

## Work and Cancer – the challenges of returning to work during a pandemic.

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Returning to work following cancer treatment is never easy at the best of times. It is often described as feeling like you are jumping on a fast-moving train, bringing with it feelings of anxiety and stress – will I be able to do my job, what do I tell colleagues about my cancer, how will I cope with the hours and workload?

However, returning during a pandemic can bring a whole new level of complexity. How will I manage my job working from home, getting use to different technologies such as Zoom/Teams, new work processes to allow for home working, the lack of face to face contact with work colleagues and creating boundaries between work and personal life (particularly if other family members are working or schooling/learning from home)?

Although the current environment of encouraging and valuing home-working may seem particularly advantageous to someone recovering from cancer, it also presents some different challenges. When working with a recent client returning after 6 months of chemotherapy, during our coaching session we co-created the following return to work plan. This plan was then further developed with the employee's line manager and HR department. The plan specifically focused on the challenges of returning to work during the current pandemic. The outline of the 4-step plan is as follows:

**Stage 1: Re-immersion in the business (Month 1).** This stage could potentially start whilst treatment is coming to an end or once active treatment has ended. It involves attendance on team video calls, but with no active participation. It is important that the Team leader/Line Manager welcomes the returning employee back and shares a brief update on their return-to-work schedule. If appropriate, this could include a prepared script explaining their cancer journey (ideally drafted by the employee and agreed with the Line Manager).

If team emails and business updates had stopped during the employee's absence this is a good time to resume receiving these, along with any copies of new procedures and updated processes (if there is online training in new processes this may be a good time to pick these up).

**Stage 2: Re-engage in work (Month 2).**

A lot may have happened in the business whilst an employee is undergoing treatment, and stepping straight back into their old role is likely to be fairly stressful and feel like a very steep learning curve.

To help re-engage in the business environment we explored starting back by working on a short business project. This meant re-engaging with colleagues and clients, but not taking full responsibility and ownership/accountability for any business areas. The beauty of working on a standalone project means there can be flexibility in the working hours whilst the returning employee is dealing with the side effects of their cancer treatment, and at the same time it allows them to build back their stamina and confidence.

The number of days hours worked per week should be agreed with the employee's Line Manager beforehand and reviewed regularly.

### **Stage 3: Establish relationships (Month 3).**

This stage involves picking up relationships and responsibility for their business area. Again, it may be important to send out a prepared script explaining the employee's absence and some details of their cancer journey (if appropriate). As with Stage 2 it is important to agree and regularly review the number of days hours worked per week.

**Stage 4: Taking back full responsibility & accountability (Month 4).** This stage involves the employee taking back full control of their old role or a new role, if mutually agreed. However, both the employee and the Line Manager should ensure that they review progress regularly. In particular, they should agree certain boundaries and safe guards to support the employee to achieve a successful return whilst maintaining a healthy work/personal life balance.

Returning to work after cancer is never easy, but by engaging in a two-way process you and your employer can co-create a smooth, less stressful and successful return to work.

### **About Louise Barrett**



Louise is an associate of Working With Cancer. Louise has over 30 years of business experience, working with both UK and multinational companies. After gaining her MSc, she spent 10 years at a major US healthcare company, Abbott Laboratories where, before moving into a senior HR role, she worked in pharmaceutical research, production management and hospital sales and marketing.

Louise was diagnosed with breast cancer in March 2015 and made a successful return to work after 9 months of cancer treatment.

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