

# Prevention column

SICK LEAVE – SEPTEMBER 2019

## Return to work after a period of sick leave: How to ease the transition

In a time when it is more and more difficult to recruit and retain good people, it is estimated that over 10% of the Canadian workforce is off work due to sickness or injury.

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Burnout
- Accidents
- Critical illness and other issues related to physical problems that may result in functional motor or cognitive impairments

... All such events can lead to an extended absence. This means that a significant number of people may be off work due to disability during their lifetime.



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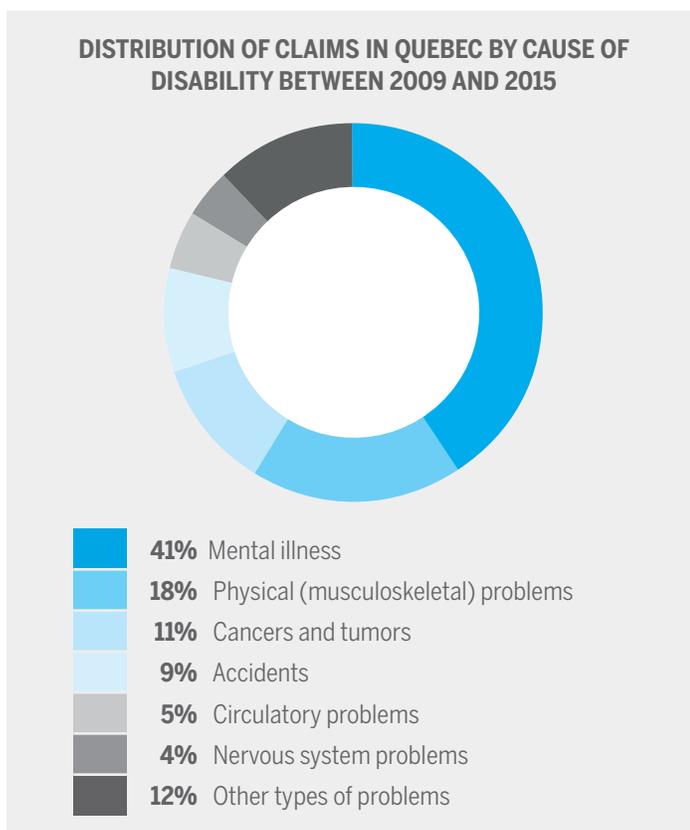
Given the scope of employee absenteeism, companies must work on their disability management practices and obtain resources equipped to help employees who are going through this complex process.

It must be recognized that a period of sick leave doesn't affect everyone in the same way. An employee who is returning to work may experience a lack of confidence, vulnerability, isolation, loss of dignity, poor concentration, feelings of shame, lack of motivation and fear. Everyone involved must work together and make accommodations to guarantee the success of a return-to-work effort.

Employers, managers, co-workers and returning employees all have a role to play in a return to work.

## For a successful and lasting return to work

According to a study carried out between 2009 and 2015 using data from the 16 largest group insurance carriers in Canada, disability cases in Quebec tended to be associated with the following causes:



The Canadian Medical Association recognizes that "Prolonged absence from one's normal roles, including absence from the workplace, is detrimental to a person's mental, physical and social well-being." It is currently estimated that, after six months of absence, the probability of return to work decreases by 50%. After 24 months, it drops below 10%.



Therefore, physicians regularly promote a resumption of professional activities for their patients as soon as possible. They believe that an individual's personal and professional lives influence each other, thus contributing to a full recovery.

This implies that, with the exception of a few cases in which the disability period is extended, most people will return to the job they held before the start of their disability period.

	Quebec	Rest of Canada
<b>CLAIM RATES</b>	33%	67%
<b>END OF RECOGNITION OF DISABILITY</b>	40%	60%
<b>DEATH</b>	24%	76%
<b>RECOVERY (RETURN TO WORK)</b>	42%	58%

For the organization, a planned, quick and safe return to work will maintain a competent and stable workforce, while reducing the pressure and costs for the different departments affected by the absences of employees on disability.

However, planning, establishing strategies and informing the teams are all necessary steps for supporting the return-to-work process while addressing the issues and concerns of each person.

Just think about how "disconnected" you can feel when returning to work after two weeks of vacation. That feeling is much worse for someone who has been off on disability for several weeks or months. It's essential therefore for employers to facilitate the process for employees once they are able to return to work and, by doing so, contribute to their functional recovery. ■

# PLANNING: **the key to success**

Helping an employee prepare for a return to work after any absence involves coming up with solutions and implementing initiatives that will help the employee respect the limitations relating to his or her work capacity while maintaining balance between the job requirements, the newly implemented measures, the organizational needs and the resources available.

A positive and supportive work environment provides enough leeway to enable employees to achieve the organization's productivity objectives without adversely affecting their health and respecting their limitations. That is the first key to success. ■



## Teamwork

Even though managers must ease the transition as much as possible, we now know that, through their way of interacting, everyone involved (disabled employees, their co-workers, their immediate supervisor, their physician and their insurer) will contribute to the success of a return to work following a period of disability.

EMPLOYEE'S ROLE	ADVICE FOR EMPLOYEES
<p>Maintaining clear and open communication with co-workers and immediate supervisors will boost awareness of employees' abilities and help them surpass their perceptions. They influence employees' behaviour and will have an impact on how the return-to-work process goes. It is important to realize that physical and mental reactivation in connection with a return to work is another step to a full recovery, one that contributes to the impression that residual symptoms are improving.</p> <p>Returning employees must begin by gradually resuming the pace of life of a worker and then "break the ice."</p>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Stay in contact with their employer or co-workers.</li><li>■ Maintain a certain level of physical and intellectual activity, in keeping with their limitations.</li><li>■ Establish a return-to-work plan with their physician.</li><li>■ Meet with their employer or immediate supervisor before they return to work, to discuss their condition, realistic expectations, possible accommodations to assist with their return and any changes made during their absence.</li></ul>
CO-WORKERS' ROLE	ADVICE FOR CO-WORKERS
<p>Feelings of belonging, of being expected and of being there to help each other are also factors that reduce the risks of relapse following a return to work.</p> <p>An employee who is returning to work after being off sick may feel they have let down their team. They may feel guilty and ashamed, realizing that their absence resulted in some inconvenience, delays and a heavier workload for their co-workers. If a temp was hired, the disabled employee's return to work marks the end of that person's contract, etc.</p> <p>The transition will be easier with a warm welcome and support.</p>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ The team members can talk to their co-worker. If they know what that person's fears are, it will be easier for them to be proactive and provide reassurance. They can remind the person who's returning to work that anyone can become disabled and at any time.</li><li>■ Regardless of the issue associated with the disability, it is essential to have the employee work with key team members who will be able to help the employee meet challenges and provide support for tasks during the transition.</li></ul>

## ROLE OF THE MANAGER OR IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR

Of all the stakeholders, the manager is the one who plays a crucial role in creating an environment conducive to a successful return to work. Managers must manage the transition in a way that's satisfactory for the employee concerned and for his or her co-workers.



## ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS



- Stay in touch with employees who are on disability, while respecting their rights and maintaining confidentiality.
- Meet with disabled employees to establish a return-to-work plan with realistic expectations on both sides. Rebuild trust, and alleviate fears.
- Put measures in place, and identify relationships that can facilitate the return-to-work process.
- Prepare the employee's return to work with the team, explaining the situation, outlining the conditions for the return to work and identifying the resource persons.
- Allow the employee's co-workers to ask questions on the return-to-work parameters (while respecting the employee's right to confidentiality with regard to health), so as to limit any reservations on the group's part.
- Ensure that the team is on board, to maximize the chances for success.

## Conclusion

No one chooses to get sick and have to leave work in order to get better. For the person on disability, in addition to receiving medical treatment, it's important to stay in touch with people and maintain a certain level of physical and intellectual activity, which is essential to a speedy return to work. Rest doesn't mean not moving.

In a situation of vulnerability, employers, managers and immediate supervisors should develop caring communication skills out of concern for the well-being of their contributors and staff members. By doing so, managers foster motivation among their teams and boost their engagement with regard to the organization. Employees will show it to their manager in return! ■



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