health promotion factsheet

people living with HIV/AIDS [NSW]

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i want to return to work

Are you thinking about getting a job and returning to work again?

For many people living with HIV, success with their anti-retroviral treatments has had a significant effect on their health and well-being. Instead of focusing on failing treatments, recurrent opportunistic infections and a never-ending schedule of visits to doctors and specialists, they are now able to concentrate their energies on maintaining good health and looking ahead to new opportunities and possibilities. A return to work is one of many possibilities they can now seriously consider.

The reasons people give for wanting to get work vary from one person to the next. As one would expect, the ability to earn more money is important to a lot of people. But it isn't just about money.

This factsheet explores some of the issues facing people considering a return to work and aims to provide some clear practical information and advice.

Contact details for all the organisations referred to in this factsheet are listed on the last page.

Work is a lot of things to a lot of people:

"It's a reason to get up and get out of the house
It provides contact with other people
I've made new friends at work
It breaks the routine of doing nothing and allows me to use my brain again
I have more money to spend on going out with friends
I am doing something meaningful and worthwhile with my time"

A good starting point in considering a return to work is to ask one question:

'Why do I want to get a job?'

- Do you want to do something that you have done before or something new and different?
- Do you need more money to pay the bills and have more financial independence?
- Do you want a job that is meaningful and adds purpose to your life?
- Do you want a job that will allow you to develop new skills?
- Do you want a job or a career?

If you have been out of the workforce for a number of years, your ideas about work may have totally changed. Take time to really think about why you want to go back to work and as part of that process talk to as many people as you can to get information, advice and ideas.

Consider

- What are the pros and cons of getting a job?
- What sort of work would you like to get? What really interests you?
- What skills and experience do you already have?
- What new skills and experience will you need to get a job you want?

It may be useful to write down your answers to the questions above. It can help you focus and order your thoughts. When doing this, some other questions to consider are:

… volunteer work can provide just as much meaning and purpose as 'paid work' as well as the opportunity to gain some new skills and experience

How will going back to work affect your health and will your health enable you to go back to work?

You should talk this through in detail with your doctor, other health care professionals, friends and family.

Consider

- How many days/hours per week can you work?
- How many days/hours per week do you want to work?

Are you going to look for paid work straight away? Are you going to consider unpaid or voluntary work?

If earning more money is not your top priority, getting some unpaid or voluntary work is a great way of testing your energy levels as well as boosting your self-confidence and self-esteem. Equally, volunteer work can provide just as much meaning and purpose as 'paid work' as well as the opportunity to gain some new skills and experience. If you want to consider the option of paid work down the track, volunteer work can help you decide what sort of work you want to do.

Where do you want to work? What type of environment will suit you?

Do you want to work in a fast paced, busy office or are you looking for a more 'laid-back' informal environment? It is really important to take time to consider what sort of environment you want to work in and what sort of environment is best going to support and maintain your health.

Consider

- If you haven't worked for some time, it may take a while to adjust to being 'back at work' and how work environments may have changed. It is therefore really important to consider how this may impact on you. So again, talk to as many people you know who are currently working to find out how it may be for you.

Are you going to look for casual, part time or full time work?

Getting casual or part time work to start with is a great way of testing your energy levels as well as building your self-confidence and self-esteem.

What do you want your working week to look like?

Do you want to work:

- mornings?
- afternoons?
- evenings?
- weekends?
- 9–5?

Are there any other restrictions on your time such as:

- caring for your partner?
- other family members?

Your answers to these questions will certainly influence what work you look for. And remember that the working week can be more flexible than it used to be. Some workplaces encourage their employees to negotiate their preferred working hours.

A 9–5 job suits some people down to the ground. It enables them to develop routines both at work and at home that are both helpful and healthful.

But some people are just not good at getting up in the morning. For others, combination drug regimes mean that mornings are not their best time of day and they would therefore choose jobs that offered afternoon or evening work.

Consider

- Working will change your lifestyle. When you get a job, even if it's just for two or three days a week, you will have to think about how and when you are going to fit in activities that you were previously able to do at times that suited you – such as shopping, going to the gym, seeing friends and other appointments. Almost everybody who works feels they are juggling lots of different activities – and sometimes they just get used to living in a less tidy flat in the process!

Will you need to acquire any new skills and experience to get a job?

If you have worked before, the skills and knowledge you gained could still be relevant. They may just need up-dating. There may be courses you can consider that will bring your existing knowledge and skills up-to-date.

Computers are now a big part of our lives, whether we like it or not.

- **How do you rate your computer skills?**
- **What computer skills will you need to get the job you want?**
- **Will you need to do a computer course before you start applying for jobs?**

Whatever subject you decide to study, take your time to find the most appropriate course for your needs. Look on the Internet, in the phone book, at your local library and talk to people you know who have done a course recently to find out whether it was any good.

What if I want to study first and consider a return to work at a later date?

Undertaking and completing a course of study can be just as fulfilling and challenging as going back to work. In fact studying is often compared to having a full time job – it certainly can be as time consuming! Take your time to choose the right course. There are many different courses available.

Consider

- **If you are studying, you may be eligible for a Pensioner Education Supplement and an Education Entry Payment from Centrelink. Contact your local Centrelink Disability Officer for more information.**
- **TAFE NSW offers a wide variety of courses and support services and allows people receiving income support to enroll in one course a year at no charge.**
- **TAFE also offers distance education through the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) to allow you to study from home. Contact the TAFE NSW Information Centre for more information about their courses and support services.**
- **Local Community Colleges also offer a wide range of short courses at reasonable prices and some colleges offer reduced course rates to people receiving income support.**

What if I want to be self-employed?

There are many issues to consider around self-employment. Working for yourself can give you the freedom and opportunity to do what you want to do. But it takes time, commitment, energy, a lot of planning and usually a bit of money too. Remember there are some important benefits of working for someone else, such as paid holiday and sick leave entitlements as well as superannuation, which should not be overlooked.

You need to get good advice before you start. Talk to people you know who are successfully self-employed.

Other sources of information or advice on setting up your own business are your local Business Enterprise Centre and the Department of Fair Trading. You can also get information from Centrelink about the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS), a self-employment programme that helps eligible people on income support become self-supporting by establishing their own commercially viable business.

Undertaking and completing a course of study can be just as fulfilling and challenging as going back to work.

Where is the best place to look for work and who can help with that process?

There are many ways of looking for work. The type of work you are looking for often determines the best way. Do you want paid or unpaid work? Are you looking for part time or full time work? Do you live in Sydney or in regional or rural NSW?

- Check the job ads in newspapers – local and community press – as well as *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*.
- Check the large number of employment websites on the Internet. Free Internet access is available at ACON branches, the Positive Living Centre, NorthAIDS and some other local community organisations.
- Phone or write to organisations that you are interested in working for to see if they have any suitable vacancies.

Consider

- A large proportion of job vacancies never get advertised – especially for part time or casual work. They are filled by people who have heard about the job through 'word of mouth'. So one of the best ways of finding out about jobs is to let people know you are looking for work. Talk to people you know who work or have their own business where there may be vacancies.
- There are a number of organisations that can also support and assist you in looking for work:
  - **Positive Employment Support (PES)**. Contact either BGF or ACON West to find out how PES can help
  - **Positive Decisions Programme**. Contact PLWH/A (NSW) to find out more out how Positive Decisions can assist and support you through providing work experience and training
  - **Job Network**. Contact Centrelink or your local Job Network provider to see if you are eligible to access their service. Options Employment Service has a specialist contract to assist people living with HIV and/or hepatitis look for work
  - **Disability Employment Services**. There are a number of other employment services that can also assist people living with HIV look for work. Contact Positive Employment Support for more information.

… one of the best ways of finding out about jobs is to let people know you are looking for work.

Will I need a resumé?

Most employers ask to see a resumé as part of the job application process. It is not always necessary for volunteer or unpaid work but it is always useful to consider writing one or up-dating an old resumé.

- What does a resumé look like these days?
- What do I put in or leave out?
- How do I explain long gaps between jobs?

You can have a resumé regardless of how long it has been since you last worked and how little work experience you think you may have.

Even if you haven't had any paid work for a number of years, it is always important to list all the things you have done since then however irrelevant they may seem to you. If you have been a carer, a volunteer, or doing things that you consider to be 'just a hobby' or 'just something that I am good at', you may have used or acquired skills that will be relevant to the sort of work you are now considering.

Consider

- Don't write yourself off because you think you are 'too old'. With age comes life experience and your 'life experience' should never be ignored. In fact make the most of it. Some employers would definitely prefer to employ someone who has 'seen a bit of life' because they have maturity, common sense and an outlook on life that can't be acquired by doing a course.

There are many ways you can get free advice on writing or up-dating your resumé.

- **Contact the PES Project at BGF or ACON West.**
- **Approach people you know who would be likely to have a resumé you could use as a template for your own resumé.**
- **If you are eligible to access the Job Network, your Job Network provider will also be able to help with writing a resumé.**
- **Check out the many employment websites on the Internet (e.g., *mycareer.com.au* and *monster.com.au*). They may have a 'Resumé Builder' as part of their website. Some search engines (e.g., *Yahoo.com*) also have Resumé Builders.**

Having completed your resumé you may also have to write a letter addressing essential and desirable 'selection criteria' – particularly if it is for a job in the public service. You should address each one, describing how the skills, knowledge and experience you have matches each criteria. For example if the job requires 'good computer skills' you should write at least two or three lines describing what skills you have and how you have used them.

It is always best to get advice on how to address selection criteria as it is a big part of the application for more and more jobs these days. Talk to any of the organisations already mentioned in this factsheet or people you know who have had to do this.

What about interviews?

No one likes interviews but with the right preparation they can become less stressful.

- **Always think through some possible questions and appropriate answers before facing a real interview.**
- **Prepare for the interview by finding out as much as you can about the company or organisation. Get a copy of their annual report, visit their website if they have one, visit the organisation/company if you can and if there is a contact person named as part of the recruitment process, contact them too.**
- **Ask people you know or use one of the organisations listed above to give you help in preparing for your interview.**

Two of the hardest interview questions to answer may be 'Why did you leave your last job?' and 'What have you done since then?' Your answers to these should emphasise the most positive aspects of your time out of the workforce (e.g., taking a break to study, travel, care for a partner, do some volunteer work or consider new career choices).

Always focus on your ability and willingness to do the job. You have to convince the interviewer that you are the best person for the job.

Don't feel pressured into accepting the first job that is offered to you just because you think you won't get offered another. Chances are if you have been offered one job there are likely to be others out there too.

On the other hand, the first job you are offered doesn't have to be 'for life' – it is often useful to regard it as a stepping stone. It may not be the 'perfect job' but it may provide you with useful experience, increase your self-confidence and self-esteem at the same time and enable you to move into another job.

Consider

- **Whilst the purpose of any interview is for the employer to establish whether you have the skills, knowledge and experience to do the job for which you have applied, it is equally your chance to 'interview' the employer. Find out more about what the job involves and what sort of workplace it is to help you determine whether you really want the job.**

It may not be the 'perfect job' but it may provide you with useful experience, increase your self-confidence and self-esteem at the same time and enable you then to move into another job.

You can continue to work casually or part time and receive a full or part pension and still be eligible for all the benefits associated with keeping your Pensioner Concession Card.

Do I disclose my HIV status in an interview?

The decision to disclose your HIV status belongs to you but you do not need to disclose at an interview. The exception to this would be if you were applying for a job that involved 'exposure prone procedures' (e.g., invasive medical procedures such as some types of nursing, surgery, dentistry and midwifery).

If you are concerned about your legal rights or responsibilities, at any stage, contact the HIV/AIDS Legal Centre (HALC) or talk to the PES service at BGF or ACON West.

The issues around disclosure and discrimination will be covered in more detail in our factsheet 'Being positive at work'.

Will returning to paid or unpaid work affect my Centrelink benefits?

If you receive a DSP and get some paid casual or part time work, the amount you earn may affect your fortnightly pension payment. It is wise to find out exactly how much you can earn before it affects your pension.

You can continue to work casually or part time and receive a full or part pension and still be eligible for all the benefits associated with keeping your Pensioner Concession Card.

However once you earn over a certain amount or are working 30 hours a week or more, your DSP payment is suspended.

You are able to retain your health care card and all the benefits associated with the card for 12 months after your pension is suspended. If you have to stop work altogether or reduce your hours for health reasons, within two years of your pension being suspended, you are automatically eligible for a DSP without having to go through the application and assessment process again.

If you decide to do at least eight hours per week of voluntary work, paid work, training or a combination of paid work and training and cannot use public transport without extra help because of your disability/injury or illness you may be eligible for a Mobility Allowance from Centrelink. Contact your local Centrelink Disability Officer for more information. You do not have to be receiving a Centrelink income support payment to qualify for this payment.

However be aware that the eligibility criteria for income support can change. Make sure that you have the most up-to-date information and if you have any concerns or questions about your Centrelink benefits, contact your local Centrelink Disability Officer or Positive Employment Support Officer for more information. The NSW Welfare Rights Centre is also a good source of information and advice regarding questions or issues you have regarding your Centrelink benefits.

If you are in receipt of any form of income support from Centrelink, you must inform Centrelink of any change to your circumstances within 14 days. If you return to work, you may also be eligible for an Employment Entry Payment from Centrelink. So ask about it when you speak to Centrelink.

What if I received a Total & Permanent Disablement payout from my last job?

It will not have to be repaid if you get another job. However if you have any concerns or questions about this in relation to your considering a return to paid or unpaid work contact the HALC or talk to the PES service at BGF or ACON West.

What are some of the other financial implications of returning to paid or unpaid work?

Whilst you may be earning more money, there are some hidden – and some not so hidden – expenses that you will need to take into account. You may have to buy new clothes for work, pay more each week in fares to and from work, and lunch. Once you are earning over a certain amount or working full time you will probably have to pay more in rent as you will no longer be eligible for SASS (the special rental subsidy). After 12 months you will probably have to pay more for medication and travel as you will no longer be eligible for a Pensioner Concession Card.

Consider

- **The Bobby Goldsmith Foundation can help with some of the costs involved in returning to work such as helping with the cost of clothes for work. If you need any extra help with your budgeting and coping with changes to your financial situation, talk to the Financial Counsellors at BGF. Contact BGF for more information.**

Sometimes there is no immediate financial gain to returning to work, especially if it is a full time job. However you should reflect on the real reasons for going back to work and consider the longer term benefits of returning to work.

Whilst everyone would agree that having more money is a good thing, especially when you have been living on a fixed and low income for some time, it is hard to put a price on the other reasons for going back to work – the social contact, doing something new and interesting, learning new skills, gaining valuable experience and feeling healthier both mentally and physically.

People often talk about how returning to work was the best thing they ever did. Yes, they probably mean that it was good to be earning more money, but keep talking to them and you will probably find that the best part about their return to work usually ends up being the fact that they feel better about themselves and are much more optimistic about the future.

The information contained in this factsheet is intended to be a guide to assist and support you in the process of considering a return to work. It may not fully answer every question or address every issue you may have. It is a complex subject not least because ideas about work and people's reasons for wanting to work vary greatly depending on who you talk to. Whatever you decide to do in the future, take time to consider what is important to you, take time to talk to those who can offer the relevant advice, information and help, so that whatever course of action you decide to take it is the best one for you.

Future factsheets will provide information and advice for HIV positive people who are currently working (covering disclosure, discrimination, superannuation, reducing working hours, managing health at work, the rights of employees and responsibilities of employers) and explore the alternatives and choices available for those for whom work is not an option but who nevertheless still would like to make some changes in their lives.

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Contacts

- **Bobby Goldsmith Foundation** for Positive Employment Support, Financial Assistance and Financial Counselling. Phone: (02) 9283 8666; Freecall: 1800 651 011; Email: bgf@bgf.org.au; www.bgf.org.au
- **ACON West** for Positive Employment Support. Phone: (02) 9204 2400; Freecall: 1800 063 060; Email: aconwest@acon.org.au; www.acon.org.au
- **PLWH/A (NSW) Inc.** for information about the Positive Decisions Programme. Phone: (02) 9361 6011; Freecall: 1800 245 677; Email: admin@plwha.org.au; www.plwha.org.au
- **HALC** for free legal advice. Phone: (02) 9206 2060; Freecall: 1800 063 060; Email: halc@halc.org.au; www.halc.org.au
- **Positive Central** for a range of services, including an Occupational Therapist able to assist people in the Central Sydney Area, as part of the return to work process. Phone: (02) 9395 0444
- **Options Employment Services** for information on their specialist employment services for people living with HIV and/or hepatitis. Freecall: 1800 784 667; Email: employment@options.com.au; www.options.com.au
- **Job Network** for information on all Job Network providers. Phone: 13 62 68; www.workplace.gov.au
- **Centrelink** for general enquiries or appointments. Phone: 13 10 21; Looking for work: 13 28 50; Pensioner Education Supplement enquiries: 13 24 90; Austudy payments: 13 24 90; New Enterprise Incentive Scheme: 13 28 50; Disability, Sickness and Carers 132717; Freecall: 1800 050 004; www.centrelink.gov.au
- **Welfare Rights Centre** for information and representation on all social security matters. Phone: 9211 5300; Freecall: 1800 226 028; www.welfarerights.org.au
- **Business Enterprise Centres** for information and advice on being self-employed. Look in the *White Pages* under Business Enterprise Centre for your local office. www.bec.com.au/old
- **Department of Fair Trading** for information and advice on being self-employed. Phone: 13 32 20; www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au

Volunteering Organisations

- **Volunteering NSW** Phone: (02) 9261 3600; www.volunteering.com.au
- **GoVolunteer** an initiative of Volunteering Australia. www.govolunteer.com.au
- **Fido** an Internet based volunteer agency. www.fido.com.au
- **Check for any specific gay and lesbian volunteer services in your area (e.g., NSW Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service).**

Training and Education

- **TAFE NSW** Phone: 13 16 01; www.tafensw.edu.au
- **TAFE – OTEN** Phone: (02) 9715 8333
- **Board of Adult and Community Education** for information on community colleges in NSW www.bace.nsw.gov.au
- **WEA Adult Education and Computer Training Centre** Phone: (02) 9264 2781; www.weasydney.com.au
- **Sydney Community College** Phone: (02) 9555 7411; www.scc.nsw.edu.au
- **Eastern Suburbs Evening College** Phone: (02) 9387 7400; www.esec.nsw.edu.au

Employment Websites

- **www.workplace.gov.au** for all jobs listed through the Job Network
- **www.ncoss.org.au** for community sector jobs
- **www.nsw.gov.au** for NSW Government jobs
- **www.mycareer.com.au**
- **www.seek.com.au**
- **www.monster.com.au**

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