





# Caring for Caregivers: Five Employer Strategies

by | Tracy Brower, Ph.D.

Employer support for caregiving—and well-being more broadly—can boost employee attraction, recruitment and engagement. Strategies such as offering increased flexibility, recognition and support programs can make a big difference for employees working to meet caregiving demands.

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**W**hile caregiving has always been important to families, friends and communities, its value and significance have escalated over the last year and a half. Caregiving needs have intensified, the definition of caregiving has expanded and its impact on life and work has increased—all of which have implications for employers.

All of this puts new stressors on people and their employers—and generates new rewards as well. Far from just a drain or a demand, caregiving is a complex and mixed experience that requires understanding, focus and intentional support. Employers can attract and retain employees more effectively and engage them more thoroughly if they are wise about the strategies they employ to support the broad array of employees who provide all kinds of care.

### New Definitions, New Scale

In the popular press, *caregiving* often refers to care provided to elders—including everything from housekeeping and personal care to transportation and nonprofessional medical support (helping with medications, etc.). According to the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology*, a *caregiver* provides informal or unpaid work to a family member or friend with a chronic condition.<sup>1</sup> The care is typically crucial and rarely paid.

One report estimates that 30% of people 65 and older receive help, and 65% of this care is provided by unpaid caregivers including friends, family members or neighbors.<sup>2</sup> But a full definition of caregiving also requires attention to the care people provide to children, friends, neighbors or others who need support.

During the pandemic, the types of people who need support and the kinds of care they need have expanded. Caregiving includes child care and learning help—especially as child-care facilities and schools have closed or reduced capacity. It also includes nonprofessional health care for all ages—activities like caring for a sick child or providing help to an elder family member in giving medication. And the toll the pandemic has taken on society's collective mental health also necessitates more caregiving in the form of emotional support and empathy. Of course, the pandemic is one factor. Another is the fact that more people are part of the *sandwich generation*—people who are caring for their children *and* parents (and sometimes grandparents)—due to increasing longevity.

A vast number of employees provide care. The *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* reports that nearly half of all people

in the U.S. have been in caregiving roles, and the figures are similar for Canada and Europe. In addition, more than half of caregivers across regions are women.

While they are unpaid, caregivers make significant economic contributions. The *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* projects these contributions to rise to \$128 billion by 2035 in Canada and to more than one trillion dollars each for the U.S. and Europe.

Another study estimates that about half of the 66 million family caregivers in the U.S. also work outside the home.<sup>3</sup> Women provide more than half of the unpaid caregiving, which would equal roughly \$450 million annually if they were paid to do the work.

### Impacts on Caregivers

Studies over the years emphasize the stress that caregiving can cause—especially for employees who are also working full- or part-time. It can indeed be exhausting for the caregiver—physically, emotionally and cognitively—because of a lack of time or boundaries as well as the emotional toll of caring. In fact, one study found that parents of children under 18 reported their responsibilities for facilitating learning for their children interfered with their ability to get ahead at work.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* found that caregivers were more likely to experience psychological, emotional, physical, social and financial stresses when they were providing care. They were also more likely to experience reduced cardiovascular health. This was largely because they were more likely to experience stress and to engage in poor personal health habits (smoking, poor diet) or reduced self-care, including getting too little sleep.

A study by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada found that daughters who provide care are more likely to experience depression.<sup>5</sup> Women caregivers also can experience negative effects of caregiving in terms of their economic well-being, partly because they may pass up job advancement opportunities or lose employment benefits because of working fewer hours. Many women also exited the workforce during the pandemic due to caregiving needs.<sup>6</sup>

While there can be negative impacts, recent research also shows that caregiving isn't totally harmful, nor as deleterious as we might believe. A study from the University at Buffalo<sup>7</sup> found that when caregivers are shown appreciation, it enhances their experience. And research from Universität Basel

found that caregivers tend to live longer compared with those who do not provide care for others.<sup>8</sup>

Community is an important part of the human condition. People are happier and healthier when they are connected with others. In addition, their senses of purpose and joy are enhanced when they contribute their skills, talents or care to others in need. Research has found that people have a natural impulse for caregiving,<sup>9</sup> and people's experience of receiving care in their first three years is integral to their well-being later in life.<sup>10</sup>

The bottom line: Caring is important in the human experience. The human instinct for belonging and affiliation is likely what contributes to the positive effects of caregiving—and since, statistically, most employees provide care, employers would be wise to create conditions to support caregivers.

## Caregiving and Employee Engagement

Support for caregiving—and well-being, more broadly—has become an important factor in attracting and retaining employees. It is also important for engaging employees and fostering their opportunities to contribute their best while they're working. In fact, plenty of evidence demonstrates that when employees are happier and more fulfilled, they are more likely to stay with a company, perform better, set bigger career goals and contribute to a positive culture.<sup>11</sup> There are good reasons for employers to support employees who provide care—for the caregivers themselves, but also for the organization.

An organization's view of employees makes a difference. In particular, employers should acknowledge and

## takeaways

- The need for caregiving and its impact on life and work have increased during the pandemic.
- Caregivers are more likely to experience psychological, emotional, physical, social and financial stresses while they provide care; however, caregivers may have a greater sense of purpose and joy.
- Employee attraction and retention as well as engagement will likely improve when employers provide support for employee caregivers.
- Providing flexibility in workhours and locations in addition to opportunities to take time off are among the strategies that can benefit caregivers.
- Offering access to apps that address mental health and providing education and coaching on topics such as financial well-being and communication can have a positive impact on employee caregivers.
- Additional employer support strategies include creating caregiver groups at work and recognizing the skills and contributions of caregivers.

appreciate the whole person at work. That means realizing that when they are away from work, they may be giving medical support, facilitating learning or providing emotional nurturing to family or friends. In addition, rather than being separate, work and life are connected: Work is part of a full life, and there is a powerful spillover effect between work and life. When people are happier at work and given more autonomy at work, they tend to be happier at home. The opposite is also true: When people are happier outside of work, they tend to perceive greater satisfaction in their work experience.

## Five Ways Employers Can Support Caregivers

When employers are empathetic, understanding and appreciative of the human experience of their employees, it has positive impacts on the overall work experience for employees and can result in greater engagement and retention. Following are some suggested approaches for employers to consider.

### 1. Provide Flexibility

Employees face a variety of demands from both their work and their personal life. They will be the most effective and healthiest when they perceive that they have sufficient capacity to support those demands. Each of these—demand and capacity—shifts based on circumstances, and the key to supporting employees is to consider both sides of the model. For example, providing greater flexibility and not insisting employees work 100% of the time from the office can reduce demands, while providing empathy can increase their perceived capacity.

Employers can also support caregiving and caregivers by allowing for flexibility in workhours and locations. Some jobs lend themselves more naturally to flexibility than others, and employees need to be accountable for results. But it's also helpful when employers can provide as much choice as possible in terms of where, when and how people work. In addition, focusing on outcomes—rather than simply presence—fosters flexibility. Managing

based on performance is effective for many reasons, not the least of which is support for caregiving.

Flexible working can include the hours that employees work—or how companies handle the hours they can't. For example, employers could design their sick leave policies to apply to both employees and dependents so that employees don't have to take sick leave when they are fulfilling caregiving duties. In another example, a study by the University of Missouri recommends the innovative approach of offering deferred or staged retirement in which senior employees work declining numbers of days per week over a year-long exit or in which they keep working but take increasing numbers of weeks off during a staged period of departure from the organization. These kinds of staged options allow them to continue contributing while others begin to take on more responsibility.<sup>12</sup> As older workers face increased caregiving responsibilities because of the age of their parents or family members, they may not be ready to retire completely but may value a more gradual “off-ramp.”

Time off, time away and space to breathe are also solutions in the caregiving tool kit. In response to concerns about all kinds of exhaustion and stress, one organization is testing “no meeting Fridays” or “happy Fridays” where employees can choose to take half of the day off. Another organization is establishing a norm where meetings default to 25 minutes or 50 minutes, rather than the typical durations of 30 minutes or a full hour, so that people have some breathing room in their day.

Communicating and implementing flexible working options requires an employer to make the appropriate policy changes and then to use both broad and focused communication mechanisms. Company intranet sites or general communication vehicles are effective, but it is also wise to arm leaders with key information so they can share with their work teams in smaller groups and refer employees to the proper group or expert if they need more details.

Implementation of flexible options is most effective when leaders receive communication before the rest of the population so they are prepared to answer questions and make their own adjustments. Depending on the scope of the policy changes, it may also be necessary to offer training (online or in person) to update leaders about why policies are being implemented, the extent of leader discretion, the criteria for leader decision making and reinforcement of the adjacent

skills leaders will need to demonstrate (e.g., listening, performance management, engagement, etc.).

## 2. Validate Skills

Another way that employers can support caregivers is by recognizing and validating the skills that caregivers build through the care they provide. These are transferable to work and include everything from empathy and follow-through to attention to detail and leadership. Employers can consider these competencies when they are assessing employees for promotion or job expansion opportunities. They can also apply this thinking in the hiring process. When they learn that someone has stopped working, reduced their hours or plateaued in their career based on caregiving responsibilities, they can be intentional about considering the skills the potential employee would bring to their work. For example, employers can ask questions during an interview to uncover the skills an employee has used during a caregiving period, and they can clearly identify these skills in assessment processes in which they are comparing multiple candidates for a job award.

## 3. Offer Tactical Support

When companies provide tactical support, they ultimately demonstrate cultural values and pave the way toward strategically including caregivers and removing barriers so they can contribute more effectively. Examples are employee assistance programs (EAPs) which offer support for mental health or other life challenges. Additional examples include providing access to teaching and tutoring resources to support parents who are facilitating learning with their children, or offering the use of care-finding programs for employees providing care to elders or who need backup or emergency child care.

Another innovative approach includes offering access to apps that help employees with things like meditation, sleep, fitness, healthy eating or online therapy as well as offering education and coaching to support financial well-being. Access to other types of education is also helpful. A study in the *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* found that a training program focused on communication skills enhanced the caregiver experience—along with that of patients. This was mirrored by research published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, which found positive effects when caregivers were buoyed with emotional support and communication skills.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Promote Community and Leadership

Employees—and especially those who provide care—require community and connections to be their best. Organizations should consider ways to ensure that people feel a sense of belonging with their colleagues. Some companies are creating groups where employees can connect over particular interests or circumstances such as caring for young children or supporting elders with dementia-related challenges.

Leaders are key to supporting caregivers as well. They must be empowered and enabled with the right skills to provide empathy, offer support and achieve business results. Many organizations are providing training for leaders in the form of online learning, face-to-face curriculum, leadership mentoring programs (leaders being mentored by other leaders) or leadership coaching approaches (pairing leaders with each other for peer support).

#### 5. Provide Recognition and a Desirable Workplace

Another element to support caregivers and all employees is by providing plenty of celebration and recognition. Employers can be intentional about appreciating employee contributions and recognizing them for solving problems, innovating or responding to customer needs—Anything they've done well in their roles is material for celebration and appreciation. This kind of process helps build up employees who may be feeling down, depressed or exhausted.

The physical environment also matters for employees who come to the office. Well-designed offices that support all kinds of work (focused, collaborative, learning and more) and that offer daylight, views, napping rooms or mothers' rooms are examples.

### Caring for Themselves

Caregivers can also influence their own health and happiness. Caregivers sometimes report a lack of boundaries or a feeling of overwhelm based on the caregiving tasks they face. But they can reduce their stress by setting boundaries or limiting their caregiving hours (where that's possible). They can also seek social time with friends. All of these tend to reduce stress.

Caregivers can also create the conditions for happiness by building a support network for the people who need care. In a cadre of caregivers, those who love cooking can deliver great meals while those who love to read can provide com-

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panionship. Research demonstrates that when caregivers are taught techniques for greater happiness, they also experience less stress in caregiving.<sup>14, 15</sup>

### In Summary

Overall, caregiving is a critical part of a strong society. Caregivers provide support to those who are elderly, young or in need of direct aid, and they also contribute to the fabric of the overall community. Resilient communities are those in which people can rely on each other, trust each other, ask for help and pull each other through hard times. And these times are certainly tough. They remind everyone how much they need each other—and how much caring (not just caregiving) is critical to individual and collective well-being—and how important employers can be in creating the conditions for happiness, health and fulfillment. 🌟

### Endnotes

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