Maximising Attendance Manager Guidance

This document may be used by managers who are responsible for their team's attendance at work. It should be used in conjunction with the Association's Maximising Attendance Policy and Procedure.

The guidelines are intended to support you throughout the process, but it is also recommended that HR advice is sought where appropriate.

1. Manager Responsibility

At Hanover, we recognise that we can only achieve our organisational objectives by ensuring our employees are present and productive whilst at work.

As a manager, you play an integral role in both maximising attendance and promoting good health and wellbeing in the workplace. The policy advises that you hold an array of responsibilities as the direct manager, including the monitoring of absence levels within your team. What is crucial however, is that all managers address sickness absence fairly and consistently, not only across their own team, but across the wider business to ensure equality.

In order to achieve such consistency, we have a policy and procedure in place to support each employee absence as it happens. It is therefore recommended that you encourage your staff to get familiar with the procedure to ensure they also understand their responsibilities and limitations with their attendance at work.

The following sections explore your responsibilities in greater detail but also provide you with guidance on how to deal with each stage of the process.

2. Monitoring Absence

The key to monitoring absence levels within any team is often found to be how you communicate with your team regarding their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Getting to know their individual circumstances and underlying health conditions, for example, can help minimise absence when you put support mechanisms in place. In general, monitoring absence can:

- help you to identify any problem areas such as high absence levels in a particular type of role or a particular location
- help you identify the types of absences that are occurring such as long-term health conditions or one-off episodes
- help you identify any patterns of absence such as an employee being regularly absent after a period of annual leave

By having a robust procedure in place, you can monitor absence levels through the triggers we have incorporated at Hanover. As explained in the procedure, an employee who reaches 3 absences in 6 months is a cause for concern for the business and will consequently trigger a Sickness Absence Capability Meeting to be held. With that stated, conversations surrounding absence with your employee should be happening well before this point, as explained in Section 6.

3. Reporting Absence

All Hanover managers are encouraged to create an open and honest communication culture within their teams. As alluded to in Section 2, you want to be in a position where you know how to get the best from individual employees. One way of attaining this is to have an open-door policy to staff wishing to discuss any issues or concerns. It is particularly important that any team member can approach you to discuss their health and wellbeing, as this can often help alleviate the risk of frequent or long-term absence.

An open culture is also critical when it comes to staff reporting absence to you as their manager. Every employee is different and therefore, every absence should be handled with care and attention. For example, you may have someone in your team who is embarrassed by an underlying condition which is affecting their ability to be at work. You as the manager need to be able to understand and empathise with the employee, whether it be over the phone or at the return-to-work meeting.

The procedure states that any absence within your team is required to be reported to you via telephone as soon as possible. During this call, it is important that you converse with the employee to understand the reasons why they are absent, how long they are expected to be off work and if there is any outstanding or urgent work needing picked up. You should also set out the contact that is required during the period of absence. This should be relative to the type of absence and the anticipated duration. For example, an employee who expects to be off for a day or two with a cold will only be required to contact you the day before they return to work. An employee who is reporting a longer-term absence due to a physical condition may need some recovery time and so you may agree to keep in touch on a weekly basis.

We expect managers to abide by Hanover values by supporting the employee at the initial telephone stage. Be mindful of your choice of language and tone, even if their absence is going to hinder your operations or productivity. There can be a number of reasons for an employee’s absence from work so it is also vital to use your initiative and experience in certain situations. The following examples may occur:

1. An employee fails to show for work and fails to make contact in the morning
2. An employee calls distressed citing an emergency

3. An employee calls asking for compassionate or dependent leave instead of reporting a sickness absence
4. An employee calls but does not provide an acceptable reason for being off

You may experience any one of these scenarios, among many more, whilst managing a team of people. Many things can happen in life and that is why our procedure allows for discretionary circumstances. Therefore, in Scenario 1 for example, you are encouraged not to jump to conclusions or express disappointment with the employee until you understand the whole picture. However, if you do not hear from them, your initiative will tell you to reach out to the individual at some point in the day to check on their safety and wellbeing.

With Scenario 2, it would be best to ask the employee to prioritise the situation at hand and make contact with you later, whether that be via telephone, email or text message. Scenarios 3 and 4 test your knowledge of our policies and so it is important you understand what qualifies as compassionate, dependency or unacceptable reasons for absence.

In most cases the absence will be straightforward but what is more important is that you manage each situation with fairness and consistency. Treat each member of your team the same when it comes to absence reporting without any favours or leeway for certain individuals over others.

4. Managing Short-Term Absence

The majority of absence cases within your team are likely to be considered short-term. A short-term absence is when your employee is absent from work for a period of up to 4 weeks. Most illnesses will only last 1-3 days but we recommend to always be prepared for any absence lasting longer than initially thought.

Employees can self-certify for a period of up to 1 week or 7 calendar days. Any absence lasting longer than this requires a doctor's fit note to be submitted. Whilst it is the employee's responsibility to submit this, you should also be aware of when documentation is required and be prepared to remind the employee during your telephone conversations. Failure to submit a fit note within a reasonable time frame is considered a breach of the absence reporting procedure.

Whilst the majority of cases will be short-term, these absences are more likely to accumulate towards a trigger point when compared to long-term sickness. That is why it is imperative that you take the time during telephone conversations and return-to-work meetings to truly understand the nature of each absence case and any medical conditions affecting the individual. Where your employee does meet a trigger, such as 3 absences in 6 months, this should not come as a surprise to the individual.

If you suspect there is an underlying health condition affecting the employee's ability to attend work, it is important that you obtain as much information as possible regarding it. This is most commonly achieved at return-to-work meetings. Identification of such a condition may lead to an Occupational Health referral however, your HR Business Partner can advise on this. Further information on Occupational Health can be found in Section 8.

We also utilise Occupational Health to help identify disabilities in line with the Equality Act 2010. Having a disability can affect an employee's ability to attend work and for that, we may need to adjust our triggers. Further information can be found in Section 6.3

5. Managing Long-Term Absence

Handling a long-term absence can be a delicate matter and can often feel difficult to manage. You may find yourself a situation where your employee is suffering from a serious illness or mental health problem. There may also be occasions where an illness is being drawn out to delay a return to work or the true reason for being long-term sick is work-related.

Regardless of the scenario, the absence can be a strain on the business but will require you to maintain respect and remain sensitive when dealing with it. Unlike short-term absences, you will want to organise regular absence meetings with any individual who is off long-term sick. Whilst telephone conversations are useful for weekly check-ins, formal absence meetings are required to capture progress and to help us understand how we can support a potential return to work.

The arrangement of any meeting also requires you to use your initiative before scheduling. For example, if your employee notifies you that they have been diagnosed with a serious illness and will be off work for a significant period of time, you do not want to be scheduling a meeting withing the first few weeks of that absence. Allow time to settle and during your telephone calls, gauge when the time is right to meet the employee.

In scheduling an absence meeting, you should liaise with your HR Business Partner who will guide you through the steps, including producing a letter and preparing and conducting the meeting itself.

6. Return-to-Work Meetings

Return-to-Work (RTW) meetings have been referenced throughout this document due to the part they play in both determining the nature of the absence and the employee feeling supported back to work.

6.1 Preparing for the Meeting

Prior to an employee returning to work following a period of absence, you should be aware of their intention to return through the telephone call received the day or two beforehand. This allows you time to prepare.

There are various ways you can hold the RTW meeting, but this may depend on the reason for absence. For example, for any serious or confidential reasons, you may want to ensure you have access to a private space where the employee feels comfortable in sharing information. Regardless, you ideally want to be scheduling the meeting on the day the employee returns to make sure you are not only supporting them but also welcoming them back into the business.

It is also recommended that you check their absence history within the past 6-12 months so you can prepare to have a conversation around triggers if applicable.

6.2 During the Meeting

During the meeting you should utilise the Return-to-Work Form (Appendix B of the Maximising Attendance Procedure). The form has a number of questions listed to prompt you during the conversation. These are fairly straightforward questions, but it is recommended that you build and maintain rapport through the conversation, particularly where there the employee may be experiencing personal problems or concerns. You can also use the meeting to update the employee on any work or information they may have missed whilst absent.

As mentioned in previous sections, any employee who meets a trigger, for example 3 absence in 6 months, should not be surprised when faced with a Sickness Absence Capability Meeting. That is because you should be discussing their absence history with them at every RTW meeting.

At the meeting, you can advise an employee with little to no absence in the past 6-12 months that there are no concerns with their absence levels. However, if the employee has had 2 absences in the past 6 months, you will need to advise them that a further absence within 'X' weeks/months will trigger for a Capability Meeting to be held. This will not only check their understanding of the policy but also highlight a level of concern to them.

In the instance where the employee does have 2 absences within 6 months and is at risk of triggering with a further absence, it is important to consider ways of avoiding this occurring. You can therefore explore this further by asking questions such as:

- Are you concerned about your ability to be at work at all?
- Is there anything I or the business can do to help support you with your attendance?
- Is it worthwhile considering using some annual leave to ensure you are getting a considerable break from work?

Preventative measures may assist in minimising the risk of the employee going off sick 3 times in 6 months. Information regarding support and adjustments can be found in Section 9.

Following the completion of the RTW meeting, both you and the employee should sign the form and you should send it to HR to be stored on the employee's file.

6.3 Mitigating Absence Circumstances

You may be aware that some employees are entitled to protection against disability discrimination under the Equality Act 2010. This protection extends to attendance at work where an employee is absent as a direct result of their disability, whether in full or in part.

At Hanover, we strive to support all employees who suffer with a disability or medical condition that hinders their ability to be at work. Often, we seek to put adjustments in place to either help reduce the prospect of high absence or to enable a quicker return to work after absence. What we do not is penalise individuals for their disability or condition.

The Maximising Attendance Procedure advises that "triggers will be adjusted for pregnancy and disability related absence". In other words, if you have an employee who is suffering from cancer and is required to take days off for treatment and recovery, you are not expected to abide by the '3 absences in 6 months' trigger. You are encouraged however, to speak to your HR Business Partner to understand how to manage such situations.

Another example may be an employee who suffers with poor mental health and has been diagnosed with depression. We will most likely organise an Occupational Health appointment to understand what impact that is likely to have on the individual and obtain advice on how to best support them. The report may state that we can expect the employee to be absent every 4-6 weeks and so we as a business, need to prepare for that and manage the situation on a case-by-case basis.

Adjusting triggers is only considered in the event of disability and pregnancy. It does not mean that we can never progress through the Stages of Sickness Absence Capability, but we can use Occupational Health reports to guide us on expected absence levels. Should you feel that absence levels are becoming excessive, please speak to your HR Business Partner for further guidance.

7. Sickness Absence Capability Meetings

The Maximising Attendance Procedure discusses what we at Hanover consider to be excessive levels of sickness absence, otherwise known as our Capability Procedure. It is crucial that each trigger is followed for reasons of fairness and consistency across the Association.

If you find yourself in the situation where a member of your team has accumulated 3 absences in a 6-month period, you will then be set to chair a Sickness Absence Capability Meeting with the individual.

As we discovered in Section 6, you will most likely be advising the employee that they have hit a trigger during the return-to-work meeting. You may find that this activates a reaction in the employee, who may question such decision to move to a Stage 2 meeting. The most common reaction usually relates to the authenticity of each absence. For example, an employee may say:

"I don't think that is fair as all my absences were genuine. I was really ill on all 3 occasions"

Providing that there is no underlying issue or disability involved, you should advise that you are not questioning the reasons for each absence but rather the attendance levels. You can also take the opportunity, whether prior to or during the Capability meeting, to advise that you are required to manage absence fairly and consistently with the rest of the team and the wider business. It would not be fair for you to surpass the procedure just because you believed all absences to be genuine.

7.1 Preparing for the Meeting

If one of your employees reaches a trigger point, you should first contact your HR Business Partner to discuss. The HRBP will then assist in the preparation of a letter and help prepare you for the meeting. Remember that this is a formal meeting and so there are certain stipulations which must be adhered to, as outlined in the procedure. These include giving the employee notice of the meeting, the employee's right to be accompanied and right to appeal.

Just like the return-to-work meeting, it is important that you prepare for the meeting and be equipped with some questions or information you would like to discuss. This would include a list of the employee's recent absences and any other information you have regarding their health and wellbeing.

Finally, it is crucial that you do not go into the meeting with a pre-determined outcome. Much like a disciplinary procedure, you want to hear what your employee has to say about their absence levels. You may think that you already know everything from the return-to-work meeting, but often new information can come to light that needs taken into consideration.

7.2 During the Meeting

You may find that your HR Business Partner is present at the meeting, particularly if you have little to no experience of holding such meetings. However, both you and the employee will be aware of this prior to the meeting as the attendees will be mentioned in the invite letter. The purpose of this would be to provide support to both parties and/or to take the meeting minutes.

Much of the content covered during the Capability Meeting will mirror what you have already discussed with the employee at the return-to-work stage, but it is advisable to recap the conversation for the purpose of the meeting and to capture accurate notes.

Below is a list of some example questions you may wish to ask the employee during the meeting:

- Can you explain your most recent absence?
- How does this absence relate to the other absences you have had in the past 'X' months?
- Do you consider yourself to have an underlying condition affecting your ability to attend work?
- What steps are you taking to improve your absence levels?
- Is there anything Hanover can do to support you in a bid to improve your absence levels?
- Are there any reasonable adjustments you can suggest for us to consider?

These types of questions are most likely to be asked during Stages 1 and 2 of the Sickness Absence Capability Procedure. Stage 3 is pitched at the level of potential dismissal and so advice should be sought from your HR Business Partner as a more senior manager may be elected to hold this meeting.

You want to be in a position where you have identified the true reasons for recent absence levels in order to make an informed decision. Be sure to explore further into your employee's answers at the meeting to ensure their understanding of the situation and whether any additional help or support would be beneficial to them.

7.3 Providing an Outcome

Once you have gathered all necessary information and you feel you have enough to make a decision, we would advise you to adjourn the meeting for a short period of time. If your HR Business Partner is present in the meeting, this would allow you to discuss any matters with them prior to delivering the outcome. Adjourning for even 10 minutes would allow you to weigh up all the information provided by the employee.

In the event that the employee comes forward with new information you were unaware of, such as evidence of a medical condition that has directly impacted their recent absence, you may want to adjourn the meeting for a longer period. The adjournment may be over several week whilst you organise an Occupational Health report to find out more information on their condition.

When you are ready to make a decision, you should reconvene the meeting with the employee (and their representative if applicable) and deliver one of the following outcomes:

- Stage 1 Meeting – Written Warning
- Stage 2 Meeting – Final Written Warning
- Stage 3 Meeting – Dismissal
- No Action

- Extension to Warning (if Warning already in place)

This is where fairness and consistency are absolutely crucial. You may want to speak to your HR Business Partner to consider what is a fair outcome but ultimately, most Capability Meetings will end with a Warning being issued.

Mitigating circumstances, such as those mentioned in Section 6.3, medical and underlying conditions will impact your decision where appropriate.

If a Warning is issued, you should notify the employee of their right to appeal and explain that the Warning will remain on their file for ‘X’ months in line with the policy.

8. Occupational Health

Occupational Health (OH) has been referenced throughout this guidance as it is a pivotal part of managing sickness absence and improving attendance within a team. The benefits include:

- Assessing employees who are absent from work and advising on the likely timescale of the absence
- Assessing fitness to work regarding ill-health capability dismissal or ill-health retirement
- Helping employers fulfil their duties under the Equality Act 2010 including disability, pregnancy and age discrimination
- Advising on temporary or permanent changes to the work or workplace, known as reasonable adjustments, to enable someone with a physical or mental health condition or disability to work effectively and safely
- Assessing where a person’s work has affected their health and what action should be taken to support the individual
- Providing confidential health advice and counselling to employees

8.1 Making a Referral

If you decide that an OH referral would be beneficial for a member of your team, you should contact your HR Business Partner in the first instance to discuss further. If it is agreed that a referral will be made, you must discuss this with the employee and obtain verbal or written consent to make a referral.

You should explain to the employee that the referral is utilised as a supportive mechanism and an opportunity to gain expert advice and input on how best to support them. An employee can refuse to be referred but the employee should be made aware that any decisions regarding their ongoing absence will be made without the benefit of expert advice and guidance.

Should you gain approval from the employee, you will need to complete the OH referral form. This form is an opportunity for you to summarise the situation to date and provide the OH doctor with as much as information as possible in order to receive a detailed report in response. Once you have provided a summary of the condition, the symptoms and how it is affecting the employee's ability to be at work, you can list a number of questions you wish to be answered directly by the doctor. Some common questions include:

- Is the employee currently fit for their role in line with the attached role profile?
- How do you foresee their health progressing in the near future?
- Would you consider the employee to have an underlying health condition or disability?
- Was the employee's absence cause by their work in any way?
- What reasonable adjustments can we make to help the employee remain in work or return to work?
- Can we expect to see any changes in absence or performance levels?
- Should a phased return be considered? What shift pattern would you advise?
- Should we amend duties to a lighter workload for a period of time?

The HR team can provide advice and guidance on the type of questions you may want to ask by understanding what it is you are looking to achieve from the report.

8.2 The Report

After the appointment is held, both the employee and the business will receive a copy of the doctor's final report. The employee may ask to review the report before it is released and if so, there may be a slight delay in receiving it. OH, may request additional information from the employee's GP or specialist and this may also cause a delay in receiving the report.

Once you have received a copy of the report, you should arrange a meeting with the employee to discuss the contents of the report. However, please seek advice from your HR Business Partner at this stage prior to meeting.

9. Support and Adjustments

Supporting employees through absence or difficult periods in their life plays a huge part in the role of a manager. Yes, you will have deadlines to meet and work outstanding that needs completing but, you want your employees to sustain good attendance levels and produce their best work.

As a result, we as an employer always look to support employees where we can. In addition to Occupational Health, there are several mechanisms that we can put in place to enable employees to prevent sickness or return to the workplace following absence. Examples include:

- Helping employees manage stress. A Stress Risk Assessment can be undertaken to help pinpoint stressors which we can act upon to alleviate pressures.
- Using periods of annual leave regularly throughout the year to ensure adequate breaks or authorising, where possible, annual leave requests at short notice
- Access to the employee counselling service
- Introducing a temporary or permanent change in hours or working pattern through a flexible working application, where this can be accommodated
- Introducing a temporary amendment to duties and hours/days of work through a phased return to work
- Utilising the flexible working options available such as home working and no core hours (where the role is eligible)
- Provision of equipment for use in the office such as wrist support, document holder or a screen to prevent glare on the computer screen