Planning an individual's return to work after illness with Covid-19

**Institution
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It is likely that all businesses, irrespective of their activities, have some staff who will have contracted the virus at some time during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moving towards 'the new normal', occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals have a valuable role to play in planning and supporting workers' return to work. Specifically, they have the skills and experience that enable them to take the lead in implementing a 4-point plan, as follows...

4-point action plan

1   **Introduce or revise the organisation's return-to-work policy**
Make sure it involves all the key stakeholders in the organisation – Human Resources, management and worker representatives.

2   **Keep in contact**
          While workers are off-work with illness, it's important to keep in regular contact with them. Who makes this contact will vary by organisation. How that contact is made may vary by the individuals' preferences and the circumstances of their ill-health. For example, if a worker is hospitalised with Covid-19, contact would need to be with their family rather than directly with them.

3   **Take a tailored approach**
          Just as keeping in communication during illness needs to be tailored, so does the individual's return to work.
a A risk assessment of the work tasks will help identify the changes that might support the returning worker. Covid-19 may have affected their physical strength or cognitive abilities such as concentration spans.
b Return-to-work controls such as a phased return to work, flexible working or changes to responsibilities can be developed. A written plan agreed with all key groups will help to assure the worker.

4   **Review the plan**
          As the experience of returning to work develops, there will be lessons to learn for the individual and for the future.

A 'return-to-work' team
Any action plan will work better if it is based on a team approach. At different times this team could consist of:
✔ a senior manager
✔ a manager
✔ a human resources professional
✔ a labour or trade union representative
✔ as well as the occupational safety and health (OSH) professional.

Other professionals – occupational health and medical, for example – may be required to support an individual's return.

Returning to work following a bereavement
Covid-19 is resulting in the deaths of family and friends. Grief and mourning will affect workers' physical and mental health. In the return-to-work process, particular consideration should be given to individuals who have been or are experiencing bereavement.

The role of the occupational safety and health professional
The occupational safety and health professional's role in the return-to-work process is critical. They can support good return-to-work practice by:
- giving advice on risk assessments
- promoting the benefits of work to workers' health and wellbeing
- focussing on what the worker can do and how barriers to their return to work can be removed.

IOSH has a range of guidance available in this area:
- *A healthy return: good practice guide to rehabilitating people at work* www.iosh.com/healthyreturn
- *Working well: guidance on promoting health and wellbeing at work* www.iosh.com/workingwell

For more information visit www.iosh.com/returning-safely/planning-an-individuals-return