

P3 PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

How we supported a business and employee through long-term ill health

HR

Case Study



Client Overview

Sector:
Professional Services

Size:
Large professional practice based in Manchester

HR Setup:
Working with P3PM as their external HR Business Partner for ongoing advice and case management support

Key Employment Context:
A recently promoted director – a high-performing, senior team leader – was diagnosed with a serious neurological condition within a month of her promotion

CASE STUDY

The Challenge

Andrea was one of the most senior members of staff – an outstanding performer, an effective team leader, and only recently promoted to director level. Towards the end of 2015, she was taken ill and diagnosed with severe Multiple Sclerosis (MS). The MS had a massive impact: half of her face was numbed, along with the right side of her body. Once out of hospital, Andrea remained off work for almost a year.

As a director, she was responsible for a team of around five people and was the key relationship manager for several of the firm's most important clients. The business needed to manage her absence carefully – balancing its duty of care to Andrea with the practical and financial pressures of a senior role left unfilled.



OUR APPROACH

Our Approach

The Business's Response:

- Reallocated Andrea's workload to other team members to ensure clients received a consistent level of service – a process that took several weeks
- Directors visited Andrea regularly in hospital and at home, frequently discussing her strong desire to return to work
- Supported her financially with full pay for six months, followed by half pay
- After a year, Andrea periodically returned to the office without specific tasks – a necessary step given the business's duty of care to the employee and its clients
- A phased return with reduced hours was attempted, with no formal workload, deadlines or responsibilities

Key Considerations:

- Andrea was suffering with chronic fatigue – a common symptom of MS – and struggled with even the most basic of tasks
- After around six months of phased return, it became clear she was unlikely to make any significant contribution at work
- The business had to balance compassion for Andrea with its obligations to the wider team and its clients
- The seniority of her role made re-distribution of responsibilities especially complex and costly
- The business needed to understand its legal obligations before taking any formal steps

OUR APPROACH

HR Support & Guidance

P3PM liaised closely with the business throughout the process, mapping out a structured approach that kept both the employee's wellbeing and the business's obligations in equal focus – meeting on several occasions to review progress and determine next steps.

Support Provided:

- Advised the business on its legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010, including the duty to make reasonable adjustments for a disabled employee
- Proposed and arranged an occupational health assessment to determine what Andrea could and couldn't do in a work context
- Reviewed the occupational health findings together with the business and determined the appropriate course of action
- Supported the business through the settlement agreement process once it became clear that Andrea was unlikely to be able to return to meaningful work

OUR APPROACH

The Process We Followed

Managing Long-Term Ill Health — Step by Step:

- Maintained regular communication between the business and P3PM throughout Andrea's absence, reviewing the situation at each stage
- Supported a structured phased return to work with clear parameters – no formal workload, deadlines, or responsibilities – to manage risk to Andrea, colleagues, and clients
- Commissioned an occupational health assessment and reviewed the findings together with the business to determine the most appropriate next steps
- Guided the business through the settlement agreement process – mapping the timeline, managing the documentation, and ensuring the outcome was fair to both parties



RESULTS

Outcome & Impact

A fair outcome for the employee

Andrea was supported throughout – financially, practically, and with compassion – and the settlement process concluded with a dignified and mutually agreed resolution.

Legal obligations met

By following a structured, occupational health-informed process, the business fulfilled its duty of care and its obligations under the Equality Act, reducing the risk of a tribunal claim.

Business continuity maintained

Client relationships were re-established and workloads redistributed over time, enabling the firm to continue operating effectively despite the loss of a senior director.



RESULTS

Outcome & Impact (continued)

Significant financial cost

The total cost – including full and half pay over the absence period and the final settlement payment – was around £50,000. A substantial sum for any business, and potentially devastating for a smaller firm.

Hidden management costs

Beyond salary, the business absorbed significant time costs: managing the process, colleagues covering Andrea's workload, and re-establishing key client relationships over many months.

18-month process

The entire journey from diagnosis to settlement conclusion took around 18 months. Once the decision to proceed was made, the settlement itself took approximately 2-3 months to conclude.





TAKEAWAYS

Lessons & Next Steps

What the client learnt about managing long-term ill health in the workplace:

1. The business should not have allowed the situation to continue for as long as it did. In hindsight, the settlement process should have been started earlier – compassion and financial support to the individual were prioritised well ahead of the wider needs of the business, which significantly increased the final cost.

2. What was good for the business and what was good for the individual were not balanced well enough. When facing a deeply personal and sensitive situation, it is natural to lead with compassion – but this must be weighed against a clear-eyed assessment of commercial reality.

3. Involving HR support earlier – and more formally – would have helped the business map out its options sooner, set clearer expectations around timelines, and reduce the financial and operational burden on the wider team.

4. The experience gave the business a much clearer framework for handling long-term absence in future: structured review points, occupational health involvement at an earlier stage, and a more explicit process for moving towards resolution where return to work is not feasible.

RISK ANALYSIS

What Could Have Happened Without Support?

Without structured HR support throughout Andrea's case, the business faced serious exposure on multiple fronts – legal, financial, and reputational:

> *Having an HR Business Partner to navigate this process meant the business met its obligations, managed costs as effectively as possible, and reached a dignified outcome for both the employee and the organisation.*

- A failure to follow a proper process could have exposed the business to a disability discrimination claim under the Equality Act 2010, particularly if reasonable adjustments were not adequately explored.
- Without occupational health involvement, the business would have lacked objective evidence about Andrea's capacity – making any formal steps significantly harder to defend.
- An unstructured or prolonged absence with no review points could have extended the financial burden far beyond the £50,000 ultimately incurred – particularly dangerous for a smaller business.
- Without clear HR guidance, the business may have either acted too hastily – risking a claim – or delayed indefinitely, prolonging the cost and uncertainty for everyone involved.
- Colleagues and clients could have experienced a protracted period of instability with no clear resolution, damaging morale and client confidence in the firm.
- A poorly managed process could have left Andrea feeling unsupported or unfairly treated – turning a compassionate employer into a respondent at an employment tribunal.



GET IN TOUCH

Contact P3 People Management

0161 941 2426

p3advice@p3pm.co.uk

p3pm.co.uk