

ELDER CARE

Flexibility, Support Are Key in Elder Care

With more than 36 million workers juggling job responsibilities with the care of aging relatives, the graying of America is hitting home in the workplace.

Whether one calls it the sandwich generation or the family caregiver trend, this issue affects the bottom line of every business enterprise.

There are 633,000 family caregivers in Massachusetts alone, and more than 400,000 of them are holding down full- or part-time jobs.

American businesses lose at least \$33 billion each year due to employees with elder care responsibilities, according to a 2006 MetLife study.

A good work-life balance is a priority for most employees and, today, as the elderly population grows, part of that balance includes having the flexibility to take care of aging parents who wish to remain independent.

Without it, businesses will incur productivity losses as staff members are forced to quit, interrupt the workday, deal with crises, take unpaid leave or miss work for elder care reasons.

The majority of caregivers have to modify their work schedules as a result of their caregiving responsibilities, and many also experience negative health effects from the stress.

This comes at an already difficult time for employers as they brace themselves for a 10 million worker shortage by 2010, according to the U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of



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Labor Statistics.

The gap is driven by members of the baby boom generation retiring and the smaller cohort of younger workers coming after them.

With this increased competition for skilled workers, employers will have to set themselves apart with environments that understand and support their staffs' unique personal circumstances.

The good news is that preventing elder care productivity losses need not break an employer's benefits budget.

Providing elder care information and support increases loyalty among employees, especially those who are 50 years old and older, according to research by WFD Consulting.

And some of the most effective responses involve little or no direct

cost and can be implemented quickly. Business leaders who take steps now to minimize the impact of elder care on productivity will find themselves in a favorable position vis-à-vis their competitors in the emerging tight labor market.

Understanding the Elder Care Work Challenges

Unlike child care, elder care is not an issue that employees are likely to talk about around the water cooler.

In his book, "Elder Care: A Six Step Guide to Balancing Work and Family," John Paul Marosy points out that most employees regard care of older relatives or friends as a private matter. They are less likely to make their situations known to a manager or supervisor. And elder care differs from child care in several other important ways.

- Elder care does not follow a predictable pattern. It's not a matter of infant care followed by preschool, then on to adolescence and college. Elder care can take many forms and can last months or years.

- Elder care involves an adult-to-adult relationship. The family caregiver must often overcome years of emotional "baggage" in dealing with the situation. What's more, except when the elder is mentally incompetent, the adult child cannot impose decisions – as a parent would with a child.

- Elder care situations are complex and change over time. Each person ages at his or her own rate.

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Diseases progress differently and require different courses of care. It's not unusual for an employed family caregiver to be faced with housing, financing, health care and psychological issues – all at the same time.

Effective Solutions: Flexibility, Education, Information

To minimize productivity losses, companies and organizations need to address job flexibility, make modest investments in manager and employee training, and provide timely information and support to its employees.

- Job flexibility is the No. 1 need expressed by family caregivers in a large-scale study by the National Alliance for Caregiving.

Employees want flexible work schedules and they highly value paid time off to tend to caregiving duties. Providing flexible schedules engenders loyalty among employees and helps employers maintain an experienced and more produc-

tive work force.

- Managers need training to be able to identify in employees the signs of impending burnout caused by caregiver stress. Research shows higher rates of depression, anxiety, sleep disorders and stress-related injuries among family caregivers, compared to the general population.

A good manager should know how to identify the symptoms and refer the employee to resources within the company or in the community. Offering or sending managers to seminars aimed at the health and well-being of the employed caregiver can reduce stress and avoid costly turnover.

- Obtaining the right information at the right time can make all the difference in dealing effectively with an elder care situation. For pennies a day, programs can provide the employee or his or her family with instant telephone access to a trained elder care counselor who can cut red tape and find needed services anywhere in the

U.S.

And, for those caring for an elder who doesn't live close by, a private geriatric care manager (usually a nurse or social worker) can serve as the eyes and ears for a family member, making sure that a parent gets the advice and help needed to live as independently as possible. Such support also offers adult children peace of mind and, in turn, provides their employers a more focused employee.

As the nation ages, families will be stretched to meet the demands of caring for relatives while managing their careers. Employers who recognize these challenges and provide a support system will cultivate loyalty and increase productivity among employees who are working overtime to meet all of their obligations.

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