

## NAVIGATING A CAREER AFTER CANCER: CHRISTINE LYDON

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There is, of course, no ideal time to be diagnosed with cancer. After all, in a typical year, there are weddings to attend, birthdays to celebrate and careers to forge. Who would welcome the upheaval of a cancer diagnosis?

It was no different for me. At the time of my diagnosis in September 2015, I had a career in healthcare communications that I loved, with a wonderful team around me, and was in the middle of an interesting and busy project.

I had been referred to the breast clinic for assessment. I'd found a lump some months earlier. I hadn't been unduly concerned – I'd read the stats, the likelihood of cancer seemed minimal – but knew it was smart to have it checked. I left the hospital later that day bruised and bandaged after a mammogram, ultrasound and biopsies. Poor timing or not, I was to be diagnosed with an aggressive Grade 3 tumour a week later.

In the days leading up to the confirmation of my diagnosis, I returned to work as normal. Thankfully, I had flagged things with my line manager in advance, and she was primed to support me. There was a definite sense of getting my affairs in order, wrapping things up and handing over work. Unsurprisingly, it was difficult to concentrate on work. My mind was very much focused on determining just how serious my illness was and what the likely course of treatment would be. Fortunately, my immediate team and HR advisor were remarkable: each was helpful, considerate and respectful, giving me time and space to come to terms with my new reality.

Many will find it surprising that after just six weeks I had returned to the office, albeit virtually (perhaps good practice for 2020!). It hadn't been my intention at first, but it was a decision I am glad I made. In fact, I'd had little opportunity to even consider work in the frantic days that followed my diagnosis. I had a diary filled with CT scans, bone scans, MRIs, echocardiograms, blood tests and face-to-face meetings with the oncologist and surgeon. And yet, as I completed my second cycle of chemo, there I was preparing for a limited return to the office.

I will acknowledge that my approach is not for everyone. I also appreciate that I was in a privileged position with the support and guidance I was offered. I can only share my own experience and what worked for me. There is no right or wrong way to navigate work and cancer. It's my wish that others have the choice and the support required to make it work for them.

Here's what helped me make it work:

- **Candour:** I knew that I wasn't obliged to share the news of my illness with others. But I also felt that it was important to be open. With up to 1 in 2 of us expected to face a diagnosis of cancer, I believed it was right, for me, to be frank about my experience

for those who would come after me. I knew too that my employers couldn't support me adequately if they didn't understand the challenges I was facing.

- **Pragmatism:** I had to be honest about what I would be able to do. There was no possibility of me being well enough to cope with four days in the office. Together with my HR manager, we worked out an arrangement that saw me work from home two days a week. I was free to come to the office when I felt up to it but under no pressure to do so.
- **Flexibility:** By necessity, my previous client-facing work was no longer possible. Instead, I pivoted and acted as more of a floating support for colleagues and teams as needed. It was still a challenge and felt like the right role for me, at the right time.
- **Regular communication:** I was lucky to have a supportive HR team that was genuinely committed to ensuring that my new part-time role worked for all parties. I kept the team regularly appraised of my treatment milestones. And, as I began to consider the new normal, once active treatment had concluded, we discussed what my new working life might look like.

And how was it for me? The ability to keep my hand in had several benefits. Working gave me something else to focus on besides cancer. It was a reminder that the world was continuing to turn, and I was still a part of it. It gave me a clearer picture of what I was capable of, and when I was ready to build up my hours. It was also a confidence boost and showed me that there was more to me than a serious illness.

Five years on, I'm still working with the same company and back to a four-day week. Like so many other people dealing with the repercussions of gruelling treatment, I occasionally encounter periods of fatigue. It's a careful balancing act: ensuring that I am delivering my best work while also looking after my physical and mental health. I am grateful to work for an enlightened company that understands the complexities, challenges and rewards of maintaining a career, post-cancer.