

## Career Break: Policy and Procedures Work Life Balance (WLB)

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0.2	16/03/2006	Submitted to HRC
0.3	19/07/2006	Submitted to Works Council – rejected – 5yrs & no resignation
0.4	04/10/2006	Approved at Management Board – 5yrs & no resignation
1.0	20/10/2006	HRC agreed 5 yrs & no resignation
2.0	Feb 08	Policy updated to reflect OD, style guide and EIA
2.1	10/11/09	Policy amended and agreed with Policy Changes Group to clarify time limit between special leave and career breaks

### Introduction

1. HEFCW recognises the contribution employees make to the work of HEFCW and the Career Break Scheme has been introduced to retain and develop such employees while enabling them to achieve their personal objectives.
2. The Career Break Scheme is an arrangement whereby employees can take time away from the work place, can maintain their skills level whilst away and can later return to HEFCW. A career break may be taken to:
  - undertake voluntary work;
  - undertake a period of training/further education /personal development;
  - travel;

- cope with domestic responsibilities such as the care of dependants (please note that these provisions are in addition to the separate provisions for maternity, paternity, adoptive, foster and parental leave).
3. Staff wishing to take up employment with an outside employer or to become self employed are not eligible to apply for a career break.
  4. The essential elements of the scheme are that:
    - periods of absence are for an agreed length of time;
    - management and employees participating in the scheme keep in touch during the absence;
    - opportunities are provided during the absence for work experience and training; and
    - wherever possible employees participating in the scheme return to a job at the same/equivalent grade to the one they held before the break.
  5. Full details of the conditions of unpaid leave are given in Annex A.
  6. HEFCW will work on the principle that a career break will be offered provided that in-depth discussion ensures that there is no reduction of organisation efficiencies.
  7. A Career Break Scheme is a unique arrangement in respect of allowing the alteration of contracts of employment.

## **Eligibility**

8. All employees may apply for a career break. HR will need to be satisfied that the employee has:
  - completed at least one year's satisfactory continuous service;
  - a good performance rating on the most recent performance appraisal i.e. at least a "fully met" rating, or in the event of a rating below "fully met" that this be attributable to particular extenuating circumstances such as illness or domestic circumstances;
  - a satisfactory attendance record.
9. The Career Break Scheme is a discretionary provision and it must be recognised that there may be cases where, despite satisfying the criteria, an employee cannot be granted a career break, although every effort will be made to do so. In these circumstances HR must consider with the employee and the relevant Head of Team (or nominated deputy) whether other arrangements could be made to help the employee meet domestic responsibilities or achieve their personal development objectives. These may include flexible working patterns such as part-time working or job-sharing, compressed hours, short term special leave, or a temporary reduction in hours, depending upon the circumstances of the employee and the operational needs of HEFCW.

## **Length of the career break**

10. A career break in the form of unpaid leave may be granted for a minimum of three months up to a maximum of five years. In each case the length of the career break will be agreed in advance with the employee, HR and the Head of Team (or nominated deputy). The length of the career break cannot exceed the duration of any existing contract of employment.

## **Combining a career break with other leave**

11. An employee may wish to begin his or her career break following maternity, paternity, parental, foster or adoptive leave, as appropriate. In these circumstances the employee may take the full entitlement to paid and/or unpaid leave under the terms of the appropriate policy followed by up to five years' unpaid leave. The intention to apply for a career break should be made clear as soon as possible.
12. When the career break follows maternity leave the participant will not be expected to repay maternity payments (as detailed in the policy) provided that she returns to work for a minimum period of three months continuous service following the end of the career break. Any work undertaken for HEFCW during the career break will be off set against their commitment to repay.

## **Application process for a career break**

13. Applications for career breaks will be made via the form following discussions with the Head of Team and HR. Applications should normally be made up to one year, but no less than three months prior to the commencement of the career break. Where employees are currently absent from work on maternity, parental, paternity, adoptive, or foster leave, this date will be the date on which they would otherwise be due to return to work from that leave.
14. The Head of Resources will consult with the CEO/Director of Strategic Development / Director of Finance & Corporate Services with a view to being able to accommodate the request to discuss if overall arrangements can be put in place to accommodate the request taking into account cost and impacts to department/organisation efficiency.
15. If the application is approved, the agreed terms of the career break will be confirmed in writing by HR. The employee will be required to agree to all the terms and conditions governing the scheme. If the application is unsuccessful, the employee will be advised of the reasons for its refusal.
16. Employees must be able to provide appropriate documentation to accompany their career break proposal e.g:
  - details of the voluntary work;
  - details of the training/education course;
  - details of the personal development opportunity;
  - details of the travel arrangements;

- details of any caring responsibilities;
  - a statement of benefits HEFCW is likely to achieve as a result of approval of the application.
17. Where both partners work for HEFCW, and provided they both meet the eligibility criteria set out above, they will each be allowed to apply for a career break
  18. The employee has the right of appeal to (in line with HEFCW's Grievance procedure) the CEO or Chair of HR Committee, as determined by policy, where a request has been refused for the employee to take a career break.
  19. The decision of the CEO / Chair of the HR Committee on the application is final.

### **Conditions during the career break**

20. Employees who are granted a career break will take part in the keeping-in-touch scheme, the object of which is to:
  - keep in contact with the participant;
  - keep the participant up-to-date with changes in HEFCW and their work;
  - maintain their skills level and confidence; and
  - maintain familiarity with the work environment.
21. Guidelines for the keeping-in-touch scheme are at Annex B.
22. During the course of the career break, participants must let HEFCW know of any changes in their circumstances, including address, telephone number, and any personal arrangements that would affect the operation of the scheme. Participants on career breaks will be asked to confirm their commitment to the scheme and its terms and conditions and HEFCW will confirm the continuity of the arrangements on an annual basis. If a participant on a career break does not contact HEFCW, or respond to communications from HEFCW during any period of 12 months, HEFCW will take appropriate steps to terminate the career break arrangements.

Employees on a career break will be issued with relevant organisational information, the details of which will be agreed between the employee and HR prior to commencement of the career break.

### **Arrangements for returning to work**

23. Any vacancy created as a result of a career break will normally be filled on a fixed term or secondment basis. It would normally be expected that an employee in these circumstances would return to the post they vacated on taking up the career break. Where it has not been possible to fill a vacancy on a fixed term or secondment basis or if there has been an organisational restructuring, and therefore an employee's post no longer exists, they will be able to apply for vacant posts as internal candidates, in accordance with current Recruitment & Selection Policy and HR will send details of all vacant posts as they arise. In such cases an actual date of return cannot be guaranteed and will depend on when a post is secured via the recruitment process.

24. If no vacancy exists once the participant has returned to work, the Redundancy policy will apply.
25. HR will write to participants approximately six months before their career break is due to end to enquire about their return to work, and the participant will be asked to confirm their intention to return to work, in writing, at least three months in advance of their due date of return.
26. Participants who wish to return to work earlier than the date agreed at the start of their career break must submit their request at least three months in advance of their desired date of return. Every effort will be made to accommodate the revised requested date of return, subject to operational requirements.
27. Participants who wish to delay their date of return must submit their request at least three months in advance of their previously agreed date of return. Every effort will be made to accommodate the revised requested date of return, subject to operational requirements and provided that the revised period of career break does not exceed the maximum period of five years.
28. Flexible working arrangements may be requested to ease the transition back to work and the participant may request to return to work on a part-time basis. The granting of such requests will be considered and cannot be guaranteed but will not be unreasonably refused. The procedures for applying to amend working patterns will apply to such requests and will be considered in accordance with the Flexible Working Hours and Flexible Working Patterns policy.
29. On return to work employees will be placed on the pay step they would have reached had they not had a career break, in accordance with the current Pay and Grading Policy rules unless they:
  - return to a higher graded job or they return to their original job which has been upgraded, in which the new pay zone will apply; or
  - return to a lower graded post as a result of job sizing, in which case the rules for such circumstances, as governed by the Pay Policy, will be applied; or
  - request a lower graded job, in which case the appropriate pay zone for that job will be applied.
30. On return to work, the period of continuous service completed by an employee prior to the start of the career break will count for the calculation of entitlements and benefits as detailed in Annex A.

### **Timescales for considering/granting of applications**

31. HR will provide the employee making the application with notice of his or her decision on the application normally within four working weeks of receiving the request.

## Conditions of Unpaid Leave

### Principles

1. Participants on a career break have the right to return to a job at the same/equivalent grade as far as is practicable but is not always possible to guarantee this.
2. A career break will not count as effective service for the purpose of incremental credits, pensions, sick absence. A 'stop the clock' principle is operated such that although unpaid leave does not accrue benefits, those already accumulated are preserved and built upon when the participant returns to paid employment.
3. The effect on unpaid leave on participant conditions of service is summarised below.

### Performance pay

4. Performance appraisal box markings earned before a period of absence can be taken into account in considering eligibility for performance pay within the terms of the appropriate agreement. A break report must be completed before the employee begins their career break.

### Pensions

5. Absence due to career breaks neither qualifies nor reckons for pensionable service. However, for participating employees with at least two years qualifying service the pension rights accrued up to the point at which unpaid leave begins are preserved. Options for treating preserved benefits on return from career break should be discussed with the pension administration provider.
6. Participating employees may also improve their pension rights on return by:
  - making additional voluntary contributions; and
  - buying added years
7. Participating employees with less than two years' qualifying service are advised to consult their pensions administration provider about their pension entitlements.

### Sick absence

8. Career breaks do not count towards re-qualifying for paid sick absence under the 'one year in four rule' (please see Sickness Absence policy for further details).
9. There will be no entitlements to sick pay whilst on the career break scheme.

10. The maximum amount of paid sick absence allowed is 12 months in any period of four years. Employees who have exhausted this maximum paid sickness absence before taking a career break would have to re-qualify on return to work.

### **Annual leave**

11. Any annual leave owing to a participating employee must be taken before commencement of the career break; there will be no payment in lieu for any leave outstanding. There will be no entitlement to annual leave during the period of the career break.
12. Absence due to the career break does not count as qualifying service for a higher annual leave allowance but qualifying years served before a career break are added to those served on return.

### **Maternity/paternity/parental/foster/adoptive leave pay**

13. Participating employees on a career break are not eligible for any periods of occupational paid leave as defined by each policy.

### **Promotion**

14. Participating employees on a career break are eligible to apply for posts at a higher grade, while they are absent, and will normally be required to return from their career break to take up the post.

**Career Break: Keeping-in-touch arrangements**

- 1 HR will co-ordinate the Career Break Scheme and will ensure that contact is maintained with participants.
- 2 Participants will be sent notices and any publications issued to employees along with details of vacancies or any other major changes in the organisation within an agreed period prior to their anticipated return date.
- 3 During the career break work experience and training will be provided to help participants to maintain their skills levels and confidence. It will be voluntary but participants will be advised to consider participating as a means of maintaining their skills level and confidence. Participants in the keeping-in-touch scheme who undertake work experience or training, will be paid at a salary commensurate with the grade and step at which they took up the career break.
- 4 It will be essential that participants recognise the need to keep in touch with HR. In this way training plans can be identified and preferences for work experience established. HR will aim to be able to marry these preferences and the requirements of HEFCW to provide satisfying work experience. Participants will be expected to raise any issues known or to put any alternative keeping-in-touch suggestions to HR.
- 5 Enquiries should be made to HR.