

Vocational rehabilitation

Tackling cancer in the workplace

An illness like breast cancer can strike at the very heart of the person you are. Highly personal, it not only can affect the individual physically, but mentally too. Treatment and recovery can be a long, difficult process with a number of potential barriers to overcome. Some cases may not offer the potential for a full recovery. For many, work can prove to be a welcome return to normality, regardless of the suggested outcome.

In this case study, our vocational rehabilitation expertise and experience helped an employee with an incurable cancer to continue working for as long as she wants to and is able to.

The role

This 57-year-old woman is a Senior Nurse Adviser for a medical sales and health care company. Her responsible role involves working on projects and with patients, auditing for the NHS, and creating and delivering training to NHS medical professionals throughout the UK.

 57

years old

Senior Nurse
AdviserResponsible
role

Employee 
case study

The absence

Pamela was originally **diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009**. After undergoing treatment, her cancer went into remission and she was able to make a full return to work in 2011. Unfortunately, in 2016, Pamela received the devastating news that her **cancer had returned**, and that, this time, it was considered to be **incurable**.

Despite this awful blow to her and her family, the secondary cancer had been caught at a very early stage. Pamela wanted to consider **returning to work and her normal life** while she underwent maintenance treatment to keep the cancer in check for as long as possible. However, the cancer and her treatment left her understandably feeling anxious, fatigued and with difficulty concentrating. She was also concerned about the effect her psychological and physical symptoms might have on her, her colleagues and **whether she would manage** within the working environment.

How our built-in support can help

As part of her company's **Group Income Protection policy**, which provided a percentage of her income while Pamela was off work, she also received built-in **access to expert vocational rehabilitation support**. The team got in touch to introduce her to the service and to make her aware of the range of support available to her.

Following an initial conversation in Nov 2017, our Vocational Rehabilitation Consultant, Kim Hanlon, recommended potential adjustments Pamela could make, and how we could **help her** make a **graduated return to work**. Kim advised her to discuss these plans with her GP and to contact us again when both felt she was ready.

With her GP's consent and approval of Kim's suggested plan, Pamela's employers contacted us in the summer of 2018, asking us to support her return to work.

In any return to work plan, it's vitally important that **all parties are in agreement**. As well as her GP, Kim and Pamela discussed the plan with her employers, who were happy to take on board Kim's recommendations and keen to ease Pamela's return in any way they could. These included gradually building up her hours, accommodating her chemotherapy treatment every three weeks (and its after-effects), reducing the travel required in Pamela's day-to-day role, and ensuring that her duties and new projects were less intense and stressful.

In July 2018, Pamela and her employers put **Kim's plan into progress**. As part of the all-round support, Kim also signposted Pamela to relevant cancer support charities, and provided resources and applications to help her manage the psychological impact of her condition.



The outcome

Initially, Pamela and Kim were **in touch every week** to see if the plan needed altering while Pamela got to grips with the working environment. But as she continued to make good progress, these calls reduced to fortnightly.

Throughout this time, calls between all parties took place at **4 to 6-week intervals**. Meanwhile, Pamela kept in touch with her treating healthcare professionals to keep them advised, and to ensure both the plan and her progress kept in line with their ongoing medical opinion.

By December 2018, **Pamela had returned to her full-time hours** and two months later in February 2019, she resumed her full duties. Kim kept in touch for a few weeks more to ensure Pamela could sustain this level and all parties felt comfortable they could continue to support her internally.

Her successful return to work has been invaluable, not only to her employer, but to Pamela herself – restoring a sense of normality and reinforcing the value she has to offer those around her.

The employee's view

Kim, my vocational rehabilitation consultant has been supportive and given expert advice throughout my phased return to work.

Her phased return plan was extremely useful. I think I would have done too much, too soon without Kim's advice and support. She put the brakes on me when I had no idea that I needed to take it slowly myself.

Kim's help has enabled me to make a smooth and easy transition back to work. And throughout the process, Kim has been kind and empathetic. I really couldn't have done this without her and I'm very grateful.

Added value from Unum

A cancer diagnosis can be devastating – not only to the person, but to their family, friends and colleagues. Not all cases can offer a complete cure or remission. But for those who want to work through their diagnosis and treatment, the workplace can be a great help and motivator.

Managing cancer treatment and its effects, while juggling work and home life can take determination and courage. Our Claims and Rehabilitation teams are on hand to help people with cancer – and their employers – to overcome any barriers preventing people from rejoining the workplace, and help smooth the way to a successful and sustainable return.



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