

How can cancer survivors best be supported to return to work?

To mark the European Week Against Cancer, 25-31 May 2018, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) publishes recent findings from its project exploring the implications of cancer for workers and workplaces across Europe. The publications identify instruments, practices, policies and interventions that can promote the successful rehabilitation and return to work of cancer survivors.

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In Europe, about 1.4 million people of working age are diagnosed with cancer each year. Although many of these people are able to continue working, the average return to work rate is only 64 % after 18 months, and those surviving cancer are 1.4 times more likely to be unemployed and three times more likely to receive disability benefits.

"In addition to the detrimental effects that being out of work has on an individual's well-being and finances, this situation has severe economic consequences for businesses and society as a whole", says EU-OSHA Executive Director, Christa Sedlatschek. "In fact, in 2009, working days lost as a result of cancer are estimated to have cost the European Union EUR 9.5 billion. Therefore, it is essential that companies implement effective strategies to help their employees get back to work following diagnosis of cancer."

Through its project 'Rehabilitation and return to work after cancer – instruments and practices', EU-OSHA aims to raise awareness of the problems faced by workers affected by cancer and develop guidance for employers on how to support them in returning to work.

Cancer survivors often experience psychological problems such as depression and anxiety, as well as physical problems, particularly fatigue. These health issues can reduce their ability to work and may be associated with negative attitudes among colleagues. Scientific evidence suggests that multidisciplinary interventions involving, for instance, a combination of physical and vocational rehabilitation measures and counselling can help in achieving a successful return to work.

Good practice examples

As part of the project, seven good practice examples from five EU Member States were identified and analysed in depth. They demonstrate a range of approaches to helping survivors get back to work.

The 'Working through cancer' programme run by Macmillan Cancer Support in the United Kingdom is an example of a particularly innovative intervention. This comprehensive programme offers a range of resources – from online information and e-learning modules to telephone support and in-company training courses – specifically tailored to the needs of workers and their families, employers, HR managers and healthcare providers. One of the programme's aims is to ensure that employers understand the benefits of actively helping workers to get back to work after treatment.

Several recommendations are made as a result of the success factors identified in this project:

- Legislation should be developed making it mandatory for all businesses to offer return-to-work programmes for workers, and support for this should be provided, particularly for SMEs.
- Early implementation and good communication between all relevant stakeholders is essential for effective return-to-work interventions, and programmes should be tailored to workers' needs.
- Return-to-work programmes should be integrated into company policies, and sufficient time and resources should be allocated to providing information on cancer and return to work.
- Efforts should be made to encourage positive workplace attitudes towards people returning to work after cancer.

Links: