



# Managing employees with chronic health conditions: the management view

## Face to face with Clare Rafferty (1)

Interview by Fabiola Silvaggi

**In your opinion, what are the greatest difficulties around reintegration and inclusion of chronically ill workers within companies?**

One of the biggest barriers to successfully managing employees with a long term condition in the workplace, is a lack of workplace policies. Organisations which publish policies enable line managers to treat employees with consistency and equity and provide a template for action to ensure the member of staff is appropriately supported. It is important to note that this does not mean treating everyone the same, for employees as individuals will have differing requirements and need varying levels of support.

The skill and experience of the line manager is critical, and a lack of training for line managers can often lead to issues where the employee may not be treated with appropriate levels of respect and dignity. A lack of training and knowledge, a reluctance to hold difficult conversations along with poor emotional intelligence can lead to managers making decisions which are in the best interests of neither the employee nor the organisation.

Workers with long term conditions who are absent from the workplace for a period of time, if not kept informed and updated as to changes in the workplace which affect their role, nor made aware of promotion nor training opportunities which have arisen, can be made to feel excluded, alienated and unwelcome, which in turn can make a return to work a challenge for both the employer and the employee.

If an employee requires adjustments to enable their return to work, by law these adjustments must be “reasonable.” This means that the employer must make a judgement and a balanced decision about what is fair, not just to the individual employee, but also to the long term survival of the organisation and must consider its duty to all its employees. Adjustments which are financially or practically disproportionate to the size of the organisation may not be implemented, and this would cause a barrier to the reintegration of some staff back into the workplace. Communication of these decisions should be made in a clear, transparent and timely manner.

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<sup>1</sup> Clare Rafferty is director of [Wellbeing Associates](#)

## In your opinion, how has the concept of prevention and health promotion changed within companies?

Businesses are increasingly aware of the shifting demographics, the ageing workforce along with a skills shortage in certain areas and this in part is helping to re-focus energies onto workplace health promotion. There is an increasing acceptance that an immediate demonstrable return on investment for wellness programmes should be replaced by a much broader matrix of measures to include participation, engagement as well as attraction and retention of top talent.

As obesity levels continue to rise, along with the costs of Type II diabetes, there is an accompanying recognition that everyone is going to have to play their part in turning the tide of this epidemic – and that includes the broader role businesses have to play in our society.

There remains however, a lack of knowledge and uncertainty about how to approach the implementation of workplace health and wellbeing programmes at a strategic level: ad hoc, tactical initiatives, often implemented in a scatter gun approach, inadequately measured or evaluated interventions, lacking senior management commitment, no long term vision, measurable objectives or action plan mean that programmes often lose traction with the organisation and fall by the wayside.

## What can the law do to facilitate the adoption of prevention strategies in the workplace?

Sedentary behaviour has been evidenced as an independent health risk factor with prolonged bouts of sitting time linked to an increase in all-cause mortality. The workplace has been identified as an environment where adults sit for prolonged periods of time and there is evidence that there are links between sedentary behaviour and a variety of health problems.

Whilst the links between increased sedentary behaviour and obesity levels are apparent, it is less well-known that prolonged sitting time, regardless of how much exercise an employee may be doing in the evening or at weekends, may contribute towards early death. Given that much time at work is now so often associated with sitting at a desk in front of a screen; at some point this must become an issue of health and safety and subject to regulation.

Although there is guidance around time spent at a screen, there is as yet no guidance or legislation about how much time an employee must spend sitting and this should certainly now be an area for legal consideration.

## In your opinion, is it useful when managing an employee with a chronic health condition, for a company to be flexible about working arrangements such as working from home/revised shifts etc

Managing an employee who has a chronic illness should be done as flexibly as possible, without disproportionately and negatively impacting on the wider running of the business. A larger business will have more resource and be able to absorb greater levels of disruption to everyday working patterns. A small organisation will need to carefully consider the impact on business processes and also on remaining staff, who may be left to accommodate a significant shift in requirements.

Businesses and line managers should be aware that enabling flexible working where appropriate, has numerous benefits to both the member of staff as well as to the organisation, such as retaining and attracting experienced staff, increasing employee commitment and loyalty and ultimately in improving levels of productivity.

### How can a return-to-work plan be useful in managing employees with chronic health conditions?

Firstly it is worth saying that if the employee has been well-managed during their absence, they should feel confident and positive about the prospect of returning to work and the return to work process should be easier and more successful.

Prior to meeting face to face with the employee, appropriate medical input or reports should be obtained to help inform the discussion. The meeting should then enable both the employee and the employer to air any potential issues and to explore suggestions about future work arrangements. The possibility of adjustments should be considered, such as a phased return, changed working patterns, perhaps a discussion about transportation to and from work, alterations to work stations or possible training that may help the return to the workplace to ensure the member of staff is fully up-to-date in any business process changes and feels confident to re-enter the workplace and resume their duties.

### How can a wellness programme be useful in managing employees with chronic health conditions?

A wellness programme is a positive way for the organisation to offer additional support to all staff, including those who suffer from a chronic health condition. Wellness programmes for staff demonstrate that an organisation cares about the wellbeing of its staff. In return, employees will feel a greater sense of goodwill and loyalty to their employer, a higher level of engagement with the success of the business and ultimately this will translate into higher levels of ‘discretionary effort’ and increased productivity. Wellness programmes can therefore have a positive impact on the bottom line of the organisation and prove to be a worthwhile investment.

For the employee with a chronic health condition, a workplace wellness programme can offer immediate, convenient access to much-needed practical support, guidance and motivation to help improve their health. A significant proportion of the population spend many hours per week in the workplace, so the venue is an ideal location to help improve public health issues. It is a contained environment over which the organisation has an element of control, and can use this control to help promote the public health agenda by promoting healthy lifestyle activities. In this way the organisation is contributing positively to broader societal issues and as a result, may come to be publicly regarded as a socially responsible business which cares about its place in the world above and beyond the sole drive for profitability. Positive public approbation is often rewarded by employee and customer loyalty which has a beneficial impact on the financial performance of the organisation – the virtuous circle being complete.

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