

'Managing my return to work after cancer inspired me to set up Working With Cancer'

BARBARA WILSON, 64, is married with two adult children and lives in London. She founded workingwithcancer.co.uk

I was a human resources director in the City when I was diagnosed with breast cancer aged 54. It was pretty devastating, and there were lots of tears. My children were 15 and 11 and I remember waking at night thinking, "Will I see their next birthday?"

My company supported me fairly well, but I don't think they understood that it takes a while to recover – and neither did I. I had three lots of surgery, four months of chemotherapy, then returned to work during my radiotherapy. You want to be the ordinary employee, wife and mother you were before, not "someone with cancer" – but it was tough. People very quickly forget and don't understand why you're not working at 200mph like you used to, or why you may need to go home early or arrive late.

Two years later, I did a coaching course and while coaching a head teacher returning to work after cancer, I realised it was an effective way of helping cancer survivors understand what to expect, and to get back to work successfully. I also saw that companies needed information and training on how to support their staff. So, when I "retired" in 2012, I set up WWC to help both companies and individuals manage work and cancer.

In 2013, I joined a School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) Start Up Programme and last year, was accepted onto their SSE and Lloyds Bank Scale Up Programme to help the business grow. Both were free and the first came with a £4,000 grant, the second with £15,000! That was useful – and enabled me to fund a film about the company to use for marketing. But the course



helped in many other ways. Everyone there had a totally different idea – food co-operatives, bike mending, working with young offenders. We met one or two days a month to get hands-on business advice – marketing, finance, social media etc – as well as emotional support when things weren't going as well. SSE also provides mentors if you'd like one. I was lucky enough to

'SSE arranged for the editor of w&h to be my mentor'

get Sue James – the editor of w&h – who would meet me regularly and give me advice on my business plan.

I have 10 freelance coaches, trainers and consultants working with me now who are paid for the work they do. We're not a charity – we charge commercial organisations for our coaching and consultancy. Sometimes they find us through word of mouth, or our website, and we approach companies directly. The income subsidises workshops for cancer patients on how to manage work and cancer, which we run for a wide range of cancer charities. It also subsidises coaching for individuals with cancer who don't have the backing of their companies. All our profits go back into the business.

We've had wonderful feedback – the classic one we keep hearing is, "I'd

have given up work if it weren't for you." My life is full on – I'm probably working six days a week, but I love what I do. Watching someone recover from a life-

threatening illness and knowing that you made a difference is more rewarding than my old job by a country mile.

Do you dream of growing your own social enterprise?

Barbara, Jo and Cemal have all been supported by the School for Social Entrepreneurs. SSE is a charity that helps adults of all ages to start up and grow social enterprises, by equipping them with learning and connections. SSE's learning develops your confidence and emotional resilience, as well as your business skills, social impact and networks. SSE, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, also connects you to mentors, experts and a community of peers, and some programmes offer a grant of up to £10,000 to help you develop your project.

- ✦ Discover what courses are available near you by visiting the-sse.org/our-courses
- ✦ Short workshops last a half-day or a couple of days and may charge a small fee.
- ✦ Long programmes, lasting up to a year, are normally fully funded with a grant, so there is no cost to you.
- ✦ Applications are open until 11 October for SSE's Community Business Trade Up Programme, for organisations focused on their local area, offering a free learning programme and grant of up to £10,000: visit the-sse.org/community-business w&h