The stay-in-touch and re-entry program ''organising family time''

A concept for balancing work and family life for employees of the University of Kassel

The continual expansion and evaluation of family friendly conditions for studying, working and science is a central building block to the University of Kassel, as a family friendly institution. In alignment with our family- and life phase- oriented personal politics, the University has made it our goal to make parental leave or leaves of absence due to family matters special.

Employees, as well as executives, profit from a contact retention and re-entry program. Executives usually have a great interest in holding on to the job experience and knowledge of employees on leave and having early notice about when re-entry can be expected. A collaboratively planned re-entry can lead to an earlier return, as well as simplifying the process for everyone involved. Therefore, a contact retention and re-entry program can lead to the long-term employment of qualified specialists and executives and reduce costs in employee recruitment, qualification and training. For employees, long leaves of absence can create insecurity and compatibility concerns regarding one's career and family life. For this reason, a contact retention and re-entry program can signalize to employees that their work, as well as their needs for compatibility with private responsibilities, is appreciated.

Especially female employees choose family related leaves of absence on a greater scale and often risk negative consequences for their careers. To prevent possible professional disadvantages for women, counteract gender inequality and support family and life phase-oriented time off work, re-gardless of gender, this program can be a valuable tool in promoting equality.

The goal for this program is to base the communication between the university and its employees on their individual needs during career interruptions, as well as simplify their return.
Target group: Employees in administration, science, technical areas and apprentices at the University of Kassel, who are taking a leave of absence for family reasons (such as pregnancy, maternal leave or parental and caregiver leave).

The measures that accompany employees' parental and family leave and prepare them for their return are described below. Executives inform employees on the program and offer arrangements.

It is recommended that at least a planning meeting is held prior to the leave of absence (before the planned leave and a re-entry meeting). The organization and implementation during this entire process lies in the responsibility of the immediate executives.

Phase I: The time of preparation: the planning meeting[1]

This phase begins with an employee's individual decision to take a leave of absence for family reasons or the official announcement of this decision (e.g. due to pregnancy, parental leave or necessary care for a family member). This phase comes with uncertainty regarding work scheduling during the leave and possible re-entry, and a high need for communication on both sides. The goal should be a joint security in planning and expectations for all those involved. The planning meeting between executives and employees should be initiated and implemented promptly, ideally, if possible, 8 to 12 weeks before the planned leave of absence.

In the planning meeting, information and discussions can be shared on the following:

1. Executives provide information on existing contact points and tools around balancing work and family responsibilities at the University of Kassel, e.g.:
    a. (counseling-) opportunities through the Family Welcome Service
    b. counseling opportunities on labor law regulations at the department of Human Resources (Abteilung Personal und Organisation)
    c. counseling opportunities on social security regulations at the payroll-office (Hochschulbezügestelle)
2. If and when the reason behind the leave of absence may be made public (e.g. within the team, department, etc.)
3. In case of pregnancy: Exemption from work for examinations upon presentation of proof from the medical practice
4. Expected length and extent of leave of absence
5. Possible working models during family leave and upon return (e.g. part-time employment, possible working time options at the university)
6. Handling of remaining vacation hours
7. Discussing the transfer of responsibilities to replacement staff
8. Employment possibilities during leave of absence (considering current legal regulations; uni-kassel.de/go/stay-in-touchandre-entryprogram): an interest in employment opportunities such as vacation and sick leave substitutes, e.g. arranged through the internal job placement market (www.uni-kassel.de/go/intern_Stellenvermittlung)

[1] guide „the planning meeting ", see appendix

9. participation in internal and external training courses, conferences, etc.; the coverage of costs must be agreed upon individually. Insurance is provided for participation in training courses and the company outings. For questions about childcare, please contact the Family Welcome Service
10. Maintaining contact opportunities on the universities part, optional: e.g. interest in a maintaining stay-in-touch meeting, participation in the buddy model (details in Phase II)
11. Re-entry

Phase II: The time during the family time-out: the stay-in-touch phase

To approach possible problems during re-entry in a timely manner, well-kept contact between the university and its employees during absence is important. Different measures of maintaining contact during the leave can create incentives for quick re-entry and prevent possible loss of qualifications and information. The frequency of contact depends on individual needs, considering the length of leave. As a rule of thumb: the shorter the leave, the more essential information regarding the immediate work environment should be shared. Depending on the agreement, it is recommended to inform employees about the following topics during their absence:

- Invitations to personal meetings, like business events (such as internal department or team meetings, staff assemblies). The organization of these meetings, as well as the form and frequency, are determined collaboratively
- Invitations to formal and informal events, like general university celebrations, department / faculty celebrations, lectures and company outings etc.
- Information about changes that concern the workplace, the work environment, the department or the university as a whole

Furthermore, employees can continue to use the University of Kassel's internal communication channels during their absence (e.g. university account email addresses, accessible through the OWA browser). That way, employees can stay informed flexibly and independently about internal processes and offers in addition to the directly shared information. Due to data protection regulations, the business e-mail address may be used in a business context and to pass on business information only.

The buddy-model [2] (optional)

The buddy-model is possible in the case of complete reduction of working hours during a leave of absence.
The buddy model entails the possibility for employees to have a contact person from the immediate work environment (not an executive) during their leave. The goal in this measure is to strengthen the collaborative relationship between coworkers during the leave of absence, promote teamwork in the future and therefore improve the wellbeing of employees in the workplace after re-entry. Buddys act as a connecting link between the workplace and the person on leave. As this model creates additional tasks for buddys, their work as buddys is considered a part of their job and takes place during working hours. The executive in charge stays informed about the resulting teamwork and the contents of the formal exchange. In addition to this exchange of information, other questions, concerns and challenges can be addressed in the buddy model. Informal topics of discussion are also permitted. The informal conversational dynamic can maintain a sense of belonging in the university, especially with colleagues, and help facilitate re-entry.

<u>The buddy model works in the following steps:</u>
Before the planned leave, employees can choose and inquire about a buddy from their department. The buddy selection can be based on shared personal interests, life experiences or professional abilities (e.g. close colleagues, people with experience regarding leaves of absence, their own substitutes etc.) Furthermore, employees can speak to the executive (during the planning meeting) about the possibility of multiple buddys in the work environment. The resulting duo then agrees on how the exchange can be implemented during the absence together, taking their own needs and capacities into account.

It is advisable to define clear guidelines and recommendations. The frequency of exchange and the choice of information channels should also be discussed. The guideline “Agreement on the buddy model” (available in the appendix) can serve as a guide. In advance, buddys should be informed on their role in this model, as well as the ways in which they would like to or should offer support. Ideally, the buddy-model should be understood and implemented as a flexible support system, despite agreed regulations.

- [2] Guide „agreement to the buddy model“ see appendix

The stay-in-touch meeting [3] (optional)

A stay-in-touch meeting between an executive and their absent employee can create an opportunity for an evaluation and adjustment (if needed) of the decisions made and discussed during the planning meeting. The timing of this depends on the planned length of the leave of absence and is agreed upon individually.

Topics in the meeting can include:

- Changes in the length or extent of the family leave of absence
- Changes in the needed information or channels of communication
- Changes regarding the wish for an opportunity of part time work
- Arrangement of further contact meetings, if desired

Phase III: The end of the family time-out: the re-entry interview [4]

The main goal during the preparation for re-entry should be rediscussing, reviewing, and planning the implementation of the work time model, that was agreed upon during the planning meeting. It should be kept in mind, that the chosen working time model must consider the interests of all parties involved. The executive is responsible for initiating this meeting.

Topics for the re-entry program can include:

- Possible changes and expectations that may have evolved since the last meeting
- If needed, further information on existing information channels and measures in the area of balancing work and family responsibilities
- Working out a fitting time model regarding the scope of tasks and working hours (including flextime and working from home)
- Definition or adjustment of future areas of responsibility and other important changes such as the contents of the last team meetings that might not have been communicated during the absence
- Need for professional training and qualification measures (usually the need for such as measures is greater, the longer the employee was absent)
- Appointment of a person responsible for re-entry training
- Consideration of possible vacation and project planning

[3] guide „The stay-in-touch meeting" see Appendix
[4] guide „The re-entry interview" see Appendix

Phase IV: The time after the family time-out: the return

The last phase commences with the actual re-entry after a leave of absence. The goal with this phase is to implement the re-entry as planned and finally, reflect on the time of absence as well as the re-entry.

The following measures can be helpful for a smooth re-entry:

- A structured first day of work accompanied by an executive and possibly another employee for the training
- Establishing a job-related handover and a training phase
- Participation in further education and training offers
- A conversation evaluating the re-entry should take place about 4-12 weeks after re-entry. Topics of conversation can include:
    - Review of the re-entry implementation and training phase
    - Assessment of further needs for qualification
    - Speaking about personal development
    - Room for improvement regarding the current working model
    - Need for further support and counseling offers
    - Reflecting on the contact retention and re-entry program (in particular, the benefits for employees and executives)

Appendix

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The planning meeting

Conversation guide – Employee interview as part of the stay-in-touch and re-entry program

Date:
Executive:
Employee:
Department / Area:

General information

The planning meeting can take place 8 to 12 weeks before the planned leave of absence. Approx. 1-1.5 hours are considered a good time frame for an employee interview. It is helpful to provide employees with these guidelines in preparation as well. This will allow you both to prepare for the meeting in advance and may shorten the duration of the conversation.

In case of pregnancy:

The departement of Human Resources was notified on: _____

Expected starting date of maternity leave (if applicable, employment prohibition): _____

- How long is the parental leave planned for? (expected period) (reference to deadlines - legal framework) **Note: This question does not require a (binding) answer**

- Would you like to work part-time during your leave of absence? If so, to what extent and under which conditions?
    - Partial mobile working options (uni-kassel.de/go/mobilearbeit)
    - Substitution activities (e.g. as part of a sick leave replacement)
    - Interest in qualification measures (e.g. further training/conferences)

- How do you envision the time after your leave of absence?

Contact retention opportunities during a leave of absence:

The following possibilities are optional and can be customized to fulfill individual needs at any time.

- Are you interested in the buddy-model and would like a greater exchange of information on general and personal topics? (only in cases of full leaves of absence)
- What would you like to be informed about during your leave of absence? What information would you like to receive?

The executive and / or the appointed buddy will always share the following information with you: Invitations to personal meetings and official events; invitations to formal and informal events; information about new developments concerning the field of work, the workplace, the department/division or the university as a whole.

- Which business e-mail address would you prefer to receive information through?

- Are you interested in another contact retention meeting? If so, when should this appointment take place? (a rough time frame can also be defined here)

- Are there any further discussion topics or questions that need to be addressed?

Agreement on the Buddy-Model

Conversation guide – Employee interview as part of the stay-in-touch and re-entry program

Date:
Executive:
Employee:
Buddy:
Department / Area:

The Buddy-Model

The buddy-model is a possibility for employees with a complete reduction of working hours during their leave of absence.
The model entails, that employees have an available person from their immediate work environment, who isn't an executive, to contact during their leave.
The goal with this measure, is to strengthen the connection between coworkers during a leave of absence, improve prospective teamwork and to promote well-being in the workplace.
Buddies act as a connecting link between the workplace and the absent employee. Because a model such as this one, creates additional tasks for the buddies, these tasks are limited to their regular working hours.
Aside from the formal exchanges of information, other questions, issues and challenges can be discussed within the buddy-model. Informal conversation topics are not excluded from this either.
The informal exchange of information can further promote a sense of belonging within the university and coworkers, as well as ease the re-entry.

- The following agreements were made between the employee and their buddy:

- Organization within the buddy partnership: expected starting date; frequency of contact; location of meetings (on campus, digital etc.); exchange of information during the buddy partnership; possible appointment of a substitute (in case of further absence):

The participants declare themselves ready, to carry out the exchange of information as agreed upon. Changes can be discussed with both parties at all times. The executive will be informed of any changes or early termination within and of the partnership

The buddy partnership will begin on _____ and is expected to end on

_____.

Date, employee‘s signature

Date, buddy’s signature

Date, executive‘s signature

17.07.2026

The stay-in-touch meeting during a leave of absence

Conversation guide – employee interview as a part of the stay-in-touch and re-entry program

Date:
Executive:
Employee:
Department/Area:

General information

The date for the stay-in-touch meeting was agreed upon during the planning meeting, to communicate possible changes and take them into account long term. This appointment is based on the duration of the leave of absence and can be arranged individually. A time frame of 1 to 1,5 hours should be counted in for this meeting. It is helpful to provide the employee with this conversation guide as well. That way, both parties can prepare for the meeting in advance and possibly shorten the duration of the conversation.

- Have any framework conditions changed during the leave of absence or on the part of the department?

- How satisfied are you with the current exchange of information (and if applicable, the buddy-model)? What is going well? Is there room for improvement in any areas? Which topics should be discussed?

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The re-entry interview

Conversation guide – Employee interview as part of the stay-in-touch and re-entry program

Date:
Executive:
Employee:
Department/Area:

General information

The re-entry interview should take place at least 3 months before the planned re-entry and should take approx. 1-1.5 hours. It is helpful to provide employees with these guidelines in preparation as well. This will allow both of you to prepare for the interview in advance and may shorten the duration of the interview.

- Date of re-entry:

- Working time model - How is the return to work planned? (full-time or part-time re-entry, possibly a time limit on part- time work, gradual increase in working hours)

- Which implementation options can management offer?

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- Would you like to take advantage of mobile working opportunities? (uni-kassel.de/go/mobilearbeit) if so, in which arrangement?

- Familiarization at the workplace (which preparations can be made to ensure a pleasant re-entry?)

- Possible need for qualification:

- What remains to be discussed? Are there any further questions?