

Absent without leave [AWOL]

A checklist for small business owners and managers

Use this checklist when someone does not turn up for work and has not followed your absence reporting rules. Start from concern, not assumption: check they are safe, keep a clear record, and only move into formal action once you have given them a fair chance to explain. This helps you protect the person, your team, and the business.	
☐	Check the basics first. Confirm they were expected at work, check rotas, holiday records, appointments, sickness messages, shift swaps, and any approved leave before treating the absence as unauthorised.
☐	Try to make contact quickly and calmly. Phone, text, email, or use the usual work communication channel. Keep the tone supportive: “We were expecting you today and want to check you are safe. Please contact us as soon as you can.”
☐	Consider welfare and safety. If there is no response, try the employee’s personal contact details and, where appropriate, their emergency contact. Be careful not to share unnecessary information or cause alarm.
☐	Record every step. Note the date, time, method, person contacted, and outcome of each attempt. A simple log is enough, but it needs to be accurate.
☐	Send a first written request for contact. Explain that they have not attended work as expected, set out the contact attempts made, ask them to respond by a clear deadline, and remind them of the absence reporting procedure.
☐	Be fair where family-related or protected leave may be involved. If the absence relates to maternity, adoption, paternity, parental, dependants’ leave, disability, pregnancy, or another protected reason, pause and take advice before taking formal action.
☐	Update payroll carefully. Do not pay unauthorised absence unless your contract or policy says otherwise, but make sure payroll understands the dates and that the decision is reviewed if the employee later provides a valid explanation.
☐	If they respond, listen first. Meet with them promptly, understand what happened, check whether support or adjustments are needed, and confirm expectations for reporting absence in future.



☐	If there is no valid reason, decide whether informal action is enough. For a one-off issue, a clear conversation and written reminder may solve it. If the absence caused serious disruption or there is a pattern, move to your disciplinary process.
☐	If there is still no contact, send a formal invitation. Invite them to an investigation or disciplinary meeting, include the concern being considered, provide reasonable notice, explain their right to be accompanied where applicable, and say the meeting may go ahead if they do not attend.
☐	Hold the meeting fairly. Review the facts, contact log, any explanation received, the impact on the business, and whether there are any mitigating circumstances. Avoid jumping straight to dismissal.
☐	Confirm the outcome in writing. Set out your decision, reasons, any warning or action taken, expectations going forward, and the right of appeal if disciplinary action is issued.
☐	Plan the return or close the loop. If they remain employed, agree a return-to-work check-in and review date. If employment ends, make sure final pay, holiday pay, property, systems access, and records are handled properly.
☐	Learn from it. Check whether your absence policy is clear, managers know what to do, emergency contact details are up to date, and rotas or handover arrangements reduce disruption next time.

