# Careers & Follow-Ups — Managing Your Career as a Cancer Survivor

Our lives took a hard right to the land of doctors and follow-ups and fears, but we do not have to live there forever.

July 1, 2018 By Lisa Vento Nielsen

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A big issue with getting back to work after dealing with a cancer diagnosis and all that entails is twofold:

1. Most important is being well enough to work and mentally able to focus on the tasks at hand — the last thing we feel ready to do during cancer is to find a new job but unfortunately, for many of us, it is just what we have to do, full stop. Despite needing to take a year or more to get through treatment (hopefully as some of us are in treatment for the rest of our lives) we also need to get ourselves out there to do the things EVERYONE dreads to do regardless of their health status — INTERVIEWING and NETWORKING and all of the things that used to make our hearts go bump in the night but now we know are just means to an end. We need to eat, so we need to work We need to stop thinking about cancer, so we need to work… and herein lies issue number 2:

2. We now are trying to put cancer behind us (if we are lucky enough to not be stage 4) yet now we have these pesky follow-up appointments, daily pills and aches and pains and an understanding of our bodies and mortality than we never had before.

Many of the people that I am helping get back to work have such debilitating joint pains and fatigue that they are in follow-ups and trying to figure out what it could be beyond just this “new normal” or what their doctors call, “Something I never heard of — why would you have pains and be tired?” AS IF — these folks mean well but if you have not had to take the meds and measures we have to take to you know stay alive then how can you know there is not pain, fatigue and whatnot?

We need to be career-ready and cancer-ready at the same time — we have plans and backup plans to our plans and contingencies but the real meat and potatoes of the issue is that we need to figure out what days we need to miss from work to keep things going as they are — how many visits will we need to attend? Is there a clinical trial we want to do and if yes, how many visits will that be and for most of us, our treatment hospitals are not so conveniently located to our places of work so it means more follow-ups = “better care” = more time off from work = can’t make the equation work.

No matter the job, no matter the lip service we will receive, there is still the unwavering potential issue that someone thinks that we are a liability — that we need to take time off, that we are not as stellar as we are expected to be despite the poison pumping through our veins, the cells that did not do what they were supposed to in our bodies but instead wreaked havoc on our lives and our livelihoods.

When I mentor people through my program about career after cancer the very big elephant in the room is how you can manage this new priority of taking care of YOU as well as being a decent employee and having a normal job where you do not have to panic about taking an afternoon for a follow-up appointment. These types of working arrangements are out there — but the rub is in what to tell and when and how to figure out if this is the right role for YOU. It is all about YOU now — being happy in your role, liking what you do and having decent bosses and colleagues who do not clock your every minute…

Women who have become moms during their working careers understand this a bit — the whole idea of being "mommy tracked" at work which is going from an upward moving career to something that is just going down or stagnant. Well, in that vein, those of us who have had cancer, we have been "YOU TRACKED."

You realize now that your health and well-being is important. You realize you do not want to be somewhere where you have to pretend all day long that you care about what you are doing. You know you do not want pity and misunderstanding to plague you every day of your career — you want to be known as YOU the person who rocks out at spreadsheets, or social media or writing not the person who lost their hair and is on certain meds forever.

It might seem impossible if you are considering how to get back to work — you might feel lost or ashamed or unable to pretend you give a crap about deadlines and spreadsheets when you just had a countdown wall about how many chemos or radiations you had left to get back to this "normal" but I promise you with my programs, my one-on-one help, my expertise you can get back to work…

Our lives took a hard right to the land of doctors and follow-ups and fears but we do not have to live there forever. We need to think about how to balance our new sense of selves, our new understanding of mortality to help us figure out how to move forward and live again and as we all know, living means bills to pay, vacations to take, insurance to have, friends and families.

Good luck on the path to "you" and if I can help in anyway, click here.

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