

I WAS TERRIFIED THE FIRST TIME I ARRIVED at my new office. I greeted my boss and colleagues cordially, obsessively running elaborate calculations in the back of my mind as to how I would accomplish multiple pen strokes, button pushes, document edits, phone lifts, door openings, handshakes, and other seemingly invisible tasks.

I did not question my prior work experience or intellectual ability, but rather the basic mechanical endurance required to utilize my qualifications remained a big unknown. I came ready and armed with Dragon NaturallySpeaking software and a

Adjusting

I will not lie—reentry to full-time work was rocky. I had a CRPS flare-up that spread and finally waned over the course of 9 months as I struggled to increase my endurance and quell tremendous anxiety; my initial challenges during this time reminded me of my first bout with CRPS. My remission-maintenance program turned into a new search for a readjusted cocktail of treatments and strategies—this time in a different city. Yet, I hung on to that job with my teeth, even if a friend had to dress me in a suit and chauffeur me up to the front office door a few times. On my first business

needed to be mastered, carrying the heartbreaks of most of my pain and disability. Eventually, the symptoms quieted, and my threshold increased slowly throughout that first year. I could support myself and contribute on a daily basis at my job. With time and advanced planning—including software voice command memorization and macro development—there was a way to accomplish tasks in an alternative manner if the “regular” way was not working. Soon, I was in my second year at a national poison prevention association enjoying a promotion, planning my wedding, and envisioning the next steps in my life.

Returning to Work

By Elena Juris

special computer mouse, but could I handle it? Would I set myself back and hurt myself? The fear was overwhelming.

Baby Steps

These were not my first steps back into the workplace. I first volunteered as a Spanish medical translator for just 2 hours per week, and then slowly increased my teaching hours in the English as a Second Language classroom to part-time for 2 years after my original recovery from CRPS in 2003. I also tested voice-activated computer software while writing a book on CRPS in 2004. Each step was necessary before making my first leap back to the computer-intensive realm of a full-time office post.

trip, I remember paying the hotel bellboy to open and close my suitcase for me and even pull out some items as my hands hurt too much. I learned the art of memorization, as I couldn’t take notes, and often spent evenings on the couch in the dark, taking hours to reduce my overstimulation.

Ironically, one of the few things that I could do consistently during this adjustment time was work. Cleaning the apartment, cooking, driving—let alone hobbies—were a different matter to address in the future. At work, I felt useful and empowered—less limited than anywhere else in my life. I adjusted to my limitations and challenged my “guilt” of disability through working and finding ways to circumvent office challenges; life outside the office still

Stability

I now work at the National Institutes of Health, a step I took 2 years after my first big leap. I had heard that the federal government made an effort to be disability friendly, and I thought it would be a supportive place to develop a long-term career in my field.

My long-term interest in health issues, both personally and professionally, also influenced this choice. The federal government provides reasonable accommodations for individuals with dexterity problems (caused by pain or other mobility challenges) through the Computer/Electronic Assistance Program (CAP); other assistance is available for individuals who rely upon wheelchairs, require sign language and TTY, and so

on. Initiatives are increasing within the government for websites to be generally accessible by speech recognition software and screen-reader programs for the blind. If you are aware of your abilities and disabilities, and have a sense of the consistency with which you can accomplish tasks, it is a win-win for people who truly want to return to work.

My federal experience has been very positive; I now supervise 14 employees while managing highly visible organizational development/training programs and editing a newsletter that reaches more than 16,000 employees. My limitations are always in the back

actively use also provide a deep sense of financial relief.

Federal Employment of People with Disabilities

When I reflect on the back-to-work details that I had worried about, and I see how my threshold of physical endurance in and out of the office continues to slowly increase since I began working full-time 4 years ago, I am thankful for the sense of independent capability that has also been restored through my return to my career. Numerous federal disability employment awareness programs and conferences have been publicized

responsible for coordinating disability employment.

There are some positions and careers that you clearly cannot return to—for me, my former career in a fast-paced public relations/communications firm was left behind in the wake of my CRPS. I still grieve it. However, the possibility of reinventing oneself remained, but my dwindling, partial worker's compensation benefits were not going to help me once my symptoms stabilized. The job options in the federal government may be one path to explore. You do not need to have been in a mid- or high-level position to take this route;

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of my consciousness and in front of my screen, as the pace of emails can become overwhelming with voice software restrictions. Yet, I simply try to remain mindful of my limits ahead of time in order to avoid hurting myself, and rely extensively upon problem-solving and strategic thinking for solving physical challenges rather than becoming a victim of them. Crucially, my supervisor is a willing advocate of my suggestions.

Within this framework, I have continued to progress up the ladder and transformed a new career course in this process. My abilities and hopes tend to swell and fall depending on my physical state, but I experience a sense of integration back into the workforce that remains constant. The federal health insurance options and regular physical therapy coverage I

throughout the Department of Health and Human Services and other federal agencies. I encourage readers not to give up on working—look at the options on usajobs.gov and contact the human resources specialist listed for each job regarding what documentation would be needed for “disability status” and “Schedule A” hiring. Disability status for a job in the federal government does not signify Social Security Disability status and does not make you eligible for receiving any payments; it simply means that you have some sort of mobility or pain disability, which can be assessed by your state vocational rehabilitation experts. This status also allows employers to place you on a 2-year trial employment period as an incentive for them to provide opportunities. Call around to find someone at each federal agency

from my experience, it might have been easier for those starting out. ■

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Elena Juris is author of *Positive Options for Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD): Self-Help and Treatment*, which provides holistic day-to-day strategies for managing CRPS as well as patient testimonials.

Suggested Reading

Information for Individuals with Disabilities from USAJobs.gov: <http://www.usajobs.gov/individualswithdisabilities.asp>

Computer/Electronic Assistance Program (CAP): <http://www.tricare.mil/cap>