



Supporting Working Carers





Introduction

Across the globe, millions of employees have unpaid care responsibilities. In the Asia-Pacific alone, the number of [employee-caregivers will grow to a total of 1.2 billion by 2035](#), an increase of 100 million on today. Employee caregivers already make up 60% of the workforce and more than 80% of them rely on care assistance to be able to attend to their paying job. Employers need to be prepared for how to support employee caregivers, because with rising life expectancies across the world, carers are a rapidly growing demographic.

According to [Carers UK](#), half of all carers take over a year to recognise their caring role, with over a third taking over three years to recognise themselves as a carer. This recognition is critical to seeking support both inside and outside of work instead of carrying alone the intense emotional and practical challenges that come with caregiving.

When carers are supported by their employers they can juggle work and care more effectively, with identifiable benefits in terms of retention, productivity and reduced absence. If carers are not supported, they are more likely to experience stress, to have to reduce working hours, miss out on opportunities for professional development or even leave the workplace altogether. To retain talent, employers need to support their working carers, starting with understanding their employees and their care responsibilities.

The State of Caring

Demand to provide care peaks for employees between the ages of 45-64, the point at which many are striding career-wise and possess vital knowledge and experience. While many men are carers, the [majority of sole carers are women](#), and statistically women become carers earlier than men. A [study from Duke-NUS on caregiving in Singapore](#) found that 73% of caregivers are children or children-in-law, and almost three in four caregivers are women. [Unpaid elder care work in the US](#) is predominantly done by women, people on low incomes, and Black and white Hispanic people.

The associated financial and career progression costs are compounded over time. Starting caregiving leads to a reduction in employment, and this [decline is sustained for at least two years](#), which can contribute to inter-generational poverty. Carers Scotland reported that nearly half of working age carers lose £12,000 of income per year because they provide care. One in 6 people give up paid work to care, equating to [600 people each day resigning](#) as they can't manage both their career and caring role. This is a huge loss to both employers and families.

But it's easy to see why. The vast majority ([72%](#)) [work full time](#) with over a third providing 30 plus hours of care a week. Juggling full-time care with full-time work is exhausting. The rest are muddling through. Over half have "carers guilt", worried they're not doing a good job at work or home. Nearly a quarter have [turned down a promotion or job offer and 30% have reduced working hours](#).



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Unlike parenthood, becoming a carer to an elderly or sick relative isn't usually planned. Often it creeps up because of a fall or progressive disease. It's normal for an employee to have been caring for 2 years before they consider themselves a carer or ask for support. Even when they do recognise that they need support, it isn't always provided. 20% of carers who gave up work to care said that an [unsupportive workplace](#) was one of the reasons for leaving employment.

Best practice employers typically offer programmes that include a mix of policy, practice and employee benefits targeted to support the mental, physical and financial wellbeing of carers, because the impacts of care responsibilities can be all encompassing. Over half (57%) of people who had stopped working or reduced their hours at work to care said they had done this because of the [stress of juggling work and care](#).

In our experience of helping clients, a combination of coaching, interactive workshops and manager sessions are critical for ensuring holistic support for the working carer. We have identified five steps that employers can take to support their working carers.

5 Steps to Support Carers

The first step is to ensure leaders and stakeholders adopt a prevention-first mindset. This can be achieved by encouraging their managers to provide a supportive culture where any of their employees who are struggling with caring responsibilities feel they can share their caring situation with their managers and colleagues, where their challenges are recognised, and if and when required, coping strategies are co-created.

Second, survey staff to understand the size of your working carer population, scope required support and shape a working carer policy. Recognise that as a newly acknowledged issue a lot of need for carer support will be hidden and some employees will be reticent to identify themselves as a carer for fear of discrimination. Frame your request with an acknowledgement that the majority of carers are engaged in a 'silent struggle' at work and that needs to change. Aligned to this goal, establish a comms programme for leaders to speak openly about their own care responsibilities, to normalise discussion about care across all levels of the organisation and remind carers of available support.

Third, offer flexible working practices. Paid leave is becoming a [legal must](#), but carers [value the normality](#) work offers and the opportunity to hold onto their pre-carer self, so make sure you support them to carrying on working until care requirements dictate otherwise. In the early days this might be as fundamental as helping their employee caregiver to identify with their caring role.


Fourth, establish a Working Carer Employee Resource Group to offer a listening ear, practical advice and help shape policy. Related to this point, keep listening to staff and adapt policy and practice. A positive community can be the difference between treading water and swimming when it comes to navigating juggling caring with a career.

Finally, in our experience, it is of critical importance to support line managers who are supporting carers. Research shows that carers are most likely to disclose care responsibilities to their line manager and not HR or Occupational health. Line managers are best placed to agree flexible working arrangements that meet the needs of the carer as well as the team and business delivery.

You can support your managers by helping them to understand the typical needs of employee caregivers in the workplace, and the practical and sustainable ways they can help them to stay productive in work whilst achieving what they need to outside of work. A Harvard Business School report reveals that [80% of employees](#) with caregiving responsibilities say caregiving ‘duties’ impact their productivity at work. This in time can severely impact career trajectory – if loss of ambition doesn’t get there first.

A manager who knows how to encourage open discussions where sharing concerns and difficulties is normal allows employees such as caregivers who are often reluctant to openly discuss their often complex, and personal situation for fear of judgment and career limiting decisions, the space to explore and gain support from others.

Managers can then help their employee caregivers access organisational mechanisms and frameworks and importantly work together in finding the working environment, policies & practices, and team support that is most helpful for their situation. Sometimes something as simple as a small change to work patterns or meeting structures, or the introduction of some mental wellbeing sessions or to be frank just the opportunity to ‘heard’ by their manager and colleagues is enough to make a huge difference.





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