

RETURNING TO WORK AND MAKING CHANGES

BY SARA LIYANAGE

I thought it seemed rather fitting to start writing this third and final article in my series of '*returning to work after cancer treatment*' whilst on the train to work. Every Wednesday I leave the house, walk ten minutes to the station and take a train into London. It's very different taking the train once a week compared to the four times a week that I did before I had cancer. I used to work Mondays to Thursdays. I would leave the office early on three of those days so I could collect the children from their after-school club. My parents helped me out on Wednesdays so I could stay later in the office at least once a week. And I had Fridays off when I zoomed around catching up on everything that needed to be done. It was hectic. I may have been working part-time hours but I was constantly trying to prove my productivity by picking up my emails after work and on my day off. All whilst trying to be the best full-time mother I could be and running our family home. It was really busy and absolutely exhausting.

Then along came cancer. I took an extended leave of absence from work and I returned after finishing my treatment one year ago (almost exactly to the day). I was phased back in: building up from a few hours a week to now working two full days a week. I work on Tuesdays at home and Wednesdays in the office. I count myself incredibly lucky in that I have an understanding employer and a job that allows me to work two days a week. I certainly don't take it for granted. But I knew that there was no way that I could return to my old working pattern whilst also trying to deal with the lingering physical and emotional side effects of cancer treatment. Had I gone back to work four days a week I'm fairly sure that I wouldn't have got this far - I would have self-combusted. I think I was pretty close to that before being diagnosed with cancer. And in fact, having cancer was a bit of a wake-up call so when it came to planning my return to work, I recognised that I needed a much better work/life balance.

It wasn't straightforward. Making such a significant change to my working life involved much deliberation and discussion. This included balancing the financial impact of reducing my hours with the impact that work would/could have on my wellbeing (and actually the wellbeing of the family because if I got ill again then it wouldn't just be me that suffered - you can't pour from an empty cup after all), considering the impact upon the longevity of my career and whether reducing my hours was the right thing to do for me personally. I also had to discuss my needs, and the needs of my team, with my manager, HR and our occupational health manager.

It wasn't an easy decision to make or implement, but I'm pleased I did and I don't have any regrets.

Things I notice about my new work-life balance:

- Going to the office one day per week rather than four or five is a significantly different experience. I enjoy traveling into the office, switching on my work brain and becoming professional me for the day.
- Working at home one day a week helps me to maintain a good work-life balance. It started off because of the post-treatment fatigue (I struggled with the commute) but now that the fatigue has calmed down, I actually think my productivity is better with the balance of one day in the office one day at home.

- Two days of work is enough to engage my brain, remind me of the professional person that I am, stimulate me with work related conversation and give me the satisfaction of doing a good job.
- I enjoy the work that I'm doing on these two days. It's effectively the same job as I had pre-cancer but I've delegated a number of tasks to some junior members of the team who report back to me. It helps them with their aspirations for promotion and it helps me from a time management point of view.

So, what about my three days when I'm not working in my pre-cancer role? Well, I've managed to fill those quite easily. There's the usual routine of house work, food shopping, tidying, cleaning and so on (the list is just too long to repeat here) but I also have more time to focus on me. For example, I have time to walk the dog every day, do more exercise and practice some all-important self-care.

And, of course, there's my third job (after being a mum and part-time solicitor). This third (unpaid) job is running my breast cancer website that I set up during my treatment, www.tickingoffbreastcancer.com. I spend my time researching resources, writing content, collaborating with experts, professionals and charities, writing for other cancer sites, liaising with patients about guest blogging their personal breast cancer story and generally trying to bring something safe and supportive to those going through breast cancer. It's just a little not-for-profit website which means that I'm my own boss so I don't have deadlines, targets or business plans. I can pick it up and put it down as it suits me. Some weeks I'm very active and others I'm not. But the main thing is that I enjoy running this website. Not only am I enjoying the challenge of doing something entirely different, it's also my way of giving something back to the cancer community.

Sara is the author of **Ticking Off Breast Cancer**, a book about juggling life with treatment for primary breast cancer at the age of forty-two. This book follows the physical and emotional impact of breast cancer on Sara's life, and provides practical help by way of checklists at the end of each chapter. The book is out 26 September 2019 but you can pre-order the book now from [Hashtag Press](#). Sara is also the founder of www.tickingoffbreastcancer.com, a website dedicated to helping people through their breast cancer treatment. It's a website supporting those who do not know which way to turn for help after receiving a breast cancer diagnosis; those who are overwhelmed by the breast cancer resources online and those just looking for a comfortable, safe, calm place to turn for help. The website provides practical advice for each step of the way, together with many links and signposts to other online resources. Follow her on [FaceBook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).