



Putting return to work on the map following a cancer diagnosis

CANCER WORK SUPPORT SERVICE

Cancer treatment and care have been revolutionised over the last few years and increasingly people are living longer post diagnosis. However, As Bevan points out in his article in *The Conversation*¹: how do we ensure that people are 'thriving' post diagnosis, not just 'surviving'.

Although treatment improvements are likely to continue, nationally we are not seeing people return to work following treatment at the same rate (Bevan 2018). For those who want to return to work, we have to question what the obstacles are and who can help to surmount them.

Certainly, healthcare providers have a responsibility to ensure that patients rehabilitate to the extent that they can return to work if they want to, but employers also have a crucial role to play in mapping out a successful and sustainable return to work.

In the Working Towards Wellbeing (WTW) **Cancer Work Support Service**, we see a significant variation in how employers support people back to work following cancer. Some organisations are proactive in their support and work hard to understand their employee's needs, whilst others wait until their employee has been told they are medically ready to return to work before they contact them.

For the individual, this can be six months or a year since they were at work and could be months since they were discharged from their specialist clinical team. They may have had little contact with work during this time and no support in improving their mental and physical fitness to prepare them to get back into work. Often our patients describe this time as 'falling off a cliff'.

There are a number of ways that, as an employer, you can support the transition of your colleagues from patient to employee.

Firstly, by developing meaningful HR policies. These are a lynch-pin of successful return to work planning. As an organisation, would you say that your approach is 'one size fits all' or has the flexibility to react to individual need. Let's think about a few examples:

1. Would your policy allow a person experiencing fatigue as a result of chemotherapy to use a convenient disabled parking bay on a short-term basis? or would you insist that the person apply for a blue badge?
2. Do you have a fixed return to work schedule, i.e. 6 weeks, or can you flex to a much slower phased return if needed?
3. Have you considered this group of people within your disability and inclusion policy and how are you accommodating 'reasonable adjustments' as per the Equality Act 2010?

Secondly, you can support your HR team and line managers to understand what your employee with cancer may be going through, so they can be better equipped to provide the right support.

A great way to do this is to provide better general knowledge about cancer and treatment. You can build a library of useful resources and provide links to charities such as Macmillan and Anthony Nolan for further information. The idea is not to become experts but improve staff confidence and understanding.



Joan was returning to work after breast cancer and chemotherapy treatment and was struggling with the effects of her treatment. She kept remembering her colleague who also had breast cancer but had remained at work throughout her treatment. Joan was really worried that her boss would think her 'weak and unreliable' as she was struggling with her own return to work.

She was pushing herself to return to work as quickly as possible because of this fear and was struggling during her phased return. If her line manager had read that everyone can react differently to treatment she would be able to reassure Joan that her return to work journey would use a different map to her colleague.

Finally, but equally importantly, is upskilling line managers to have better conversations with their colleagues. A first step is understanding any fears they have about talking to their colleague. Are they worried that they will be putting pressure on them, are they scared about saying the wrong thing? Is this causing them to put their head in the sand and not having an open conversation?

Consider the case of Nadine who had worked for her organisation for a decade. She couldn't understand why her line manager wasn't getting in contact with her, yet whenever she called her manager they returned her call immediately. Her line manager was worried about contacting her; Nadine thought she didn't care.

It is important that line managers are supported to develop their skills in talking to people sensitively about their needs with regards to work, as well as how to implement HR policy and reasonable adjustments. Just a simple 'what support would you like from us at the moment?' is a good starting point.

Later on, when return to work is more imminent it is helpful to ask: 'what symptoms are you experiencing and how can we help to accommodate them for you?'. For example, if someone is experiencing fatigue, it may be helpful to start later in the day. Or, perhaps if their concentration is at its best in the morning make plans around this.

Keeping in regular communication and keeping your promises is key. We've heard stories where employees are still waiting for that call back, even several months later in some cases. Imagine how they feel about their employer and return to work.

So in summary, employers have a significant role to play in putting return to work on the map for people living with and beyond cancer. In answer to Bevan's question, the role of an understanding, helpful, empathic and flexible employer can enable an individual to thrive rather than survive post diagnosis.

Working To Wellbeing (W2W)

Working To Wellbeing (W2W) provide wellbeing and rehabilitation services, supporting employees with physical health, mental health and long term conditions, the 3 key causes of presenteeism and absence, joining the dots between the physical and mental health issues that cause and perpetuate poor health. WTW's specialist clinicians are highly trained to provide a truly integrated service that results in health behaviour change and optimum work capability.



The W2W Cancer Work Support Service helps to support people returning to work after treatment and can help bridge that gap for both the employee and employer. If you would like to know more about how to support your employee returning after a diagnosis and treatment for cancer, we will be holding an open question and answer webinar for employers at the end of March and again in April.

Click on [this link](#) to sign up

¹ Cancer survival is on the rise, but return to work rates are not keeping up, *The Conversation*, December 2018. [Click here](#)