



Essential Workplace Resources

RETURN-TO-WORK TOOLKIT

Supporting returners after maternity/parental leave, caring responsibilities, ill health, bereavement, trauma, or career breaks.

This toolkit is an overview for SME managers and owners. It highlights practical actions, common pitfalls, and key UK legal risk areas. It is not legal advice and should be applied to your organisation's specific circumstances.

It is important that your managers are trained to hold these types of conversations and that they use standard templated documents to ensure consistency.

Need tailored support?

Email: emma@ec-hr.co.uk for templates, manager coaching, and a return-to-work plan designed for your business.

What returners need (and what managers often miss)

Returning to work is a psychological transition, not just a date. Many returners are balancing a “double load”: re-entry pressures at work alongside major life change at home.

Common realities:

- Confidence dips and identity shift
- Disrupted routines (sleep deprivation, medical appointments, childcare logistics)
- Fear of judgement (“less committed”, “not up to speed”)
- Practical constraints that can look like “performance issues” if misread
- Emotional impact of grief

Your job as a manager is to reduce friction so the employee can rebuild capability quickly and safely.

Before the return date

Before the employee returns, confirm the basics in writing so there is no ambiguity. This should include the return date, working pattern, location, reporting line, and any temporary adjustments you have agreed, along with a clear review date.

At the same time, plan the work properly: identify what has changed while they were away (systems, clients, priorities, team structure) and be explicit about expectations.

Book the right conversations early, including a return-to-work meeting between the manager and employee. Finally, create a simple re-onboarding plan covering training refreshers, key meetings, and a buddy or support contact, and complete a quick risk-assessment for any pending flexible working request, likely health-related adjustments, or known conflict/relationship issues that may need careful handling.

Week one

In the first week back, the priority is to welcome the employee and reset expectations in a supportive way, rather than expecting them to instantly operate at full pace. Agree clear priorities for the first 10 working days and protect time so they can focus and rebuild confidence—this often means limiting meetings, avoiding overload, and deliberately scheduling focus blocks. Short, regular check-ins (daily or twice weekly for 10–15 minutes) help you spot issues early and adjust quickly. Where you agree key actions or changes, follow up with a brief email so both sides have clarity and there is a simple written record.

Week two-onwards

From week two, move into a steady rhythm of weekly 1:1s that cover workload, wellbeing, and confidence. Use these to review pace and priorities, remove blockers, and identify any training gaps. This is also the period to actively rebuild confidence through quick wins and structured feedback, rather than leaving the employee to guess whether they are doing “okay”. Importantly, check fairness: ensure the returner has appropriate access to projects, meetings, development opportunities, and visibility, so they are not unintentionally sidelined.

Each employee will be different, depending on the nature of their return to work and the particular individual. Managers will need to be flexible in their approach.

Manager phrases that work:

“What would make the first two weeks feel manageable?”

“What’s changed for you that we should plan around?”

“Let’s agree what good looks like for the first month.”

“If something isn’t working, tell me early and we’ll adjust.”

Phrases to avoid:

"We're all busy, you'll need to just get on with it."

"You've been away, so you'll need to prove yourself again."

"Your role has changed, but it's not a big deal."

Practical actions you can implement:

- A simple re-onboarding plan
- Systems refresh training
- Key process updates
- Stakeholder map: who they need to reconnect with
- "What's changed" summary
- A risk assessment if necessary
- A phased return to work plan/ramp up plan
- Goal setting document
- Training, support, shadowing plan
- Regular feedback/reviews
- Reminder of Employee Assistance Programmes/other benefits that the employee can access which may be helpful

What creates grievances and exits

- Unexplained changes to duties/clients/targets/status
- Treating normal adjustment as poor performance
- "Banter" and undermining culture
- Group chats, jokes, comments about commitment/parenting etc
- Inflexibility by default
- "We don't do that here" without considering options
- Pregnancy and maternity discrimination
- Being sidelined, demoted, or selected for redundancy unfairly
- Policies or practices that disadvantage women (e.g., rigid hours) without justification
- Inconsistent handling, delays, or refusal of flexible working requests, without a clear business reason
- Disability discrimination (where ill health is involved)
- Failure to consider reasonable adjustments
- Harassment and hostile culture

Document, document, document:

Document everything, in particular:

- Return-to-work meeting notes
- Confirmed working pattern and any adjustments
- Phased return to work /ramp-up plan and review dates
- Notes of support offered (training, buddying)
- Welfare reviews
- Performance reviews

RETURNER PLAN TEMPLATE

Employee name:

Job role/ department:

Return date:

Working pattern:

Reasonable adjustments if required:

Week 1 priorities:

Weeks 2–4 priorities:

Training needs:

Support contacts:

Review date:



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What you can request from me:

- Return-to-work meeting template and manager scripts
- Phased return to work plans
- Flexible working policy, process and letters
- Manager coaching for difficult conversations
- Policy review
- Holding difficult conversations on the Company's behalf

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