

A career break questionnaire for employees and human resource practitioners

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Exacerbated by the pandemic, career break experiences and temporary employment interruptions have become an increasingly common workplace experience. Organizations are moving away from traditionalist viewpoints of time away from work and how to redesign any interruptions as a career experience.

The authors study gathering stories on Australian women's career breaks provided insights into their lived experiences. They found that research findings provided both positive and negative understandings, specifically on how participants made connections between work conditions, policies and their career break outcomes. The research findings also conveyed the dynamic nature of workplace support, showcasing the kind of workplace support needed at three critical stages of a career break: prior to; during; and when returning from a career break.

The richness of language as well as structure of participants' stories were examined to derive meaning and logic of participants career break and workplace support experiences. Narratives can go beyond understanding individual's experiences and can be used to stimulate learning and prompt for change. Faced with workplace challenges, the authors posit that this study provided an opportunity to analyze these experiences and develop a questionnaire that could

potentially support both employers and employees to navigate a more satisfying career break experience. The questions below were filtered through the insights provided by the narratives in a sequential and categorical way to meeting current work challenges. The questions provide transparency of an employee's changing job role when taking a career break, as well as transparency on striving to support the changing needs of both employees and organizations when employees take a career break.

The present study used to design this questionnaire shows that the employee aspect can be used as an important communication tool to managing both their job role and their career break, particularly identifying specific changes to an employee's job role, as well as changes to their professional and personal circumstances that may have an impact on their job role during or upon return. From the human resources practitioner aspect, this questionnaire aims to assist with both supporting and facilitating positive career break and return to work experiences for their employees. In conclusion, the value of this study is based on a rigorous rich qualitative method and the outcome of the questionnaire provides needed critical workplace direction to empower individuals and enable human resource practitioners to take lead in facilitating an autonomous process.

Stage 1: Preparing to take a career break

Directions for future discussion between workplaces and employees in relation to an employee's job role:

- What is the status of all work in progress?
- Which specific job responsibilities will not be reassigned?
- Which specific job responsibilities will be reassigned?
- How will all management responsibilities be dealt with?
- How will the progress of reassigned work be communicated and to whom?
- How will any job role issue that arises during the career break be dealt with?
- What is the anticipated ability and desire to continue specific work tasks?
- What is the anticipated return to work capacity?
- Specify any other specific concerns about job role prior to the career break?

Role of human resource practitioners in facilitating the career break process:

- What career and personal mentoring services are available?
- What other suitable internal and external networks of support are available?
- Has all the relevant career break information been obtained and recorded?
- Has all the necessary paperwork been completed?
- Have leave arrangements been confirmed and communicated?
- Are all human resource practitioners familiar with facilitation of different types of career breaks and leave arrangements within their organization?

Stage 2: During a career break

Directions for future discussion between workplaces and employees in relation to an employee's job role:

- What strategies are in place to direct, redirect and manage work from home?
- Will the employee be contactable via email and if so, how often?
- How will emails relevant to the employee's job role be dealt with?
- What is the employee's anticipated ability and desire to attend workplace meetings or social activities, that is, periodically or sporadically?
- How will any updates relevant to the employee be communicated?
- Specify any other specific concerns about job role during a career break?

Role of human resource practitioners in facilitating the career break process:

- Are there any internal or external return-to-work incentives available?
- Are there any HR well-being initiatives available?
- Are there any internal or external networks of support available?
- Is a suitable career break mentoring program available?
- What incentives may be available to employees at the workplace, that is, free parking?
- How often will communication take place with management?
- How often will communication take place with HR?
- How will any amendments to approved leave be dealt with?
- What opportunities are there to remaining job ready?

Stage 3: Returning from a career break

Directions for future discussion between workplaces and employees in relation to an employee's job role:

- Do any specific job responsibilities need to be adapted, and if so, how?
- What is the status of all work that was reassigned?
- How will any uncompleted reassigned work be dealt with?
- Which reassigned job responsibilities will be handed back and when?
- Do alternative roles within organization need to or wish to be considered?
- Are there any changes to future career plans and aspirations?

Role of human resource practitioners in facilitating the career break and return to work process:

- What family friendly policies and flexible work policies are available?
- What relevant professional development opportunities are available?
- Is a return-to-work mentoring program available?
- Are there any return-to-work networks or programs?
- What HR well-being initiatives are available?
- When will return-to-work conversations take place with management?
- When will return-to-work conversations take place with HR?
- What is the organizational process for returning to work?

This questionnaire provides guidance to human resource practitioners on the information required in relation to managing changes to an employee's job role when they embark on a career break and highlights the vital role of human resources practitioners in delivering and facilitating the career break and return to work experience.