

# Handling bereavement in the workplace – a guide for employers



**Breffni McGuinness MA**  
Irish Hospice Foundation  
Breffni.McGuinness@  
hospicefoundation.ie



**Steve Williams**  
Head of Equality, Acas  
swilliams@acas.org.uk

**In September, new Acas guidance for employers on handling bereavement in the workplace was launched. In this article Breffni McGuinness of the Irish Hospice Foundation discusses the scale of the problem, and Steve Williams, Head of Equality at Acas introduces the main points of the new guidance**

## Breffni McGuinness

Death is probably one of the last remaining taboos in societies, and especially in the area of work. Yet, when it enters peoples' lives, it can have a profound effect on many levels – mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Grief cannot be left at the door by staff when they come to work, and how they are treated by their employers at this vulnerable time will have important consequences for both (Charles-Edwards 2005). If bereavement is handled well in the workplace the employer will always be remembered – if it is handled badly it will never be forgotten. In a recent survey (National Council for Palliative Care 2014), almost a third (32%) who were bereaved in the last five years said that they were not treated with compassion by their employer.

However, from an employers' point of view there are also examples of good practice and most want to do the right thing for their employees who are bereaved. The difficulty is that often managers may be unsure of just what that right thing is or may not be confident in how to respond appropriately.

Death and grief are not easy topics for anyone and this is especially true for the workplace. A review of bereavement practices (McGuinness 2007) in a range of 34 Irish work organisations found that the majority of organisations (88%) did not have what could be described as written bereavement policies which would provide guidelines to staff and line management on procedures and best practice. Further, the two areas which managers found most challenging were firstly,

knowing what to say and secondly, how to provide support, to employees who were bereaved. In response to these findings the Irish Hospice Foundation in collaboration with Trade Unions, employer and management organisations and the voluntary sector have developed a broad range of bereavement supports for the workplace which include policy advice, practice tips, face to face and online training (Irish Hospice Foundation 2014).

In this context the new Acas Guide on *Managing bereavement in the workplace* (Acas 2014) is a timely and welcome development. This much-needed guide provides employers with practical, up to date and easily accessible information on important aspects of managing bereavement in the workplace. A key strength of the guide is that it draws on the knowledge and experience of both Acas and a range of national bereavement support organisations such as Cruse Bereavement Care. The guide also provides a template bereavement policy as an appendix and encourages employers to work with staff and Trade Unions to use this as a basis to develop their own bereavement policy.

Like any workplace issue, having guidelines and developing policies are important steps in helping staff to respond appropriately to employees who are bereaved. However, there could be a danger that these would simply sit on a shelf and gather dust. In order for them to be effective, staff need education to help them understand bereavement, and training to help them develop the skills of listening and communicating effectively with someone who is bereaved. One local government organisation in Ireland developed their own guidelines and policy on bereavement and then provided training to each member of staff (over 2000) on what the guidelines involved and how to use them. Interestingly, the human resources department have reported a significant reduction in employee bereavement issues since local managers now have the language and skills to deal with these themselves. They have also reported that employees are more comfortable

talking about death and bereavement concerns among themselves.

The launch of the Acas guide is an important step in the development of effective workplace grief support. It puts the support of bereaved staff firmly on the workplace agenda, while providing practical and accessible guidelines for employers. It has the potential to be a significant factor in the development of healthy workplace environments around death and bereavement and to reduce the taboo nature of these topics. Acas and the bereavement organisations involved are to be commended for this important addition to workplace resources on bereavement. As a famous Irish politician once said 'a lot done – more to do'.

## Steve Williams

At any time one in ten employees may be affected by bereavement (McGuinness, 2009). Each of these people will experience grief in an intensely personal manner, and need different things from their employer. Some bereaved employees may be unable to face work for some time, others may find coming back to work quickly dulls the pain; some employees may crumble at the mention of the dead person's name, whereas others may draw strength from thinking about them.

Our guide aims to give managers and employers the skills to manage this difficult situation in the immediate aftermath of a bereavement as well as in the longer term. It includes advice for managers on how to acknowledge the loss of a loved one without sounding mechanical or insincere; and suggestions on how to get the balance right in the days after the bereavement in order to be compassionate, flexible and practical, ensuring the member of staff is supported and in regular contact with the business.

We also know that the importance of sensitive handling in the workplace does not end after the funeral – many people will take weeks, months or even years to come to terms with a death. In fact, two years is understood as a normal period for grieving the death of someone close (Worden 2009). That is not to say that these people will not be able to work. But they may need time off or certain types of support and consideration at particular times, for example on birthdays, or the anniversary of the death.

The way a person is treated by their employers at this difficult time can impact their loyalty and commitment to their organisation. Research shows that over half of employees who do not receive what they consider as proper support from their employer would consider leaving (National Council for Palliative Care 2014). So we know it is critical for managers to get the balance right between compassion and the operational needs of their business.

The Acas guidance sets out how a compassionate flexible approach and a clear bereavement policy can ensure the impact on the individual affected and their employer is minimised. It is deliberately short and designed to help employers consider all the elements they are likely to face. It also provides a framework for a bereavement policy which allows managers a degree of flexibility to better match the needs of the employee with the

needs of the business. We recommend that employers develop their policy in consultation with staff and Union representatives.

The crux of this guide is for managers to take the time to listen to bereaved people, to ask what they need and how they would like to stay in contact. Give them the reassurance that they must take all the time they need and not worry about work. Managers should emphasise that they are there to help – and that the employee should stay in touch about their needs and plans (this is also the responsibility of the employer) and that they recognise that these may change. It's also a good idea to ask how the bereaved person would like their colleagues to be informed of their loss, and if they are okay to be contacted by others at work.

The guide has been developed in partnership with Cruse Bereavement Care, Eversheds LLP, Dying Matters Coalition; as well as Lucy Herd, bereavement leave campaigner, trainer and founder of Jacks' Rainbow. We have also worked closely with CBI, FSB and EEF (and many others).■

### Step by step guide for managers

- Offer your condolences.
- Ensure the bereaved employee knows they are not expected to work on the day the death has taken place. They need to hear that work comes second.
- Begin a dialogue with the employee – ask how they would like to stay in contact. Be careful not to pressurise the employee into making decisions at this point.
- Ask how much information they wish their co-workers to have about the death facts.
- Consider what action needs to be taken if the death is in the media; particularly if the press contact the workplace.
- Ask if the employee wishes to be contacted by colleagues.
- Be conscious of diversity within the workforce.
- Be open to revising and reviewing the situation.

Read the full Acas guidance at [www.acas.org.uk/bereavement](http://www.acas.org.uk/bereavement) or contact our helpline on 0300 123 1100.

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