

The Physical, Emotional and Financial Costs and Challenges of Eldercare for Employees in the Workplace

Eldercare assistance has long been a concern for baby boomers caring for both aging parents and young children. More attention was expected to be paid to it as an employee benefit, but experts find many companies have not made adequate adjustments to their benefits offerings in response to this growing trend.

Parents and elder spouses are living longer, employees are working longer, and the long-time popularity of smaller families translates into fewer siblings to help share the costs and time involved for eldercare when needed. Federal and state budgets are reducing fund allocations for caregiving. More expensive institutional care increases the financial burden for families, while shorter hospital stays drive a need for alternative care options.

The proportion of adult children providing personal care and/or financial assistance to a parent has increased more than three times over the past 15 years. Working and non-working adult children are almost equally as likely to provide care to parents in need.

One of the major challenges of eldercare is that it is usually unpredictable. It is unforeseeable when an elder relative might be injured from a fall and as a result requires regular assistance by a caregiver.

The necessity of choosing between work and eldercare is becoming increasingly common. The MetLife Study of Caregiving Costs to Working Caregivers, released in June 2011, finds the total estimated costs of lost wages, pension and Social Security benefits for caregivers is nearly \$3 trillion. The study also finds that one-quarter of adult children provide care or financial assistance to a parent. In addition, adult children 50+ who work and provide care to a parent are more likely to suffer from depression and have overall fair or poor health than those who do not provide care to their parents.

Caregiving costs both companies and employees. An employee who cares for an elder relative may feel pressured to turn down a job promotion or relocation, reduce work hours, or cease working altogether. According to a 2006 MetLife and National Alliance for Caregiving study, companies spend more on recruiting, hiring and training for replacements of these experienced employees, and have higher health care costs for over-extended workers. Businesses in the US lose an estimated \$33.6 billion a year in productivity from employees who are full-time caregivers, at an average of \$2,110 per person.

A study reported by Kaiser Health News in August 2011 states that thousands of seniors remain unable to move into senior housing because they can't sell their homes quickly enough or for the price they need in the still-depressed real estate market. There is therefore greater pressure on families to pay for parents' and grandparents' placements, or to care for them themselves.

Employers need to broaden efforts to help workers navigate the world of eldercare—whether it's medical professionals, attorneys who offer estate planning and wills, or social service workers

who can help assist with caregiving responsibilities as well as with Medicare, Medicaid and life insurance. Some companies with well-developed benefits programs offer long-term care specialists or caregiver coaches that can help with the whole process.

In the Delaware Valley, over 294,000 individuals are diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, a disease that affects mostly the 65+ population and can dramatically worsen with more advanced age. Through the Alzheimer's Early Detection Alliance (a workplace employee benefit and communications program), the Alzheimer's Association is raising Alzheimer's awareness. This is a free program offered at the sites of businesses and communities with the goals of raising awareness and reducing the incidence of Alzheimer's disease. The program started less than a year ago and addresses concerns with caregivers dealing with stress with loved ones. A clinical trial match program with educational services and campaigns for brain health and keeping the brain healthy is included. Benefit-related newsletter blurbs, website widgets, webinars, e-learning, conference calls, support groups and marketing educational programs are also included. 1000 companies nationally and 61 companies locally currently are member participants.

“At this point, we are only able to reach half of this population. The program is well sought out and allows us to work with businesses and leverage credible information,” says Theresa Haenn, Vice President of Development at the Delaware Valley Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. Claire Day, the Vice President of Constituent services at the Delaware Valley Alzheimer's Association, says that for the caregiver, “emotional issues are over the loss of the person they once knew. They need to be able to process this. Employers dealing with this alliance are supportive of connecting employees with various sources of caregiving services.” The local website of the Alzheimer's Association is www.ALZ.org/DESJSEPA.

In addition to offering traditional Employee Assistance Programs, employers can demonstrate their concern for their employees' well-being by providing voluntary programs with special underwriting adjustments that employees could not otherwise obtain on their own, such as long-term health insurance. This may be even more important after healthcare reform takes effect if employers significantly reduce or drop their benefit programs altogether.

Also, companies that already offer generous sick time accrual policies might consider extending the use of paid sick time to include care for elder relatives, following family medical leave laws that apply.

The most accepted employer assistance may be the ability of workers to use flexible scheduling. Companies can offer more support to employees to help reduce the stigma often associated with asking for time off to care for a sick older relative. Experts on aging in the workplace found that when companies have a family caregiving policy, employees tend to stay longer, even if they don't use the benefits right away or at all.

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