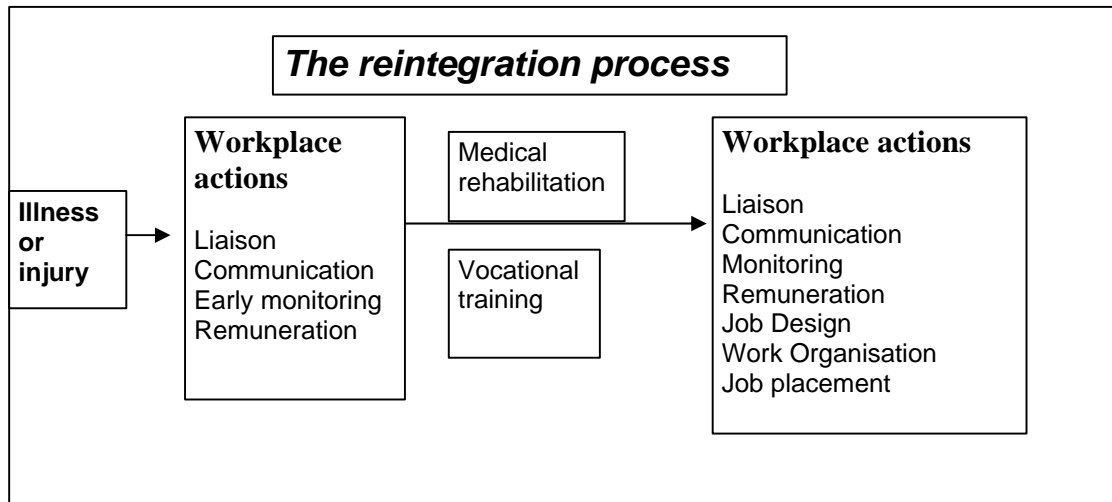
The reintegration process and the activities which should take place within the workplace are described in Figure 1.

When a worker becomes ill or injured, necessitating absence from work, the workplace can undertake a number of activities which will serve to reduce the length of time the worker is absent and to increase the prospects of successful reintegration. In particular, the employer should communicate actively with the worker, establishing the status of the worker's health, and ensuring the worker is aware the employer is committed to the reintegration process. Also, the employer should take an active role in liaising with the agencies responsible for medical rehabilitation and vocational rehabilitation. These activities are best organised through the appointment of an employee with responsibility for overseeing and managing the reintegration process.

When the worker has received treatment for their illness or injury, the rehabilitation process begins. This involves, on the one hand, efforts to restore as much functional capacity as possible to the ill or injured worker, and on the other, to provide the employee with new or additional work related skills which help them to adjust to any residual incapacity they may have. There are often problems of co-ordination in this process, between the two types of rehabilitation agency and with the workplace. It is essential that the employer takes an active interest in these processes – otherwise the links to the workplace may be broken or the rehabilitation process may not be focused on an early and timely return to work.

When the employee is ready to return to work, the workplace can undertake a number of activities which will ease the return to work process. Chief among these is the process of job placement, i.e. ensuring that the returnee is placed in a job appropriate to their abilities. This is supported by the processes of job design and work organisation, i.e. arranging the tasks which make up a job, and the relationship between that job and the overall work process for purposes of ensuring that job demands are matched to the abilities of the returning worker. In addition, any accessibility issues or assistive technologies needed by the returning employee are catered for by this activity.

Figure 1. Outline of the reintegration process



It is often the case that people returning to work are unable to take up their former jobs due to reduced capacities. This may be a temporary or a permanent phenomenon. In such cases it is appropriate to assign the returnee to partial work duties, within their former job if that is possible, or in another job which is more appropriate to their capacities and abilities.

One important element of job placement concerns the situation where the returnee cannot return to his or her original job. In such cases, the employer should assist in finding another job either in-house or with another employer.

The employer should also engage in a number of monitoring and communication activities when the employee returns. In particular, there is a need to monitor the progress of the returnee in their work with the purpose of identifying problems which need to be resolved.

Policies for effective reintegration

There are a number of policies which the employer can initiate which lead to the establishment of an effective reintegration process. These include:

- Human resource management policy
- Reintegration management policy
- Occupational health and safety policy
- Equality policy

Reintegration Management Policy

The basis for good practice in relation to managing the early and timely return to work of people who have become long term absent is a sound and comprehensive workplace policy on these issues. There are a number of strands to policy which are important in this regard. Some of these policies may already exist within the enterprise, while others will need to be created or amended to ensure that it is clear that early return to work is a goal of the organisation to which it gives its full support.

The overall aim of policy is to ensure that there is a clear statement that early return to work is the norm within the organisation and to ensure that there are the necessary infrastructures, skills and practices in place to realise this aim. This policy (reintegration management policy), should incorporate the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders within the enterprise who are to

be involved, the ways they should interact, the activities they should undertake, the resources available to them and the types of outcomes they should achieve.

The main areas through which reintegration management policy operates:

- Human Resource management
- Occupational health and safety
- Equality
- Training and personnel development

Occupational health and safety policy

Occupational health and safety policy is generally concerned with the control and management of occupational risks. However, it can also play a major role in the reintegration process through the monitoring of the returnees health and wellbeing, through assessing the risks associated with the job which the returnee is working at and through communicating to management and co-workers the capabilities of the returning worker. Policy on occupational health and safety needs to be altered to reflect this expanded role.

It should also be made clear that occupational health and safety practice plays an important role in relation to the prevention of occupation related illnesses or accident. This preventive role, which also incorporates workplace health promotion, seeks to prevent the need for rehabilitation and reintegration in the first instance.

Human resource management policy

The Human Resource Management function is the best place to locate responsibility for the reintegration process as it is generally responsible for many of the processes and personnel which need to be involved in the reintegration process.

Critical elements of HRM policy which contribute to the positive reintegration process include:

- Employment contracts
- Remuneration
- Job design
- Work organisation
- Liaison with external agencies
- Job placement
- Reintegration management
- Incentives
- Joint labour-management agreements
- Occupational health services
- Training and development
- Safe and early intervention
- Transitional work

An important function of the HRM department concerns the communication of reintegration management policy throughout the organisation. This helps to overcome one of the main barriers to integration – lack of knowledge and awareness of the process of reintegration which often leads to bias and discrimination against the individual.

Equality policy

The new developments at legislative level in relation to equality policy need to be reflected at enterprise level. These developments provide the opportunity and the obligation to incorporate improved treatment of workers who are returning to work following illness or injury. At minimum, equality policy at company level should state the commitment of the company to provide equal opportunities for returning workers to have access to suitable employment.

Reintegration strategies

Of course, policies operating in isolation will not be enough to ensure that good practice takes place - it is also necessary to resource these policies and to adopt a proactive management practice to ensure their implementation. Effective reintegration management practice requires a proactive management policy and methods which places the reintegration of ill or injured workers high on the agenda of the organisation. This can be achieved through the following methods:

- *Co-ordination of the reintegration process* - making an explicit commitment to this role signifies that the organisation takes the issue seriously, and it provides a focal point for the reintegration process (details on the duties of this role are outlined in the next section).
- *Development of clear responsibilities and reporting relationships* - reintegration is best situated within the HRM function. Establishing clear responsibilities and reporting relationships enables the effectiveness of the function to be monitored and assessed.
- *Communication of policy to all levels of the organisation* - One of the main barriers to successful reintegration concerns the level of awareness amongst all levels of the organisation about what a successful reintegration policy involves. Active management requires that all parts of the organisation are aware of the policy and their responsibilities within it, thereby reducing the possibility of barriers being erected to reintegration.
- *Active monitoring of contacts with external rehabilitation agencies* - Suppliers of medical and vocational rehabilitation services play an important role in the reintegration process and there is a danger that the employer relinquishes responsibility ent-

irely to these agencies during the rehabilitation period. It should not be assumed that these agencies are necessarily working towards reintegration into the workplace. They therefore need active monitoring to ensure that the reintegration process proceeds as smoothly as possible.

- *Development of appropriate skills* - There are likely to be skills and knowledge gaps in the organisations capacity to deliver effective reintegration management. These skills gaps may relate to the technical aspects of the process (e.g. job design, work organisation, assistive technologies), or they may relate to attitudes and knowledge (e.g. bias or discrimination against workers with disabilities). The employer needs to commit to training programmes to overcome these deficits if the reintegration process is to be managed effectively.
- *Adopt a case management approach* - This means that the organisation should take a systematic approach to the entire reintegration process for each case of LTA. The approach involves liaising with the person involved, monitoring the agencies involved in rehabilitation, internal communications and liaison with management and supervisors, identifying and designing appropriate work and jobs for the returnee etc.
- *Assessment of costs and benefits* - measuring the costs and benefits of the reintegration programme is desirable from the perspective of developing the business case for the programme. Both direct and indirect costs and benefits should be taken into account as should monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits.

In essence, the approach taken to managing the reintegration process should be similar to the management of any

other personnel issue in the organisation. It should involve policy, planning, resourcing and monitoring actions. Following this course enables the reintegration programme not only to achieve maximum effectiveness but it also to enable its effectiveness to be demonstrated.

Infrastructure and resources

In order to ensure an efficient reintegration process, adequate resources and infrastructures need to be established by the employer. Appropriate resources include:

- *Budget* – Successful reintegration programmes need an adequate and specific budget if they are to function effectively.
- *Training* – training for the function of reintegration management is essential, as this is a relatively new concept and it is unlikely that the necessary skills would be available without such training.
- *Designated reintegration management function* - Research has shown that where there is a designated person or team responsible for managing the reintegration process, the process becomes more effective. This function is responsible for all aspects of the process, i.e. for maintaining contact with the ill or injured employee, liaison with external agencies providing medical and vocational rehabilitation, co-ordination of internal services and functions (OSH, HRM, training, line management) and provision of job design and job placement services.
- Joint Management-Labour support - Where there is regular liaison between management and labour, it is useful to conclude an agreement re-

garding return to work practices in this forum. This helps ensure wide support for the policy of reintegration.

- Management Information System - It is vital to have a management information system which gives reliable and timely information on health related absenteeism. Important types of information include duration and frequency of absenteeism, causes of absenteeism, and case details.

The RETURN Project

The RETURN Project has been part-funded by the European Commission under the 'Improving the Socio-economic knowledge base' programme (Project Number SERD - 1999 - 00075). It took place in six European Countries:

- Ireland - Work Research Centre, Dublin, University College, Dublin
- Finland - Social Insurance Institution, Turku; Fortum Oyj, Porvoo
- Netherlands - University of Maastricht
- Austria - IBE, Linz
- Germany - Fachhochschule Heidelberg
- Italy - University of Cassino

In addition to this Employers Good Practice Guide, the project has produced the following products:

- The RETURN protocol
- Easy Access Guides
- Analysis of national social insurance systems
- Training specification for rehabilitation/ reintegration of LTA
- Policy guidelines
- Expert survey of approaches to LTA and return to work strategies

For more information on these products, contact:

Dr. Donal McAnaney

REHAB/UCD

e-mail: d.mcananey@rehab.ie

Or visit the RETURN web site:

www.wrc-research.ie/return