

Employer's guide to adult and eldercare

May 2011

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Why you should support your carers and how you should do it

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The demographic time bomb

We've all heard about it. For the first time there are more people in the UK over 65 than under 18. By 2050 there will be double the number of people over 65 as under 18. The population is getting older. Diet, and medicine and even, whisper it quietly, improvements in the NHS, mean we're all living longer. The demographic bombshell has some very obvious (and some not so obvious) consequences for employers. In a nutshell every organisation will have more and more employees who have care commitments for an elderly dependent. How you support your working carers will have an increasingly direct impact on recruitment, retention and engagement.

A couple of points:

- The **My Family Care position** is well known but it's worth reiterating. We believe that there are always practical and cost effective ways to support people who combine careers with care commitments. We also believe that the employee who is supported will be the most valuable, loyal and productive member of any team.
- **Terminology** – we use the terms eldercare, dependent care and homecare inter-changeably which is probably wrong (sorry). The issue is predominantly that more of us will have care commitments for our own parents. That can typically be called "eldercare". But of course employees who care for a loved uncle or aunt or for any adult might also need support. Adult dependent care is the correct phrase and homecare is often used as well.

Why employees need support

The starting point is that more of us work – technology and flexible working have made it possible and higher costs of living have made it necessary. That means that more of us will also need to combine work and family at some point and the combination is rarely straightforward. When the care commitment is unplanned it can be incredibly stressful.

There are of course many similarities between the support a working father or mother needs and those that a working carer needs. But just as important are the differences. For people with adult dependents there is no simple template for the issues faced. For ease of reference here is a list of the different factors that are often relevant:

- **Unplanned** – most of us decide to be parents. We don't plan to become carers.
- **Geography** – your children live with you, your parents don't! The UK's work force is increasingly itinerant, meaning there's no reason to assume that a care commitment involves an easy journey. It often doesn't.
- **The type of care** – care commitments can take various forms. It can be that gradually a loved one becomes dependent. Or care can be because of a sudden injury or illness. And the care needed is never the same. A care commitment can be as small as a weekly "comfort" visit to check everything is OK to something far more involved and essential.
- **Planning** – planning for the future can also be a difficult process. Does someone need to move and if so who? Is it time to look for a care home? People make decisions for their children. Adult dependents have voices and opinions of their own, meaning decision making is often a longer and more emotional process.

Remember – people often don't realise that they are carers. It's just a commitment you have that gradually makes your job or career more difficult. The right kind of employer support can and often does make all the difference but identifying the carers is an important starting point.



About the care market in the UK

This paper doesn't aim to be a detailed review of the care market in the UK but it is important that employers understand some of the main issues.

The NHS is good; social services are bad

In the UK if you need emergency or ongoing medical care then the NHS is generally quite good. The NHS is an enormous and well funded machine. When it needs to step in it often does and, notwithstanding the press, it is still an organisation that is envied across the world.

But if you don't need medical care then things are not so good. The social care market in the UK is incredibly under-funded. It can be almost impossible to navigate for all but the most informed and tenacious individuals. Unless you are very poor or very rich the chances are that trying to access homecare support will be a painful and stressful experience.

There are, at the time of writing, some 22 different benefits that someone with social care needs might be eligible for. Simplifying the system was beyond the last Government but we retain hope in the current one.

It's all about homecare

The only way that the UK will be able to support its ageing population is if we get "homecare" right. Technology also means that many ageing men and women can carry living on independently in their own homes for far longer than was previously possible. That's essential if the demographics are not going to bankrupt the country. The support dependents receive from their local authority will vary massively between the regions. It's a postcode lottery with the worst consequences for the losers.

Employers stepping in when the State has failed can and does make all the difference.

The case for eldercare vouchers

In the context of the above the case for incentivising employers to support their employees has never been stronger. There also, significantly, finally seems to have been an acceptance by all parties that childcare vouchers have had a direct and positive impact on supply of childcare i.e. the voucher model works (it's pure demand side funding so of course it works is the My Family Care view). There also seems to be acceptance that you can trust employers to follow the rules.

Put all that together and we believe that employers waiting for some Government support in this area might have a small case for optimism (watch out for the findings of the Dilnot Commission due in July 2011). If you are interested in joining the debate or having a dialogue with Government please let us know. You might also consider joining Employers for Carers www.employersforcarers.org

Employer solutions

So what can and should employers be doing?

What employees want and need can fall under three easy headings:

- Understanding
- Support
- Flexibility

Understanding – the very fact that you are reading this means that at some level your organisation cares! Most importantly employees need to feel and know that the employer will support them through what can be incredibly difficult times. It's a mix of culture and policy that some employers get right and some find more challenging.

Flexibility – care commitments nearly always involve flexibility. It's the flexibility to make sure work and care commitments can combine rather than conflict.



Support

There are a number of practical ways that employers can and do support their working carers very effectively. Some of them need to be provided by external suppliers and others are best addressed internally.

Information

The dependent care market is opaque. The very least employers should do is make as much information as readily available as possible. A dedicated carer section on your intranet is a minimum.

Carer networks – If you employ enough people then set up a carers' network. Carer networks are only as good as the employees who use and access them. Make sure your carer network is lively and supported by the HR function. For employees facing dependent care issues a problem shared can often be a problem solved!

Forum – most information can be shared online. Ideally your carer network will have access to an online forum so that people can chat and share experiences. If you don't employ enough people to have your own carer network then try connecting with other employers. There are always other similar employers who are willing to co-operate in this area.

Helplines – helplines and EAPs have become more and more affordable. If you have a childcare helpline already then make sure your suppliers extend it to include dependent care issues. If they won't then speak to us! Our Help Centre is supported by a large library of regularly updated relevant fact sheets. And there are other easy ways to point your employees in the right direction which might not cost much more than some time investment from the HR team.

Workshops – another good way to start educating your employees and managers on dependent care issues is to run workshops. In our 2009 working parent survey some 58% of respondents were also interested in hearing more about dependent care issues. What can work very well is combining a dependent care workshop with the chance for employees to have one to one consultations with an expert. That is brilliant personal support at an affordable cost.

Backup care – if you already provide backup or emergency childcare then think about extending it to dependent care issues. Providing dependent backup care is important for diversity. It's also an excellent way to start identifying your employees with dependents which in turn will help you develop the right strategy.

High level support and coaching – ultimately the best way to support an employee with care needs is to find an expert whose job is to mentor the employee through the issues and who can help put the right care solution in place. We provide this kind of support to companies such as Shell and P&G. The support can be as much about helping the families make the right decision as helping find the most affordable and suitable care solutions. For more detail please ask for information on our Adult & Eldercare Search service.

Summary

As an employer you will have employees with care issues. In the future there will be more of them rather than less. Building the business case and developing a coherent strategy to support your carers are essential. But the first step is starting the dialogue. That means identifying the people in your organisation who need support and understanding what they need. Our job is to help employers put the right solutions in place.

Find out how My Family Care could make a difference to your company

Call 0845 676 7680
Click myfamilycare.co.uk

