



Handle with care

Whether it's easing an employee back into work after a lengthy break or dealing with suspected theft in the workplace, it's important you have a well thought out plan of action, says Stuart Forsyth.



Stuart Forsyth runs FX Consultants, specialists in creative approaches to lifting business performance.

Return to work

One of our employees is returning to work after some months off following a stress-related breakdown. What can we, as a company, do to help this person successfully re-enter the workplace?

I'm not surprised that you talk of months off—the time taken off for stress related complaints is in a similar league to other serious illnesses such as heart attacks. Obviously you will be approaching this issue to ensure the re-entry is smooth, and a prelude to successful and sustainable work performance.

You and your health and safety committee (if you are a larger employer) need to complete or review your risk assessment. What, if any, hazards did you identify? How are these being managed? Who will be monitoring them, and the employee's reaction to them?

A useful model for managing the re-entry to work is that of the case-worker. The person who works with the person and their manager to agree a rehabilitation programme—and monitors progress on the case.

You all agree what is a reasonable starting level of work (hours on the job, breaks, output levels), and you set milestones for reviewing progress as you work towards the long-term goal of performance at what would be typical expectations for the job.

Like any case-worker you know that there will not be a straight line from starting levels

to achieving the ultimate job standards. Just the process of getting started (commuting, working to a routine) will be an extra load to start with.

In the review sessions you need to be able to review performance measures as well as checking on stress. Simply asking the person how they are is likely going to prompt them to give the 'socially desirable' answer. Using scales based on the previously experienced stress symptoms (this person's 'stress signature') is more objective.

You might want to discuss a 're-induction' for the person. This helps them come up to speed with any changes to systems. But be aware this could be seen as patronising.

You might want to include the team in the planning process—so that the issue of who does the work not done by the returnee is addressed and resolved openly.

Likely suspect

I manage a retail business and I'm fairly certain one of my staff has been stealing from the company. To date I haven't been able to work out who it might be or find any hard evidence. What steps can I put in place to find the perpetrator and are there any tell-tale signs I should be looking for?

Driving to work in a Ferrari is often a tell-tale sign. So could be enthusiasm to work unsupervised, or reluctance to take breaks so they can be alone.

There are a variety of sting options available. Dyed cash and

covert video surveillance are frequently used. The key thing is to maintain a solid process. Employment law barrister Chris Patterson emphasises doing it right, otherwise you may identify the likely person but find that you are in trouble as well. Here's an outline of the process:

- If you feel you have identified the person, perhaps because you have them palming the businesses money on video—tell them that you are concerned about integrity issues and that you want to have a formal meeting, to which they are welcome to bring a support person and that their continuing employment may be in jeopardy;
- In the meeting (having given them time to get any appropriate support, and ensuring that you have your support—possibly but not necessarily your legal representative), describe the observations and ask them if they have an explanation;
- Listen and make notes;
- Then show them the video (or other hard evidence) and ask them again for their explanation;
- Listen and take notes again;
- If there is a reasonable explanation, describe your expectations about future behaviour, and follow up with a letter;
- If the explanation(s) are not satisfactory, depending on your employment agreement, you may have the right to terminate them or sus-

pend them until you have a further disciplinary hearing;

- Discuss any reparations. This may appear attractive, but means that you will have an ongoing relationship with the person—which may not be desirable;
- After termination you are unlikely to want to have them work out any notice, so escort them off the premises. You should do this with consideration for protecting their dignity and not causing unnecessary humiliation. Arrange for their final pay (subject to any agreement about reparations)—and ensure that there is a letter detailing all this;
- Contact the Police if you intend to press charges;
- Explain the situation to your other staff.

After you've got it all settled have a think about the context. Did you hire the right person? It is probably worth investing in integrity assessment in the future. This can be done effectively through psychometric testing. Think about the design of the work. Much crime is opportunistic. Can you improve your systems so that it is too hard for your staff to rip you off? And from the point of view of managing this risk—do your employment agreements cover you to summarily dismiss a dishonest employee? 