

Care and Family Services and Business Productivity: work-life balance and absenteeism

In a tight economy employers have to get the best from their business in order to survive. An organisation is only as good as the people who work for it, and their productivity is critical to its performance.

We are juggling increasingly complex family lives with increasingly demanding working lives. Services that support people's everyday lives – childcare, homecare, adult and eldercare – are now as much about economic productivity as they are about social cohesion. This changes who we see as stakeholders in the development and sustainability of these services, and employers are increasingly recognised as a key driver. This is an issue for all societies and all economies. Developed economies have to extend working lives in order to meet their growing care and pensions bills; *developing* economies have to increase labour market participation in their growth sectors. Both require an infrastructure of affordable, flexible, good quality services to support families.

Most people's lives will include at least one episode of caring, and providing care for a partner, family member or friend who is ill, frail or disabled can have a significant negative impact on economic activity. In the UK 3 million people - 1 in 7 employees in any workplace - is juggling paid work with care, and that number is going to rise with the pace of demographic change. 90% of these working carers are aged 30 plus – employees in their prime employment years. The peak age for caring is 45-64 when many employees will have gained valuable skills and experience, and the Triennial Review published by the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission in October 2010 found that one in four women in their fifties, and nearly one in five men in this age group are caring. Recent research carried out for Carers UK indicated that as many as 1 million people (1 in 6 carers) give up or cut back work to care which is a real loss for employers as well as for families. With fewer young people entering the job market – and in the current economic climate - there has never been a more important time to focus on the benefits of retaining skilled workers rather than incurring the costs of recruiting and retraining new staff.

Analysis of the UK's 2001 Census shows that working – and working age - carers, pay a heavy penalty in terms of their own health if not properly supported to work and care. Those with heavy caring responsibilities are 2 to 3 times more likely than workers without caring responsibilities to be in poor health. Research has shown that caring for 20 hours a week or more starts to have a substantial effect on employment, particularly for women. Critically, carers are also twice as likely as non-carers to suffer stress and mental ill health, and studies have found a strong connection between stress in an individual's life and absenteeism. All this has very obvious impacts on productivity.

Supportive employers can play a key role in mitigating these impacts, and increasing staff resilience, productivity and performance in the workplace. They can take effective and sometimes very simple action to enable carers to balance their paid work with their caring responsibilities.

The first and most obvious area of support is flexible working, including arrangements such as flexi-time, home working, annualised hours, job sharing, term-time working, part-time working, flexible holidays and career breaks.

A good complement to flexible working is flexible leave arrangements such as compassionate leave and paid leave for emergency or planned caring. Emergency leave is critically important to carers, who can be called home at short notice when care arrangements break down or the person they care for becomes ill.

Alongside these more formal arrangements employers can offer workplace support that helps identify and signpost to services, through employee assistance programmes, occupational health teams or simply through access to a good intranet site. Peer support can be offered through in-house networking groups, face to face or, increasingly in busy workplaces or where employees do not work in the same place, virtual. Simple adjustments can also be very helpful, such as access to a private space to use a telephone, or car parking close to the workplace to make access in and out of work quicker and easier.

All this support can be detailed in a carers policy which lets employees know that caring is acknowledged in the workplace and given support. This can also help people with caring responsibilities identify themselves more easily.

Evidence shows these flexibilities can reduce absenteeism and staff turnover, and cut employment costs. The evidence from employers themselves shows that this support is rarely abused and increases loyalty and commitment.

Employers for Carers is a membership forum in the UK which offers practical guidance for employers who are committed to creating carer-friendly workplaces. One of its members, British Gas, calculated that supporting carers brought a benefit of £1 million a year. As one of their Directors said: *“With a caring emergency you are not only dealing with an absence, you are potentially dealing with a vacancy if you don’t respond appropriately. The cost of recruiting is incomparable to the cost of 2-3 days’ emergency leave. Retaining carers through support or special leave arrangements represents a saving to the company of about £1 million per year.”*

Another member, British Telecom, or BT, has found that introducing flexible working practices has had a number of business benefits, including for the company’s bottom line. Its Director of People Networks has said *“The average increase in productivity for flexible workers is 21%, worth at least £5-6 million on*

the bottom line. Stress-related absence has been reduced by 26% through flexible working alone." (Director of People Networks). There have also been huge infrastructure cost savings - nearly £1 billion savings in accommodation and systems costs alone.

However, flexible employers need to be supported by flexible services, and external support from the kinds of services we are talking about at this conference – human services – are critical when it comes to sustaining and retaining a productive workforce. Forward looking employers already help their workforce access care through providing information, signposting and services such as care vouchers and help with emergency care cover. They might deliver this directly through occupational health, or use an external provider such as My Family Care. My Family Care provides backup adult dependant care to help families manage an emergency, runs a dependant care helpline to navigate the care system, and offers tailored support such as sourcing homecare and residential care. The service is aimed at employees in high pressure high salary jobs such as financial or legal services, in which time away from a client – or time spent with a client but with your mind elsewhere – can be very costly. In these organisations time is money, and paying for someone to source or provide care to prevent an absence makes business sense.

However, this can only work if there are external care services to source, and it is access to these services that can be so problematic. With the UK facing cuts in public spending, local authorities are tightening their eligibility criteria and providing services to fewer and fewer families. We need new service solutions to fill this gap to stop families and carers coming under more pressure.

The most comprehensive research undertaken to date with working carers found that services have a critical role in carers' ability (or inability) to remain in work. Only a third of carers surveyed said that they had adequate services to enable them to work and 41% who had fallen out of work said they would rather be in paid work, but the services available did not make a job possible.

The UK quite simply cannot afford for this to be the impact of caring, and how we manage care and caring must be seen as an economic as well as a social issue. Individuals, families and employers have a right to expect an infrastructure of services which enable people to sustain care within families and relationships while having productive working lives. In the same way as a good system of childcare is seen as a condition for employment, so must a good system of care and support.

As well as being a social 'good', services must be seen as facilitators of labour market participation, with supply driven by this imperative as much as by social demand. External care and support services - and the wider infrastructure including housing, transport and assistive technologies - must be fit for 21st century families *and* workplaces. People need different levels of help at different

stages. Practical 'concierge' services such as cleaning or gardening may be needed at one point, while quality personal care for an older or disabled person may be needed at another. The availability of these services not only supports the individual or families receiving them, by enabling people to combine paid work and care and to do so with less stress; it supports employers by contributing directly to greater productivity by reducing absenteeism and promoting loyalty and payback. This is a win for families, employers, and the wider economy, and that is before any consideration of how the sector for these services in itself promotes greater economic productivity through job creation.

Caring is everybody's business – and all our economies and all our societies must grow integrated services that ensure it does not impact negatively at individual, organisational and societal level.