

Vanessa Blake

Computer Officer, Department of Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology

Everybody starting at the University will probably remember the various health and safety inductions and risk assessments they had to complete, one of them being “Working Safely with Display Screen Equipment”. However much attention one pays to correct posture, screen adjustment and regular breaks, after decades of working with computers it is very likely that some health problems will occur.

As a result of working with computers for 30 years, Vanessa developed shoulder pains, which at one point even caused her shoulder to freeze up completely. Additionally, she had some caring responsibilities for her mother, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, which added to her stress. Therefore, at the beginning of 2012, Vanessa applied to her department to work part-time and to progressively reduce hours in the years approaching her retirement. She and the department agreed on her reducing to 80%, having Monday mornings and Thursday afternoons off. She intended to use her free time to attend classes, get more exercise and to volunteer – different things that would get her away from the screen. She commenced her part-time hours in September 2012. Three months later she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The majority of the following year she spent on sick leave to attend her treatments, a combination of operations, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Vanessa returned to work in the October that year, though she continued to have regular treatments until April 2014. Fortunately, she had a staged return to work and could gradually build up her hours until she got back to 80%. At the point she was glad that she had already reduced her hours. “I still get more tired than I used to and it’s helpful to not have to work full time”, she says.

Although the “cancer has rather overshadowed everything in the past few years”, Vanessa’s flexible working arrangement has contributed significantly to her health and happiness by providing a good work-life balance. She says, “It does improve my personal harmony to be able to walk out of the office at 2pm on Thursdays to go and do something completely different.” Her Monday mornings off work are relatively short so that she can make the time to attend a tap dance class on Tuesdays. Vanessa thinks, that she works more effectively and often produces the same output in 4 days that she had previously done in 5 days. At the beginning of every academic year she works full-time for a week to cope with the higher work-load of that particular time. She can then take off the time in lieu later on in the year.

Originally, when she handed in her application for flexible working, she had planned to gradually reduce from four days to one over the final 10 years that were left before her retirement. However, she has not requested this further reduction in hours, yet. On the one hand, the department was supposed to be moving to a new building, which has been delayed, and she did not want to inflict more change on the department. On the other hand, she is yet uncertain whether she would actually be able to scale down her work-load significantly when reducing to 3 days only. Nevertheless, she is eager to pursue her plans once it is convenient for both her and the department.