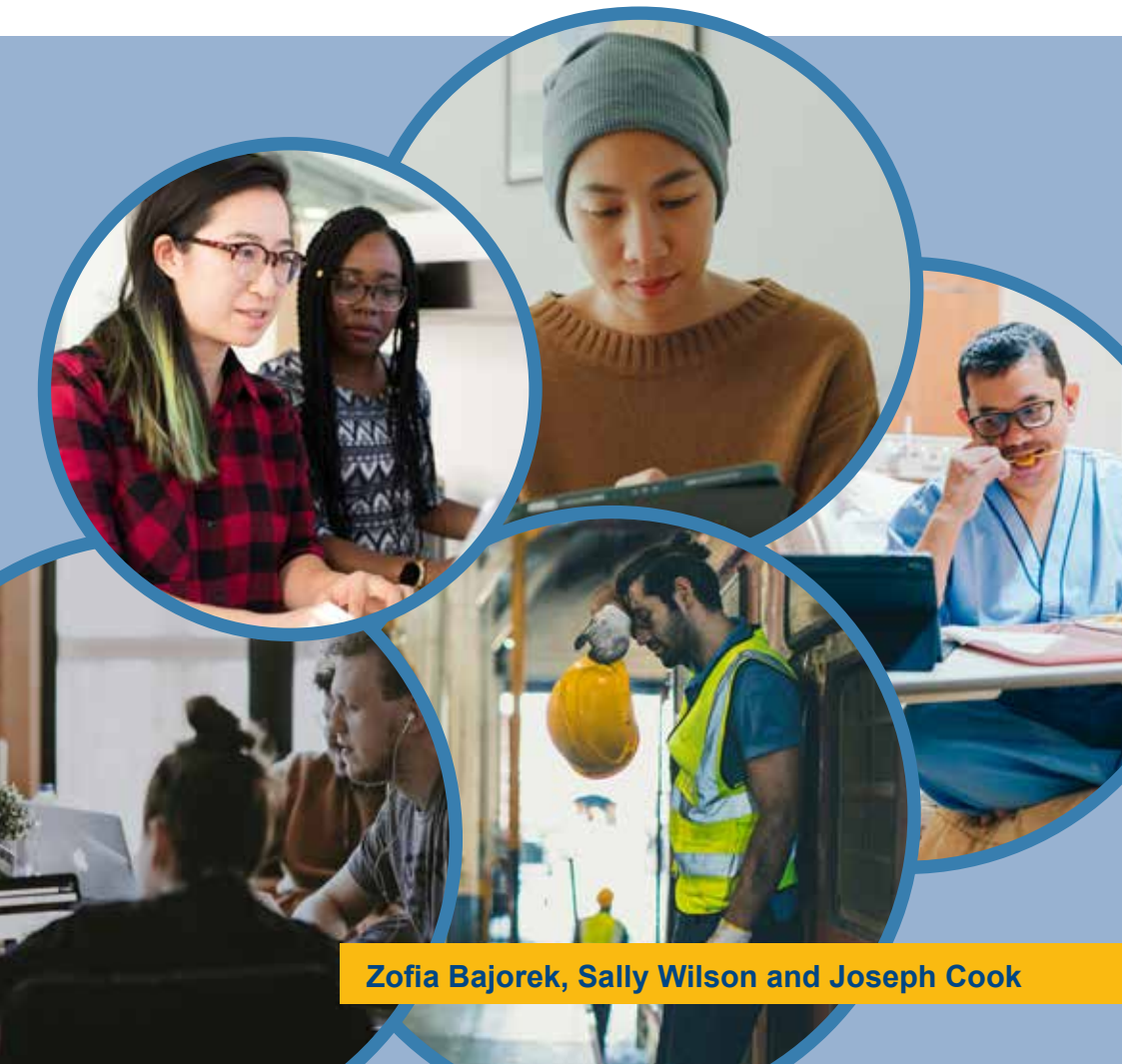


Improving employer support for those working with cancer: The Bevan report **Executive summary**



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Current projections suggest that one in two people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, but due to advances in research, earlier diagnosis and treatment, there has also been an increase in cancer survivorship. Therefore, it is more important than ever that those living with cancer have the opportunity to thrive and live in society. The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) led a study on behalf of Working With Cancer to understand current employer practices in supporting employees living with cancer back to work, and to identify enablers and barriers to good practice. This comprised a survey of 204 HR managers and four organisational case studies.

Key Findings

Results from the survey regarding current organisational policies and practices found that **organisations are not doing enough to prepare for or support employees living with cancer (or other long-term health conditions) in their workforce**. HR Managers reported that organisations tend to have generic policies that do not cater specifically for employees working with cancer. Instead, they focus on meeting employers' legal obligations. Common policies include:

- Health and safety (91 per cent).
- Dignity at work/bullying and harassment (90 per cent).
- Flexible working (87 per cent).
- Absence management/return to work (83 per cent).
- Equality, diversity and inclusion (83 per cent).

Only **4 per cent of organisations currently have a specific cancer policy**, whereas only **45 per cent of HR managers felt they needed one**. These results indicate an absence of a strategic approach to managing employees with cancer which could result in employees not being treated consistently.

There was little understanding of how many employees may have or have previously experienced cancer. The survey found that only **18 per cent of HR managers reported that their organisations collected data on this**. A further 72 per cent do not collect data, and 10 per cent said they did not know. As such, employers may not have an effective plan for managing cancer in the workplace but take a reactive approach on a case-by-case basis.

A number of challenges to better supporting employees working with cancer were identified. These include:

- **Concerns about managerial capability** (58 per cent).
- **Limited training in how to manage cancer at work** (57 per cent).

- **Limited experience of managing cancer at work** (53 per cent).

There were knowledge gaps in relation to employers' legal obligations, in particular the disability status of cancer. In the survey **25 per cent of HR Managers reported a lack of understanding about the Equality Act.**

Just over half (54 per cent) of HR Managers knew about Access to Work, a government scheme which provides financial assistance for workplace adjustments. Knowing about schemes that provide

financial aid is important, as **under half**

(44 per cent) of HR managers said that business economic conditions were a barrier to the provision of employee benefits.

Even though significant line manager capability gaps were reported by HR managers, few organisations are implementing practices to help improve this.

- **Only 11 per cent of organisations provided line manager training or coaching**

to improve line managerial skills.

- **A third (33 per cent) of HR**

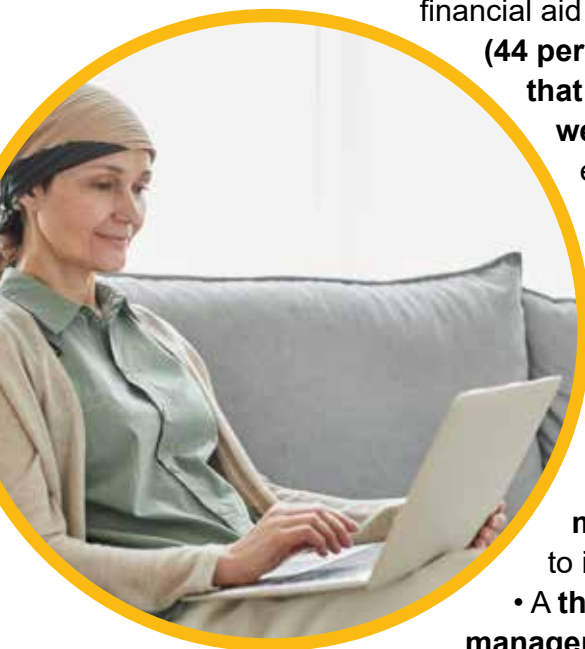
managers reported that their line

managers do not have the time to undertake

people management responsibilities effectively.

- **Specific line management training for supporting employees working with cancer was rare** (only 11 per cent offered this, 78 per cent had not offered this, 8 per cent were unsure).

- Although the case studies indicated that coaching line managers to support employees working with cancer was beneficial (for both the line manager and the employee), **72 per cent of organisations had not provided specialist coaching for line managers.**



- Some specific line managerial capability gaps were identified. Just under half (**48 per cent**) of **HR managers** said they were concerned about line managers saying the wrong thing when trying to support an employee working with cancer, and **31 per cent** lacked confidence in the ability of line managers to have a difficult conversation.
- Over two-thirds (**69 per cent**) of HR Managers were extremely or quite confident that they were providing line managers with the appropriate support to manage someone working with cancer.

13 per cent of HR managers felt that lack of senior management support presented a barrier to providing employees with further support.



Conclusions and recommendations

Given that one in two people will receive a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime, and the number of younger people (those under 50) being diagnosed is rising significantly, it is more important than ever that those living with cancer have the opportunity to work, contribute and thrive in society.

In previous research undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), Bevan and Wilson¹ observed that support to navigate a return to work after cancer treatment is improving, but more can still be done by organisations and HR to ensure that employees working with cancer have a positive experience of work.

Conclusions

Organisational & policy barriers

The need to develop specific policies and gather data

The research found that organisational employment policies tend to be generic, and they do not cater for the specific difficulties and concerns that employees working with cancer often experience. There were also apparent 'policy gaps' in relation to the provision of financial wellbeing, line management responsibilities for supporting employees with cancer, and addressing the stigma around cancer.

Not collecting or keeping any statistics on employees with cancer means that employers are unlikely to be aware of the issues or prevalence that cancer survivors face within their organisations.

The need to review how far employee benefits support those with cancer and long-term health conditions

The survey and the case studies both highlighted a variety of employee benefits and workplace adjustments that are offered by organisations

that could help employees working with cancer. The three most common were the opportunity to work flexibly (93 per cent), access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) (88 per cent) and referrals to Occupational Health (80 per cent) (although access to Occupational Health was more common in larger organisations). However, previous research² has suggested that the least commonly offered benefits including physiotherapy (40 per cent), access to health-related coaching (27 per cent), and vocational rehabilitation (10 per cent), are more effective at helping employees with long-term health conditions to return and remain in work. There is also significant evidence that EAPs, which many organisations may rely on to provide employee support, tend only to provide generic advice and are underutilised³.

The case studies suggested that a successful return-to-work included employee benefits and interventions that were implemented in consultation with the individual, taking individual health into consideration, and included on-going discussions about work patterns, job role and job design.

The need for greater clarity in communicating employee benefits

Employee benefits are only useful if they are communicated well and implemented in a timely manner. However, results from the survey indicated there appeared to be inconsistencies within organisations about whose role it is to communicate these (should it be HR, line managers, both?). This is something that organisations need to address, as HR Managers in the survey acknowledged that employees have a limited awareness of the benefits available to them. There does however need to be clarity about who is responsible for highlighting what policies and practices are available, so that consistency in the messages can be provided.

The need to consider additional benefits and services

The survey provided an open-text opportunity for HR Managers to comment on what employee benefits they would ideally like to offer if resources allowed. Some of the responses provided would require

additional organisational investment (for example, the ability to extend organisational sick pay, the provision of private health insurance, the provision of professional help for financial planning, and management training and/or coaching). Other additional employee benefits that were suggested did not necessarily require financial resources, but focussed on improving job design, reviewing policies and practices and better signposting to further expert advice and cancer charities.

Some HR Managers reflected that their current practices were inadequate and saw responding to the survey as a chance to reconsider what they could potentially offer employees working with cancer in the future.

The need to present a business case for supporting staff with cancer

The perceived cost of benefits and business economic conditions were reported as barriers to the provision of employee benefits and the survey indicated some evidence of senior management resistance to extending them. This is a concern because senior managers set an organisation's culture. A better understanding of the business case for employee benefits, particularly those aimed at mitigating long term sickness absence is needed.

The need for greater awareness of the government

Access to Work scheme

Given the above, it is particularly important that employers are aware and informed about government schemes, notably Access to Work, which provide financial assistance to implement workplace adjustments.

Line management capability & capacity

HR managers recognised the limitations of line manager capability. Potential barriers to providing better support included limited experience of managing cancer at work, concerns about saying the wrong thing and a lack of confidence in having difficult and sensitive conversations. These are all skills that require emotional intelligence

and usually require training or coaching to develop. However, only 11 per cent of organisations had provided line managers with training and coaching. Even when HR Managers felt line managers were adequately skilled, there were concerns about a line manager's capacity to provide the appropriate support required.

Evidence of good HR and line manager practice was reported in the survey. Just over 60 per cent of organisations arranged a phased return to work on a case-by-case basis, understanding that individual differences to cancer diagnoses and treatments need to be considered and the importance of regularly reviewing adjustments made for an employee to ensure they were being effective. A range of support services were also accessed when additional expert advice was required (for example, Occupational Health, patient organisations and EAPs).

The Working with Cancer Pledge

The majority of respondents (68 per cent of 132 respondents) were not familiar with the Pledge, with only 8 per cent reporting they were 'extremely' familiar. However, 82 per cent of respondents wanted to find out more about it.

If the pledge is to be effective to support both current and future employees working with cancer, it needs to be promoted more widely.

Recommendations

Policies

Employers should review their organisational policies to:

- Consider the benefit of keeping data on the number of employees with cancer and how many return to work.
- Determine if they need policies which cater specifically for cancer and other chronic illnesses.
- Ensure that current policies recognise the provisions of the Equality Act, but also consider further policies to fill the gaps. These could

address financial wellbeing, stigma and learning and development opportunities; all significant issues for employees living with cancer.

Develop a policy for supporting employees with an advanced or terminal diagnosis (a current gap identified in the survey and reported by cancer survivors in the 2021/22 survey).

Clarify who within the organisation has responsibility for communicating employee benefits to those with cancer.

Employee benefits

Employers should review their employee benefits to ensure that they are fit-for-purpose for employees working with cancer including how the length of a phased return is determined. They must be compliant with the Equality Act.

- Employers should consult with employees to determine whether there are further benefits that would help improve their return-to-work given situations vary on a case-by-case basis.
- Employers should make use of the support and expertise provided by Occupational Health and/or patient organisations to obtain 'cancer specific' recommendations related to an individual's work or role.
- It is also important for employers to recognise that psychological wellbeing may be a long-term barrier to a successful return to work. Providing workplace counselling, return to work coaching or specific cancer support for employees, for example, vocational rehabilitation and in-house peer networks can all be an important source of employee support.
- As financial considerations can be a barrier to workplace adjustments, employers should make themselves familiar with government schemes such as Access to Work that provide financial assistance to implement workplace adjustments.
- Any employee benefits used, as well as workplace adjustments implemented should be assessed regularly to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose throughout an employee's continued recovery and transition back to employment.

Line manager capability & capacity and the role of HR

All line managers and HR should receive training and/or coaching about how to support employees with long-term health conditions at work, including cancer. This might include:

- The side effects of cancer including the psychological impact.
- The challenge of cancer being a long-term and fluctuating condition.
- Relevant company benefits and policies.
- The Equality Act and reasonable adjustments.
- When and how to have conversations about cancer.
- Creating a return-to-work plan for and with an employee.

The case studies highlighted the importance of HR Managers providing support to line managers if concerns arise. HR must keep abreast of disability leaving return to work support, to ensure that discrimination does not take place.

More support should be given to line managers, so they have the time to line manage people working with cancer effectively. This may mean undertaking a review of the expectations of line managers.

Line managers should also have access to EAPs and emotional support if they have been 'triggered' by a line managerial discussion, especially if they have a 'lived experience' of cancer.

The Working With Cancer Pledge

The Working With Cancer Pledge should be promoted more widely within the UK and organisations should be encouraged to sign up.

Previous research has shown that employees working with cancer can benefit from the therapeutic nature of well-managed work. Although the results of this survey have shown that there are some pockets of good organisational practice, there are further opportunities for improvements that could make a significant difference to the number of employees returning to work successfully. This can only be to the benefit of those living and working with cancer, their families and the community as a whole.

Citations:

¹ Bevan, S. and Wilson, B. (2022). *Cancer and Employment Survey. Summary of key findings*. Institute for Employment Studies: Brighton. Available at: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/Cancer%20%26%20%20Employment%20Survey%20Results%20Summary.pdf>

² Ballard, J., Bajorek, Z., and Sheldon, H. (2018). Long-term sickness absence: a biopsychosocial survey. Part 2: the management of long-term sickness absence and the biopsychosocial drivers promoting or hindering return to work. *Occupational Health at Work*, 14, 15-26

³ Bajorek, Z. M. (2016). *Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs). Supporting good work for UK employers?*, The Work Foundation: London.



Link to full report



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