

Theme booklet for managers

The good interview on absence

This booklet is intended for managers who need to conduct an interview with an employee who is frequently absent or experiencing long-term absence. The booklet provides inspiration and specific proposals on how you, as a manager, can tackle the interview. The booklet is part of a series, and you may therefore benefit from reading the entire series, which deals in greater detail with preparation for the interview—including practical tips and how to use the log book to note down your observations.

Introduction

As a manager, you must be mindful of your employees' absence. An important tool for retaining a sick employee is a process of dialogue between you and the employee. Illness constitutes legal grounds for absence, and you must not ask direct questions about the nature of the illness unless the employee is open about this. You may therefore find it difficult to know how to plan and conduct an interview. As a manager, you also have a special obligation to intervene in time if you have a suspicion that absence—whether short- or long-term—may be due to factors in the workplace.

An interview with the employee will often help to clarify the cause of absence, e.g. illness, stress or problems in their private lives—and may also help to reduce sickness absence by suggesting alternative work routines, changes in the performance of work tasks—or in some other way accommodating requests on the part of the employee. If you have an employee who is on sick leave due to stress, you can also find inspiration in the booklet 'The good interview on stress' in this series.

The interviews for addressing long-term sickness absence, short-term and/or frequent sickness absence respectively, are different in nature. The booklet is therefore structured accordingly.

Long-term sickness absence

As a manager, you must conduct a sick leave interview with an employee who is on sick leave for an extended period of time. The personal interview must be completed no later than four weeks after the first day of illness. There are no formal requirements and notification of the interview can be made by phone, letter or email. You can choose to conduct the interview over the phone if the illness prevents the employee from being present in the workplace.

The interview begins as soon as you give notification, so you should consider what will work best for the ongoing process with the employee.

The purpose of the interview is to:

- Ensure that the employee maintains close contact with the workplace.
- Clarify when and how the employee will be able to return to his/her work.
- Identify which functions the employee is able to perform despite being ill.

As a manager you must not ask questions directly relating to the illness, i.e. questions such as: "What are you actually suffering from?" and "What diagnosis has your doctor given you?" Nevertheless, many employees will offer this information themselves.

During the interview

Begin, for example, the interview like this:

"I'm pleased we could meet today. What I want to talk to you about is your sickness absence, which has been ongoing for two weeks. I'm concerned about you and would like to know how you are doing."

"The purpose of this interview is to give me a better overview of how long you expect to be absent and to find out if there is anything I can do to speed your recovery."

Begin the interview by welcoming the employee and being positive. Make sure to maintain eye contact and talk about the reason and purpose of the interview.

There are no set guidelines on what you, as a manager, can ask. It will depend entirely on the situation. However, it is a good idea to begin by asking questions that can help clarify how to plan the work during the sickness absence and how best to support the employee in his/her return to work.

Ask inquisitive and clarifying questions

"How long do you think you will be absent due to illness?"

"Is there something we can do in the workplace to aid your return to work?"

"Which of your normal tasks will be difficult to perform at the moment?" "Are there other tasks that would be easier to perform?"

"How does your working day need to look in order for you to gradually return to work?"

"How can we work together to draw up a plan for how you can return to work as soon as possible?"

"Have you given any thought to whether any of your working conditions have contributed to your sick leave?"

"What do you think would happen if you turned up for work tomorrow morning and made a gradual return to work?"

"In your opinion, how can we best maintain contact with you during your sick leave?"

"What should we agree to tell your colleagues?"

Before the interview ends, it is important that you summarize and focus on what has been agreed. You must have a common picture of the agreements you have entered into and the next step in the process. You may have to ask for a 'sick note', a 'fit-for-work certificate' or a 'certificate of duration'—see the text box, including:

Sick note: A sick note is a note from the doctor documenting illness in connection with sick leave and is designed to provide the employer/the manager with documentation that the employee's absence is due to illness and to indicate the expected length of sickness absence. A sick note can only be issued during absence due to illness.

Fit-for-work certificate The fit-for-work certificate is a doctor's note designed to help the workplace aid employees on sick leave to return to work.

The fit-for-work certificate is used in cases where the employer/manager—following dialogue with the employee—is in doubt as to what considerations should be made with regard to the employee's health in order for the employee to return to work full-time or part-time and perform either normal or adapted work tasks. The employer/manager is not entitled to be informed about the diagnosis, but can, however, obtain information about work-related restrictions.

The fit-for-work certificate can be used at any time during the period of illness. It can also be used in the case of repeated sick leave, i.e. the certificate may be prepared at a time at when the employee is not on sick leave but has been off sick repeatedly.

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Certificate of duration: After 14 days of employee illness, an employer has the right to require further information about the duration of the illness. This information is given in a statement issued by the employee's own doctor—or if the employer requires it—a specialist chosen by the employee.

Short-term or frequent absence

An employee's short-term or frequent absence may impact work performance and indeed have a greater impact on the other employees than a long-term sickness absence.

As a manager, you must actively decide when to take action with regard to short-term or frequent sickness absence.

If there is a pattern to such absence, disciplinary action may be required in the form of reprimands, warnings, and other disciplinary measures.

Preparation before the interview

It is your job to make a specific assessment of the individual employee's frequent sickness absence and determine whether action is required. The following indicators may aid you in this task:

- How many sick days are we talking about?
- How many periods of absence have there been in the past year?
- How long are the periods of absence?

- Patterns (are there particularly demanding periods or specially busy weekdays, e.g. Fridays/Mondays?)
- Is the cause known to you? And is there a good explanation?
- How does it affect task performance?
- How does it affect the other employees?
- Prepare a sickness absence overview.

During the interview

Begin the interview by welcoming the employee and being positive. Say a little about the purpose of the interview. Give the employee an opportunity to comment and tell you about his/her perception of the situation regarding absence.

Begin, for example, the interview like this:

“I’m pleased we could meet today. What I’d like to talk to you about is that I have recently become aware that you are experiencing recurring sickness absence on Mondays and Fridays, and I’m concerned that it may be affecting the performance of your work tasks.”

“The purpose of this interview is for us to find a way to reduce your sickness absence in the future.”

It may be useful to bring an overview of the employee’s sickness absence in the last 12 months. Please enter any absence by marking in a calendar (provides a good overview). In the event of absence on a Friday and the following Monday, mark the weekend days as well. You may also have received some feedback or reactions from the employee’s colleagues which is worth mentioning. Stay focused on the reason for the interview, namely that it is due to the short-term and frequent sickness absence.

Ask inquisitive and clarifying questions

“Have you, yourself, noticed a pattern in your absence?”

“How do things look from your perspective?”

“Is there anything about your work tasks or conditions in the workplace that are contributing to your sickness absence?”

“Is there anything that I can do as a manager to reduce your sickness absence?”

“Or something I should be particularly aware of?”

“Is there anything you, yourself, can do?”

“Do you have any suggestions as to how your sickness absence can be reduced in the future?”

Please be aware that short-term and frequent periods of sickness absence may be due to the fact that the employee is not happy in his/her job. It is important therefore that you clarify whether circumstances in the workplace are the reason for the absence. If the employee’s absence is due to private issues, it is a good idea to discuss how DTU can step in with support, e.g. reduced working hours or alternative working hours.

Conclude by summarizing the interview and making clear the agreements and expectations going forward. These may take the form of agreements on what the employee should do when he/she calls in sick, and when, if applicable, there is to be a follow-up interview.

Finish, for example, the interview like this:

“It’s time to round off the meeting. What we have agreed is that you will call me if you get sick. I suggest that we meet again in eight weeks to follow up on today’s interview. That way, we both have time to think about what we have discussed. Don’t worry—I’ll invite you in for a follow-up interview.”

“We have agreed that if you need some time off because you are not sleeping, you can call me and we can arrange this at short notice. If you are sick, simply follow the normal procedures as you have done in the past.”

After the interview

The interview should preferably have identified the reason for the frequent sickness absence. If you assess that the absence is not linked to an actual illness, or you are unable to obtain real information as to the reason for sickness absence, you should consider whether to take disciplinary action. In this case, you must contact your HR partner.

If the employee has mentioned stress as a contributing factor, you can also read the booklet ‘the good interview on stress’, which is also part of this series.