



Critical Analysis of the Return to Work Process at Castell Howell Foods



WHO ARE CASTELL HOWELL FOODS?

Castell Howell Foods Ltd.'s growth reflects operational expansion and a sustained focus on workforce wellbeing integral to the organisation's values. It holds a reputation for combining commercial success with ethical business practices, emphasising employee development, community engagement and environmental sustainability. The focus underpins the organisation's long-term strategic vision and its ability to adapt to evolving foodservice sectors.

Effective return to work (RTW) processes are a critical component of organisational management, enabling employees recovering from illness, injury or medical treatment to reintegrate. Processes safeguard physical and mental health while supporting business continuity, efficiency and staff morale (Black and Frost, 2011). Recently Castell Howell Foods has reported increasing levels of health-related absence, inconsistencies in structure, delivery and communication have been observed, which may reduce the overall effectiveness of the RTW process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The RTW process is shaped by theoretical models such as the biopsychosocial framework and Organisational Support Theory (OST), which emphasise the interaction between individual health, workplace structures and perceived organisational support (Eisenberger, 1986). Although conceptually robust, frameworks are often insufficiently translated into practical workplace strategies. Research by the Health and Evidence Exchange Centre (2025) highlights the effectiveness of coordinated, individualised and collaborative interventions, yet it assumes access to resources such as dedicated RTW coordinators, which are seldom available in medium-sized, labour-intensive firms like Castell Howell. Similarly, Hanson *et al.* (2024) illustrate how workforce shortages, pressures and cultures can undermine theory, emphasising the need for tailored context-specific solutions.

Mental health studies highlight the importance of managerial competence, support and organisational backing for successful reintegration (Olsson *et al.*, 2025; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Communication and proactive engagement by line managers are pivotal, yet production-oriented firms face challenges as operational demands may conflict with employee welfare considerations, a tension often underestimated in the literature. Sustainability warrants attention, as conventional RTW measures, such as return dates, often overlook long-term functional outcomes, including ongoing wellbeing, retention and productivity (Beekman, 2023). While Castell Howell's policies align with HSE and ACAS guidance, secondary data suggest that implementation can vary due to managerial capacity and operational pressures. Literature reinforces the principles of coordination, individualisation, support and sustainability, highlighting the gap between theory and practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The RTW process is shaped by theoretical models such as the biopsychosocial framework and Organisational Support Theory (OST), which emphasise the interaction between individual health, workplace structures and perceived organisational support (Eisenberger, 1986). Although conceptually robust, frameworks are often insufficiently translated into practical workplace strategies. Research by the Health and Evidence Exchange Centre (2025) highlights the effectiveness of coordinated, individualised and collaborative interventions, yet it assumes access to resources such as dedicated RTW coordinators, which are seldom available in medium-sized, labour-intensive firms like Castell Howell. Similarly, Hanson *et al.* (2024) illustrate how workforce shortages, pressures and cultures can undermine theory, emphasising the need for tailored context-specific solutions. This research adopts a pragmatic philosophy, prioritising practical outcomes and application of knowledge to real context (Bryman, 2016). Pragmatism allows flexibility around questions and context. Any quantitative strategy measures key variables, identifies trends and generates insights on RTW. (McNeill and Chapman, 2005; Stokes and Wall, 2014).

Primary data were collected via a questionnaire distributed to the workforce, capturing employees' experiences of RTW. Survey items examined satisfaction with procedures, perceptions of support, adjustment adequacy and communication. Closed-ended questions ensured consistency in responses, while limited open responses provided additional context, enhancing reliability (Bryman, 2016). A total of 102 responses were received, representing a substantial proportion of the workforce. Data were analysed using descriptive and comparative statistics, filtered to include only employees with RTW experience. Ethical approval was secured.

Limitations include the single-organisation focus, reliance on self-reported data and the absence of extensive qualitative insights, which restrict analytical depth and external generalisability. Validity was strengthened through alignment with theoretical frameworks, triangulation with secondary HR data and consistency checks across survey responses.

KEY FINDINGS

Respondents reflected diverse roles (Fink, 2017; Black, 2008). Nearly half reported absences greater than one month, highlighting the need for tailored reintegration support (UK Government, 2024; Waddell and Burton, 2006). Over half of employees rated RTW support as good or excellent, citing phased returns and supportive line managers as key enablers. Nonetheless, inconsistencies were evident, with some respondents reporting unclear communication and ambiguous processes (Shaw *et al.*, 2008). Workplace adjustments were provided to 60% of employees, although preparedness varied, particularly in physically demanding roles, highlighting inequities in support delivery (Branicki *et al.*, 2024). Employee involvement in RTW planning was reported by 60%, stigma led some to withhold disclosure of limitations (Carroll *et al.*, 2010; Cullen *et al.*, 2018). Nearly half of respondents were unclear on RTW policies, emphasising the need for improvement (MacEachen *et al.*, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Effective RTW at Castell Howell Foods relies on structured policies, competent managerial support and active employee involvement. While many employees experienced phased returns, workplace adjustments and supportive managers, inconsistencies in communication, policy awareness and preparedness were evident. Transparent communication, tailored interventions and equitable implementation are essential. Consistent, people-focused practices can enhance wellbeing, reduce barriers to RTW, improve retention and strengthen organisational trust. Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of combining theory with context to improve reintegration outcomes in medium-sized, labour-intensive workplaces.

