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Extended Leave Policies a Winning Move

ORGANIZATIONS AND EMPLOYEES ALIKE CAN BOTH COME OUT AHEAD

By Heather Hudson

When Felicia Shafiq woke one Saturday morning with chills, she thought she had the flu. Never one to let a minor illness keep her down, she popped a couple of Tylenols and headed out to compete in a volleyball tournament. By evening, lower back pain had set in. But it wasn't until breathing became a struggle that she allowed her mother to take her to the hospital.

Within hours, she was in a coma.

Two weeks later, she woke to learn that she was recovering from an acute form of pneumonia and a blood infection that almost killed her.

Gangrenous feet. Huge blisters on the palms of both hands. A month of dialysis while her kidneys recovered (the back pain she experienced was her kidneys failing). Amputation of some of her fingertips. Intense physical therapy to rehabilitate her hands

and feet. And the eventual amputation of both of her legs below the knees.

Almost as excruciating as her recovery and rehabilitation was being away from her beloved job. A long-time senior support engineer at SAP Canada in Vancouver, Shafiq is passionate about her work.

Overall, she spent about a year in the hospital and 3.5 years away from work. She credits her company's support as one of the main things that motivated her to recover and get back to work.

"[It wasn't only] my friends and colleagues, but management and upper management would visit me in the hospital and at home and send me encouraging emails," said Shafiq. "The biggest thing they did was remind me to focus on my recovery and assure me that my job was secure and would wait for me as long as I needed to be away. That took a huge weight off my shoulders and allowed me to focus on recovery."



Photo courtesy of Felicia Shafiq

"THE KIND OF SUPPORT AND CARE THAT SAP GIVES ME MAKES ME WANT TO GIVE BACK TO THE COMPANY. I'M MORE INVOLVED IN DIFFERENT PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES AND I'M INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN PROJECTS THAT GO BEYOND THE SCOPE OF MY REGULAR WORK. IT MOTIVATES ME TO DO MORE."

— FELICIA SHAFIQ



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— AGNES GARABA, SAP CANADA

Back at the office at SAP Vancouver, Agnes Garaba was the HR business partner for Shafiq’s unit. She didn’t know Shafiq at the time, but remembers the tremendous faith her managers and team had in her ability to recover.

“Felicia was off for a long time, but her team never doubted that she would be back,” said Garaba. “I’m really proud of the team for making sure she wasn’t forgotten in the years she was off and making her feel welcome and included in the SAP life.”

Today, Garaba is the head of HR for SAP Canada and believes in the importance of supporting the diverse needs of all employees.

“In a time when it can be very challenging to find the right talent, it’s imperative for organizations to be attuned to what our talent needs,” she said. “Sometimes, that means people go through ups and downs. Even if it takes 3.5 years to get back to work, it’s important to support them.”

According to the Canada Labour Code, most employers must protect employees from dismissal, lay-off, suspension, demotion or discipline because of an absence due to illness or injury for any absence not exceeding 17 weeks.

However, some companies, including SAP Canada, offer extended benefits that accommodate longer-term disability leaves and leaves of absence for a variety of reasons. Garaba says their programs serve to help employees bring their best to the workplace.

“Whether it’s recovering from an illness or pursuing a passion, we provide employees with opportunities and programs that give them time off without having to worry about their job being at risk,” said Garaba.

SAP Canada’s short- and long-term disability program allows employees to touch base with the company if they fall ill and need to be off for more than 10 consecutive days. If an illness requires more time off, a member of the Leave of Absence team gets involved to help.

“Our Leave of Absence team is in place as an intermediary to help employees talk to our [insurance] vendors and provide the information they need,” said Garaba.

When Shafiq was ready to return to work, SAP Canada arranged an ergonomic assessment to determine what kind of set-up and equipment she might need.

“For the most part, everything is as it was,” said Shafiq. “We made sure the monitors were at the right level, my seat was comfortable and that I had a low-profile keyboard to help with my hands.”

It wasn’t long after she was digging into new and old projects at work that Shafiq was approached by a physiotherapist about joining a sitting volleyball team. It hit a sore spot: even watching standard volleyball on TV made her emotional.

She dismissed the idea, but told a friend about it.

“He told me to do it,” she said. “[My friend] said, ‘I can see you on a podium one day accepting a medal for sitting volleyball.’”

She gave it a try. Last year, Shafiq and her sitting volleyball team competed in the Parapan Am Games in Toronto and qualified for the 2016 Paralympic Games. They travelled to Rio this past September to play.

The pursuit of this passion has meant intensive training, including flying to Edmonton once a month. Once again, Shafiq availed herself of SAP Canada’s progressive leave options. Garaba says the company is happy to support her.

“We’ve found that when we allow people to take time away from work to pursue personal goals, they are enriched,” said Garaba. “The energy they get from fulfilling a goal comes straight back into the workplace.”

A flexible work environment, including working from home and self-managed hours are just a couple of ways they make it work.

“We don’t have a written program about our flexible environment. Each department has its own subculture about what works and what doesn’t,” said Garaba.

Shafiq also takes advantage of SAP Canada’s Month of Service program, which allows employees to volunteer time to non-profit organizations. It’s no surprise that she’s teaching kids with different abilities how to play sitting volleyball. She says it’s job benefits like these that help her make the most of her life – before and after her illness.

“The kind of support and care that SAP gives me makes me want to give back to the company,” she said. “I’m more involved in different projects and initiatives and I’m interested in participating in projects that go beyond the scope of my regular work. It motivates me to do more.” ■