

## MY STORY BY NEIL WALKER



It was July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2018 when I went to Northampton General Hospital for, what I assumed to be a routine MRI scan to get to the bottom of what had been causing me severe back pain for a couple of months. It had got to the point where I had taken more than a week off work for the first time in 30 years of work. I was a local authority accountant, and in stereotypical fashion, I would spend hours hunched up over a laptop in the least ergonomic positions possible. There was no doubt this was to blame, I thought.

I knew something was wrong the minute I came out of the MRI machine. The technician had been sent to find a consultant, and within minutes, the consultant had demanded I be taken into A&E without delay, as from an initial view of the scan, it appeared my back might fracture at any minute. I was subjected to further observations, scans and tests overnight, and by the next morning, the news was relayed. At the ridiculously premature age of 49, I had been diagnosed with Stage 4 – terminal - prostate cancer.

Up until this point, I had never even been to a funeral of anyone under 75. There was no history of any cancers anywhere in my family tree. I had no risk factors, I had no symptoms prior to the back pains. It came from nowhere, and blew my life apart.

My first instinct was to jack in work immediately. There was more to life, as everyone told me. Why spend what little time I had left, working? To be fair, I didn't know how little or otherwise time that was, as I refused to ask the question and the doctors wouldn't tell me unless I did.

I began treatment the very same day, and within a few days the back pain had disappeared. For the first time in nearly three months, I ironically felt a lot better. I was told I would have a week of radiotherapy straight away and then chemo would begin in about ten weeks, so I prepared to stock up on sick notes and spend the summer feeling sorry for myself on the sofa. It wasn't long before I missed work however. Missed talking with colleagues, solving problems, helping people. Even just getting out the house. After about 4 weeks, I had enough. I decided I needed work in some capacity.

I called my boss who was very surprised to hear from me, but after talking he was supportive of the idea and suggested I came into the office to talk some more, when I had more idea about the treatment plan that was to be put in place for me.

The four areas that I felt needed to be addressed were:

### **Letting everyone know**

Whilst I felt good about going back, I felt apprehensive about the people side of things, and the potentially awkward first conversations. I had already been very open on social media about what had happened and several of my work colleagues were aware, but I asked my

boss to let everyone know and that I had no problems talking about my diagnosis if people wanted to.

### **Flexibility with Hours**

I already knew work would be flexible with my hours. They allowed me to reduce my hours in half when my daughter was born, and I stayed on reduced hours for the last seven years. This time I didn't want to permanently reduce my hours, but I did want to take some of the pressure off during chemo. Following the discussion with my boss and HR, work were very open to this, and doing it without impacting my pay and other terms.

### **Flexibility with Appointments**

As anyone with cancer will tell you, life is full of appointments, some at short notice. Again, I was open as to the potential of these to disrupt my working, but we didn't feel it would be difficult to work around.

### **My fitness to work**

Thirdly the question was how my treatment and illness would affect my work. It was early days, and I wasn't entirely sure how this would go, but I certainly felt ready to be back in the office. To be honest, even after three years, my cancer symptoms have barely surfaced, and the side effects from my two rounds of chemo so far have been mild enough that I could still work throughout. Amazingly perhaps, I haven't taken a day off work sick since my initial diagnosis. There have been a few days when I felt a bit meh, but the flexibility work gives me allows me to work from home on those days, rather than commute to the office.

I'm now two and a half years on and back up to working 30 hours a week at least. Indeed at the moment I am in the middle of a major project, and probably working 40 hours most weeks. Choosing to work as opposed to many other things I could be doing instead is obviously a personal choice, and will be dependent on things like symptoms and side effects, but for me it was essential for keeping me mentally balanced.

The things I would stress are:

- Be open with work – tell them up front as much as you can about how you flexible you will need them to be and get agreement they are happy with that and what steps you'll both take to ensure it works for you both.
- Be honest with yourself as to what you're capable of. You are still working, but it is almost certain you wont be working as the person you were before. Don't beat yourself up over that.
- Keep reviewing the situation, both with work, and yourself and family. What was right when you went back to work may not be right for you a year or to down the line.