

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT WORK AND CANCER DURING COVID 19

A couple of weeks' ago my associates and I made the time to discuss the impact of Covid on the people we are coaching to try and draw some initial conclusions.

We already know about the enormous impact Covid has had on cancer treatment: delayed or postponed appointments for scans and other procedures; video calls rather than in-person appointments which can work for some but are not a substitute for a proper examination, and perhaps most worryingly, people not being screened or making appointments to see their GP because they fear entering an unsafe environment.

So what have we learned so far about those working with cancer?

1. Mothers with cancer and school age children have found it especially tough – we all need to cut them some slack

Yes, I know this is blindingly obvious but frankly we heard several times about mums diagnosed or in the early stages of recovering from cancer who were at the same time working from home, doing most of the housework and combining this with home schooling while dad – well let's just say, he let mum get on with it. How and why do we women let this happen?

It's now clear that this situation is going to be with us for some time as local lockdowns take place and as children get sent home from school because of potential Covid flare-ups

2. Line managers need to be much more proactive in keeping in touch, as do employees

We are social creatures. Management text books and training do not cover home working – yet – so HR teams need to issue guidelines setting out good practice. **Essentially, managers need to provide regular, frequent, timely and appropriate support to all their employees working from home particularly those with long term conditions like cancer.** This is not about checking up on them but showing interest, concern, reassurance and encouragement. You cannot assume that working from home makes life easier or that no news is good news.

If some people have gone or are going back into their work places, it's particularly important to understand and remember that you need to keep in touch with those working from home more than ever, as many will feel isolated and potentially be excluded, wittingly or unwittingly, from team activities.

For those continuing to work from home, a question for HR Business Partners and line managers: how far do you understand the circumstances of individual employees? Note point 1 above. What further help can you provide them in terms of flexible hours, home working equipment, or other reasonable adjustments to make their lives easier. Please remember [Access to Work](#) can help fund equipment and other adjustments, for example, our coaching service for employers and employees.

And a message to anyone working from home – whether you have cancer or not - if your boss doesn't call you, please don't take a passive approach. Take the initiative and contact them; if need be suggesting and arranging a regular catch up call.

3. And for those who were shielding and still very vulnerable – employers, please don't 'watch and wait'

For some people, especially those who live alone and were shielding, there has been a 'perfect storm' of health, life and work problems to cope with. It has been and still is incredibly tough, living alone and coping with cancer, particularly if your work is stressful too. If you are the colleague or manager of someone in this or a similar position, please keep in touch even more, don't 'watch and wait' (to borrow a term used in cancer treatment).

4. Some of our coachees had a good lockdown. So, why is that?

I. Their managers followed good practice:

- Had regular check-ins with them to see how they were doing
- Adopted a partnership approach:
 - Providing office equipment at home
 - Allowing flexible working hours
 - Ensuring they were not being overloaded.
 - Setting up short weekly team meetings

II. They were not being forced or shamed into returning to work but instead were being allowed to go in for a day or two every week or fortnight **if they wished to**.

III. They found **they could be more productive at home**, as they were not having to deal with a long and tiring commute.

The common themes were that our coachees felt part of the team, not forgotten, and in control of their circumstances. Let's all please take note!