

CASE STUDY: LINDA

Linda graduated from college 3 years ago. She worked for two years as an administrative assistant before being diagnosed with cancer. She took a year off for treatment, but is now ready to return to work. However, Linda still has medical appointments twice a month. During her last interview the job application asked if she had ever been diagnosed with cancer. Unsure how to answer, she left the question blank. She was not hired. Linda prefers not to disclose her medical condition, but is concerned about the unexplained gap in her employment history. Linda wants to know about her options.

1 There are no simple answers as to how to handle this, either on the resume or in the interview. Linda might want to ask herself what she wants to say about this because that's an important place to start. Then she might ask herself what the benefits are and what are the losses? How does she feel about each?

A resume can be the entree to an interview. Unless she wants to lie on her resume, the year of unexplained unemployment will be a problem, especially in a tough job market. It might be worth spending money to work with a professional resume writer so she can build on her strengths.

The next challenge is the interview. Going back to work will be an important step toward "normalizing" after a year of difficult treatment. It's helpful to take stock of the kind of environment you're stepping into. How would it feel to have to hide your experiences and your current needs, including medical appointments?

Whatever strategy Linda uses in the resume regarding the job gap works here as well. There is no need to get more specific than necessary, particularly if she isn't currently experiencing symptoms that would affect her performance. If she chooses to disclose why she was unemployed for a year, she should be matter of fact about the experience and assure everyone that the situation is under control and it won't be a problem for them. If she is clear about her own strategy for getting a new job, she will communicate that strength.

ROSALIND JOFFE, CAREER COACH

3 Linda needs to get comfortable with and practice out loud a phrase or sentence that explains her one year absence. She has no obligation to tell anyone that she has had cancer. If asked, Linda can say that she was dealing with a personal/family situation that was too difficult to manage while working full-time.

She can arrange her medical appointments at lunchtime, early morning or late in the day so that she doesn't have to tell anyone about them until she starts working and feels comfortable enough to do so if need be. Also, her medical appointments won't last forever, eventually they will decrease in frequency.

In this marketplace so many people have lost their jobs that employers aren't as scrutinizing about periods of unemployment which is definitely to Linda's advantage. It is understandable that Linda is worried about finding a job but it is important that she feel proud that she has recovered from cancer and excited about finding a new job opportunity that will meet her values and needs.

JULIE JANSEN, CAREER COACH

2 The question of whether a candidate has ever been diagnosed with cancer, or heart problem or diabetes or MS is inappropriate, illegal and irrelevant to the job. The appropriate question is whether you are capable of performing the essential duties of the job, with or without accommodations.

That said, how to deal with a potential employer who is ignorant of or flatly disregards the law? The first question to ask yourself is whether you want to work for an employer who is projecting such a negligent attitude at this early stage of your relationship.

I would probably have left the question blank too. Or, I might have asked in a naïve tone: "I'm confused. I thought it was illegal to ask a candidate about specific health conditions? Why do you want to know about cancer as opposed to heart disease, arthritis or diabetes?"

I doubt you will hear this question from most employers or ever see it again on an application.

As for the employment history, you should be able to bridge it on your resume using only the years of employment. Often, resumes do not show the month of the start date, so it might read 2008-2009. You could also list a sabbatical in 2009 because of family illness.

MARGOT LARSON, CAREER COACH

WEB RESOURCES

Cancer and Careers - www.cancerandcareers.org

Cancer Legal Resource Center - www.cancerlegalresourcecenter.org

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission - www.eeoc.gov/facts/cancer.html

Fertile Hope - www.fertilehope.org

Imerman Angels - www.imermanangels.org

I'm Too Young For This! - www.i2y.com

Job Accommodation Network - www.jan.wvu.edu

Patient Advocate - www.patientadvocate.org

Planet Cancer - www.planetcancer.org

Workplace Fairness - www.workplacefairness.org

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This document was put together to provide guidance on common work and cancer related issues. For personalized career coaching assistance please contact Cancer and Careers. For personalized legal advice please contact the Cancer Legal Resource Center.