



# Cancer and Business: Acting Together

The right words, the right actions

Value. Shared.

**Allianz**   
Global Investors



*"Today, I'm back at work part-time on health grounds. This allows me to receive follow-up care on the side to continue my recovery. (...)*

*I was warmly welcomed at work straight away. My managers had been made aware and when I returned I wanted to tell people about what I'd just experienced so that I could put the illness behind me immediately. For many people, I'm the same as before, but with others I feel a certain unease or distance..."*

*"He's in our team and he's coming back soon. We'd like to welcome him as well as we can but we don't know what to say or how to behave. "We're afraid of causing offence. How can we show our concern without stigmatising him or overdoing it?"*

*"I have to answer the team's questions. And I have my own questions too. As a manager, how do I deal with his situation? We all have to move forward. We're expected to perform. I don't want to be insensitive. How do I do it?"*

*"Between,  
What I think,  
What I want to say,  
What I think I'm saying,  
What I say,  
What you want to hear,  
What you think you hear,  
What you hear,  
What you want to understand,  
What you understand,  
There are ten ways we may have  
difficulty communicating."*

*Encyclopédie du savoir relatif et absolu,  
Bernard Werber, Albin Michel, 1993*



## Editorial

This guide is based on the booklet entitled *Mots et attitudes face à la maladie* published by the French National Cancer Institute. It was written by companies that have signed the “Cancer and Employment” charter, which includes Allianz, together with Nathalie Vallet-Renart, Managing Director of Entreprise et Cancer.

The purpose of the guide is to help you find the right words and attitudes to support both those affected by the illness and those who work with them.

*“Accommodating” the illness of a colleague or collaborator remains a challenge. We’re confronted with their pain, their anguish, their mortality, and perhaps with our own mortality as well. It’s a difficult and delicate process and anyone can feel lost, powerless or frightened. At the same time, carelessness can make any of us behave in a way that marks, hurts, affects – sometimes permanently – or provokes incomprehension.*

*To better meet the expectations of those affected by cancer, the existing mechanisms are necessary, but by themselves they aren’t enough. We also have to listen and offer support in a way that builds trust and creates a climate in which they can return to work in the best possible conditions.*

**Thierry Breton, Managing Director  
of the French National Cancer Institute**

# Challenges and Objectives

Companies are places where we work, but also places where we live.

How can we reconcile the operational reality of the workplace with the onset of cancer?

How can we work together to ensure that the delicate situations we face in the workspace become times of attention and recognition and opportunities to clearly demonstrate our values?

When faced with intimate matters in the professional environment, it's up to each of us to fully consider the situation at hand, to reflect on its impact, and to choose the right words and attitude.

## For people affected by cancer, the objectives of this guide are to:

- **Help those around you at work to better understand** the impact of cancer and cancer treatment, particularly at work
- **Show you how** to cope with this period in your personal and professional life
- **Change how** the disease and its effects are portrayed

## For those around you at work, the objectives of the guide are to:

- **Raise individual and collective awareness** about the importance of the words and attitudes we choose
- **Suggest the right words and attitudes** for the three key stages in a colleague's illness (announcement, absence, return)
- **Create a positive and constructive dynamic** about how cancer is portrayed in the company



## Guide

### 1 Announcement

### 2 Absence

### 3 Return to work

This guide is structured around the **three stages** in the illness: announcement, absence and return to work.

It is aimed at employees affected by the disease, as well as those who work with them: managers, colleagues, occupational health services, HR managers.

# Announcement

## You've been diagnosed with cancer. How do announce your illness?

*"I didn't say anything. I didn't want to be looked at as the one with cancer, as someone to be pitied. I was going to be given more responsibility and didn't want the illness to get in the way."*

*"It was obvious. I told my N+4, he's someone I've worked with and I know he's very understanding. Then I told my manager, then my colleagues. I wanted to be the one to tell them, rather than have someone else do it."*

**These two contrasting accounts** show that there are a number of ways to go about announcing the disease.

Illness is a private matter. You are not obligated to talk about it. However, by choosing to talk about it, you give those around you at work the opportunity to show their support and to better understand your behaviour. Your anxiety and concerns can cause changes in demeanour that may be a source of misunderstanding.

You can contact your manager, your HR manager, the occupational health service or those in charge of disability situations. They're all there to help.

You don't have to go into the details of your illness, but you can say, for example: *"I've just been told I have cancer. Treatment starts in eight days. I don't know exactly how long I'll be away. For this procedure, it'll be twelve days."*





## You're part of the professional circle. How do you take the news of an employee or colleague falling ill?

The announcement of a colleague's illness can cause strong emotions, depending on a person's nature.

This can be a difficult time for both the person making the announcement and the person being told, which can lead to inappropriate reactions that may cause a misunderstanding. Listening to your colleague and being there for them will help them talk about it in complete confidence.



### The core values:

- Being considerate
- Reassuring
- Providing support
- Showing empathy



### The right words:

- Is there anything I can do for you?
- Have you already spoken to other people in the company about it?
- I don't know what to say but I'm here for you.
- There are people in the company who can help you.
- Do you need any help making the announcement?



### The right attitudes:

- Making yourself available
- Adopting an attitude that promotes dialogue and trust
- Taking the news and accepting your own emotions
- Respecting confidentiality
- Being professional by not asking about the illness or intimate matters



### Things managers and HR should watch out for:

It is important to monitor the reactions of the work group when the announcement is made in order to act appropriately and at the right time.

With new treatment methods and the possibility of early detection, more and more employees are combining treatment with their professional activity. This means that we should be alert and attentive to their needs at all times during this treatment period.

# Absence

**You've been diagnosed with cancer. What attitude should you adopt when you're away?**

*"I want to stay in touch but I certainly don't want to talk about work. By email would be best. I can answer when it suits me."*

*"I don't want any contact. I'm focusing on my recovery."*

Announcing the diagnosis doesn't necessarily mean you know everything about all the treatments, their duration, your time off work or when you'll return. This may be uncomfortable for you or those around you.

These two contrasting accounts show that there are a number of attitudes to adopt during your absence.

It is important to consider staying in touch with your professional circle, but ultimately you decide whether or not to do so, how to do so (SMS, email, telephone), and how often.

It seems important not to break off contact, since you're still part of the team. Being aware that there's still a place for you can lend moral support. In addition, keeping in touch during your absence makes it easier to return.





## You're part of the professional circle. What attitude should you adopt when your colleague or employee is away?

Medical treatment is part of our personal life. Knowing whether to keep in touch may seem difficult. If your colleague is okay with it, email and SMS can be used to show your support from the appropriate distance.



### The core values:

- Availability
- Listening
- Sincerity



### The right words:

- I hear you.
- We're thinking of you.
- Do you need anything?
- Can we check in with you from time to time?
- We're looking forward to seeing you again.



### The right attitudes:

- Knowing to reach out to your colleague.
- Proposing to keep in touch in a way that suits everyone (who, when, how); reviewing this regularly.
- Making yourself available when your colleague feels the time is right.
- Adapting to any changes in your colleague's wishes as a result of what they're going through.
- Accepting silence and absence.
- Anticipating their return to work and preparing for it together.



### Bear in mind:

Sick leave suspends an employment contract. The employee decides whether or not to remain connected to the company, as well as the type of connection.

# Return and life at work

## You've been affected by cancer. How do you prepare your return to work?

Going back to work is something you can really look forward to, but while you may want to go back, you may not have the energy to do so.

*"The occupational physician helped me understand that it wasn't the right time for me to return to work. It was hard but I know he was right."*

*"I went back for three days a week. It was a good way to avoid overdoing it and burning myself out."*

Depending on the length of absence and the severity of treatment, the return to work is often done on a part-time basis. Starting at your own pace gives your body time to rebuild its strength. Gradually, you can increase your working time.

### Important:

**Prepare for your return to work. A pre-resumption visit** with your occupational physician can help you decide the right time to return. The occupational physician can recommend a functional or organisational adjustment to your position so that you can return **under the best possible conditions**.

When you're sure that you're going to return, inform your manager and HR manager. To make the right adjustments, they need to know how you feel and what you're able to do.

### The big day:

You know the date of your return to work. It's an important day for you. You may be wondering whether you're still part of the team, how they'll see you, or how you'll be received.

*"When I came back, I didn't want a celebration. I was too emotional. I went to my office straight away. When I felt up to it, I went to see people one at a time."*

Your colleagues and manager may behave awkwardly, even if they mean well. Being open about what you want makes it easier for them to prepare for your return. For example, you may or may not want to talk about your illness, you may want to meet for breakfast, or you may prefer to return quietly.





## What happens next?

*“If I want to, I can. That’s what I thought. And then I had to stop for two months. I was exhausted. It took me a long time to listen to my body’s signals and to take care of myself.”*

*“I had meetings in (any foreign language). I was so tired that even when I tried hard, I couldn’t remember anything”.*

If you can’t see the side effects of your treatment, it’s as if they don’t exist. Consider discussing your problem with your manager, HR manager, or occupational physician. Don’t ask too much from yourself. Listen to yourself, like you’d listen to someone else. It’s not complaining if you simply say something is wrong and look for a solution. Problems with fatigue, poor concentration and poor memorisation are common. Talk about them as soon as possible. You’ll avoid misunderstandings and receive support.

## You’re part of the professional circle. How can you make it easy for your colleague to return to work?

To make your colleague feel welcome on the day of their return, you should prepare in advance. This support should also be consistent over time.



### The core values:

- Home
- Support
- Positivity
- Team



### The right words:

- Feel free to tell me what you’d like to see on your return.
- You can count on us over the long term.
- I’m glad to see you again.



### The right attitudes:

- Preparing for their return and taking the time to welcome them.
- Being there for them and listening.
- Giving your colleague the chance to talk about their illness in a way that suits them.
- Respecting confidentiality
- Giving them an active role.
- Showing flexibility and understanding.



### Things managers and HR should watch out for:

Side effects or traces of the illness can last for a number of years. Their return isn’t limited to the day they resume work; it’s a long-term process.

Your word means something. Speak to them sincerely.  
Your actions make a difference. Do what you think is right.

Whether you've been diagnosed with cancer or work with someone suffering from the disease, you can seek the support of the occupational physician or HR managers at each stage of the illness.



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#### **Legal notice**

This booklet is has been translated and partly adapted from Allianz France booklet *Guide cancer et entreprise: agir ensemble* (also partly based on *Mots et attitudes face à la maladie*, a guide jointly prepared by the signatory companies of the French National Cancer Institute's "Cancer and Employment" charter).

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