

Unauthorised absence and lateness

Not turning up for work

Unauthorised absence is when someone does not turn up for work and either:

- has not got permission from their employer beforehand
- does not follow the organisation's policy for reporting an unexpected absence – for example someone is off sick but does not tell their employer

What might count as unauthorised absence or being 'awol'

Unauthorised absence can include when someone is late for work.

Other terms people might use include:

- 'awol' or absent without leave
- absent without permission

Some employers might count any absence that they have not authorised beforehand as unauthorised absence. For example, returning late from annual leave.

Leaving work early without permission can also count as unauthorised absence.

Employees and employers should check any relevant policy their organisation has to find out:

- what counts as unauthorised absence
- how the organisation handles lateness

Checking an employee is safe

Employers have a duty of care towards their employees. They must do all they reasonably can to support their health, safety and wellbeing.

When an employee does not turn up for work, their employer should follow steps to check where they are and if they're safe.

They should first check if the employee has a planned absence. For example, if they're on holiday or have an appointment.

If the employee should be at work, the employer should:

1. Try contacting the employee using their work contact details
2. Try contacting them using their personal contact details
3. Get in touch with the employee's emergency contact

Using emergency contacts

Employers should check with employees who their emergency contact is.

Employees should make sure their emergency contact is happy:

- for their contact details to be shared with the employer
- to be contacted if the employer is concerned about the employee's safety

When speaking to an emergency contact, employers should take care not to cause them unnecessary panic. For example, they should:

- speak calmly
- explain why they're calling
- ask open questions
- not jump to conclusions

Lone workers

'Lone workers' are employees who work by themselves, without other employees from their organisation. They're more vulnerable than other employees because they work alone.

Lone workers can include employees who:

- travel alone to and from work, or between work locations
- work from home
- are first at a workplace before other employees arrive, or last there after others have left

Employers must take steps to protect lone workers from health and safety risks.

They should do a health and safety risk assessment with any lone workers. This is to agree on how they can reduce or remove risks to their safety.

For example, an employer might agree in the risk assessment who to contact if:

- the employee does not show up for work and cannot be contacted
- the employer is concerned about their welfare

[Find out more about protecting employees who work alone from the Health and Safety Executive](#)

If an employer cannot contact their employee

If an employer has tried all options and still cannot get hold of their employee or their emergency contact, they might be concerned about their welfare.

As a last resort, to check they're safe they could:

- go to the employee's home address – if appropriate
- contact the police to ask for a welfare check – if they have serious concerns about their safety

Recording unauthorised absence and lateness

Employers should record when an employee is late for work or has an unauthorised absence.

Keeping a record means the employer can:

- identify any patterns of absence or lateness, for individuals or across the organisation
- speak to an employee if they're repeatedly late or absent, to find out if there's a reason for it that they can help with

Employers must consider data protection rules and confidentiality because individuals can be identified by these records. [Find out more about data protection from the Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).

How an employer records lateness will depend on the organisation and the nature of the work. For example, some employers might be more flexible about lateness and allow employees to work time back. In other cases, even being 5 minutes late could have an impact on the organisation.

Avoiding discrimination

Employers must not discriminate against employees when recording absence or lateness.

For example, a pregnant employee might be repeatedly late for work due to morning sickness. If their employer disciplines them for this, it could be discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity.

Recording some types of absence separately could help the employer avoid discrimination. For example, they could record pregnancy and disability-related absence or lateness separately.

Recording these absences separately does not mean the employer should ignore them. They should still speak to the employee to find out how they can support them.

For example, a pregnant employee is repeatedly late for work due to morning sickness. Their employer agrees they can work from home until they feel better, so that they do not have to leave the house early to travel to work.