



# RETURNING TO WORK

A TOOLKIT FOR CANCER  
PATIENTS & SURVIVORS

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## RETURNING TO WORK AFTER A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

Whether you have completed treatment or are still in treatment, and have reached a point where you’ve decided to return to work, the process of re-integrating into the workforce can often bring mixed emotions: relief, excitement, hope — but also awkwardness and uncertainty. Even if you are feeling physically and psychologically ready to return to your job, you may have concerns and questions, such as whether you will encounter scepticism or support from your employer and/or colleagues, how ongoing and/or long-term treatment and side effects might impact your ability to do your job, what you can do to address a newfound desire to do more meaningful work, etc.

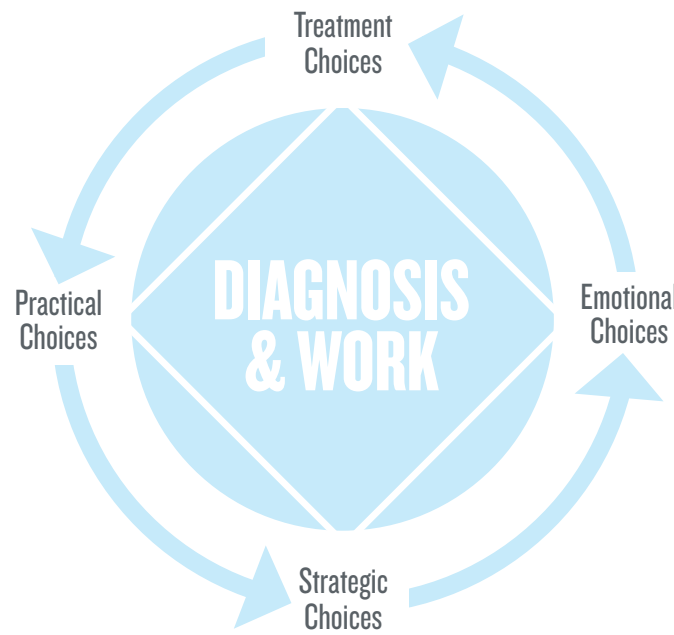
The work-and-cancer experiences of patients and survivors vary from person to person — and across Europe. Countries have differing laws and protections, and not all companies have the same internal policies, benefits and so forth available to the people who work for them. And while policy initiatives related to the workplace rights of individuals with long-term and/or terminal illnesses have been presented to the EU parliament, formal approval and implementation of such policies take time.

Ultimately, the path you take to re-entering the workforce will depend on your specific circumstances. This toolkit is designed to help you comprehensively think through the various realities, questions and choices you face, so that you can create a return-to-work plan that’s right for you and your unique needs.

## THE BACK-TO-WORK DECISION

When creating a plan for returning to work, it’s important to take a step back to consider the big picture and think about the many, often competing, factors that might impact your plan — such as your current health and energy level, whether continued treatment is needed and what that schedule will be, the degree of interest you have in your work, etc. Some of these elements may be in conflict with each other, which can make it difficult to establish a single, clear path forward. But acknowledging this conflict can help remove some of the frustration you may feel and help you focus on making informed decisions that will enable you to choose the best path forward for *you*.

# THE BACK-TO-WORK DECISION



The first thing to do as you plan your return to work is ask yourself two questions:

**1. "How important is work to me?"**

Keep in mind that this could include many different things, such as financial security, benefits, being part of a community, passion for what you do, a sense of identity and value, career aspirations, and so forth.

**2. "What information do I need in order to make a smart plan about returning to work?"**

Some examples: information on company policies and procedures if you are returning to your existing role; relevant national laws; what to expect from any ongoing treatment and recovery. (More on gathering this information can be found on pages 6-8.)

To help you answer the questions above, consider these additional questions:

**"Do I *have to* go back to work or do I *want to* go back to work? (Or is it a combination of both?) How does this factor into my decision-making?"**

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**"Do I feel ready to return to work physically? What (if any) concerns do I have?"** (For more information on addressing side effects in the workplace, see pages 19-23.) \_\_\_\_\_

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**"Do I feel ready to return to work emotionally? What (if any) concerns do I have?"** (For more on thinking through potential concerns, see pages 6-10.) \_\_\_\_\_

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**"How closely is my work tied to my sense of self/sense of purpose?"** (For example, is your identity so deeply rooted in your job that it's the reason you get up in the morning?) **"How else does my job provide meaning in my life (if it does)?"** \_\_\_\_\_

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**"What are my short-term and long-term work goals?"** \_\_\_\_\_

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**"Have my career priorities changed? If so, how?"** (For more on shifting career priorities, see pages 26-28.) \_\_\_\_\_

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**"How might my income/finances be impacted if I continue to take time off or work a reduced schedule? How does this factor into my decision-making?"** \_\_\_\_\_

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# THE BACK-TO-WORK DECISION

## GATHERING RELEVANT INFORMATION



- Treatment options
- Timeline
- Potential side effects & mitigation strategies



- Company policies, benefits and culture
- Workplace flexibilities
- Job demands



- Applicable laws
- Relevant EU recommendations
- Illness-related leave

The above images are designed to be a visual aid to help you think about the types of information you may need in order to make good, ongoing decisions about returning to work. As you can see, there are three categories into which relevant details can be organised.

### MEDICAL AND TREATMENT INFORMATION

Whether you plan to return to work while continuing treatment or after it has ended, it's important to speak with all the members of your healthcare team to understand how any ongoing treatments and/or side effects may affect your work and your schedule, so you can determine what kind of arrangement will be best for you. Among other things, you'll want to find out more about how treatment is likely to progress and what to expect, including the specific side effects you are likely to experience and any solutions for mitigating them, particularly while at work.

Additionally, you'll want to give careful thought to what the demands and requirements are — both physical and mental — of your specific job/the type of work you will be seeking. Some questions to ask yourself/discuss with your healthcare team include:

“Are there aspects of my job that may be more difficult to carry out? And if so, what are they?” (For example, lifting heavy objects, sitting or standing for long periods of time, typing.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

“Has my ability to think and/or concentrate been affected by treatment? How might that impact my work?” \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

“Realistically, how many hours will I have the energy to work...”

- “...in a day/during a shift?” \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- “...in a week?” \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- “Is fatigue likely to increase or decrease over time, and how will I manage those changes?” \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

List the various responsibilities associated with your job — no matter how big or small. Will ongoing treatment and/or side effects impact your ability to do these tasks? (For more on this topic, see “Side Effects and the Workplace,” on pages 19–23.)

	Responsibility/Task	Potential Impact of Treatment
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

# THE BACK-TO-WORK DECISION

## GATHERING RELEVANT INFORMATION

“Will I be able to handle my commute as I did before?” For example:

- “Will it be uncomfortable to travel by bus or train? Is my immune system strong enough for me to safely commute using public transportation?” \_\_\_\_\_

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- “Will I be able to manage driving in heavy traffic in both the morning and evening?” \_\_\_\_\_

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- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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### WORK INFORMATION

Whether you are returning to a place where you previously worked or beginning a new job, you’ll want to think through and gather information on the topics outlined below. (Some of this information can typically be found in an employee manual or online portal.) Use the lines to jot down relevant notes.

Procedures related to taking additional time off, and other relevant company policies you may have access to — for example, working remotely or working a flexible schedule.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Benefits that are available through your employer, such as a retirement plan, a supplemental health insurance policy, paid childcare, etc.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

The overall culture of your company: Are coworkers supportive and willing to pitch in when other staff members have had to be out on leave? Or is the environment more competitive? Or somewhere in between? How does this impact your thinking about whether or not to return to work?

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### LEGAL INFORMATION

You’ll want to learn more about relevant laws in your country that may allow for job protections or accommodations, address the topic of disclosure in the workplace and inform employers of their obligations to their employees. It is important to note here that Cancer and Careers is not recommending that you research and understand legal information because it is likely that a work-related situation will necessitate legal action. Rather, it’s because cancer patients and survivors should think of the law as a tool in their arsenal to help them achieve their work goals. This idea will be discussed further throughout this toolkit.

If you are seeking additional legal information regarding rights and protections in your country, reach out to your local cancer league or society (the Association of European Cancer Leagues maintains an online listing of its members, at [www.europeancancerleagues.org/members](http://www.europeancancerleagues.org/members)); review government-maintained websites with information on employment/labour and disability laws; or consult a reputable legal expert.

# THE BACK-TO-WORK DECISION

## GATHERING RELEVANT INFORMATION

### PERSONAL LIFE AND PREFERENCES

Beyond the categories noted on the preceding pages, there are additional things to think about as you develop your return-to-work plan, such as: What are other areas of life that take up substantial time and energy and need to be taken into account when determining how best to structure your work?

Some specific questions to ask yourself:

“What are some of my non-work-related responsibilities that are part of my day-to-day life?” (For example, cooking for yourself/others, helping kids with their homework, tending to elderly parents/in-laws.) \_\_\_\_\_

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“What activities do I enjoy doing that I want to be sure to schedule into my week?” (For example, taking an art class, meditating, attending religious or spiritual services/meetings.) \_\_\_\_\_

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Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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# DISCLOSURE



As you get ready to return to work following a course of treatment — or while still undergoing treatment — you’ll want to think about how much (or how little) information you want to share with your employer and coworkers. Presumably, for most people who have been out on medical leave, at least some degree of information regarding your health has already been communicated with a supervisor/management/ Human Resources, in order for your leave to have been approved in the first place. However, at the point of returning to work there may be new information about treatment and/or health status, and feelings about how open you want to be regarding your medical condition moving forward — or if you want to share at all — can vary widely.

Below are some things to consider as you decide whether and how to discuss your cancer status during your return-to-work process and beyond. Also included is information on how disclosure elsewhere can impact your employment — including in the future — even if you decide not to share details of your health at work specifically.

### SHARING AT WORK

Deciding whether to share information about your recovery, ongoing treatment and/or prognosis with your employer/coworkers is a very personal decision, and your feelings about whether and/or how to do so may evolve over the course of your cancer experience. Making choices that you feel comfortable with is important, and doing so requires weighing several factors. Some people opt to share very little information — or none at all — even if they had previously been very open. All choices are equally valid.

This toolkit focuses primarily on the practical, emotional and “cultural” (i.e., the interpersonal/social environment at your job site) considerations when making this decision. However, it is also critically important to understand what your country’s laws require in terms of disclosure to your employer. (See page 9 for more on gathering legal information.)

When determining whether to share details of your health status at work, there are three overarching things to consider: your treatment side effects, legal protections and workplace culture.

**Side effects:** Lingering side effects such as cognitive/memory challenges (otherwise known as “chemo brain”), fatigue, nausea and chronic pain could affect your job performance and make it difficult for you to perform some of your job duties. If you are experiencing (or are likely to develop) any of these side

# DISCLOSURE

effects, you may want to disclose this to those you're closest with at work — or those who will be most useful in helping to create a workable solution for you. Similarly, you may find yourself wanting to share at least some information about your circumstances if you will need to take significant time off for ongoing treatment and/or will have noticeable changes to your appearance. (See page 13 for more on deciding whom to share information with.)

**Legal protections:** As mentioned on page 9, you will want to have a good understanding of any relevant employment laws in your country, including those that may provide you access to job protections and accommodations, as well as the information you may need to share with your employer in order to access such protections. Having this knowledge will enable you to make prudent decisions regarding disclosure as you return to your job.

**Workplace culture:** Spend time thinking about your workplace culture and your relationship with your boss/coworkers. Is it friendly, open and close-knit? Or is it more formal and competitive? How have people reacted when other staff members have had to deal with a serious illness and/or life event (e.g., maternity leave, caring for an aging parent)? Reflecting on your work environment can be very telling and give you some insight into how people might respond if you opt to share information with them. If your office fosters a more collegial/open environment and you have a good relationship with your coworkers/boss, you may decide to be open about what you have been through and actively keep them up to date moving forward. They could potentially be a valuable source of personal and emotional support. Alternatively, if your office is more reserved, you may choose not to share details about your experience — or choose to speak about it with only a few trusted coworkers. It's important to pay attention to your instincts.

Some specific questions to ask yourself, which may help you make decisions about sharing news of your cancer during your return to work, are:

“Am I comfortable sharing personal information with people at work?” \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

“How long have I worked at this job? How does that factor into my comfort level in terms of disclosing?” \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

“How well have I performed in this position up until now? Have I received positive feedback? Is my performance likely to change as a result of my current health situation? If so, would sharing information help my employer understand why those changes are happening?” \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

“Are there other employees who have been open about their health status/the health status of a family member they've had to care for? How were they treated?” \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## WHOM TO SHARE INFORMATION WITH

**Supervisor:** Once back on the job, you'll need to think about whom you want to inform regarding any follow-up doctors appointments, potential ongoing treatment and/or resulting side effects — if any. If you disclosed your diagnosis to your supervisor before going out on medical leave, it is helpful to think through what information you have already shared about your diagnosis and whether there are now additional details you feel it would be useful to disclose. Consider also whether your boss was understanding and supportive; if so, it may be helpful to continue to keep them informed regarding your condition — especially if you anticipate needing additional time off or a possible modification to your role.

**Management/Human Resources:** As with the initial disclosure of your diagnosis, it may be the case that upon returning to work you will need or want to keep more people than just your immediate supervisor informed regarding your health and any related issues/needs — especially if you are part of the management team. Again, your country's laws and your employer's protocols may determine whether your manager is allowed to share this information with Human Resources and/or other supervisors who might be impacted. So be sure to find out from your direct boss if/how your personal information will be shared with others in more-senior roles.

**Coworkers:** It is impossible to provide universal guidelines on disclosing details of your cancer to colleagues, since, as mentioned on page 12, so much will depend on the culture of the organisation and your relationship with the people there. So you'll want to think about these factors and use them to help guide your decision on how much — or how little — you want to share with your fellow staff members once you're back.

# DISCLOSURE

Below, list the names of those colleagues (including supervisors, managers and HR representatives) with whom you feel comfortable sharing information about your cancer experience. You may also want to identify the people who could be a confidant and/or source of support, if needed: \_\_\_\_\_

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## WHEN TO SHARE

If you ultimately determine that you want to share your health status and are planning to work during treatment, generally the best time to tell people is after a treatment plan has been established — since, at that point, you'll likely have a better sense from your healthcare team of how your diagnosis (as well as the treatment) will affect your job performance and/or appearance. Then you can decide whether to tell supervisors/coworkers in advance of starting treatment or on a need-to-know basis as treatment moves forward.

## HOW AND WHAT TO SHARE

Disclosure is on a spectrum. For those who have decided to disclose, you'll want to think seriously about what, and how much, your supervisor and coworkers need to know. For some people the decision to disclose will mean sharing widely at work. Others will choose to keep the details to a minimum, which might mean disclosing only their diagnosis or even just news of ongoing side effects that may impact them on the job. Remember, how much you share is entirely up to you. You can always share more, but once information has been disclosed it cannot be “un-shared.”

Understandably, many people are unsure about how to have a disclosure conversation with a manager or supervisor. A good approach is to acknowledge that you are taking the time to be thoughtful about your employer's interests and concerns as well as your own. Below are two examples of how to do this:

• *“I know this is a lot for you as well, but I think if we collaborate we can come up with a plan that works for both of us. It's very important to me that everything continue running as smoothly as possible while I transition back.”*

• *“I know you have many things to consider in terms of how we manage this, but I want you to know how important it is to me to continue doing the best work I possibly can. I have some thoughts on how we can work through the situation together and ensure that we hit all our marks.”*

## Tips on what to tell:

- Reveal only as much as you want to, in a straightforward manner. People will take their cues based on how you present yourself.
- Prepare ahead of time what you plan to say, including what specific information about your treatment/recovery you want (or do not want) to share. Writing down notes to refer to during conversations is often helpful for making sure that you cover everything you want to discuss.
- If you are sharing information with just one or two colleagues, create a comfortable private environment in which to tell them. And, be sure to mention if you want them to keep this news to themselves, as it might not be obvious to them to do so if you do not say something.
- Give them a chance to ask some questions, if you feel comfortable doing so. Some people have no experience with cancer and therefore no idea what you're facing. (More information on preparing for potential responses from colleagues is on page 16.)
- If you plan to broach the topic of legal protections with your supervisor, think strategically about how to do it. Some supervisors might feel threatened by the discussion, so it can be a good idea to emphasize that your primary interest is ensuring that you are best able to help your company meet its needs.

Most importantly, remember that returning to work will be a fluid experience and your situation, energy levels, etc., may change or fluctuate over time. By sharing your current status, you are initiating a conversation with your manager and/or coworkers that, ideally, will be ongoing. This will enable you to discuss things as they evolve and adjust your plan of action accordingly.

Below, list the information you are comfortable sharing at work — if any — as well as the people with whom you plan to share it:

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How might you start the conversation? \_\_\_\_\_

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What information are you not comfortable sharing at work? \_\_\_\_\_

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# DISCLOSURE

How might you respond if a coworker unknowingly asks about something you would prefer not to discuss? \_\_\_\_\_

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## PREPARING FOR POTENTIAL RESPONSES AND/OR MISCONCEPTIONS

There can be a wide range of responses from supervisors and coworkers when a cancer diagnosis is discussed. Making a list of possible reactions — both welcomed and less preferable — can help you better prepare for the conversation.

Some potential responses include:

- Fear
- Discomfort
- Confusion
- Pity
- Anger
- Avoidance
- Support
- Love
- Understanding

It is also useful to be aware of common misconceptions that some people may have regarding cancer, so that if one of your coworkers is misinformed, you can clear up any misunderstanding. Among the most common misconceptions are:

- Cancer is an automatic death sentence.
- Cancer is contagious.
- Cancer can always be cured if detected early.
- Cancer prevents you from being able to work.
- Cancer automatically makes you less productive, less competent or less reliable.

What reactions and/or misconceptions do you think your coworker(s) might have when discussing your cancer? How might you respond?

Potential Coworker Reaction/Misconception	Your Response
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

## SHARING ONLINE

For many cancer patients and survivors, the virtual space has become a valuable source of community and encouragement, in the form of online support groups, blogs, social media, etc. However, it is important to remember that the Internet is a public space and the information you share online may be seen by people other than your intended audience. Therefore, if you are active on social media and open about your health status there, it's a good idea to think carefully about what you post — particularly if you opt not to share any or all details of your cancer experience at work. While you may feel you are safe posting on your social networks about your cancer history, many platforms' privacy settings change frequently; so it's wise to protect yourself rather than risk having personal information shared with people you don't want to disclose to.

Whatever you share online becomes part of your digital footprint, and keeping track of all the elements of one's online presence can be challenging. The fact is, many employers, managers and coworkers actively search popular social platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, the blogosphere and Facebook, which means that they may be able to access what you post; so you'll want to consider the effects of your online behavior and manage it accordingly.

As an alternative to mainstream social networks, Cancer and Careers recommends using Caring Bridge ([www.caringbridge.org](http://www.caringbridge.org)) and/or MyLifeLine ([www.mylifeline.org](http://www.mylifeline.org)). While both are in English, these websites are globally accessible and were specifically designed as online forums with a greater degree of privacy, for people living with ongoing medical conditions. However, even profiles on these sites are not automatically protected 100%, so you will need to take steps to set your privacy settings at a level that works for you. Fortunately, this is fairly easy to do and privacy settings change far less frequently on these sites than they do on more commercial sites.

In addition to selecting optimum privacy settings on more popular, *public-facing* platforms, there are ways to control your messaging to ensure that your personal and/or professional brand is positive, interesting and accurately reflects how you'd like to be represented. One way to do this is to ask yourself the following questions before you post something:

- "Would I want a boss — current or future — or coworkers to know this about me?"
- "Would I want this information on the front page of a newspaper or the homepage of my favorite news site?"

As with sharing in the workplace, it is important to keep in mind that when posting online it's always possible to share more later, but it is never possible to "un-share."

# DISCLOSURE

Obviously, there are many people who are completely comfortable with sharing their health information publicly. And that's fine too. The goal is to make a thoughtful decision about disclosure — one that feels authentic to you and is in line with your particular personality, circumstances and needs.

For those who have been very open (via social media, a blog, etc.), as they get ready to return to work, they might want to think about how to convey their “story arc” to help the public they are sharing with see them as ready and able to be back on the job.

If you are seeking additional legal information regarding disclosure rights and protections in your country, consult government-maintained websites with information on employment/labour laws or seek advice from a legal expert.

# SIDE EFFECTS AND THE WORKPLACE

## IDENTIFYING THE IMPACT OF SIDE EFFECTS ON THE JOB

If you are returning to work and still experiencing lingering side effects from treatment — or will continue treatment once you are back on the job — being able to mitigate (or at least manage) those side effects at work can help you feel more comfortable and, in turn, more able to perform your duties.

To help with that process, it can be useful to first identify what those side effects are and how, specifically, they might impact the kind of work you do. For example, will numbness in your fingers make it difficult to type on a computer keyboard? Will soreness/limited mobility following surgery prevent you from lifting heavy items? Will issues with balance make it hard for you to stand for long periods of time?

Below, write down existing/potential side effects from treatment and the ways in which they are likely to affect your job. (You may also wish to refer back to the information you provided in the chart on page 7, in the “Gathering Relevant Information” section.)

	Side Effect	Task	Impact
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

Once you have identified your specific/possible side effects and their potential impact on your work, you can begin to strategise ways to counteract both. Over the next few pages, you will find information on some of the more common side effects from treatment, as well as suggestions for ways to manage them.

## MANAGING ONGOING SIDE EFFECTS AT WORK

### ADDRESSING COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

**Cognitive Challenges (aka “Chemo Brain,” though it can result from other forms of treatment as well)**

- Let go of the idea of multi-tasking. Regardless of a person's age, health history, etc., the human brain functions best when focusing on one item at a time, so try to make this practice a habit.
- Write down (or type up) a list of priorities. Seeing your most critical tasks written out in order of importance can help keep them top of mind. If there are certain parts of your job that are the same, day in and day out (e.g., if you are a retailer: reconciling the day's purchases, restocking merchandise), consider creating a cheat sheet that includes all the steps required to successfully execute that portion of your routine.
- Break down tasks into their smallest parts. When you're developing your to-do list, be specific about each

# SIDE EFFECTS AND THE WORKPLACE

component of the task, so that nothing falls through the cracks and you can tick them off, one by one.

- Take notes — in meetings, during phone conversations, at workshops/conferences. Doing so eliminates the need to remember everything and gives you something to refer back to. It can also help to use one notebook or planner (for to-do lists and note-taking) and bring it with you wherever you go.
- Rehearse what you need to say. If your job requires you to give presentations, make client pitches or sales calls, provide your manager with project updates, train new hires, etc., set aside time in advance to plan and practice.
- Schedule “meetings” with yourself on the office/public calendar. By blocking off time to work on specific projects — and turning off phone and/or email notifications during that time — you will be more able to concentrate on the task at hand. And if your boss and colleagues know that you are unavailable, there are likely to be fewer interruptions and less pressure to respond immediately.
- Remember that feeling stressed can impact your ability to concentrate. Tips on how to manage stress in the workplace can be found below.

## Stress

- Be careful not to push yourself too hard. Instead, listen to your body. Break for lunch daily, and take additional, short breaks throughout the day. Go for a 10-minute walk outside whenever possible — the fresh air and exercise can help clear your mind and boost your energy.
- People under stress tend to breathe in short, shallow breaths that do little to bring in oxygen and a lot to increase tension in the chest and shoulders. Next time you feel anxious or overwhelmed, take a few moments to breathe deeply. Getting more oxygen into your body will slow your heart rate, decrease your blood pressure and relieve tension.

## Fatigue

- If you are starting to feel tired or weighted down by a task, take a few moments to renew your focus. Perhaps make yourself a cup of tea or listen to an upbeat song to help increase energy. Experiment to figure out what works best for you.
- Exercise is an excellent way to decrease or ward off fatigue, and it can be as simple as going for a walk or doing some gentle stretches in your desk chair.

## Hair loss

- Ask your healthcare team or hairstylist about wig retailers and salons. And if you decide to order a wig online, be sure to do so from a credible retailer. There also may be charities that provide wigs to those who cannot afford them. For more information, consult your local cancer league or advocacy organisation.

## Nausea

- Talk to your healthcare provider about medical options to address nausea.
- Use natural (and doctor-approved) remedies such as eating ginger or drinking ginger ale, as these can provide effective relief.
- Eating smaller meals throughout the day, instead of three large meals, can alleviate both nausea and fatigue.

## Anxiety

- Anxiety at work often results from feeling overwhelmed. To counteract this, try to honestly assess what you can and cannot manage, then set appropriate boundaries with regard to taking on projects. While it may feel uncomfortable to do so, it can be necessary in order to avoid increased stress.
- Many people find it helpful to speak with a mental health professional about their anxiety, in order to better understand trigger points and determine effective ways of communicating boundaries with managers and coworkers.
- You can also practice with family and friends how to respond to potentially uncomfortable questions that might arise at work. Being prepared will ease some of the anxiety about conversations at the office.
- Find and use support systems (e.g., support groups and phone help lines).

## USING WORKPLACE ADJUSTMENTS

In addition to the above strategies, requesting a modification to some aspect of your job may help reduce the impact of side effects on your performance. For example:

- Changing your work schedule to accommodate symptoms that are related to specific times of the day, thereby making your on-the-job hours more productive.
- Requesting equipment/furniture/changes to your environment to address symptoms that may be preventing you from successfully meeting your job requirements.
- Finding a new position that has less-taxing responsibilities.

Below is a checklist of questions, organised by category, that can help you determine possible job modifications.

### Schedule

- “Can I work the same number of hours per week, but adjust the start and end times of my day?” (For example, instead of working 09:00 to 17:00, can you work 07:00 to 15:00, if you are more focused in the morning?)
- “Can I request more breaks?” (For example, if your job allows you to have two 15-minute breaks and a 30-minute lunch break, but having four breaks throughout the day would be better for you, could you ask for an additional break?)
- “Can I meet the responsibilities of my position by working from home?” (For example, if you’re dealing with extreme fatigue and your commute to/from work is taxing, could you work from home instead, thereby redirecting into your work the energy that would otherwise go into your commute?)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

# SIDE EFFECTS AND THE WORKPLACE

## Equipment/Furniture/Environment

- “Are there adjustments that can be made to my work space that would make it more conducive to my needs?” (For example, can equipment such as printers and phones be moved so that they are easier to reach?)
- “Can I move my work space to an area that would be more comfortable?” (For example, could you relocate to an office closer to the restroom if your side effects cause you to need the bathroom more frequently? Or closer to the break room or watercooler if you are dealing with side effects requiring you to stay hydrated?)
- “Can I request special furniture?” (For example, if your role requires you to stand for long periods of time but you are experiencing fatigue, could you request a chair or stool to help reduce the drain on your energy?)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Position/Role

- “Can non-essential responsibilities be reassigned to someone else?” (For example, a school teacher experiencing fatigue might have their recess-monitoring duties assigned to another teacher.)
- “Can exceptions be made to existing policies?” (For example, if your company doesn’t allow the use of headphones at your desk but you need noise-cancelling headphones to help you concentrate — perhaps an exception can be made.)
- “Is there an open role at my current workplace that I’m qualified for and that might be more manageable given the side effects I’m experiencing? If so, would I be able to switch to that role?” (For example, if you work in a front-facing administrative position at a medical clinic but are concerned about possible infection due to a compromised immune system, perhaps you could get an alternative position that would reduce your interaction with sick patients.)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## ADDITIONAL HELP FOR SIDE EFFECTS

While it is important to make changes/adopt behaviors while on the job in order to help manage side effects, it is also useful to consider implementing potential solutions in your personal life that, in turn, may improve your overall experience at work.

- **Exercise:** Develop an exercise routine. Studies have shown that exercise can ease the effects of chemotherapy treatment. Adding even a simple exercise regimen to your day can help you feel more energised and potentially decrease the risk for recurrence of the disease. Make sure to speak with your healthcare team about safe practices.
- **Sleep:** Do not underestimate the importance of sleep. Getting enough sleep can be the key to remaining focused and productive. Create schedules for before and after work that enable you to get the amount of sleep you need.
- **Diet:** Eating properly can help alleviate treatment-related symptoms such as fatigue and weight loss. Additionally, you may want to consider speaking with your medical team (including a nutrition counsellor, if possible) about creating a plan to address and ease other symptoms, such as nausea, mouth sores and dry mouth, which can cause distraction and pain while at work.

What further thoughts/ideas do you or your healthcare team have about how you might manage your specific side effects — either at or outside of work?

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# MANAGING WORKPLACE INTERACTIONS

## THE SWIVEL

If you find that your fellow employees are dwelling on your recent treatment instead of on work, try a technique called “The Swivel,” which enables you to take even the most well-intentioned question and redirect — or, swivel — the conversation from the cancer topic back to the subject of your job.

For example, if your boss says, “*How are you feeling today?*” you might respond with, “*I’m fine, thanks. While you’re here, do you have time to review the project report that was distributed at this week’s meeting?*”

Another example: A coworker says, “*My uncle had cancer, too.*” One possible response: “*Thanks for sharing that; I am sure it must have been quite difficult. Actually, I was hoping you might be able to answer a few questions I have about the new expense-reimbursement system.*”

The key is to acknowledge your colleague’s comment, then redirect the conversation to a subject you would prefer to discuss.

## HANDLING AWKWARD AND INSENSITIVE COMMENTS

As mentioned on page 11, deciding whether to disclose information at work about your diagnosis and treatment experience is intensely personal. If you choose to do so, it’s important to determine ahead of time how much detail you want to reveal and to whom. It can also be helpful to prepare yourself as much as possible for all types of reactions, comments and questions.

For example, if a coworker asks, “*Metastatic? Doesn’t that mean you’re dying? How can you work?*” a possible response could be, “*There is a lot of confusion, complexity and fear around cancer, so I can understand that you’d have questions about what that word means. However, a lot of people continue to live full, productive lives for many years after receiving that diagnosis. And for me, contributing to the work we do, so that the team can continue meeting goals and deadlines, is part of that.*”

Another example: After disclosing your diagnosis, your supervisor says, “*Did you smoke?*” (Or “*Did you drink?*” or “*Did you tan?*”) Your response might be: “*There is a lot of confusion, complexity and fear around cancer so I can understand that you’d be curious about whether I somehow brought this on myself. However, what is important now is how we can work together to make sure that we continue to meet our goals while I balance both work and treatment. My job is incredibly important to me, so I hope we can collaborate to come up with the best plan for doing so.*”

Additionally, some survivors wonder whether, after having shared information about their cancer diagnosis and treatment at work, they will be perceived in that environment as “the person with cancer,” rather than as the competent, contributing team member and professional they are. The fact is, it may take time to recast yourself in the eyes of your coworkers. However, try not to take it personally or get too frustrated if your manager/colleagues focus their discussions with you on the topic of your health. Instead, acknowledge

these exchanges and then swivel the conversation to a place where you feel comfortable and empowered. By bringing up work-related topics, you will help your coworkers see you as you want to be seen.

Use the space below to write down some responses to awkward comments you have either faced or are worried about facing, along with “swivels” that may be helpful during your return-to-work process. Remember to use language that sounds like you, and to practice saying the responses out loud to ensure the phrasing feels natural.

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## SETTING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Knowing your limits and how to communicate them will help you be a better employee. Being effective on the job means knowing how and when to decline requests, so that you are not overwhelmed with extra work. If you feel like you have too much on your plate, it is best to establish some boundaries and keep the lines of communication open with your manager, so that you can maintain balance and continue to do your best possible work. When you are approached about taking on additional projects, it’s important to craft responses that feel natural to you and that communicate the “no” in a professional and team-oriented way. For example, “*I appreciate that you thought of me for this project, but I’m a bit inundated this week and am concerned about my ability to complete it in a timely manner.*”

If and when it comes time to discuss work limits with your manager, be sure to prepare for it; doing so will give you a sense of control and make the conversation seem more manageable. It can also help to come up with a few creative solutions (e.g., staggering deadlines or outsourcing projects to other team members) that you can suggest during your meeting. Being proactive about drafting a proposed “plan of action” decreases the amount of time and effort your manager needs to devote to figuring out a solution, which they are likely to appreciate. Frame the discussion around not wanting to sacrifice the quality of your work, but show that you are willing and excited to take on work you can handle.

# RE-ASSESSING YOUR JOB

A cancer diagnosis often prompts people to re-evaluate the kind of work they do. For many individuals, a job consumes a significant percentage of each day, so it is not surprising that some survivors begin to look more carefully at the nature of their work and the amount of time they spend doing it, and consider whether they want to continue on that same path. For some people, it is a sudden realisation that the kind of work they do is not as fulfilling as they want or need it to be.

If you find that you are at a point where you're re-evaluating your job, there are steps you can take to assist with the process.

Start by asking yourself what you like about your current (or most recent) job. Then, delve into what is missing and what gives you a feeling of satisfaction. Answering the following questions will help you develop a better sense of what you are looking for.

## “WHAT’S RIGHT ABOUT MY JOB?”

Figuring out what has been good about your work situation can make it easier to identify the one or two things you have really been missing. Perhaps your company's support and flexibility during your treatment have made you see them through new eyes. Maybe your job has given you the chance to exercise the skills that you enjoy using the most. It may be that your lifestyle is just what you want it to be. Or perhaps you get satisfaction from learning new things and your job gives you that opportunity. Ask yourself the same questions about previous jobs, too.

Write down whatever it is that gives you fulfillment and is important to you at work.

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## “WHAT’S MISSING?”

Once you have identified what has worked for you in your existing job/past jobs, consider what has been missing. Just because you are good at something, it doesn't necessarily mean you want to go on doing it forever. Perhaps your cancer experience has made you want to do something that you think is more meaningful. Maybe you're in need of a better work-life balance. Or you might feel stuck in the same old rut. The most important thing is for you to be aware of what you believe doesn't exist/hasn't existed in your job(s). When you know what that is, it is much easier to make decisions and do something about it.

Now create a second list, of things you haven't liked about your job or what you feel has been missing. Once that is done, you will have documentation that reflects your preferences and the things you'd like to avoid.

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If one of the things you listed above is that you feel your job isn't meaningful enough, then your next step is to spend time thinking about how you, personally, define “meaningful” in terms of work, as meaning comes in many forms.

To get you thinking, consider whether you find value in any of the following: solving problems, sharing knowledge, learning new things, producing things, creating experiences (for yourself or others), advocating for a cause.

For many people, having a meaningful job means doing something they are passionate about — but again, one's passions are individual and personal. So as you try to answer the question of what kind of job would be meaningful to you, keep an open mind and recognise that there are multiple, varying ways to define the term.

## “CAN I GET WHAT I WANT FROM MY EXISTING ROLE?”

Before you start looking for another job, determine whether there is a way to incorporate what you're missing into your current job. Is it possible to speak with your manager about adjusting your schedule or factoring in some time working from home to establish greater work-life balance? If you haven't learned anything new in several years, is there an aspect of your company or industry that you would like to explore? Are there specific skills that other people within your organisation have that you think you would enjoy using or learning?

What about improving a less-developed skill, like public speaking, personnel training, financial management or marketing? If you really like what you do but feel you need a change, why not get involved in a special project that focuses on improving your employer's business? Identify an area within your company that needs help, think through the details of how you can improve it, and put together a brief proposal to present to your boss. Or how about getting more involved in your industry's key associations? This is also

# RE-ASSESSING YOUR JOB

a great way to meet new people in your field who tend to be decision makers, which can be especially useful if you've been out of the loop for a while as a result of your illness.

Below, note the possibilities for working with resources and opportunities within your current company.

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## “WILL I HAVE TO GO ELSEWHERE TO GET WHAT I NEED?”

If you have taken a hard look at your existing job and company and determined that you just can't create a situation or do work that satisfies you there, then it makes sense to start looking for opportunities at other companies or in other fields. Even companies that are laying off employees may still be interested in hiring talented people. (For information on job-hunting, see the “Job Search” section, on pages 29–32.) Use the space below to jot down ideas about other organisations/industries you might like to explore.

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# JOB SEARCH

Not everyone re-entering the workforce wants (or is able) to resume their previous role — in which case, looking for a new job becomes a significant part of the return-to-work process. Not surprisingly, job-hunting is its own distinct process; it includes various steps and there are important factors to consider as you begin.

First, it is critical to remember that the overall experience of looking for work has many highs and lows — which is true for all individuals, regardless of their health history. There will be days filled with new leads or interview opportunities and days that seem to bring only setbacks or rejections. All of that is to be expected and you will want to think about how you are going to take care of yourself mentally, physically and emotionally through what can sometimes feel like a roller-coaster ride. Concentrate on being the most desirable candidate you can be — and, although it may be challenging at times, try not to focus too much on your cancer experience. Instead, equip yourself with the right job-search tools, savvy and strategy so you will stand out among other applicants.

## NETWORKING

If you decide that you need to find a new job at a new company, you'll want to begin networking with as many people as possible. As you do so, use the chart below to keep track of everyone you reach out to, including their name, the date you were in touch, and information regarding the exchange (e.g., whether it was via email, phone or text; what was communicated; and any next steps, such as scheduling an in-person meeting or sending them your resume). You may not find a new opportunity as quickly as you'd like, but you will be planting seeds.

Keep your master list of what is important to you (see “What's Right About My Job?” on page 26) close by, to remind yourself of what you need and want from work. Use that list and your networking tracker (below) to draft questions that you can ask in informational meetings/interviews. Identifying what's missing in your work (see pages 26–27) can get you started in the right direction for job satisfaction.

Name of Company	
Current/Potential Contact	
Plan for Networking (e.g., send LinkedIn message, request informational interview)	
Notes	

# JOB SEARCH

Name of Company	
Current/Potential Contact	
Plan for Networking (e.g., send LinkedIn message, request informational interview)	
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Notes	

Name of Company	
Current/Potential Contact	
Plan for Networking (e.g., send LinkedIn message, request informational interview)	
Notes	

## DISCLOSURE DURING THE JOB SEARCH

Depending on your country’s laws, you may not be obligated to disclose your cancer diagnosis to a potential employer — in an application, in a cover letter or during an interview. As with all other work-related disclosure decisions, whether or not to share health information during the job-search process involves personal choices. If, in order to do the job you are applying for, you think you may need to request that an adjustment be made to the role, you might need to disclose some information to make that possible (there may even be a law you are protected by that can help you make that request\*). But you may choose not to disclose during the application/interview process and instead wait until you receive an offer — or begin working — to request a modification. Typically, you won’t really know what to ask for until you are on the job and able to get a better sense of how your ongoing treatment/side effects might impact your ability to carry out your responsibilities.

*\*If you’re seeking additional information regarding disclosure laws in your country, reach out to your local cancer league or society (the Association of European Cancer Leagues maintains an online listing of its members, at [www.europeancancerleagues.org/members](http://www.europeancancerleagues.org/members)); review government-maintained websites with information on employment/labour and disability laws; or contact a reputable legal expert.*

Here are some important things to consider regarding disclosure, through all phases of the job-search process:

### Cover Letters

Sharing health information in a cover letter is a personal choice. That being said, given that the cover letter is a tool designed — in conjunction with one’s resume — to get you a phone interview or a virtual or in-person meeting, in general it is not the appropriate forum for sharing a diagnosis, because there is no opportunity for discussion. A cover letter is skimmed by a hiring manager to determine if you can put coherent thoughts together and make a good argument about how you bring something unique to the role; so focus on doing that in your letter, and then make a decision about disclosure once you are more deeply engaged in the hiring process.

### Interviews

The interview phase is just one part of the overall hiring process, and there is a strategy to it: Think of the first interview as the beginning of a relationship. The goal is to impress a prospective employer and advance to the next phase. Using that perspective, the first interview may not be the best time to share your cancer history. If you do choose to disclose, it’s probably better to wait until you feel confident the company is invested in you and likely to make you an offer — or until the offer officially comes through — and then share this information as part of your discussion of salary, benefits and other related components.

The Swivel (which was introduced on page 24) is also extremely useful during the interview process, by helping to focus the conversation on the position you are interested in and the skills and experience you can bring to it. One way it can be particularly helpful is in fielding questions about a gap in employment history. The Swivel offers a way to acknowledge the “gap” question asked by the interviewer and then redirect the conversation toward your actual goals and desire to get hired.



# JOB SEARCH

When planning swivels for interviews, you will want to come up with concise, credible, accurate answers to possible questions, then practice them until you are comfortable with the language. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to respond to a question about a gap in employment by saying, “*There was a family situation that I had to attend to, but it has been resolved and I’m excited by the opportunities this position offers to use my skills to help grow your business. Let me tell you how...*” It answers the question of why there is a gap, and no one would argue with the fact that cancer can be considered “a family situation.” But more importantly, it focuses the conversation on the opportunity at hand, thus encouraging the interview to progress from there. Practicing your responses is key, so that you feel at ease when answering.

As with all job interviews, the most important thing is to be prepared, which includes practicing ahead of time how to respond to possible questions in a way that enables you to sell your skills and show the employer that you are the best candidate for the position. Also as part of your preparation, it can help to remind yourself of your many accomplishments, none of which should be overshadowed by having taken time off.

Use the space below to write out some interview questions that might be asked, as well as your planned responses. Don’t forget to use The Swivel when needed.

Interview Question	Response

Keep in mind that once you find a new job, many of the topics covered earlier in this toolkit — such as managing side effects in the workplace, handling interactions with coworkers, setting professional boundaries — are likely to be relevant in your new situation as well.

# CHANGING CAREERS

If what you ultimately determine is that you want to change careers entirely, the first step is to embark on an information-gathering process. Doing so will help set you up for success.

Begin by taking an inventory of all your skills, both the hard ones (like writing or using a particular type of software) and the soft ones (such as managing your time efficiently or being “a people person”). Make the lists as long as necessary to cover all of them.

To help you get started, listed below are the major skills categories (as well as a few examples for each).

## Fundamental Skills (e.g. Writing, Accounting, Computer Skills, Public Speaking)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## Thinking Skills (e.g., Problem-Solving, Decision-Making, Creative Thinking)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## People Skills (e.g., Customer Service, Team Work, Leadership)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## Management Skills (e.g., Negotiation, Strategic Planning, Budget Development)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## CHANGING CAREERS

Once you have created your lists, it can help to have a loved one or former colleague review them to see if they have anything to add.

Next, you will want to think about which of these skills you actually want to use day to day at work. From there, brainstorm jobs that might be relevant and/or require these skills.

Then, begin talking to people. Reach out to individuals in your network — you can start with those you are connected to on LinkedIn — who have jobs that sound interesting to you, and set up informational meetings with them.

Also, take some time to think about whether it is the job that matters more to you, or the company you will work for. For some people, the specific kind of work they will be focusing their energy on day in and day out is what is most important. For others, it is about being part of a particular organisation or community. One is not better than the other; the point is to figure out what is best for you.

As part of that self-assessment, you will want to consider how your physical and mental capabilities may have changed as a result of cancer treatment. For example, do you have the same capacity with regard to things such as energy, strength, dexterity, comprehension and memory retention? It is important to be honest with yourself about this, so that you don't find yourself in a work situation that you are unable to manage after a period of time.

If you are unsure what you're capable of, you may want to check with your healthcare team, as they often have tools for assessing such abilities.

## WHERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION

We hope you find this toolkit helpful as you think through and plan for your return to work. Remember, re-entering the workforce is both a step-by-step and fluid process and you may need to adjust and adapt your plan as you go along.

If you need additional information on returning to work, understanding relevant laws or general cancer survivorship support, you may wish to explore the following resources:

### **ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN CANCER LEAGUES**

[www.europeancancerleagues.org/members](http://www.europeancancerleagues.org/members)

The Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL) is a non-profit, pan-European umbrella organisation of national and regional cancer societies. Its list of members is a resource for finding a support organisation in your country.

### **EUROPA DONNA**

[www.europadonna.org](http://www.europadonna.org)

EUROPA DONNA is a Europe-wide coalition of affiliated groups of women that facilitates the exchange and spread of pertinent information concerning breast cancer through the different cultures it represents.

### **EUROPEAN CANCER PATIENT COALITION**

[www.ecpc.org](http://www.ecpc.org)

The European Cancer Patient Coalition (ECPC) is the voice of cancer patients in Europe. With more than 450 members, ECPC is Europe's largest umbrella cancer patient association, covering all EU member states and many other European and non-European countries. ECPC represents patients affected by all types of cancers.

### **EUROPEAN PATIENTS FORUM**

[www.eu-patient.eu](http://www.eu-patient.eu)

The European Patients Forum (EPF) is an umbrella organisation that works with patient groups in public health and health advocacy across Europe. Its members represent specific chronic disease groups at the EU level or are national coalitions of patients.

Founded in 2001, Cancer and Careers (CAC) is a U.S. non-governmental organisation that strives to eliminate fear and uncertainty for cancer patients and survivors, whether currently employed or looking for work. Our comprehensive website (available in English and Spanish), publications, and educational seminars for people with cancer and their healthcare providers are all provided free of charge — and are accessed by more than 500,000 people annually. Since early 2018, CAC has been engaged in research to learn more about the work-related experiences and resources available for cancer patients and survivors across Europe.

For more information, please visit [www.cancerandcareers.org](http://www.cancerandcareers.org).

## ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

Please note that the content in this publication is intended to provide general information on the topics presented. It is provided with the understanding that neither Cancer and Careers nor any other contributors are engaged in rendering any legal or professional services via the information contained within. The information provided in the toolkit should not be used as a substitute for professional services. Cancer and Careers recommends seeking appropriate professional counsel for any questions about a specific situation.

*Returning to Work: A Toolkit for Cancer Patients & Survivors* was made possible in part through a grant from Pfizer.



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