

Cancer and Careers

BY REBECCA V. NELLIS, MPP



When you think about your place of employment, many words come to mind: a paycheck, benefits, security—but also, camaraderie, fulfillment, identity. When you think about the word cancer, different words and feelings are evoked. In the past, people did not necessarily think about these words together or the symbiotic relationship between the two. The focus after a cancer diagnosis was on getting well, and rightfully so. Yet medical advancements in the past 15 years have created an enormous, ever-growing population of survivors who must think about what comes after cancer—especially with regards to their current and future employment.

The statistics are staggering; one in two men and one in three women will face a cancer diagnosis and its aftermath. For most people today, a cancer diagnosis means getting up and going to work, despite any treatment-related challenges. To do so, however, most people will need a little help along the way.

I'd like to share some of the statistics that motivate why I get up and go to work every day:

- 42 percent of cancer survivors are of “working age”
- Many cancer survivors face unemployment challenges
- One to five years post-diagnosis, approximately 20 percent of cancer survivors still report workplace limitations
- 79 percent of respondents to a 2012 Harris Poll/Cancer and Careers survey said that cancer recovery was aided by the routine nature of work.

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Employment after a cancer diagnosis and treatment is a challenging, often uphill battle into the unknown—yet necessary. This statement is the underlying reason why Cancer and Careers (www.cancerandcareers.org) was started. Of the many excellent programs and services dedicated to cancer support, we are the only organization in the U.S. solely focused on helping people with cancer thrive at their place of employment. For nearly 15 years, we have been at the forefront of supporting working people affected by cancer, as well as their health-care providers, employers, and caregivers. Our “workspace” is that busy, messy intersection where life with cancer, and life on the job, collide.

In Their Own Words

To start to understand firsthand the complexity of the issue, here are a few quotes from people who have attended our events and used our programs and services:

- Joan. *“As a colorectal cancer survivor, the challenge came when I had to keep taking time off for scans and follow-up appointments. My employer began to berate me, and just really made it difficult and uncomfortable for me to make those appointments, and of course attend them. I was eventually let go.”*
- Kurt. *“I am 51-years-old. I had a brain tumor partially removed in 2011 and was stable until May 2013. Just a couple of weeks after the cancer came back, I was laid off work. My career is high-level, and I acknowledge that my memory skills are being impacted by the tumor and treatments.”*

- Erik. *“I worked in the film industry for 15 years, but stopped after being diagnosed with cancer. I’m struggling to find work and am open to any job. I can’t really return to film because I’m not as quick as I used to be before treatment.”*

Cancer and Careers is fueled by these voices. We are tenacious about moving the awareness needle on the employment challenges people with cancer face, what needs to be done to help meet these challenges—and why this issue matters.

So, What Do We Do?

At Cancer and Careers, we help people with cancer take control of their work situation; we refer to it as “being the boss over cancer.” For instance, if the person is currently employed, we can help him or her create an action plan after the cancer diagnosis. Our services include:

- Insight on how to share the news of a cancer diagnosis with managers or co-workers.
- Assistance in designating a “point person” at the workplace for when the person with cancer is out of the office.
- Help arranging a more flexible work schedule (if possible).
- If not, help transitioning the individual back to work after having to take time off during cancer treatment.
- Legal and financial education, with referrals to additional resources to help individuals with cancer make informed decisions and plans.
- A resume review service to help people with cancer “stand out on paper.”



BE THE BOSS OVER CANCER

- Advice on managing online reputations on commonly used social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn.
- Strategies to help “swivel” people away from pesky interview questions that may send them off track.

In a nutshell, Cancer and Careers aims to put power in the hands of people with cancer, and to “have their backs” with support, and the goal of propelling them forward to succeed in the workplace.

So, What Can You Do?

At Cancer and Careers, we believe that healthcare professionals are our “insiders,” and an important part of the cancer and employment equation. An oncology nurse, social worker, or patient advocate can be a key ally, eliminating some of the uncertainty about balancing work and cancer early in a person’s cancer journey.

Since 2009, Cancer and Careers has trained more than 1,700 professionals, offering free tools, accredited events, and specialized instruction. For example, our Education Series for Healthcare Professionals offers several get-down-to-basics webinars on what it means to work through cancer treatment, how to decipher the legalese that surrounds employment issues, and how to come back to work (smoothly) after taking time off for recovery.

We know people with cancer often have employment-related questions. We understand that these people and their caregivers need an individual or an organization they trust to answer these questions and offer follow-up resources

when more questions come up during their cancer journey. Bottom line: working men and women with cancer need a map and a guide, and a healthcare professional is uniquely positioned to help with both.

Strategies to Succeed

Now let’s zoom back a little and talk about what works on a macro-level. What simple practices cultivate a climate of support?


- When the patient, healthcare team, and employer all work together to create a plan of action.
- When prospective employers focus on the skills and experiences of qualified candidates, regardless of their health history or resume gaps.
- When people who can no longer do a certain job because of the effects of their cancer treatment are able to find new work opportunities and not made to feel that they will never be able to support themselves, or their families, again.
- When cancer patients understand their rights and how to exercise them via existing laws.
- When employers lead the charge in developing supportive workplace policies because they recognize the value in retaining quality staff members and make it a priority to do so.

As chief mission officer for Cancer and Careers, I oversee all mission-related plans and goals, and we have an exciting year ahead. We will continue our efforts to reach underserved regions in the U.S. because our free resources are particularly important to those with less access to information or

support. We have hosted patient events and in-service trainings in remote communities from Hawaii to Alaska, and our 2015 travel plans include stops in New Mexico, Nebraska, and Wyoming.

We are also in the midst of piloting a cancer support program for employers since we know one of the biggest predictors of workplace success for cancer survivors returning to employment is workplace accommodations. The program, Workplace Transitions for People Touched By Cancer, is a collaborative effort between Cancer and Careers, several major U.S. companies, such as Anthem and Pfizer, and the U.S. Business Leadership Network, to help employers offer the support necessary for their employees who are cancer survivors.

Lastly, our fifth National Conference on Work & Cancer will take place June 12 in New York City. This accredited, full-day event will include presentations, Q&A sessions, and discussions from an esteemed group of oncologists, cancer rights attorneys, medical social workers, career experts, and others. Admission is free, and we offer travel scholarships for those needing financial help to attend.

There is always more to talk about on the issue of employment after cancer. As cancer care providers, we thank you for spreading the word, staying in touch, and keeping the conversation going! 

Rebecca V. Nellis, MPP, is the chief mission officer for Cancer and Careers, a national nonprofit addressing the intersection of work and cancer. For more information, tools, and programs visit www.cancerandcareers.org.