

Returning to work after sickness absence: smart plans empower worker and workplace

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- What I'll try to do in this session is:
 - *Synthesise the evidence around maintaining work ability for people with health problems*
 - *Translate that knowledge into a practical application - the journey back to work*
 - *And on the way have a little fun, perhaps a little controversy, and maybe some music!*

Work disability happens all too easily...

- It's a huge societal problem
 - for governments, employers, workers, carers, insurers....
- >2.5 million people economically inactive because of long-term sickness
 - ONS 2023
- It starts with short sickness absence



Setting the scene

- *Culturally, ill-health is seen as a reason to stop working*
- Is that a rational response?
- Is it actually good for peoples' health?
- Is it best for disabled people?
- *Let's explore...*



The work-health relationship

- Work and health are complementary not conflicting!
- Work can be health promoting

– Dr Serena Bartys, 2023



- We should be supporting the concept of *working while recovering*
 - because.....

Work is generally good for us –
worklessness is not



... when Rihanna sings in Jamaican patois,
work means something rather different!

– *Work*, Rihanna, 2016

We need something novel to support return to work

- Current approaches to work-health clearly are not adequate...

inadequate

/ɪn'adɪkwət/

adjective

**lacking the quality or quantity required;
insufficient for a purpose.**

OH needs to update what it does!



- **Business Disability Forum: survey on OH services, 2023**
 - Most *workers* said the OH report was difficult to understand, had not helped put adjustments in place, and did not help them manage their disability at work
 - Most *managers* found OH reports unhelpful, unbalanced, unclear, or non-committal
 - The overwhelming message was that survey respondents felt let down.
- In a leading article for *Occupational Health [at Work]*, journal editor John Ballard said the survey should be: a '*catalyst for serious dialogue between OH providers, professional bodies, disabled employees and their employers to explore how their interaction can be optimised*'.



Access to work wait times leading to lost jobs

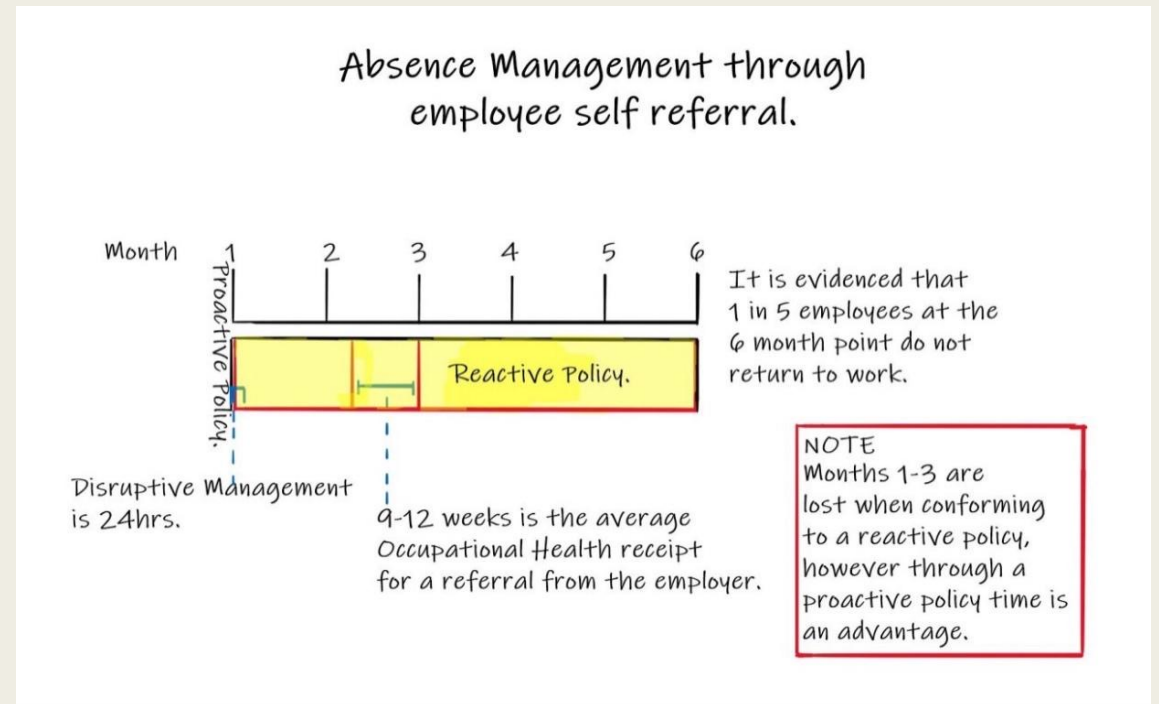
Wed, 11 January 2023

The average "clearance" time for Access to Work applications was > 2 months in October 2022. The longest wait time was nearly a year.

UK Policy and Campaigns Officer, said *"The wait times for Access to Work have been unacceptable for a long time now, but these new figures show how the delays are getting out of hand"*.

OH referral typically beyond optimal window

- 9-12 weeks is the average time for OH referral from the employer



Fit notes

- The data tells us that more 90% of the time, fit notes are signed as 'not fit'
 - That can't be right

**Statement of fitness for work
For social security or Statutory Sick Pay**

Patient's name

I assessed your case on:

and, because of the following condition(s):

I advise you that: you are not fit for work.
 you may be fit for work taking account of the following advice:

If available, and with your employer's agreement, you may benefit from:
 a phased return to work amended duties
 altered hours workplace adaptations

Comments, including functional effects of your condition(s):
Sample

This will be the case for
or from to

I will/will not need to assess your fitness for work again at the end of this period.
(Please delete as applicable)

Doctor's signature

Date of statement

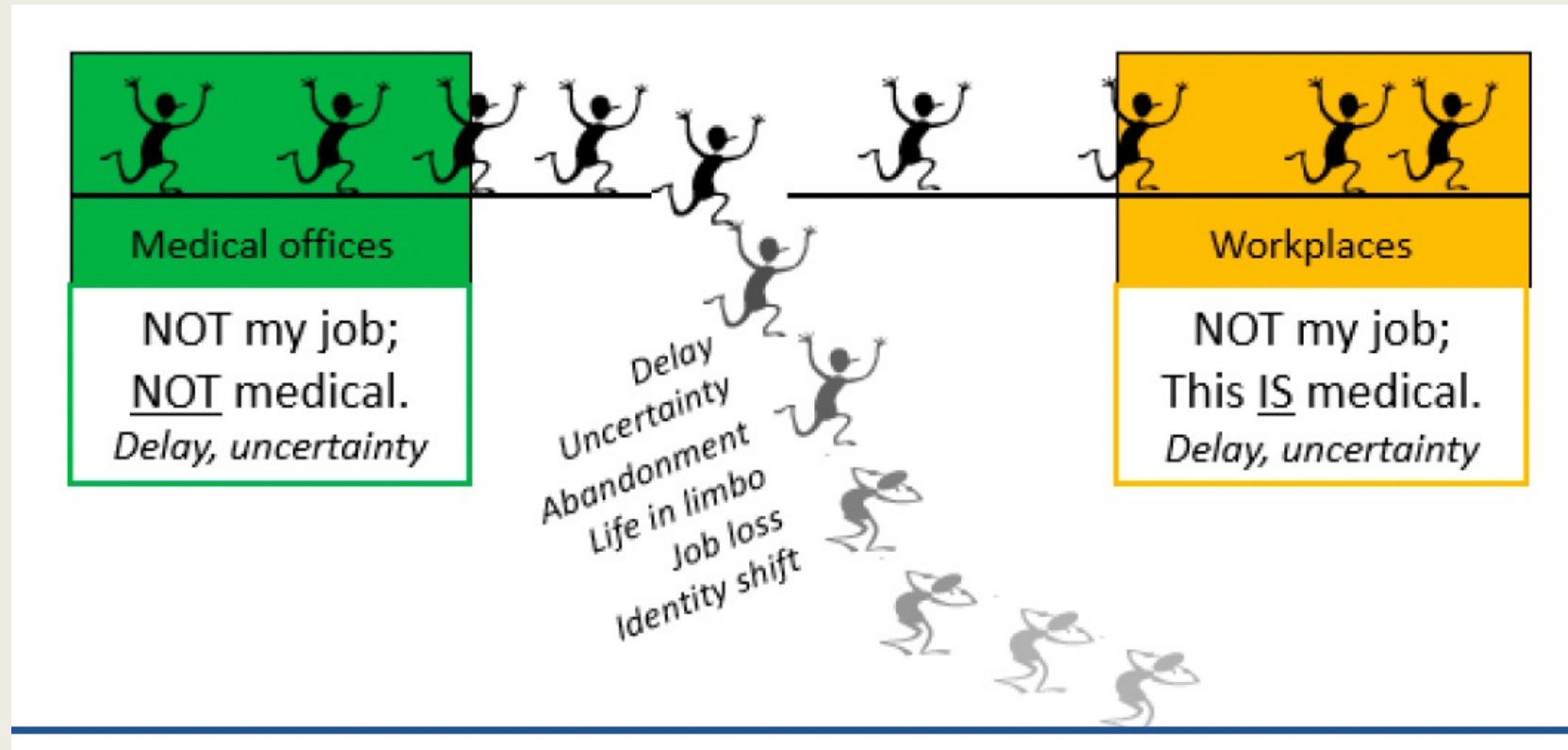
Doctor's address

Med3 04/10

What about delivery?

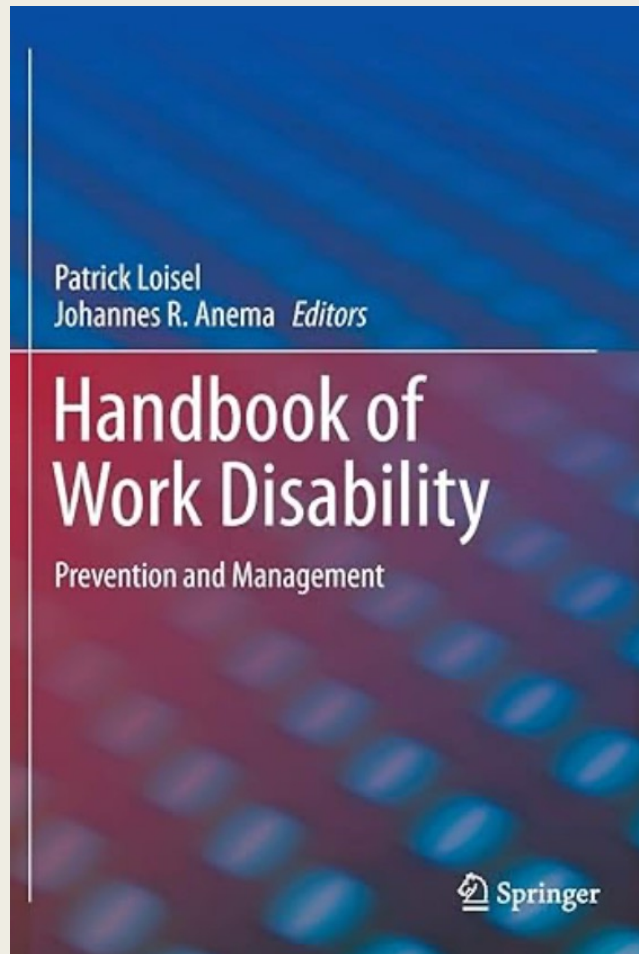
- High customer service scores (being friendly, helpful, courteous, returning phone calls in a timely manner, etc) don't match with duration of absence –
 - those rehab offices with the highest customer service scores also had the longest duration!
 - *Jason Parker, Centrix Work Disability Solutions, USA*
- Good OH is more than a tick box exercise
 - *It's not **how** we deliver stuff, but **what** we deliver!*
 - high fidelity to evidence-based concepts

Mind the Work<>Health Gap



The Result – needless work disability

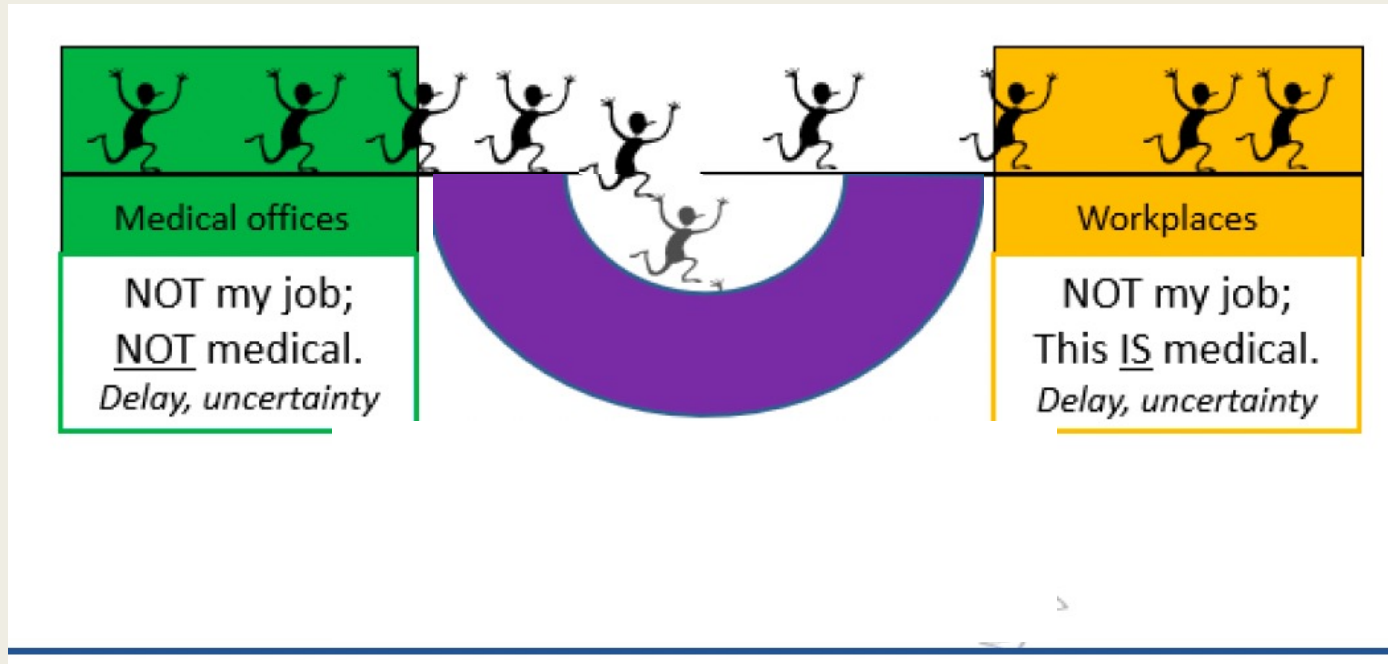
Rethink work disability



- Directly address work disability as the central issue, independent of the condition...
- The goal is not to fix a disorder or take care of an illness
- It is to effectively identify and address the determinants of work disability at the personal, workplace, and societal levels through evidence-based interventions

*Loisel and Anema, Handbook of Work Disability
Prevention and Management, 2013*

Bridge the gap by getting all players onside



smart Return to Work Plans can help



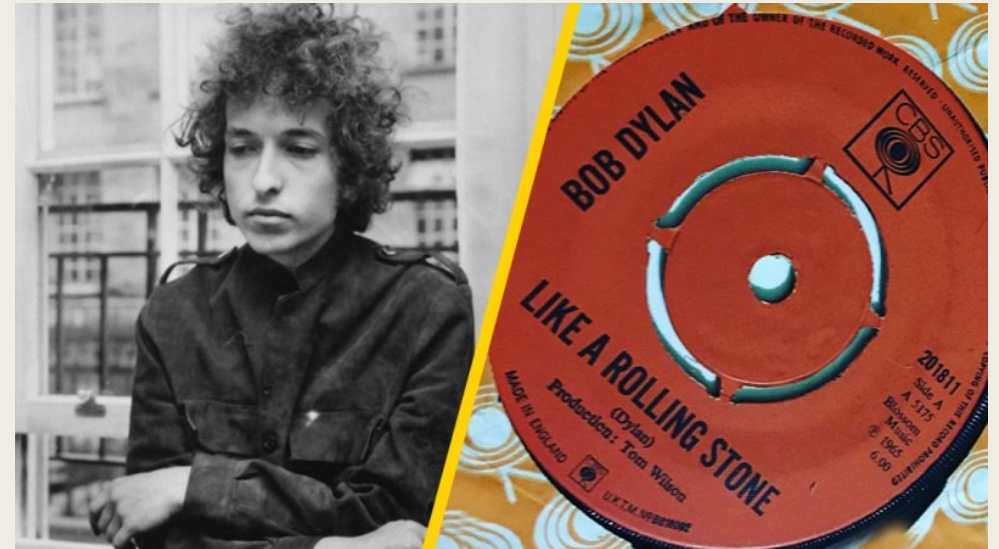
Return to Work Stay at Work

- Desired outcomes but...
- The worker and employer may well believe it's simply not possible
- So, we need to empower them to achieve the impossible!

How does it feel, ah how does it feel?

To be on your own, with no direction home

Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone



- *Like a Rolling Stone*, Bob Dylan (1965)

- RTW doesn't just happen
 - *it needs planning*
 - early *planning*
- Creating and agreeing a Plan is probably the most important component of effective RTW
- Not just any old plan...
- But how do we do it, and what does it look like?



Knowledge Transfer Partnership

- Between



- and



- Funded by



Our project:

- Assessed the evidence
- Moved that evidence into a digital guide for developing an individual smart RTW plan
- Co-production model
 - *wide stakeholder involvement*



What we learned

- Stakeholders wanted something they could understand and use
 - *with a different focus:*
- Move from what's wrong (*diagnosis*) and what's happened (*cause*)
- To what's *going* to happen
 - *supporting work ability*
- Biopsychosocial conceptual basis



What we created:



Re>Work

START

SIGN IN

Already have an account

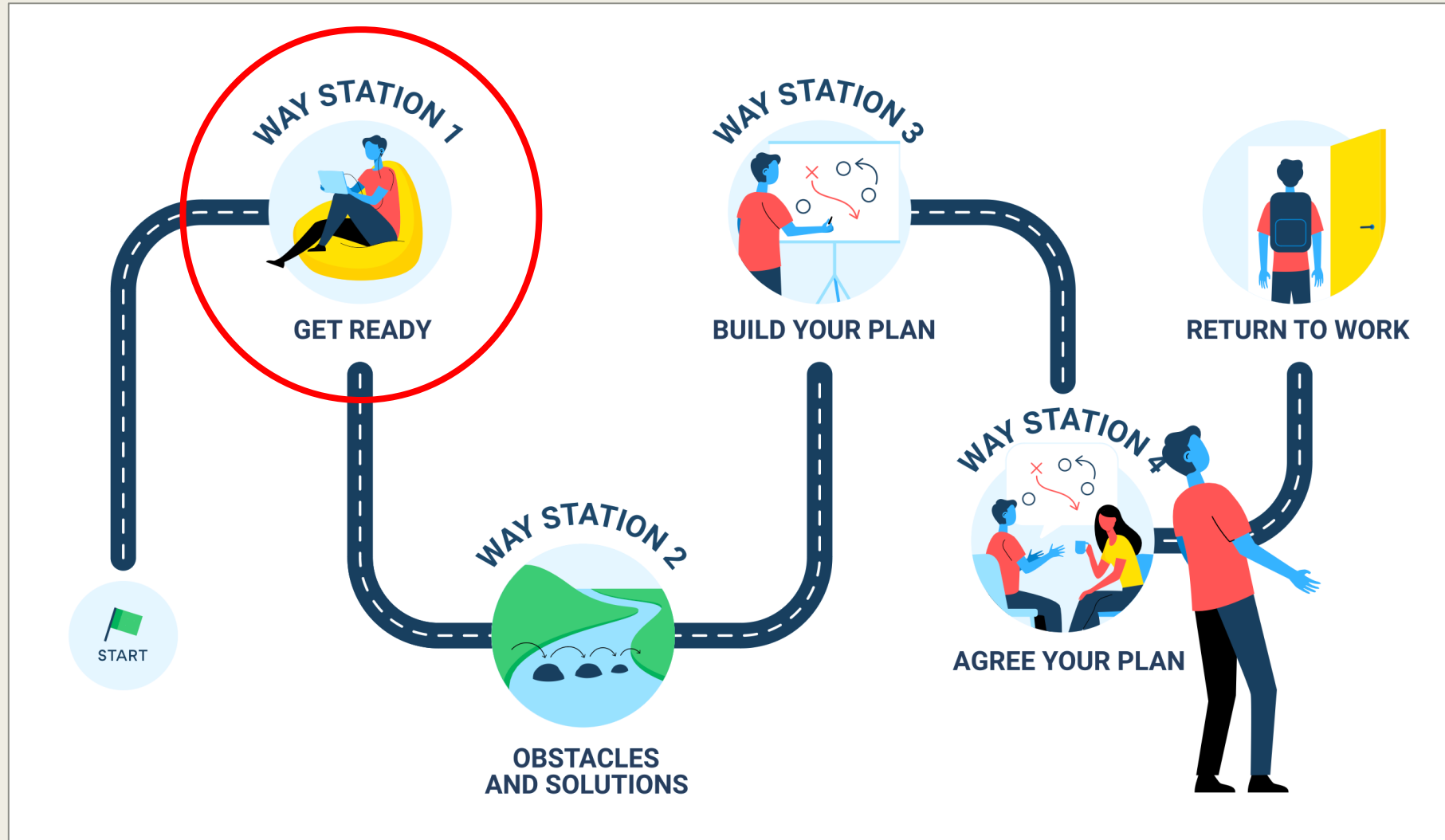
- Online guide
- Evidence-driven
- Engagement + empathy
- Interactive journey to
 - *develop smart RTW Plan*
 - *get all players onside*

Worker knows best

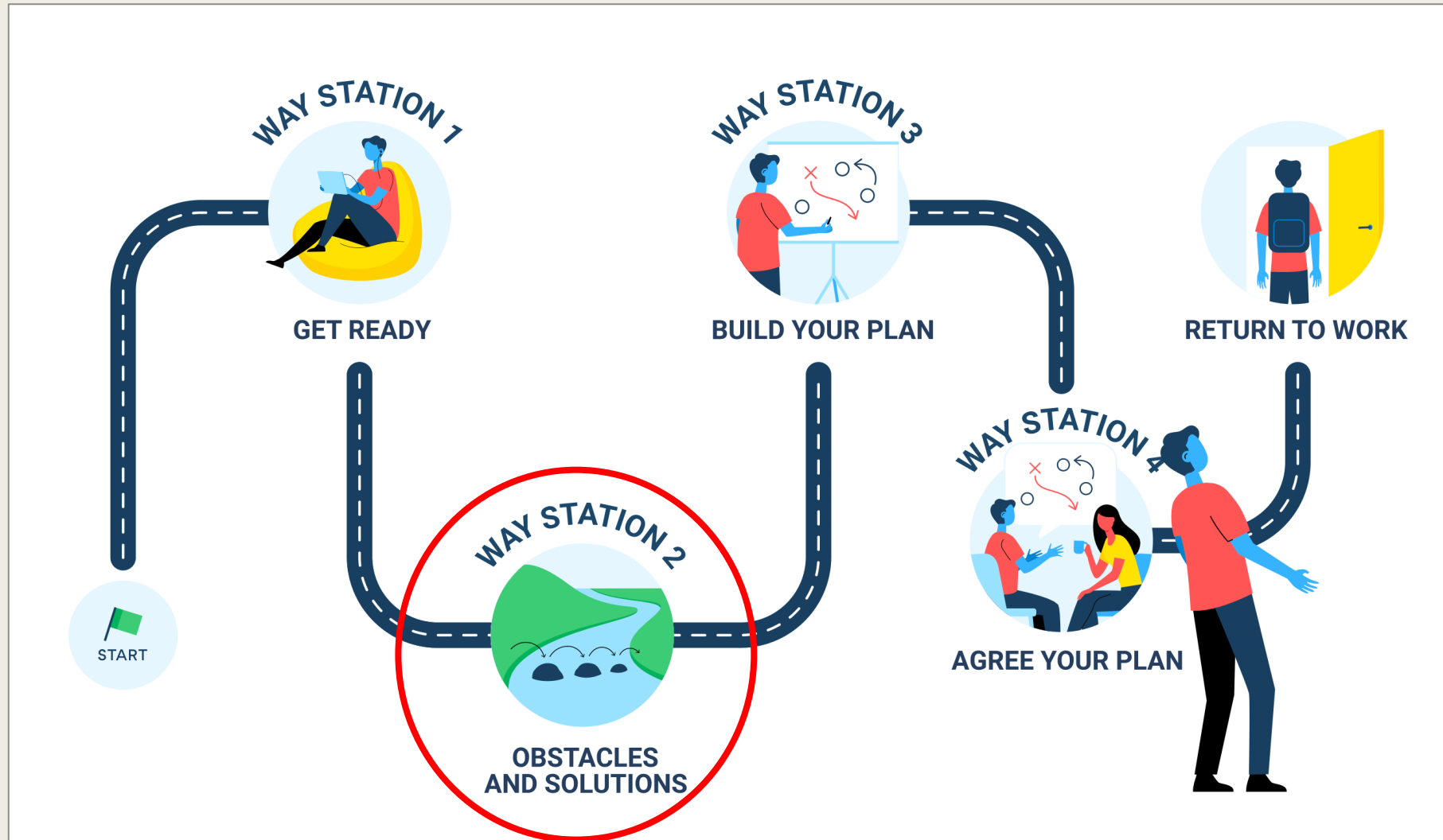


- They know their job
- They know how they feel
- They know what they can and can't do
- So, our novel approach was to empower the worker to create their own smart RTW Plan
 - *they embark on a guided journey*

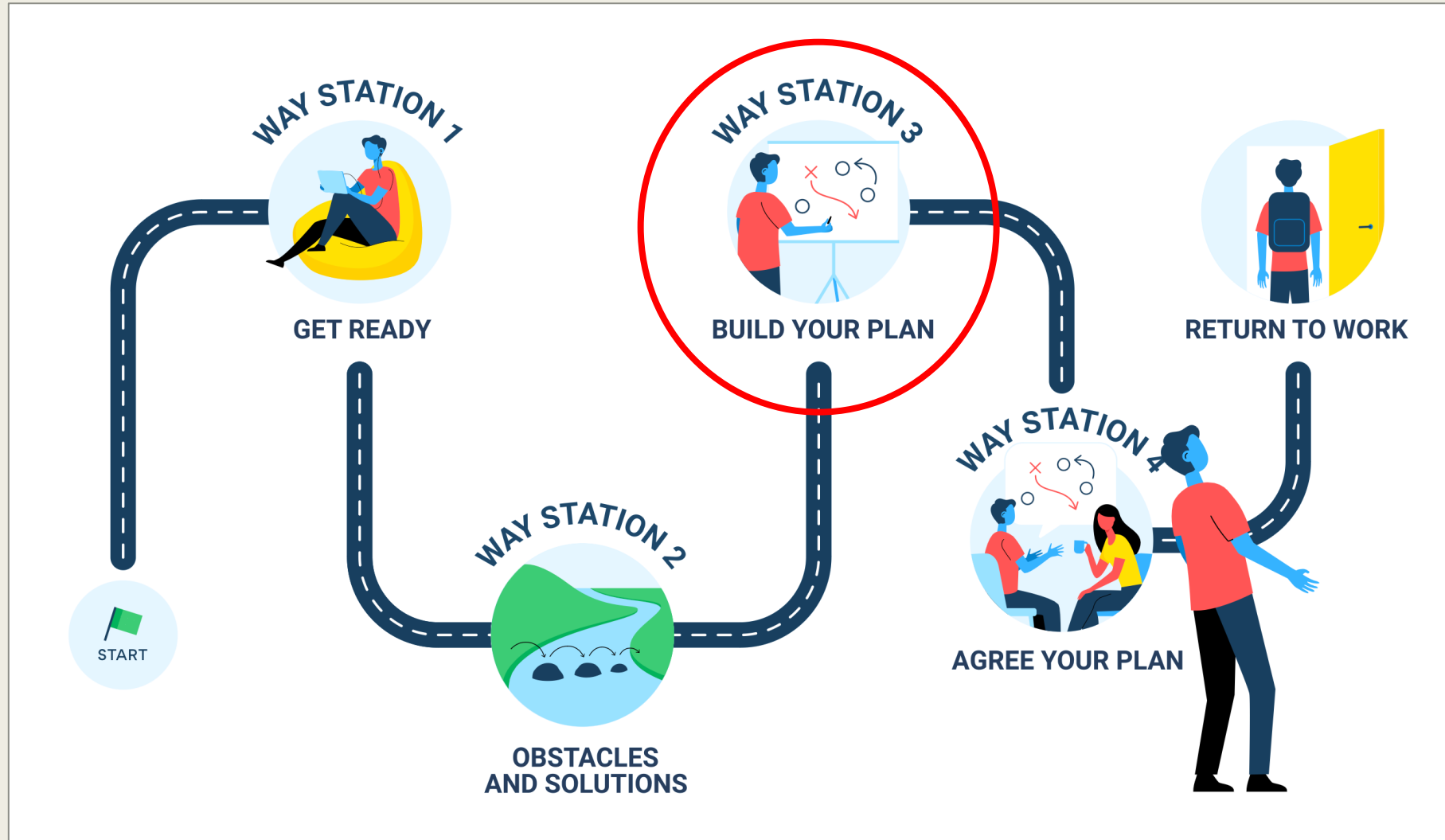
Wayfinding: 4 steps to the journey



Wayfinding: 4 steps to the journey



Wayfinding: 4 steps to the journey



Wayfinding: 4 steps to the journey



smart Return to Work Action Plan

- Based on Psychosocial Flags Framework
 - *health condition agnostic*
- Identify **obstacles** to working
 - *what's really getting in the way*
 - *it's not just health* →
- Figure out **solutions**
 - *how can those obstacles be overcome*
 - *ask the worker!*
- Plan developed by, and agreed with, the key players
- Provides *just what's needed, when its needed, for the person who needs it*



• Person



• Workplace



• Context

tsoshop.co.uk/flags

Solutions enable planning

You say you got a real solution
Well, you know
We'd all love to see the plan



- *Revolution*, The Beatles, 1968

smart Return to Work Action Plan

- The RTW Plan is the tool, but we didn't find any templates for (a) how it should be constructed and (b) what it should look like
- So, for **Re>Work** we devised two templates:
 - a *Plan-Builder* to enter info on obstacles, solutions, timelines etc
 - the *RTW Action Plan* to agree with line manager



Plan-Builder

- Use to record the essential information in structured way:
obstacles, solutions, players, and dates
 - before and after return
 - **phased return**

Smart Plan-Builder

I'm going to send the Plan to these people for agreement (tick relevant boxes):

Line Manager/Buddy Healthcare Team HR

I am planning a **PHASED RETURN**

Before I Return to Work

<input type="text" value="Obstacle 3"/>	<input type="text" value="Solution 3"/>	<input type="text" value="Who does it?"/>	<input type="text" value="DD/MM/YYYY"/>	
---	---	---	---	--

ADD ANOTHER +

After I Return to Work

<input type="text" value="Obstacle 1"/>	<input type="text" value="Solution 1"/>	<input type="text" value="Who does it?"/>	<input type="text" value="DD/MM/YYYY"/>	
<input type="text" value="Obstacle 2"/>	<input type="text" value="Solution 2"/>	<input type="text" value="Who does it?"/>	<input type="text" value="DD/MM/YYYY"/>	

ADD ANOTHER +

Phased Return Details

<input type="text" value="WEEK 1"/>	<input type="text" value="Week 1 details"/>	
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Return to Work Action Plan

- But line managers want something even more practical and efficient
- Essentially, a calendar of events - focused on the solutions, detailing who does what when

Return to Work Action Plan

PRINT PLAN

kim bo

PLAN AGREED WITH

Line Manager, Healthcare Team

RETURN TO WORK DATE

09/01/2024

I am planning a PHASED RETURN

ACTION CALENDAR

WHO DOES IT?

08/01/2024

fire the manager

me

09/01/2024

Return to Work

09/01/2024

get new line manager

n/a

Phased Return Details

WEEK 1

refuse to work

WEEK 2

agree to work

It's not a wish list

You can't always get what you want

But if you try sometime you'll find

You get what you need

The Rolling Stones, 1969



Sharing and negotiation to *agree the Plan* is fundamental

- Worker and line manager discuss the proposed Plan
 - *maybe also HCP or HR*
- Ensure the players understand the concepts
 - *educational resources*
- Modify to optimise
- Agree actions and timeline
- Is it succeeding
 - *check and check again*



The Plan Loop

- ID obstacles
- Figure out solutions
 - *before RTW*
 - *after RTW*
- Build Plan
- Send Plan
 - workplace; healthcare
- Negotiate Plan
 - Change Plan
- Agree Plan
- RTW
- Monitor
 - [Revise plan]
 - repeat as necessary



smart RTW Action Plan

- A smart RTW plan is NOT an official process to satisfy some rule, regulation, or policy!
- A smart RTW Plan is
 - *a stand-alone document;*
 - *doesn't look like a typical 'report to management';*
 - *rather, an agreed pathway with and for the worker and employer;*
 - *sets expectations*
 - *a Wayfinder that benefits everyone*



Where can you find the evidence and templates?

Occupational Health at Work 2022; 18(x): xx-xx

1

FEATURE

The smart return-to-work plan

Part 1: the concepts

Kim burton, Serena Bartys

Occupational Health [at Work]

AUGUST/SEPTMEBER_22
vol. 19/2



A 'smart' return to work

Based on biopsychosocial principles, a 'smart' return-to-work plan is a pathway agreed with the individual worker to help their safe recovery back to employment. To be effective, it needs all players onside.

1

FEATURE

Occupational Health at Work 2022; Online First

The smart return-to-work plan

Part 2: the build

Abasiama Etuknwa, Serena Bartys, Kim burton,

The word on the street:

- **Re>Work** is currently in pilot testing
 - we'll report back next year
- Meanwhile, Gov.UK has policy commitment to supporting work ability for people with health problems
 - *RTW Plans beginning to feature*

Employment and Health Discussion

- piloting now

- Trained HCPs help to build work ability plans with claimants before Work Capability Assessment
- Will it be scaled up.....watch this space



Many thanks for the opportunity to talk with you

■ kimburton1967@icloud.com

It's time I was on my way
Thanks to you I'm much obliged
For such a pleasant stay



Ramble On – Led Zeppelin, 1969

- if you liked the playlist, please support the artists with a download