

The typical 'journey' back to work – how it works.

I really hate that word 'journey' when people talk about cancer. When I say it, I do that curled fingers in the air quote mark sign that tries to make it clear it is a cliché which I don't really want to use but must because the English language doesn't appear to offer a better alternative.

So, with apologies, I think there are two 'journeys' that we make, in managing work and cancer: the one we make physically and the one we make in our head, and it's important that we understand both because they interact with and affect each other significantly.

Although there are over 200 cancers and many forms of treatment for each form of cancer, many of us go through a four-stage 'journey' where we are confronted by similar challenges connected with our work. In my experience, a major factor in successfully managing these challenges is to have a formal conversation at each of these stages with your line manager and HR: at the point of diagnosis, during active treatment, just before returning to work and in the first 12 months (at least) after returning to work.

Over the next four weeks we'll be addressing each of the stages in turn. Focusing on the challenges that you may face and how your employer can support you.

1. At the point of diagnosis: Let people know

Despite the fact that more and more of us are living with cancer, and know that one in two of us will be faced with a cancer diagnosis in our lifetime, being told you have cancer is still deeply shocking. Some have likened it to and described it as PTSD. For some the shock, the anger, and the raw fear are so strong they can't tell their families or friends. One person I know only told her husband about her cancer surgery the night before she was due to go into hospital. She didn't want to upset him. Another only told her employer she had cancer after her surgery having taken the time off work as holiday. Other people react in the opposite way and practically send out a 'round robin' email. What we tend not to do, however, is to think clearly and rationally, and why would anyone in these circumstances!?

Let's be really clear, talking about your cancer at this stage is critically important for you and for your employer because you will need your employer's help and support and they will need to plan for your probable long-term absence. You need to help them and you need to help yourself! This is a critical time to let work colleagues – specifically your line manager and HR - know about your situation, to find out about your company's absence, insurance and sick pay arrangements and to help plan how your work will get done in your absence. It's also important to let your manager know what you want said about your absence from work – do you want others to know you have cancer and if not what would you like them to know, who will tell them, how and when?

Doing these things should allow you to put worrying about work to one side – at least for the time being, while you are grappling with your health and what's happening to you.

Next week we'll be looking at how to manage work whilst undergoing cancer treatment.

Written by Barbara Wilson, Founder, Working With Cancer