

## **Absence discussions**

The direct manager has primary responsibility for monitoring sick employees. The manager is expected to maintain regular contact with his/her sick subordinate and they are jointly expected to do everything they can in order to bring about the quickest possible resumption of work.

See also the 'division of roles during the first two years of sickness' and the 'sickness step by step plan'.

After every contact the manager records all the agreements made with the employee in DossierManager.

The manager will conduct an absence discussion with the employee from the first sickness report. There are various types of absence discussion that are conducted during the monitoring of sick employees, for example:

- Absence discussion upon first sickness report;
- Contact during sickness, follow-up discussion;
- Discussion in the case of frequent absence;
- Discussion upon resumption of work, discussion upon return.

For the manager it is important to be well aware beforehand of the type of discussion concerned.

This guideline contains tips for support in regard to conducting the various discussions.

### **The first absence discussion: reporting sick by telephone**

- Does the employee call at an inconvenient moment? Tell him/her that you will call back that same day and state the hour;  
During the discussion:
- Display interest and involvement during the discussion; be correct and friendly;
- Listen carefully to what is happening (by asking open questions). Is perhaps the sickness related to work? NB The employee is not obliged to talk about the nature of his/her sickness; medical information is privacy sensitive. The goal is to assess the seriousness of the absence and what work options there are at that moment;
- Ask about the probable duration of the sickness absence (when does the employee expect to be back and what type of work he/she can do). This information is needed in order to organize the work properly and to do something about possible causes;
- Express willingness to solve any problems. Ask whether the employee needs support in order to resume his/her work;
- Ask whether the employee is receiving medical treatment and what he/she can still do. Can he/she walk, travel, sit and stand?
- Ask what has to be organized at work. Do activities have to be transferred or appointments have to be rescheduled?
- Make agreements about further contact: when will there be a follow-up discussion, how often will there be contact, who will take the initiative, when will the employee be back at work, would the employee like to be visited at home?
- The agreements are not noncommittal. Does the employee expect to be better within a week? If so, ask him/her to call if the absence nevertheless lasts longer.
- The employee must not feel obliged to make any statement about the nature and cause of the sickness. The sickness report discussion is primarily about showing interest about the employee and establishing the consequences of the absence to the work. Wish the employee a speedy recovery!

#### Tips:

- Do not act as though you are the occupational health officer;
- Make it clear to the employee that you will search jointly for possibilities to resume work;
- Give the employee the opportunity to tell his/her story (let off steam if appropriate), remain calm. Do not get into arguments.

## Contact during sickness - follow-up discussion

- Agree in what way and how often there will be contact during the sickness. Ask regularly about how things are going. Display interest. Maintain focus on the goal - appropriate and speedy resumption of work. Ask once again about the nature and duration of the sickness or ask whether the agreements made previously have been fulfilled. Is the employee able to do parts of his/her job? If so, get the employee to come back to work. If he/she cannot do his/her own job, can he/she do other work? Then make the follow-up steps clear to the employee;
- Weekly contact is necessary during the first month. After that there is contact at least every two weeks;
- The manager can also incidentally go to visit the employee at home, but never contrary to the employee's wishes;
- The manager must be able to take the actions that the law requires in the event of long-term sickness absence. If it is clear that the employee cannot return to his/her own job just like that, appropriate other work will have to be sought. If this is not successful inside the company, external options need to be searched for;
- In the case of long-term absence, a follow-up discussion takes more time (reintegration discussion), in particular in regard to translating agreements about the plan of attack (for example changes to the activities, social-medical interventions) into concrete agreements, for instance the type of work and working times (some tasks, whole days or part-time and for which period), and specific arrangements about introduction, induction and evaluation;
- As the manager, remain as well informed as possible by maintaining contact with the employee;
- Discuss during work meetings the agreements you have made with the sick employee. It is no secret that colleagues know which activities their sick colleague can still carry out;
- Let colleagues also express their interest from time to time. A basket of fruit, a card and regular telephone calls can prevent the sick employee from feeling isolated;
- The employee should be expected to also seek and maintain contact;
- In the meantime try to get the sick employee back to work as soon as possible (medically considered);
- Ask about which changes are needed to enable the return. For example activities, working times, transport, workload or a gradual return to the workplace;
- The purpose of the follow-up discussion is to maintain contact (catch up), display interest, assess the expected duration of the sickness and discuss transfer of work or replacement;
- The set way to end the follow-up discussion is to make an agreement about what happens next.
- Wish the employee a speedy recovery!

### **The discussion in the case of frequent short-term absence**

- Frequent short-term absence is a signal that something is wrong and can ultimately result in long-term absence. Better control of absence can be achieved by making sickness absence behavior a subject for discussion. Use the facts as the basis - the actual absence figures - and show them to the employee. How often and how long has the employee been absent recently? What reasons did the employee give? Ask the employee about the cause of and the solution for the absence. If desired give the employee time to reflect and make a follow-up appointment;
- Indicate the disruptive effects of the absences on the work and colleagues;
- Consider whether and what the employees' colleagues should know about the absence and possibly discuss this with the frequently absent employee;
- Give the employee the opportunity to give his/her side of the story. In many cases there are emotional factors behind frequent sickness absence, so therefore accept it if the employee lets off steam;
- Establish the cause: is it to do with the employee, the content of the job or the environment?
- Search jointly for solutions. If the employee feels he/she is being taken seriously, the result of the discussion will be better. Although the employee is under no obligation to discuss the nature of the incapacity, it is important that he/she realizes that possible solutions can be found for work-related causes;
- Make specific agreements about further actions. This could, for example, take the form of work-related support, or in the person of the occupational health officer, or social welfare;
- Discuss the implications if the absence pattern does not change. If the employee has good reasons why his/her absence pattern cannot change, a solution will have to be sought, such as a different job. The lack of valid reasons can lead to disciplinary measures. Be clear about this;
- Make an appointment for an evaluation discussion;
- Prepare minutes of the absence discussion, including the agreements and the date, and put them in DossierManager. The employee and the manager both sign the minutes. If the employee is not prepared to do this, get him/her to sign that he/she has seen or received them, or give him/her the minutes in the presence of a third party. This is necessary with a view to possible disciplinary measures.

### **The discussion upon resumption of work, discussion upon return**

- This discussion takes place upon, before or immediately after the recovery report and is intended primarily to reassure the employee so that he/she feels at home again in the workplace as soon

as possible. After a 'cold' this is quick and informal, but after a more long lasting illness it is important to spend more time catching up;

- The discussion upon return is intended to brief the employee about the status of the work and to make agreements about resuming work. Is there, for instance, a temporary modification in the portfolio of tasks? Discuss the current situation in the workplace: which activities have been transferred, which have been left undone, which changes there have been etc.
- Ask the employee how things are going, give him/her a warm welcome;
- Is the employee still receiving treatment? Can the manager or the Arbodienst [working conditions service] provide support?
- Discuss with the employee how to get back into the job. Where is he/she going to start?
- Ask what he/she thinks of the monitoring and support experienced, and ask for suggestions for improvements.
- Schedule a follow-up discussion if necessary.