

Back to active life

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Health and employment: two opposite worlds despite the advantages of integrating ill people into the professional world.

“Returning to active life” questions the links between the world of health and of employment. Despite important progress over the last years regarding access to loans for sick persons or to the right to the deletion of data that may be used negatively, health and employment are too often opposed with negative consequences for people. A work interruption for instance represents a loss of salary for the employee, a loss of talent as well as a reorganisation cost for the employer. It also represents a loss of revenue for social security.

Beyond the negative consequences of separating Health and employment worlds, the integration of sick persons in the professional world has many advantages:

For the employee, work is, primarily, a source of income. It is also generally seen as a way to reach professional fulfilment and integration into a collective group. Further, it enables the employee to provide a function that is seen as useful to society.

For the employer, integrating sick people contributes to motivating the rest of the team as “patient employees” are examples of commitment and tenacity, two qualities needed to overcome difficulties. It is therefore in the company’s interests to benefit from that individual strength, and its sick employees’ professional skills.

For the healthcare system, integration of sick people into the professional world is a necessity to ensure the sustainability of the system. Sick people can contribute to the system and represent a significant source of income for the social security.

There is therefore a need to act to better reconcile professional life and health for the benefit of all. There are many challenges. For instance: integrating better recovering people in the professional world, preventing professional and social exclusion or even adopting a dynamic management of sick leaves.

Simple solutions exist to integrate sick people in the professional world.

Once an employee has informed his employer about his/her condition, the employer has three days to propose adjustments to the employee’s working conditions, before the latter requests a leave of absence. Several simple solutions enable the integration of sick people into the professional world such as:

- **Enabling freedom of speech:** creating a favourable environment for dialogue is necessary to avoid disease stigma but also to consider solutions based on the needs expressed by the employee and his/her teams. This, for example, is the objective of the ‘Cancer@work’ initiative.
- **Remaining flexible:** The Danish Company Novo Nordisk has built its flexibility policy on basic principles: each employee has the right for flexibility, the employer is responsible for implementing this policy and creating a favourable environment to dialogue. However, there is still the need to ensure the employee’s presence at the workplace and the flexibility policy should not be detrimental to the company’s business.
- **Offering individual and collective support:** This support aims at helping “patient-employees” but also their colleagues. Individual support enables to deal with the difficulties of returning to the workplace

after an extended absence, through progressive and adapted working conditions. For instance, the startup 'Wecare@work', whose services are used by the national health insurance, supports employers to create tools to better reconcile sickness and work.

- **Training employees:** one of the major challenges for employers is to raise awareness and train their employees on sickness and work. The national health insurance supports companies by offering dedicated training courses on “mental health first aid” for employees.
- **Regulation:** on a wider scale, integrating sick employees on the workplace should be done through regulatory reforms. A bill of law has recently been voted in Parliament to enable access to employment for people with chronic conditions.

Sick leaves: focus on a major issue

Sick leaves represent 13 million of leaves of absence in 2021 and represent a major challenge that the National Health Insurance has to address. For prescribing physicians, it aims at proposing a training on burnouts and mental health at work as well as supporting them when prescribing sick leaves. For insured people, the objective is to either encourage a return to work or to qualify the worker as unable to work.