



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Section: 3.17

Career Break Policy

Introduction

1. The Assembly Commission recognises the value of supporting you in achieving balance between your work and personal responsibilities. The purpose of the Career Break Policy is to enable you to take a break away from work, if this can be accommodated by the Assembly Commission.

Purpose

2. A career break may be granted for most purposes including salaried employment, further education, domestic responsibilities, starting a business or maintaining a family business.

Scope/Eligibility

3. To be eligible to be considered for a career break you must:
 - be a permanent Assembly Commission staff member; and
 - have satisfactorily completed your probationary period (this qualifying period may be waived at the discretion of the Human Resources Office in cases of domestic emergency).
4. The granting of a career break is discretionary and not an entitlement. A career break will not normally be approved if a member of staff is being managed under the Capability Policy.
5. Each application will be considered on its own individual merits and in light of the circumstances which prevail in the particular Business Area and in the given grade/specialism to which the applicant belongs. Career breaks may, therefore, have to be refused or delayed where there are overriding business considerations. Reasons for refusal will be given to you.

Duration and Number of Career Breaks

6. A career break is an extended period of special leave without pay. You can request a career break for any period ranging from one to five years. During your full period of employment with the Assembly Commission, you may only take a total of five years on career break.
7. If you initially apply for a career break of one year, you can request one or more extensions, up to the maximum five years (for example, an initial period of one year, a request to extend for a further two years, followed by another request to extend for two years). If you return to work following a career break, you may not apply for another career break until you have completed one year's service. This requirement to have one year's service between career breaks may be waived in cases of domestic emergency, at the discretion of the Human Resources Office.
8. In exceptional circumstances, the relevant Director may exercise discretion in granting a further period of unpaid leave if requested immediately after the maximum five-year career break.
9. A woman who wishes to apply for a career break immediately following a period of maternity leave does not need to return for one month in order to avoid having to repay maternity pay. If, however, she resigns during the course of the career break or fails to return at the end of the period for at least four weeks (or the equivalent if working part-time), she will be expected to repay maternity pay received immediately prior to the commencement of the career break.

Applications

10. At least three months' notice must be given of the prospective start date for a career break, unless circumstances make this impossible. The actual start date of a career break will be decided by the Director taking into account, among other things, the circumstances of the application and the timescale for filling any resultant vacancy.
11. A request for a career break should be made to your Head of Business using the appropriate application form. You should also make your line manager aware of your application. The role of the Head of Business is to comment on your application taking account of how any career break will affect the Business Area. This information will be considered by the relevant Director who will decide on whether your application is approved.
12. The granting of all career break extensions also requires the approval of the relevant Director.

Appeals

13. If you are not granted a career break you may raise the matter in accordance with the established grievance procedure.

Conditions of Service

14. If you are granted a career break you are required to take whatever annual leave is due to you before the career break begins. Wherever possible, therefore, the last day of attendance should be fixed to take account of any untaken leave. Where you are on sickness absence up to your last day of service before commencing a career break, the provisions of the Annual Leave Policy will apply.
15. During a career break, you remain an employee of the Assembly Commission. You remain subject to the normal terms and conditions which apply to Assembly Commission staff. In particular, you are reminded that you remain subject to those conditions of service relating to conduct, financial affairs, political activities and outside appointments.
16. The period of a career break is not reckonable service towards pay progression, pension, sickness absence or annual leave accrual. A 'stop the clock' principle is applied in that employment benefits do not continue to accrue during the period of a career break, but those already accrued are preserved and built upon when you return to work. You are advised to seek advice from the Human Resources Office about the implications of a career break on issues such as pay, pension, and so on, before applying.
17. During a career break, you must report to the Human Resources Office as soon as possible if you have been arrested, charged (or reported to the Public Prosecution Service with a view to prosecution) or convicted by a court of any criminal offence, (except a traffic offence with a private vehicle for which the penalty has not included imprisonment or disqualification from driving). Failure to do so may be considered a disciplinary matter. A criminal conviction, whether work-related or otherwise, may lead to disciplinary action, although not all stages of the disciplinary procedure may be appropriate.
18. If during a career break it becomes apparent to the Assembly Commission that you may have committed a criminal offence (for example, should facts emerge as part of a workplace investigation), the matter will be referred to the Head of Human Resources who will consider what action is necessary.
19. If you take up any form of salaried employment during your career break you must ensure that it does not contravene any of the principles and provisions specified in the Standards of Conduct Policy.
20. If you are on a career break and a redundancy or early severance situation arises, you will be considered for the applicable scheme under the same terms as staff at work.

21. On commencement of a career break, you will be asked whether or not you wish to receive information about recruitment competitions. If you apply for a competition, prior to or while on career break, you must be prepared and able to return to work, if successful, within two months of the date of the offer of a position. If you are not prepared to return, your name will be removed from the list and the post will be offered to the next applicant.
22. While you are on a career break you should ensure that your contact details on iTrent are kept up to date. If you have any difficulty doing this, please contact the Human Resources Office.

Return to Work following a Career Break

23. The Human Resources Office will contact you three months before the end of your career break to confirm if you:
 - intend to return on the due date; or
 - wish to apply for an extension (up to the maximum of five years in total); or
 - wish to resign.
24. At the end of your career break, it is unlikely that you will return to your previous post, but you will be placed in another vacancy at your substantive grade when it is available. This may be in your former Directorate or the equivalent Directorate following any restructuring or reorganisation. You may also be offered a suitable post in another area of the business subject to meeting the criteria for the post.
25. The Assembly Commission will endeavour to return you quickly to a post at your substantive grade. However, you may be required to work for a reasonable time in a lower grade post until a suitable post in your substantive grade can be found. Pay would relate to the lower grade until a suitable post in your substantive grade became available.
26. Where a suitable post is not available you may take up alternative salaried employment on a temporary basis, until a suitable post becomes available either in your substantive grade or a lower grade.
27. On return from a career break to a post at your substantive grade or a lower grade, you will return at the equivalent pay point when your career break started, revalorised as appropriate as a result of intervening pay settlements.
28. If you wish to return early from a career break due to unforeseen circumstances, you must give three months' notice. However, there is no guarantee that a post will be available earlier than the date originally agreed.
29. If you began your career break while working under an alternative work pattern, you should be aware that a return to that working pattern may not be possible. Neither may it be possible to facilitate a new request for an

alternative work pattern. Every effort will be made to secure a work pattern that suits you, but you will be expected to be flexible.

30. Other unpaid leave arrangements as set out in the Staff Handbook will continue to apply.
31. If you are returning from a career break and you refuse appointment to three posts identified by the Assembly Commission as suitable, you may be dismissed in accordance with the disciplinary procedures laid down in the Staff Handbook.
32. In the event that the Human Resources Office has made reasonable attempts to contact you at the end of your career break with no response, then resignation will be assumed and procedures for 'Leaving the Secretariat' will be implemented.
33. If you are unable to return to work on the due date because of illness, you will be required to produce a self-certification or GP's medical certification promptly. It is important that the certification covers the whole of the period in which you were ill, after the end of the career break. If you are unable to return due to illness, you will not be entitled to contractual sick pay in respect of that illness and will be subject to normal managing attendance provisions.

Related Policies, Guidance & Forms

34. A number of documents are referenced in this Policy and can be found in the Staff Handbook or in the relevant area on AsslSt.