5 Things Employers Get Wrong About Caregivers at Work

There is a large group of employees at nearly every company that have much to contribute to organizations but may need thoughtful policies to thrive. Supporting this group is integral to DEI, loyalty, and retention goals, and yet few companies even track their status. The group I'm talking about is caregivers.

They are the fastest growing workplace identity group, and they make up around 73% of the workforce. "Caregiver" is a broad term on purpose — it includes parents, those caring for elderly family members, and those supporting a sick or disabled child, sibling, or spouse. Through my work as a journalist and consultant on caregiver issues in the workplace, I see again and again that companies have serious blindspots about their caregiver population and regularly make assumptions that can undermine their stated values and goals — along with their bottom line.

Here are five big misconceptions I'd like to debunk in order for companies to better understand the realities of their employee caregivers so that they can make smart policies to support them.

Myth #1: School and childcare are "back to normal."

Employers need to better understand the huge logistical care challenges that employees may be facing daily. Before the pandemic, childcare facilities were expensive and hard to find, and public schools were completely out of sync with the realities of working parents. Sadly, things are now far worse for everyone, making it harder than ever to solve the care jigsaw puzzle.

According to The Center for American Progress, 88,000 workers have left the daycare industry since the start of the pandemic, in large part due to low pay. For example, in North Carolina the entire state is deemed a “childcare desert.” In some areas of the state, waitlists for an infant daycare spot average around one year, and for every 100 children born, there are less than 20 licensed daycare spots.

But staff shortages aren’t just an issue for daycares catering to children under five. In addition to teacher vacancies, public schools are experiencing huge problems with the support staff that enables the school system to provide safe custodial care. According to Axios, about 88% of schools nationwide are dealing with bus driver shortages, which makes transportation unreliable and leads to long route times when the buses do show up. After-school care is facing similar struggles. This summer, EdWeek predicted “a perfect storm of funding and staffing crises” for after-school programs. This prediction bears out. In my city of Durham, North Carolina, there were over 700 kids on the after-school waitlist at the start of the 2022 school year.

Employers must understand that employees who rely on private daycare and public school to do their jobs are facing near constant, unpredictable care conflicts through no personal fault of their own. For a single mom of a 6-year-old who could only get after-school care Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the requirement that everyone come into the office Tuesday and Thursday, no exceptions, could send her looking for a new job. And expecting an official clock-in time at 9 AM for remote workers may unnecessarily penalize the dad who, at a moment’s notice, must rush across town to drop his kids off at school because the bus never came to get them.

Not supporting employees through the hardship of the current care landscape and its unpredictability can lead to more burnout and attrition. Evaluating flexibility and hybrid policies through a caregiver lens is helpful and providing access to backup care services can ease some of these ongoing stressors.

Myth #2: All it takes to have “inclusive care policies” is giving dads paternity leave.

Workplace family leave policies have evolved a lot over the last decade, with more gender-neutral language and the inclusion of same-sex parents and adoptive and foster parents, which are all wonderful changes. However, family leave policies often laser focus on welcoming a new child, when they instead should be much broader to include other kinds of caregiving needs beyond those of brand-new parents.

A 2019 Harvard Business School report on caregiving found that while welcoming a child was a top caregiving reason people left their jobs, next on the list was caring for a sick child (49%) or managing a child’s daily needs (43%). A third of people who left their position due to caregiving cited eldercare as the reason, and almost 25% cited an ill or disabled family member. The lack of supportive policies around a range of caregiving life events can be costly for companies. According to The Council on Aging, "70% of caregivers [who do eldercare] suffer work-related difficulties due to their dual roles…annually, employees lose up to $3 trillion in wages and benefits while employers lose $17-33 billion due to absenteeism and turnover."

Creating paid family leave policies that can be used for a broad set of reasons, including supporting family members' physical and mental health needs, and encouraging people to use the benefit can help improve loyalty, reduce burnout, and save on costly turnover.

Myth #3: Those who choose flexible work are less interested in advancement.

New data shows that women, people of color, and caregivers are more likely to want to choose forms of flexible and remote work. According to Lean In's 2022 State of Women in The Workplace report, "Only 1 in 10 women want to work mostly on-site, and many women point to remote and hybrid work options as one of their top reasons for joining or staying with an organization. Women of color and women with disabilities are about 1.5 times as likely to experience demeaning and 'othering' microaggressions when they work mostly on-site as opposed to mostly remotely."

In order to more fairly and accurately value all employees, we need to examine some of our ingrained biases. A pre-pandemic study from Stanford randomly assigned employees to be in office or remote. Those working offsite were actually 13% more productive, but they were promoted half as often. Proximity bias is very real, with a recent study from the Society for Human Resource Management showing that 42% of supervisors confess to sometimes forgetting about remote workers when assigning tasks. If companies are not actively training managers on these issues and working to support remote workers, their talent pipeline will become an open drain of women, people of color, and caregivers.

Myth #4: Caregiving isn't talked about much at our office, so it must not be an issue.

Many people are not comfortable sharing about their caregiving responsibilities in the workplace because they are worried about being penalized professionally. Only 56% of caregivers report that their work supervisor is even aware of their caregiving responsibilities. The Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion report, *Uncovering Talent,* reveals that 61% of all employees minimize their identities that make them "different" in some way, which can look like silently struggling through a frantic work week while your child's daycare is closed due to Covid, or saying to coworkers you are going to the dentist when you are really driving your father to his chemo appointment.

Unfortunately, mothers in particular are right to be concerned that their family responsibilities might be held against them. Anti-mom bias has been long-rampant in the workplace.

The best way for leaders to create more transparency around caregiving is by starting to talk about it themselves. If you leave early on Thursdays because you lead your child's Scout troop, rather than just having the time blocked on your calendar as "busy," share the reason you are unavailable. Rather than saying you'll be out of the office for "a family trip," be honest that you are taking time off work to help your mother move into assisted living. Leaders showcasing that they have personal lives and care responsibilities can have a huge impact in what employees feel is "OK" to talk about at work.

Myth #5: If there was a problem with our policies, we'd know about it.

Companies rarely put effort into evaluating policies unless something prompts them to do so. In a labor market with a low unemployment level, individual employees might rather leave their job than put in the extra and often uncompensated work of pointing out policy flaws and going out on a limb to advocate for changes.

According to research from The Rosalynn Carter Institute, close to one third of caregiver employees have chosen to leave a job at some point because of their caregiving responsibilities. If someone says in their exit interview they are leaving "to spend more time with their kids" or "have more flexibility to help with their elderly mother," jumping to the conclusion that this decision was purely personal can obscure what the company could have done to better support the employee, and what policies might have made it possible for them to stay on the job and thrive. (The authors of Harvard Business School's Caring Company report have an excellent chart, Figure 15, on the self-perpetuating cycle that leads to caregivers getting overlooked by companies in this way.)

One way companies can start proactively addressing active issues for caregivers, rather than just trying to stop the bleeding of costly attrition, is by investing strongly in Employee Resource Groups as part of overall DEI initiatives. I'm hearing more and more about employees starting caregiver-specific ERGs, or expanding their women's or parents' ERGs to include all caregivers.

So what does investing in ERGs look like? For starters, give these groups budgets, access to development and training, and compensate employees for this work through bonuses, raises, and/or factoring the work into their performance reviews. For ideas on how to do this, check out The Parents in Tech Alliance's new open-source database. I also recommend giving ERGs regular access to company leaders. Welcome them to make meaningful suggestions for the organization. Don't think of ERGs as an inconsequential social club, but as having the potential to be a highly effective focus group that lets your company know its blind spots and helps come up with ideas for solving them. Plus, they double as a cost-effective recruitment and retention tool.

If you aren't convinced that your organization needs to think more deeply about its caregivers right now, consider this your wake-up call to start proactively planning for the future. In a few years, the tsunami of eldercare responsibilities employees will face as their Baby Boomer parents and relatives age may be drowning them. According to the U.S. Census, the 2030s will mark the first time in U.S. history that the number of people 65 and older will be more than people under 18. This makes building up your company's care infrastructure a smart business decision to get the most out of a strong and diverse group of employees today and for decades to come.

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