

Carers in the Workplace an Employer Briefing

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Carers in the Workplace

As the population ages and employers increasingly seek to offer competitive terms and conditions in order to attract and retain key staff, interest in employers' policies on the provision of time off for *eldercare* – and other forms of care besides childcare – appears to be growing. This briefing reviews recent research on, and practice recommendations for, the growth of the caring population, and the implications for employers.

The ageing population

The UK has an ageing population. The population grew by seven per cent in the last 30 years or so, from 55.9 million in 1971 to 59.8 million in mid-2004.

However, population growth has not occurred evenly across all age groups. The proportion of the population aged 65 and over has increased from 13 per cent in 1971 to 16 per cent in 2004, but the proportion below the age of 16 has decreased from 25 per cent to 19 per cent.

The older population is ageing. Within the population aged 65 and over, the proportion of people aged 85 and over has increased from seven per cent in mid-1971 to 12 per cent in mid-2004.

Over the past three decades, the median age of the UK population rose from 34.1 years in mid-1971 to 38.6 in mid-2004. This ageing is primarily the result of past trends in fertility, although recently declining mortality rates, especially at older ages, have been playing a major role.

One of the consequences of an ageing population is that middle-aged people increasingly find themselves having to look after, or arrange the care of, their elderly relatives.

Table 1 Economic activity of carers (per cent)

Economic activity status	Men	Women	All adults
Working full-time	12	15	13
Working part-time	14	18	17
Unemployed	15	16	15
Economically inactive	17	23	21

Source: Maher and Green (2002)

Some facts about the 'care force'

- There are some six million carers in Great Britain (excluding those looking after children). The 2001 Census found that 5.6 million adults were providing unpaid care for a 'sick, elderly or disabled person'. The earlier General Household Survey (GHS), which is a sample survey, estimated the total number of adult carers at 6.8 million. The GHS includes people who provide smaller amounts of care and has more details about the composition of the carer population than the Census.
- It is estimated that the number of carers will grow to nine million in the next 30 years (source: http://employersforcarers.org.uk/docs/changing_demographics.html).
- The GHS found that 16 per cent of the population were providing care (18 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men). Men constitute roughly four in every ten adult carers.
- One-third of carers live with the person they are looking after, while the other two-thirds care for someone in another household.
- The average age of a carer is around 50.
- Thirteen per cent of full-time employees and 17 per cent of part-time employees are carers, that is roughly one in seven of the workforce.
- There is a high level of 'turnover' among the caring population - 40 per cent started caring within past year, while 40 per cent finished caring. It is estimated that half the adult population is likely to be heavily involved in providing informal care at some point in their lives (Hirst, 2002).
- Taking on a caring responsibility can affect the working lives of a significant minority of employees. Henz (2004) found that, while 36 per cent of first-time carers who were working carried on as before and 34 per cent of carers who were not working stayed outside the labour market, the remaining 30 per cent of carers (46 per cent of all carers who were working) changed their working arrangements in some way (eg stopped working, reduced or changed their working hours).

Carer-friendly work practices

Studies of working carers indicate that the main ways in which employers can help them cope with combining their domestic and work responsibilities is by allowing some flexibility in their working time and the ability to take time off to cope with unpredictable emergencies. A review of the literature and past IES Research Network events indicates that employers generally do not have specific policies to support their employees involved in eldercare or other forms of care besides child care. Most employers hope that their existing policies on flexible working time etc. will meet most needs.

Examples of the sort of arrangements carers benefit from include:

- flexible working hours
- the option of reducing working hours
- care leave
- permission to work at home (some of the time)
- permission to make informal working arrangements (swap shifts etc.)
- availability of unpaid leave
- availability of career breaks
- access to a telephone in private
- supportive working colleagues, especially line managers
- access to information and advice about:
 - caring, eg benefit entitlement, support groups, etc.
 - workplace support and what entitlements are available.

Many carers said that they were not aware of the relevant policies and practices of their employers.

Issues for employers

Some of the concerns that employers have raised about operating policies for employees who are carers involve:

- **ensuring consistency of treatment** across departments and between managers, *eg* defining terms like 'carer' and 'dependant' fairly when flexible working arrangements were largely informal.
- **staying within the law** – employers wanted to ensure that they did not directly, or more likely, indirectly discriminate against a group of employees by treating them less favourably than others, in providing care-related leave for instance.
- **adopting best practice** – most employers at the recent Research Network forum on flexible working thought that providing flexible working arrangements to accommodate employees caring for relatives had become a necessary part of their employment package. There was an expectation among employees that their employers would adopt best practice.

Work and Families Bill

- At the beginning of 2006, the new Work and Families Bill is still going through Parliament. It extends the right to request flexible working to carers of adults from April 2007. The government will be consulting on the definition of *carer* during 2006.

Source: <http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/workandfamilies.htm>

Emergency leave entitlement

Under the terms of the Employment Relations Act 1999, employees are entitled to a period of unpaid leave to deal with an emergency involving someone who depends on them.

- **Who counts as a dependant?** Spouse, partner, child, parent, other family in household.
- **What counts as an emergency?** Illness, accident, assault for which you need to arrange (re-arrange) care.
- **What sort of leave?** As long as it takes (to deal with the emergency, not the care!).

Source: <http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/individual/dependants.pdf>

Useful contacts

Employers for carers is an interest group that includes major employers, employers' organisations and government agencies. It aims to 'identify and promote to employers and policy makers the business benefits of supporting carers in the workplace; influence employment policy and practice to create a culture which will support carers in and into work'.

www.employersforcarers.org.uk

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers is the largest provider of comprehensive carers' support services in the UK. The Trust currently provides information, advice and support services to almost a quarter of a million carers.

www.carers.org

Working Families is 'a campaigning charity that supports and informs working parents and carers, and works with employers to encourage them to reap the business benefits of helping their employees balance their work and home lives'.

www.workingfamilies.org.uk

Employers Forum on Age is 'an independent network of leading employers who recognise the value of an age diverse workforce'

www.efa.org.uk

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