

# 5 Ways to Support an Employee With Cancer

By Rebecca V. Nellis

According to the National Cancer Institute, more than 1.8 million new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in the United States in 2018. Many of those new cancer patients will be active members of the workforce. After their diagnosis, they will have to make important decisions about whether they can work, how much they should work, what kind of workplace accommodations they might need and how much information they should disclose to their employer and coworkers. This is where human resources staff can step in to play a critical role in helping them navigate the various issues that come up while undergoing treatment and continuing to work.

Maintaining one's employment while receiving treatment for cancer and going through recovery can be difficult, but research shows that many cancer patients want to keep working. In 2017, my organization, Cancer and Careers, commissioned the Harris Poll to conduct a survey to understand the experiences of U.S. cancer patients and survivors who were employed or unemployed and looking for work when they were diagnosed. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents agreed that working through treatment helped them cope.

Holding onto a job after receiving a cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming for employees who lack access to the proper resources. Here are five actions you, as an HR professional, can take to prepare to aid an employee who requests support and guidance.

## Know the Relevant Policies

First, do your homework ahead of time. Learn your organization's policies regarding leave and disability, and look into how the organization responded when learning that other employees had developed cancer or another serious illness. Knowing what has been done—good and bad—in the past can guide your approach to supporting a present employee.

You should be able to provide details about medical leave, short- and long-term disability, flextime and leave banks as soon as you are asked. Be ready, as well, to help an employee understand his or her health insurance coverage and to help the employee connect with an appropriate insurance company representative. In fact, expect to spend a good deal of time helping the employee navigate insurance issues.

## Be Familiar With Applicable Laws

A number of federal laws protect cancer patients' rights, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Family and Medical Leave Act and HIPAA, or the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. State laws may also shield employees with cancer from discrimination and guarantee their privacy.

Make sure you are fully up to date on rules and regulations under each applicable law. The websites of the agencies that enforce the laws are good places to find compliance guides and additional information for employees and employers.

## Discuss Disclosure

An employee who tells you about his or her cancer diagnosis may not want everyone at work to know. Let the employee dictate what gets shared with whom.

Some people will consider it essential to disclose their diagnosis more widely. Others will want to maintain a higher degree of privacy. Either way, it is critical for you to know and respect the employee's preference.

## Consider Making Accommodations

The ADA requires state and local government agencies of any size to make reasonable accommodations for qualified employees



who request them in order to continue performing the essential functions of their jobs. Reasonable accommodations can include modifying schedules, redesigning workspaces or adjusting policies. A simple example would be placing a printer near an employee's desk so he or she no longer needs to walk up and down stairs to retrieve printed documents.

The decision to accommodate an employee with cancer should start with a discussion aimed at identifying whether any changes are needed. Even if the employee makes no specific requests, it may be worthwhile to offer suggestions. Challenges do not appear all at once, and accommodations—many of which cost nothing or very little—can be key to keeping a valued employee on the job.

It is important to understand that while programs like the Job Accommodation Network, which is operated by the U.S. Department of Labor, offers general guidance, no set of common accommodations exists. Every person responds to cancer treatment and recovery differently. Also, workplaces and job responsibilities differ widely.


Last, remain open to making modifications in an ongoing fashion. An employee's needs may evolve.

## Equip Managers to Work With Employees Who Have Cancer

Cancer and Careers is just one national nonprofit that empowers and educates people with cancer to thrive in the workplace. We have found that employees most appreciate practical tips and tools for getting organized to ensure adequate time for treatment and job duties, making decisions about disclosing a cancer diagnosis, understanding their legal rights and managing treatment side effects while at work.

It is also critical to provide guidance and information to managers whose team members develop cancer. Created by Anthem, Inc., Cancer and Careers, Pfizer and the US Business Leadership Network, the free Workplace Transitions for People Touched by Cancer toolkit can help fill in some of that knowledge gap.

---

*Rebecca V. Nellis is the executive director of [Cancer and Careers](#). An expert on managing illness in the workplace, Nellis has worked with thousands of employees, health care professionals and companies on how to support the unique needs of cancer survivors in the workplace. You can email her at [rnellis@cew.org](mailto:rnellis@cew.org). —*