

# *Long-Term Absence Due to Illness – Support Material for Managers*

## **Purpose**

To support managers in:

- Treating the employee in a respectful, safe, and professional manner
- Maintaining appropriate contact during sick leave
- Managing the situation within the work community
- Planning and enabling a sustainable return to work

## **1. The Manager's Role During an Employee's Long-Term Sick Leave**

As a manager, you are responsible for:

- Treating the employee with dignity and empathy
- Handling work-related issues and practical arrangements
- Cooperating with HR and occupational health care
- Ensuring the functioning of the work community

It is always permitted and often necessary to ask for support from HR, occupational health care, or your own manager.

## **2. When You Become Aware of Illness or Long-Term Absence**

- Listen actively and be present
- Show trust, empathy, and respect
- Accept that the employee's reactions may be strong and fragmented. In a state of shock, the employee may share things very openly and in detail.
- Explain that the employee is not obliged to disclose details about his/her health condition or diagnosis. Discussions should take place at the level the employee is willing to share.
- Manage your own emotions and respect your own boundaries. As a manager, you are not a therapist. Refer the employee to occupational health care when needed.

## **Avoid**

- Diminishing the employee's experience by comparing it with your own or others' illnesses. **Note!** *Never share other subordinates' or colleagues' health information.*
- Giving medical advice
- Pressuring the employee for information or decisions

The focus should be on finding solutions together, not on "saying the right things." Do not make assumptions – each situation is unique. People react to and cope with situations differently. The length of sick leave and how the employee can return to work will become clearer over time.

## **3. Contact During Sick Leave**

Most employees appreciate gentle and regular contact. Consider how you would yourself like to be contacted.

### **Good Practice**

- Agree with the employee on how and how often you will stay in contact
- Always ask whether the timing is suitable or whether you should contact them later
- If calling does not feel natural in all situations, text messages or a card may also be appreciated. Flowers may be sent at colleagues' own expense.
- Treat the employee as before, he/she is still the same person
- Encourage the employee to reach out if work-related questions arise during sick leave. Remind the employee that he/she does not need to worry about his/her work tasks while on sick leave.

### **Remember**

- Some illnesses may involve significant fluctuations in energy and mood
- Keep in touch. Continuous contact also makes it easier to address more difficult issues later on.

## 4. Confidentiality and the Work Community

The employee always has the right to privacy and personal integrity. The employee may not want colleagues to know about the illness. Respect the employee's wishes.

### Principles

- No information about illness may be shared without the employee's consent
- Ask how – or whether – the absence should be communicated. You can act as a messenger if the employee wishes. Clearly state that you have the employee's consent.
- Do not prohibit the employee from telling colleagues him/herself
- Do not inform external parties about sick leave, even if it appears in the employee's automatic email reply. Instead, say that the person is currently unavailable.

### The Work Community

- Long-term absence often affects colleagues and their workload
- Pay attention to workload and the team's need for support
- Contact HR early and with a low threshold

## 5. Salary and Practical Issues

In cooperation with HR:

- Ensure that the employee receives information about salary and benefits. Ask the employee to contact HR with any questions. Clarity reduces anxiety and creates a sense of security.
- Remind the employee to report the absence in Mepco and to update the situation if sick leave is extended.
- If sick leave lasts longer than 5 calendar days, a medical certificate is required. The certificate should be sent to [humanresources@hanken.fi](mailto:humanresources@hanken.fi) via **secure email** or **by post in a sealed envelope** to HR.

The manager is not entitled to see the medical certificate but is entitled to know the duration of sick leave. HR is entitled to view and process medical certificates for payroll purposes (diagnosis code and time period).

## 6. Planning the Return to Work

A successful return to work requires **planning, flexibility, and cooperation**.

### Early Preparation

- Start planning the return to work well in advance
- Inform the work community about any work arrangements or adjustments (secure confidentiality)
- Agree in advance with the employee how you will proceed when returning to work becomes relevant

### Cooperation with Occupational Health Care

- Occupational health care supports both the employer and the employee. It can assist in assessing work ability and is familiar with methods and processes related to returning to work.
- Prepare for and actively participate in work ability or network meetings. The employee may experience these meetings as demanding.

### The Manager's Responsibilities

- Investigate possible work adaptations and arrangements (e.g. task adjustments, workload, working hours, on-site presence / remote work)
- Listen to the employee's wishes
- Ensure a realistic workload
- Observe and support work ability, for example through:
  - frequent and regular one-to-one discussions, especially at the beginning
  - monitoring flex-balance

**Contact HR** in advance if you are planning changes to working hours, work tasks, or remote work that will also affect the rest of the team.

### Documentation

Document what you have agreed on together. Create a clear plan (e.g. via email) covering the return to work, adjustments and arrangements of tasks, changes to working hours, follow-up points, responsibilities, etc. A **documented plan** supports both the employee and the employer and reduces the risk of agreements being forgotten in everyday workload.

## **7. The Manager's Own Work Ability**

Supporting an employee on long-term sick leave can be emotionally demanding.

### **Remember**

- Set boundaries for yourself
- Use available support functions. Contact your own manager, HR and/or occupational health care.
- You are responsible for the process, not for curing the illness
- Asking for help is part of professional leadership