

Back to Work



Deciding How and When After Amputation

By Rouzalin Hakim

Starting a new job is a daunting, yet exciting experience. It's filled with unfamiliarity both in terms of who you meet and your day-to-day routine. That feeling of uncertainty is amplified even more when you're starting a new job (or returning to your previous workplace) as a new amputee.

You're met with questions about your own skillset and strengths that you can internalize – will I still be able to work the way I did before? Is 9-5 going to be too tiring to maintain? Am I going to be on my feet or working with my hands all day? How will I handle stressful work situations?

These are just some of the many questions you'll come across and the challenges you'll face, but it's important to focus on what you value most at a workplace, and ensure that your workplace values you and everything you bring to the table – because it's undoubtedly a lot.



I struggled to get this article started because I'm still undecided about the subject itself... returning to work. My personal pros and cons list is split right down the centre about my decision to go back.

Allow me to share a little of my journey so this makes sense. I'm a one-and-a-half-year-old amputee. Before my accident I was working one full-time job and two part-time ones. At the same time, I was working out at the gym every day, enjoying my motorcycle and traveling a lot.

I was always out doing something in the community. So, as you can imagine, the lifestyle change of a traumatic amputation was a shock to every part of my system. My world was turned upside down and I wasn't handling it well by any means.

I went from being a very active, independent, and on-the-go person, to completely losing that life. My independence was stripped away from me, and my finances were depleting rapidly. I'm a homeowner who lives alone with no other financial resources.

It came to a point where I was deferring my mortgage and using lines of credit just to make ends meet. So, financially speaking, I was desperate to return to work. I searched endlessly for work-from-home jobs but pandemic restrictions were loosening up, and employers were expecting staff back in the office again.

Between rehab, physio, and prosthetic appointments, there was just no way I could commit to a working schedule. Physically, I was drained. And in the middle of relearning everything, I was in a state of financial panic. I couldn't return to my old jobs because they were too physically demanding. I couldn't take on a new role due to scheduling. I was, to say the least, stuck!

In addition to all of these things, I was also dealing with the emotional side of trauma: PTSD, anxiety, depression, mourning, and fear of being around people again. By the one-year mark, I was running out of options.

I had returned to one of my previous jobs, but only with part-time hours which barely made a dent in the bills. It was time to push further outside of my comfort zone and start looking for something else. That meant I would have to cut back on my physical recovery regimen, but I had no other options.

After an extensive search, I came across a role that I was very familiar with, one that I had done for years. A role that I felt I would be comfortable and successful doing. I hesitantly applied, mindful that the competition for job seekers was stiff. After seemingly endless interviews and conversations, I was offered the role. The job was perfectly suited for me. But it came at a price.

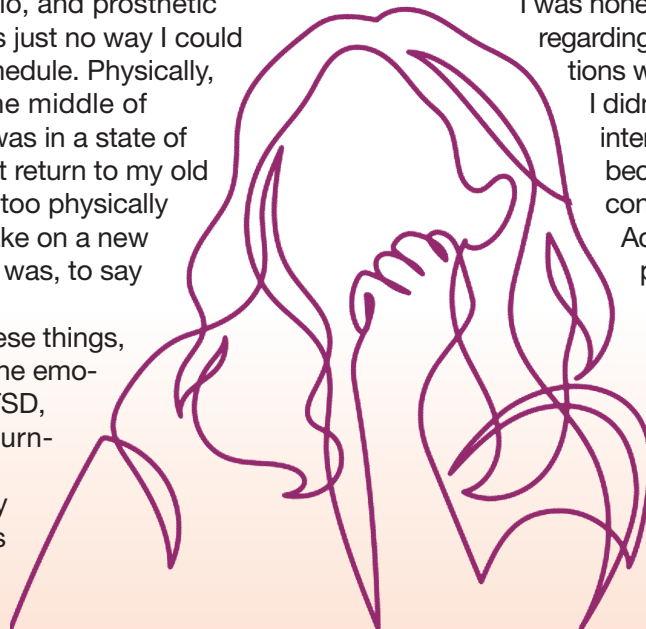
The job required full-time, 10-hour shifts. For a new AK [above-knee] amputee who was still learning how to... well, do everything again, this was a lot to consider. I'd have to give up my part-time job for this one. If this new one went south, I'd have nothing to fall back on. I thought long and hard. The employer needed an answer ASAP. I thought about all that I had overcome in the last year. I found enough confidence in that to say "yes".

I was honest and transparent from the start regarding my situation. I knew modifications would need to be considered.

I didn't share this in my first and second interview. But when the opportunity became more certain, I expressed my concern. It didn't discourage them.

Actually, this employer seemed impressed and onboard which gave me great relief. It's important to mention that this was not the case in other job interviews. It saddens me to say that even though we aspire to be an 'equal' working world, that's not the case from my experience.

Let's fast-track to the first two weeks at my new job.





I was extremely self-conscious of my leg and how I walked in front of my new colleagues. I was extremely shy and very uncomfortable. I internalized comments that weren't meant to be hurtful, but I received them that way. My colleagues didn't know that I was wearing a

prosthesis and asked, "how did you hurt your leg?" and "why are you walking differently today?"

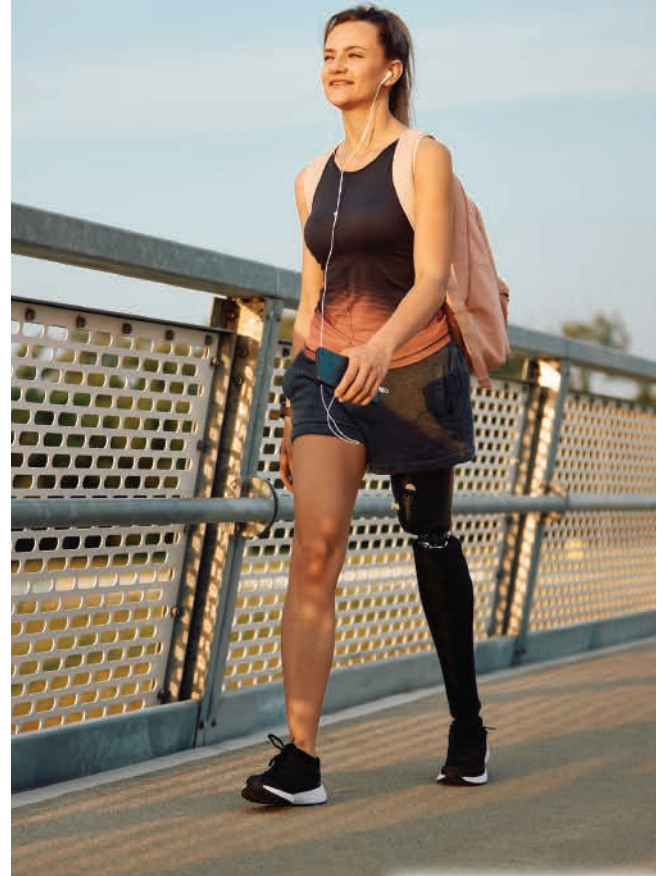
I was embarrassed and extremely hurt, but Human Resources and other staff were of great support in sensitively announcing that comments are to be kept to oneself in the workplace. My OT [occupational therapist] also offered a lot of support. He set up an assessment of the workplace with management and myself. Things were slowly getting slightly easier to cope with, but I was still struggling with the physical demand of the job itself. Ten hours for four days a week was, and still is, a lot to handle. I think that might be the case regardless of your physical condition.

Every day I leaned on the great advice of my OT: "Just one more day. Just make it through today and when you get home, relax and unwind. Listen to your body."

But sometimes we act in the moment of emotion: exhaustion, embarrassment, shyness, hesitation. Many things can make us feel like it's time to throw in the towel and walk away. But by taking some relaxing time away from the circumstance, your head and actions can be much clearer.

One more point to share... as I write this I have been with my current employer for exactly five months. I'd love to give you a definitive answer on whether I'm glad or regretful of my decision to return but I can't. Some days are really tough, and some days are not. I will tell you this: in knowing that I'm doing this for me gives me great pride and a genuine sense of accomplishment. That's what gets me through a tough day. That, and a glass of wine at the end of it. Cheers!

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