

RETURNING TO WORK AFTER CANCER: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF EMPLOYEES

Project implementation period: 2018–2019

Objective of the research. To disclose employees' experiences of returning to work after cancer.

Tasks:

1. To analyze and to describe the study participants' experiences of returning to work after cancer;
2. To analyze factors, that facilitate and hinder the return to work of cancer.

Methods. 16 individuals working in Lithuania took part in this study. They were employees who have returned to work after fully completed cancer treatment. The study sample consisted of 2 males and 14 females aged 26 to 69 years. A qualitative study was conducted using a semi-structured interview, which consisted of three question topics related to the experience of taking a sick leave due to cancer, returning to work and questions about the organization in which study participant worked. Interview also consisted of introductory and situational questions. The analysis of data was based on the principles of thematic analysis.

Results. The research revealed three main theme groups, which describe the subjective experience of return to work after cancer: factors related to balancing work and illness (adaptation to work, working conditions, career opportunities and additional needs), barriers to return to work (side effects of the disease and its treatment, psychological difficulties, ethical issues, misunderstanding of others) and facilitating factors to return to work (motivation, support, flexible working arrangements). Due to the illness and its treatment, cancer survivors who return to work may have reduced working capacity and some physical activity restrictions. They often suffer from various physical and psychological difficulties. Finding a balance between work and illness becomes relevant even after total completion of the treatment. Employees, who have returned to work need continued medical care, additional rest and rehabilitation. The present study revealed, that in most cases rehabilitation and possibilities to have an additional rest are considered insufficient, the return to work is too abrupt. Thus, certain adjustments of working conditions are often needed. The analysis of the research participants' experiences revealed that the confidentiality for cancer survivors who returned to work is not always guaranteed in Lithuanian workplaces. Their right to privacy is also often violated. Employees who have returned to work after cancer face stigma and are misunderstood by others. Working conditions are not always appropriate and adjusted to returnees' needs. Inequality of career opportunities are also present in some cases. Cancer survivors who returned to work often feel socially and financially insecure. Due to the stigma, unequal opportunities at the workplace and misunderstanding from others, employees may face additional difficulties in the return to work process. In face of cancer, both colleagues and manager should avoid any prejudices towards the returnee. It is important to ensure the confidentiality, to ethically communicate disease-related issues and to take into account the disability of the returnee. Motivation of employees, the support of others and flexible working arrangements facilitate return to work. The present study reveals the need to educate society on cancer related issues and the topic of return to work after long-term illness. It is also crucial to develop an appropriate communication culture in Lithuanian workplaces and expand the availability of social and psychological services for cancer patients.

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