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zorg van de zaak





A working environment in which employees work together safely, healthily and with pleasure. As an employer, you can contribute to sustainable employability within your company. A healthy interest, healthy conditions and attentiveness contribute to this.

Your employees deserve attention. So, make time for that and really listen and see what you can do with their suggestions. Healthy working conditions ensure that employees are fit and enjoy their work. For example, work with a low physical load or work that causes little stress. It is also important that employees have a working environment in which they can work safely. You need to be attentive to notice whether your employees are in good spirits. Always check whether they enjoy their work, whether the atmosphere is good and whether they are eager. Sustainable employability is achieved by staying one step ahead of unhealthy situations. So, pay attention to signals from your staff, recognise situations that are a bit more difficult, act quickly when you are faced with absenteeism and make improvements to prevent it from happening again.

In this handy booklet, we show you how easy it is to promote healthy working and thus improve sustainable employability among your employees. The 11 key questions on recognising situations at the workplace, dealing with absenteeism and improving prevention are summarised. That way, you have tools to shape sustainable employability yourself. In doing so, you will not only improve the health of your employees, but of your entire company.



# Problem recognition



Health is a gift, it is said. However, it is a misconception that you cannot control your health. In fact, you can see many illnesses coming, which also allows you to assess whether one of your employees is about to fall ill.

Especially conditions associated with unhealthy work, such as burn-out or RSI, present themselves well in advance. Through a series of questions, we will show you the main signs of an employee who is at stake. You will be able to recognise many of these signs, for instance employees who are ill more often and absent for a day. Tensions at work or disappointing employee performance are also signals that employees are struggling to do their jobs well.

Through our answers, we will teach you to recognise the signs so that you know where action is needed. Because the sooner you pick this up and do something about it, the more you as an employer will be able to prevent absence.

# 1. What are the biggest contributors to absenteeism?

There are many misunderstandings about the causes of absenteeism. Many people think the causes are primarily medical, such as flu or back pain. In reality, half of all health symptoms during sick leave are influenced by work-related issues (25%) or by a work-life balance-related issue (25%). The main contributors to absenteeism are:

50%

of illness reports are work-related or due to an issue with work-life balance.



## **Mental workload**

A major culprit is mental workload. Examples are frequent overtime, complex work tasks or too much to handle. About 35% of work-related issues affecting employees are related to mental workload.

## **Disagreements**

Tensions and absence arise easily when there is difficult communication with your staff or between employees. Almost 9 percent of work-related absenteeism is caused by this.

## **Physical workload**

Physical strain also causes quite a few days of absenteeism. At least 12% of all work-related absence is due to people having to lift, kneel or stoop more than they can handle, for example.

## **Motivation**

A lack of job satisfaction also regularly makes employees ill. A lack of motivation may arise because the work is not challenging enough or does not match your employees' ambitions.

## **Private problems**

Another important illness trigger may arise from your employee's private life. Examples include informal care, divorce, debt or grief. The pressure and tension can run so high that the employee is no longer fully employable. This plays a role in about a quarter of sick reports.

# 2. What signs predict absenteeism?

A change in behaviour is the main signal that an employee is not quite in top condition. Whether absence will indeed follow is not certain; perhaps nothing is wrong. However, the indications below may be reason to have a conversation

with the employee. If it turns out that your employee indeed feels so unwell that absence is imminent, you can do something about it in time.

Often, you can already notice something off about your employee. This might include the following signs:

- Noticeably more errors and sloppiness.
- A slower pace of work.
- Being late more often.
- Taking longer breaks.
- Regular work stoppages.
- Not completing all their tasks.
- Being less communicative about work.
- Keeping others from working.

You should also be alert if an employee suddenly starts working extremely hard. This may seem like a bonus, but it could also be a less positive sign.

For example, a sign that the employee is seeking distraction from unpleasant thoughts or events. Examples include the following signs:

- Lots of overtime.
- Active at odd hours (late-night emailing, for example).
- Hardly taking any breaks.
- Taking on too much.
- Constantly talking about work.
- Correcting or instructing others.
- Doing unauthorised work.

Personal behaviour is also a possible indication of an impending crisis. Pay attention to the following signs:

- Being quieter than usual or just very busy.
- Being cranky.
- Complaining.
- Lying.
- Taking a lot of leave.
- Frequent short-term illness.
- Bullying.
- Tension or absence.

**All these signals don't have to mean anything; every employee shows them from time to time. So don't draw premature conclusions, but engage in conversation if you think something needs to change.**

# Illness

You can reduce absenteeism due to illness, but never completely eliminate it. It will continue to be the case that employees call in sick. As an enthusiastic employer, you would prefer to have them back on their feet as soon as possible, to return to work healthy and well.

Only you have to learn to sit on your hands, because you are not allowed to make an ill employee better. Playing doctor yourself as an employer is forbidden. You should leave that to the experts, to avoid inadvertently making the wrong decisions that don't benefit anyone. Recovering from illness requires expertise for which you need others.

That doesn't mean you should stand by the sidelines as an employer. In fact, it is good to keep in touch, because this way you will also hear what your employee is up against at work. Examples include too much load or a lifestyle that is getting in the employee's way.

As an employer, it is sometimes best to provide a solution to that, so that the work itself does not cause illness. And talking about enjoying work is totally fine, as long as you stick to non-medical problems.

Your job as an employer is to remove obstacles that affect the enjoyment and employability of your employee. As a result, you can help your employee get back to work, for example by adapting their work or by adjusting their working conditions. Leave medical symptoms, treatments and anything that results from this in the hands of the occupational physician.

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# 3. Can I talk to my employee when they are absent?

Yes, you can. Showing interest is always nice. But beware: as an employer, you should not make the conversation about their illness. So, don't ask about the nature of the illness, health symptoms, doctor's visits, disabilities or treatments. That is what the privacy watchdog, the Data Protection Authority, stipulates for employers.

## No playing doctor

You might think: that works on paper, but my employees spontaneously tell me about these topics. That may indeed occur. It is important to make it clear that you trust that your employee has called in adequate help. So, don't ask about their illness or record anything about it, even if your employee spontaneously tells you about it. Do not play doctor yourself.

## What am I allowed to discuss?

- Is there anything I can do for you at the moment?
- Is there anything left to be arranged internally or with clients now that you are absent?
- What is your own assessment of when you could resume your work, partially or fully?
- Do you have your own ideas about temporary adapted work or tasks? Feel free to let us know so we can have an open conversation about this together.
- I want every employee, including you, to enjoy working. Are there issues at work that affect your enjoyment at work? If so, I would like to talk to you about this to work together towards solutions.
- I find work-life balance to be very important. If that is an issue for you, I would like to look at joint solutions, even before you call in sick.
- What would be a good time to have contact again? Will you call me?

You can and may talk a lot, as long as the conversation is not about the nature of the disease.

## Occupational physician

The occupational physician will tell you what to consider if your employee has long-term absence. The occupational physician works together with a practical support officer.

Ninety percent of illness reports are resolved within six weeks. In about 10 percent of cases, the occupational physician comes into the picture. Especially if the absence is set to last longer, it is important for you to know where you stand. The occupational physician makes an assessment concerning the duration of the absence, medical limitations and possibilities.

The occupational physician also advises whether actions are needed from the employer and employee to achieve solutions to the problems.

## Making adjustments

You will also be told what you can do for your employee. For example, whether adapted transport is needed if your employee cannot travel by themselves. Or whether adapted work tasks are needed. You can then make an action plan with your employee based on the advice of the occupational physician.

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# 4. What am I allowed to discuss with my ill employee?

If you think there are issues at work that might be bothering the ill employee, it is OK to talk about them. In fact, it is good to talk about certain issues, as they often affect the employee's performance.

You should understand how you can improve the work so that your employees are more pleasant to work with. Because if you provide working conditions that cause less stress or less physical strain, you make it easier for your employee to recover and resume their work. Worry, stress, anxiety, insecurity, anger or removal from work will then immediately diminish.

## **Disagreements**

Consider the employee's possible disagreements with colleagues or supervisors. Should you be told that this is an issue, it is very important to discuss this with your employee. In doing so, do not discuss illness or recovery, but discuss removing barriers at work. Your employee will be much more likely to be able to return to work sooner.

It could also be that the ill employee has a problem with you as an employer, and you can also have a conversation with your ill employee about this. But be careful not to prove yourself right in such a discussion, because that will not benefit anyone. Above all, listen, stick to the facts and agree on how to solve the problem.

## **Working conditons**

You may also start the conversation about workplace health and safety. For example, about work that might be too hard for an employee or about workload and job content. Work stress

is a serious illness trigger. Keep talking to your employee about what they think is important for healthy working conditions. By consulting often, you can come up with practical solutions that can prevent or reduce a lot of absence.

Again, this should not be directly about the employee's illness and recovery.

## **Personal circumstances**

You may also discuss personal circumstances with your ill employee. For example, their competences that no longer fit with their job, as there might be something to improve there.

Circumstances at home can also be a topic of discussion, if they affect your employee's employability. For instance, care duties an employee has at home that do not fit with their working hours.

# 5. What can I do to reintegrate the employee?

As an employer, you have to be willing to adjust the work and work environment so that your employee can come back to work.

## First weeks

In the first weeks after reporting ill, you may ask your employee what adapted work tasks are possible, given the circumstances. Your starting point here should be a good conversation between you and your employee, who can indicate what is possible themselves.

If it is a case of prolonged absence, the occupational physician will advise whether and, if so, how the employee may do adapted work.

The occupational physician will ascertain the nature of the illness and the prospect of recovery. They will also examine whether reintegration measures are needed. For instance, adjustments to the hours and tasks, work schedule, transport to and from work or the workplace itself, such as adapted chairs and desks or adaptations to the work environment as a whole. Sometimes, a solution is to give your employee another position within your company.

If you cannot get your employee reintegrated back into your own company, help them find work elsewhere. If your employee comes up with their own suggestions in this regard, listen to them. You should only ignore such a suggestion if you can provide very good arguments for doing so.

## Action plan

Sometimes, such adjustments are not necessary, if it is assessed that the employee will recover by themselves and be able to function fully again like before they reported ill. This is often the case for short-term absenteeism. But if absenteeism lasts longer, temporary adjustments are often desirable or even necessary.

If your employee is sick for more than six weeks, you are required by law to draw up a reintegration plan. In it, you must describe the initiatives you are taking to get your employee back to work. But beware: you may not write about your employee's illness. Even if your employee agrees that you may write something about it, you may not include this information in the reintegration plan.

# 6. How do I know if my reintegration plan will be successful?

You cannot know for sure whether your reintegration plan will be successful. But you can maximise the chances of success. Many of these success factors are also listed in the Eligibility for Permanent Incapacity Benefit (Restrictions) Act. They include the following points:

1

## **Barrier-free work resumption**

Stay in contact and conversation with your employee. Especially about what you can also do, in collaboration with your employee, to remove barriers to (partial) work resumption. As we described above, this is about removing barriers where there are struggles in working relationships (colleagues-employee, employer-employee) or improving working conditions (work stress, physically demanding or unhealthy work). And it is about creating conditions that make private matters that affect work no longer a barrier.

2

## **Active in adapted work**

Make sure you know what it takes to get your employee active again. So, where there are opportunities for temporary adapted work: fill this in together. If your employee will be ill for longer, you will get additional information from the occupational physician, who will draw up a so-called problem analysis for this purpose if your employee is ill for six weeks, unless full return to work is in sight in the short term.

See what you can do to remove barriers for the future.



3

**Action plan and updates**

Based on the advice of the occupational physician, make an action plan, evaluate it and adjust it where necessary. The action plan should state which agreements you will make with your employee about reintegration. So, it is a joint plan. You should agree on how often you will have contact, the possibilities for reintegration and the route to get there.

If there is a threat of long-term absence (full return to work is not expected within 3 months), the occupational physician will draw up a problem analysis.

Even if your employee is temporarily not yet employable, it is important to have this conversation with your employee and fill in the action plan (temporarily no adapted work opportunities yet). And see what you can do to remove barriers for the future.

This shows what your employee can and cannot do. Even if it states that your employee is temporarily not yet employable, it is important to have a conversation with your employee and to fill in the action plan (temporarily no adapted work possibilities on the advice of the occupational physician). And see what you can do to remove barriers for the future.

4

**Deferring the action plan**

If your employee is admitted to a health facility (hospital, rehabilitation institution, mental health institution, etc.) then you can defer making the action plan until the employee is available again.

5

**Back to work**

If your employee can resume work, determine by mutual agreement which tasks are justified, how many hours will be worked and in which periods. In doing so, you should stick to the parameters of the advice of the occupational physician. If you have a question about this, do not hesitate to contact the occupational physician for an explanation.

6

**Interim adjustments to the plan**

Keep a close eye on whether, in the meantime, you need to adjust the action plan. Indeed, your employee's medical situation may change or new positions may arise in your company that fit with the reintegration. Keep in good contact with your employee and evaluate the action plan with the employee about every six weeks. Then you can check whether you need to adjust the action plan.

If your employee can resume work, decide which tasks are justified in consultation.

# 7. What should I do if the action plan does not work quickly?

Despite the problem analysis and the agreements that you and your employee make about returning to work, their reintegration may take longer than you had anticipated. As soon as you detect this, it is necessary for the occupational physician to adjust the problem analysis to the new circumstances and for you and your employee to adjust the action plan.

After a year of absence without reintegration, you should start looking at whether your employee has a better chance of reintegrating outside your company.

But even then, your employee may fail to return to work. After a year of being absent without reintegration, you should check whether your employee has a better chance of reintegration outside your company. If, after a year, there is no prospect of a full return to the original work or other work within your company, you are obliged to deploy guidance to find other work outside your organisation before the 58<sup>th</sup> week. This is quite complicated. Get support from your occupational health and safety service provider.

As soon as you start this search, you should also adapt the action plan. This should then state what initiatives you will take to find a suitable workplace outside your company. Until you find one, as an employer, you should do everything possible to get your employee back to work within your company.



# Preventing absenteeism

As an employer, you have ways of adapting work so that it causes less absenteeism. These include, for example, adjusting working conditions, investing in employee skills and helping the employee to improve their working state.

But it is also important to engage with your employees about health. Because their lifestyle also matters. Even though they are free to live how they want, you are entitled to say something about the state in which they do their work. Starting on time, being rested and being properly employable during the working hours you have agreed: you can hold employees accountable for that. Because it is also important for employees to realise that healthy working is linked to healthy living.

Through questions and answers, we will show you that you are not alone in achieving sustainable employability, but that your employees also bear responsibility. And that you can help them do so. Because sustainable employability is not something you do alone; you achieve it together with your employees.



# 8. How do I prevent an employee from being absent?

If you are in good contact with your employees, you can often tell if things are going well or not so well. Signs, such as regular absence, making a lot of mistakes or not meeting agreements properly give you a reason to have a conversation with your employee. Give them feedback on what you have noticed and that you have concerns about it.

One of the other signs is when employees have been absent for long periods or frequently. In 50 percent of cases, frequent or long-term absence is a harbinger of recurrence, because the actual cause has not been discussed and resolved. This often involves non-medical factors.

## **Ask the employability coach**

Do you need help to prevent an employee from being absent? Consult Zorg van de Zaak's employability coach about the possibilities. The employability coach advises and guides employers and employees on employability and absenteeism.

As an independent third party, the employability coach helps make the non-medical causes of absenteeism discussable and solvable in a three-way conversation with the employer and employee.

In addition, the employability coach ensures that the employer is well informed and thus able to keep a grasp on making and keeping their staff employable. The employability coach also helps translate the advice of the occupational physician and supervises the implementation of this advice in daily practice.

The employability coach, like you, has no access to your employees' medical information. You never discuss the health symptoms of your employees, but the employability coach does play a bridging role between you, your employee and the occupational physician.

**See where improvements can be made**

Also talk to your employees themselves, as they often know very well when things are not going well at work. By listening carefully to them, you will hear what areas for improvement there are in your organisation.

**Listen to your staff**

Listen to your employees, because absence is also regularly determined by what people experience at home. Examples are informal carers who have a lot of care responsibilities at home and find it difficult to combine them with their work, or people in debt or going through

a divorce. You cannot take away their worries, but you can offer help that makes it easier for them to do their jobs well, despite their problems. For instance, you can adjust work schedules for carers or put people in debt in touch with debt relief organisations.

**Trust**

Be an employer with an open ear, who is listening and willing to help. The better you succeed in this, the more your employees will trust you and the better they will indicate what they need to keep functioning well.

By listening carefully to your employees,  
you will hear what areas for improvement  
exist in your organisation.



# 9. What is my employee's role in preventing absenteeism?

Your employee is obliged to follow all authorised measures you take to keep your staff safe and healthy at work. For example, the use of safe working facilities and guidelines that minimise work-related risks.

You should also expect your employee to do everything possible to stay fit for work. For example, following a training session or course in good time. Healthy living may also fall under this. As an employer, you are entitled to demand that your employees show up for work well rested and in good shape. As an employer, you may hold your employee accountable for this if their commitment to work or safety at work is at stake.

Your employee's obligation to prevent absenteeism does not become void after reporting ill. They are obliged to cooperate with reasonable supervision on your part and with guidance from the occupational health and safety service. If there are regulations from you or your occupational physician regarding reintegration, your employee must comply with them. This does not preclude them also being allowed to consult a treating doctor themselves in case of illness. And if they disagree with the occupational physician's reintegration advice, they may request an expert opinion from the UWV. If they disagree with the occupational physician's medical opinion, it is sometimes possible to request a so-called second opinion from another occupational physician.

Your employee must cooperate in drawing up an action plan. And should additional education or training be required, which will provide your employee with skills that allow them to resume their own or other work within a foreseeable period (six months), your employee is obliged to actively cooperate in this as well.



# 10. What can I do if my employee refuses to cooperate in reintegration?

If your employee refuses to cooperate in reintegration, you can take action against this as an employer. However, this must be within reason. First of all, you must confront the employee about their unwilling behaviour. After all, your employee should have the opportunity to still put their shoulder to the wheel. You also need to be sure that it is due to unwillingness rather than incapacity.

Both you and your employee are obliged to do everything to restore the relationship so that initiatives to reintegrate are successful. If you find it difficult to resolve a conflict with your employee, ask others for help, for example a mediator via Zorg van de Zaak.

If a helping hand offers no solution and even reasonable urging does not change your employee's mind, a reprimand is in order. You are even legally obliged to do so, because it is your duty as an employer to do everything possible to make reintegration possible. This also includes urging your employee to cooperate in reintegration.

You must discuss the reprimand verbally and confirm it in writing.

In extreme cases, you may suspend salary payments or withhold wages. This is a tough remedy, so you must have very good arguments to do so. In an extreme case, you may even proceed to give notice of dismissal.

While there is normally a ban on dismissal in the first two years of illness, this does not apply if your employee rejects any form of reintegration. Always engage legal support if you are considering such measures.

# 11. How do I ensure that my company stays healthy for my staff?

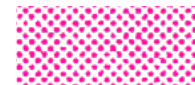
You can only achieve a healthy company if you know what risks exist in your company. This is not easy, as you are usually unaware of all the dangers lurking in your own company. Risks not only include dangerous machinery, but also hidden illness triggers, such as work pressure. Most business owners do not realise when the workload is so heavy that it becomes unhealthy. By being aware of this in time, you as an employer can take measures and prevent illness-related absence.

Enlist help to create a so-called risk inventory and assessment (RI&A), for example by a safety expert. They will also give you tips and ideas to reduce health and safety risks.

If you are making changes to your company, such as new construction, also engage a safety expert or an ergonomist. They will think along in the design so that you can optimally take occupational health and safety into account.

Also involve your employees in keeping your company healthy, as this is also in their interest. One way to do this is to appoint a prevention officer, who is the link between you, the staff and the health and safety service. Every company is obliged to have a prevention officer, who looks at measures that are important for health and safety from the perspective of the work floor. That way, you engage the whole company to stay healthy.

But the lifestyle of your employees also contributes to the health of your company. Getting a good night's sleep, eating responsibly, not smoking – these are things that are beyond your control, but which have noticeable consequences. So, help your employees to live a healthy lifestyle, for instance by eating healthy food in the canteen, encouraging exercise and understanding the importance of rest.





# zorg van de zaak roadmap

What happens when your employee reports ill? Zorg van de Zaak takes you through all the options for reintegrating your employee in nine steps.

## Step 1

### **The illness report**

Around the first two weeks after an illness report, the Zorg van de Zaak employability coach can, depending on your contract, conduct a telephone intake with the employer or with the employee.



## Step 2

### **Deployment alert factors**

As an employer, you don't have to wait six weeks to start reintegration (the time limit at which the occupational physician usually intervenes for the first time).

Especially if the absence has a non-medical cause, you can also take immediate action. The employability coach will consult by phone to see which measures would be good to remove barriers and speed up reintegration. A three-way conversation with the employability coach or another intervention such as a workplace assessment and advice, mediation, career guidance, occupational social work support or debt assistance may be part of it.

## Step 3

### **Problem analysis (weeks 6 to 13)**

Six to 13 weeks after reporting ill, the occupational physician draws up a problem analysis. The problem analysis is usually postponed to 13 weeks at the latest if full resumption of work can be expected within 13 weeks. Of course, the occupational physician will offer advice on the parameters for resuming work.

## Step 4

### **Action plan (week 8)**

In week 8 after reporting ill, you and your employee will draw up an action plan for reintegration. In this plan, you will also set the ultimate goal of reintegration. You can use the advice of the occupational physician as input for this. If reintegration in another job outside your own company works out better than in your own company, as an employer, you are obliged to make use of this possibility. Staying ill unnecessarily is not allowed.



## Step 5

### **Periodic review (weeks 12 to 104)**

Until two years after reporting ill, you must do everything possible to reintegrate your employee. Also consider training programmes, courses and interventions that improve the capacity of your employee or break down any barriers to work. In the meantime, the occupational physician will check how your employee is doing and to what extent (adapted) work is possible.

## Step 6

### **Preparing the first-year evaluation (after three-quarters of a year)**

If your employee is still not at work after a year of illness, you are expected to evaluate the action plan. For example, if the resumption of work falls short of expectations, if the final goal has proved unachievable or if there have been changes to the employee's capacity. If your contract with us includes help with the first-year evaluation, we will of course support you. In all other cases, we can also help you on an extra-calculation basis.

## Step 7

### **Calling the employer immediately after first-year evaluation (week 53)**

If your employee is still not employable after the first year, their reintegration requires other efforts. You must now draw up a reintegration plan that takes into account your employee's job opportunities, distance to the labour market, recruitment possibilities and possibilities of resumption on the labour market. You must also draw up a personal profile, a reasoned search profile and an overview of reporting moments. Depending on your contract with us, our employability coach can help you with this.



YES/NO-

## Step 8

### **Calling the employer: preparing the WIA application**

If the employee also fails to reintegrate in the second year, you should prepare to apply for the WIA (Work and Income According to Labour Capacity Act). This law provides for what is needed to declare your employee unfit for work. You must submit the WIA application no later than week 93. The application requires the complete reintegration report and, prior to the final evaluation of the action plan, an up-to-date assessment by the occupational physician about the capacities of the employee at that time. Moreover, the employee must receive the compiled medical information needed for the WIA application from the occupational physician. Depending on your contract with us, our employability coach can help you with this.

## Step 9

### **Additional interventions in consultation (throughout the process)**

In the two years that you are responsible for the reintegration of an ill employee, many initiatives are mandatory. For example, drawing up an action plan, creating a file on your reintegration efforts and the first-year evaluation. Without these initiatives, the UWV will reject the WIA application you submit and you will have to continue paying the employee's wages for an additional period. However, the more you do to make reintegration a success, the less likely the WIA application will be rejected.

We would be happy to help make your ill employee's reintegration process a success. You can always call our employability coach for this purpose.

Get well soon →

# A helping hand from Zorg van de Zaak

Zorg van de Zaak is the occupational health partner for working people in the Netherlands. We offer integral and integrated solutions for the development of healthy organisations with rock-solid teams.

Together, we build organisations where employees are empowered to take charge of their own health, work and life. And where employees can develop and work together safely and with pleasure.

Because people are happier when they participate in work and society. Therefore, we strive to keep everyone stronger at work and offer help in times of need. In doing so, we strive to make a substantial contribution to a healthier, fitter and happier Netherlands.

Want to know more? Visit [www.zorgvandezaak.nl](http://www.zorgvandezaak.nl)

# zorg van de zaak