

DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE CANCER SUPPORT

Working together towards recovery

People with cancer need help from their employers before, during and after treatment, says Catherine Hufton

There are 750,000 people of working age in Britain who have cancer. Many want to continue working or to return to work but struggle to do so because of lack of support. HR professional Barbara Wilson set up Working with Cancer after her own experience of the disease, and she now helps people and businesses recognise that the illness should not mean the end of a career. We asked her to tell us about the solutions her business offers, as well as the personal challenges that someone with cancer may face.

LAUNCHING AS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

"I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005 while I was working in the City as a human resources director, and I realised that there was then very little support for people trying to manage work and cancer," says Ms Wilson. "I gradually got more involved in starting a campaign with Macmillan, and then joined the National Cancer Survivorship Initiative, where I chaired part of the Government's five-year cancer strategy. When I finally retired in 2012 I felt there was still a lot more that could be done to help employees, so I set up Working with Cancer in June 2014. I attended The School for Entrepreneurs, and they helped me establish the company as a social enterprise. We aren't a charity, but the profits we make from working with commercial companies support the work we do with cancer charities."

COPING WITH CANCER AT WORK

"When I was going through my own cancer treatment, there was a variety of things I felt I needed more support with at work. I didn't really discuss a proper phased return to work with anyone, and I also didn't understand how long it would take to recover or how to cope with side effects such as numbness and pins and needles in my hands (peripheral neuropathy). "Many of these side effects don't start until the treatment has finished, particularly if you've had



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chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and often the medication comes with side effects as well. What I found – and what happens to a lot of people – is that you don't really understand that recovering is not a straight-line process. You have good weeks and bad weeks, and if you aren't prepared to talk about the side effects and/or don't understand what's happening to you, then you can quickly lose confidence in your own ability.”

PROVIDING A PERSONALISED SUPPORT SYSTEM

“At Working with Cancer we provide one-to-one coaching for employees. Not only do we help the individual, but we also offer support, guidance and information to the employer too. It's useful to coach the individual and help them understand what's happening to them, as well as advise

the management team on the best things to do from their side.

“Support is usually required for six to 12 months, depending on the individual's recovery. Each person's experience is different; there are 200 forms of cancer and many methods of treatment for each type.

“We also provide consultancy on return-to-work policies, and advise companies what they can do differently or better. That funds the workshops we run for charities such as the Maggie's Centres, Trekstock and The Teenage Cancer Trust.”

STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS

“There are typically three points when a structured conversation should be initiated by an employer with someone experiencing cancer. The first is at the point of diagnosis. It's really important to ask the

individual how they are and what help and information they need, although at this early stage they may not know what help to ask for. There also needs to be a conversation when they are beginning active treatment, whether it's surgery, radiotherapy or chemotherapy. The third should be held when they return to work.

“What you talk about in these conversations may often seem very mundane but they are incredibly important. They should cover everything from what to tell colleagues and clients to the kind of work the individual feels they can do for the present, to the hours they feel they can manage, sick pay and holiday entitlement. These issues need to be discussed in a structured rather than a casual conversation, to avoid misunderstandings.”

Take time to talk
Use structured conversations to find out what help is needed, advises Barbara Wilson (inset left)

HURDLES TO OVERCOME
“One issue we often come across is that confronting cancer is not considered very 'fashionable' by businesses. Employers may say, 'Well Barbara, we did cancer last year. This year we're doing mental health.' Around a third of long-term sickness results from cancer diagnosis, and one in two of us will face the disease at some point in our lifetime, so it is an issue employers need to support fully at all times. I believe some companies see cancer support as 'this year's project', when, frankly, it should just be a regular part of the assistance they provide.”

STABILITY AND REASSURANCE
“It's essential for employers to understand that cancer doesn't just have physical consequences but severe psychological symptoms too. Many people suffer from a lack of confidence and feelings of anxiety. When you've been away from work for a prolonged period of time, systems and processes may have evolved, teams may have different personnel and even your boss and office location may have changed. Post-treatment, most cancer survivors simply want stability and reassurance, so all the alterations that occur while they're away need to be carefully thought through and managed.”

SUCCESS STORIES
“We helped one young woman who had been extremely ill. She found it very tough reintegrating into the world of work, partly because she had been so ill, but also because she was returning to a busy and demanding environment. When we first met she felt she wasn't getting a lot of support or sympathy from her colleagues. After working with her for about a year, that has changed significantly and she is now doing well and feeling much happier about her work and life in general. That's not unusual.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK AND RECOVERY
“Going back to work is not only about money, it's part of your self-esteem and identity. The major issue for many people post-cancer is re-establishing their life, moving forward and finding a new normal. Work is a source of friendships and gives you something else to think about other than your illness. Fundamentally, it just allows you to be you again.”

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