Going Back to Work

Lisa Vento Nielsen, MBA, PMP, is founder of the Balance After Cancer Foundation and creator of the SuperMom—Breast Cancer Eradicator blog, which appears on CancerHealth.com.

December 17, 2018 By Lisa Vento Nielsen

When you learn that your good health is gone—the second you are told, “I am sorry, but you have cancer”—everything else fades away. How can you be expected to be yourself and do your best when your body is apparently a traitor?

Many people with cancer face discrimination at work, lose their jobs or question their careers, identities and passions during their illness. Cancer and its treatments can rob us of everything that makes us “us”—our ability to function at 100 percent, our hair and eyebrows and, most importantly, our belief in tomorrow. Sometimes we can feel as though we’re just a walking slew of appointments, surgeries and treatments. Or we’re suddenly faced with our mortality and the realization that “I do not want to spend what is left of my days here.”

I say “we” because I’m a cancer survivor myself. I’m also a career expert and author, and I’ve helped clients with résumés, career coaching and more. But despite my expertise, after my bout with Stage III breast cancer at age 39—and losing my job the day after my last chemotherapy session—I struggled to return to work. I could not get comfortable in my new body, with my new hair (thanks, chemo!) and my new perspective.

If you or someone you love is trying to go back to work after cancer treatment or while living with cancer, here are some tips.

Be confident. Embrace who you are and know that you can bring something valuable to the professional world, even while undergoing treatment or receiving follow-up care.

Confidence is one of the hardest things to maintain as a survivor or person living with cancer. If we get fired or written up, we may feel we are not capable of working. But for many of us, that is not true. Although we might need a more flexible schedule or other accommodations, we are still worthy and many of us are still able to work.

Make sure you have an up-to-date résumé. If you have missed some time at work because of your illness, there are ways to hide those blanks. Or you can address it during an interview, saying, “A life event prompted me to take time off, but I am ready to return and know I can do great work for you because…”

Know that your medical status is not public information. You do not have to disclose your illness during interviews or to your supervisors or coworkers. However, you should inform the human resources staff and let them know whether you need special accommodations or extra time off.

A cancer diagnosis can be a good opportunity to develop a career plan. Knowing what you like to do and what you find meaningful can help you make a move or find a new position that’s right for you.

For more free advice and resources from Lisa, visit BalanceAfterCancer.org.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/going-back-work-lisa-vento-nielsen