

How I Managed My Work and Cancer: A Personal Perspective

I was 35 when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the time, I was still building on my HR career. I was gaining more exposure and experience which I felt I needed to be able to step up. I couldn't be knocked down with an illness.

So, it took a while before I got my lump checked out. I knew it was there for some time but I thought it was another benign cyst. I had been checked out twice before and diagnosed with fibroadenomas so I didn't think this was anything serious. Maybe I was really busy at work; maybe I was too engrossed in gaining as much experience as possible in my new job that I didn't make a doctor's appointment for ages. The doctor referred me to the hospital and I remember that when I got a call from the hospital with an appointment within two weeks, I said I wasn't available and was there any other time! I had important work commitments I didn't want to miss.

I was never really happy in any of my jobs which is probably why I have been a bit of a job hopper. I didn't really understand how work can play an important part in your life - not just something to pay the bills and feed your family - until I got ill. Work gives you a sense of purpose, an identity and gives meaning and structure to your day.

Even when I was given the diagnosis and they told me I could have surgery the following week, all I could think about was the redundancy consultations I would miss out on! I wanted that experience and I didn't want to let anyone down.

So, during my treatment, both chemotherapy and radiotherapy, I continued working when I could. I had a really good relationship with my manager and I was open and honest with her. She was as flexible as she could be with me and that really helped. I found out that I was also going to lose my job when I was diagnosed and that was another worry. I wasn't ready to look for another job - I didn't look the part and I didn't know what I should tell people at interviews. In the end, being made redundant probably did me a favour. It forced me to recover, to think about my next steps and to return to work when I was ready.

As work was important to me during my illness, it can be important for a lot of other people going through cancer, whether that is providing a sense of purpose, an identity, to help pay the bills or to offer that social interaction. Work and cancer is a topic that is often overlooked but there is more

and more support becoming available. This is where I would like to share my personal experiences to help others in a similar situation. I take a young person's perspective and use my professional HR expertise to support you.

So, what did I learn?

- I could work at the same time as having chemotherapy and radiotherapy
- I didn't have to disclose my condition to anyone but in my experience, it helped
- I had an open and honest relationship with my manager which helped with communication
- I went back to work when I was ready
- I took on some contract roles after redundancy at a lower level to rebuild my confidence
- I now focus on finding work with more meaning, where the work and the organisational culture fit more with my values

If you are interested in reading about my experiences further, please take a look at my blog

www.myhealthyworkinglife.co.uk