

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

There are many ways for people to work through cancer treatment — and you and your employee may mix and match strategies to adapt as treatment progresses.

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

As discussed earlier, “reasonable accommodation” is a legal term that refers to an adjustment in the workplace that can help employees continue to work while going through treatment. Collaborate with your employee to come up with a reasonable accommodation that works best for both of you. Employees may require more than one accommodation, and their needs may evolve over time as their treatment and side effects change. Maintain an ongoing dialogue with your employee on what is working and what isn’t, so you can adjust accordingly while ensuring a productive workplace for all. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is an excellent resource for guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment laws. It also provides a searchable database of possible reasonable accommodations. For more information, visit www.askjan.org.

Workplace accommodations often cost the employer very little or nothing at all. In addition, according to a 2015 JAN study, accommodation benefits for employers include:

- Retaining a valued employee (90%).
- Increasing the employee’s productivity (72%).
- Avoiding the costs of training a new employee (60%).
- Increased the employee’s attendance (55%).

IDEAS FOR REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

MODIFYING WORK SPACE

Thinking through how your employee’s work space is set up can help to alleviate fatigue and ensure he/she isn’t wasting precious energy on non-essential activities. For example, if your employee has to walk up and down stairs multiple times a day to use the company-wide printers, perhaps installing a printer at his/her desk would be a simple solution.

- Switching your employee’s work space may help your employee cope with side effects. For example, if your employee is experiencing nausea as a treatment side effect, moving him/her away from the staff kitchen may decrease the exposure to nausea-provoking smells.
- Special furniture may provide comfort to your employee or help him/her overcome work obstacles. For example, providing an adjustable/ergonomic chair might minimize neuropathy or other cancer-related pain. Or, perhaps your employee needs a mini refrigerator in his/her office to store their medication so it is easily accessible.

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MODIFYING SCHEDULE

Sometimes cancer treatment side effects can be worked around by shifting hours or important meetings to times of day when your employee is feeling best. You can troubleshoot by posting an in/out-of-office schedule and making sure that the staff knows who is the designated point person.

Telecommuting

Telecommuting can be a good solution for those in treatment and recovery. Try these steps to keep the work team going strong:

- Jointly come up with a written communication plan that gives the days and times the employee plans to be at home or in the office.
- Decide together how and when you'll be in touch with one another and how and when others who need to communicate with the employee can do so.
- Make sure your telecommuter has access to the company server or a document-sharing platform, as well as a computer loaded with the necessary software to effectively do his/her job remotely.
- If possible, keep up with regularly scheduled meetings and training, either live or by conference call.
- Find a telecommuting partner, a coworker who can help the person working from home keep connected to the informal communication channels.

Flexible Work

This allows your employee to work full-time, but with a flexible schedule. Some examples of flextime work are:

- Varying the start and end times of the employee's workday.
- Maximizing the hours that the employee feels his/her best.
- Allowing the employee to take time out during the day for appointments and make up the time later.

Part-Time Work

The employee may need to reduce the number of hours he/she works, which will most likely affect the entire work team.

A few things you should consider when scheduling part-time work:

- The time(s) of day when customers typically need the employee the most.
- Regularly scheduled meeting times.
- How will the work be accomplished while the employee is on a part-time schedule?
- Which tasks/projects can be managed on a part-time schedule?
- How will the rest of the job be accomplished?
- Should tasks be delegated to other employees?

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Not all jobs are suitable for strategies like telecommuting, flexible schedules or part-time work. Certain situations may call for some creative thinking on the part of the entire staff. Tasks might be interchanged or coworkers cross-trained to stand in when schedules must be adjusted. Good solutions may include switching the employee to work that is project-oriented or can be done with minimal supervision.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- Make sure everyone knows that you still regard your employee as a valued part of the team. You can convey this through words, attitude and assignments.
- Watch for job creep. There is a danger with flexible, part-time or off-site work situations that the employee may end up overworking. It's easy to let boundaries blur when working at home. It is also not uncommon for an employee to feel that his/her absence or flextime is letting down fellow coworkers — and to over-compensate as a result. A clearly defined work plan helps combat job creep and overwork.
- It's also important to keep in mind the feelings of your other employees. They may feel overwhelmed by new responsibilities and may even resent any altered work schedules. Make use of your HR department and of Cancer and Careers' resources for coworkers (www.cancerandcareers.org/en/coworkers).