

Eldercare in the Workplace: Prevalence and Consequences

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The American population is aging. The current population of those individuals 65 and older is approximately 35 million; this number is estimated to be 70 million by the year 2025 and nearly 80 million by the year 2050. The number of individuals 85 and older is the fastest growing segment of this population. What does an aging population mean for the American society?

Older people are not only living healthier lives but are also more independent than they may appear. About 60% of people 65 or older live on their own; only 5% are in nursing homes. Longer life and greater independence add up to good news for older Americans, but ultimately they will encounter limitations associated with aging, and that in turn will directly impact the workplace as more employees begin caring for aging parents or relatives.

Name the factors that rob productivity in the workplace. Is "eldercare" on the list? Maybe it should be. A 2001 MetLife study revealed that eldercare issues, including lost productivity, cost employers as much as \$29 billion a year. Employees facing emergent problems regarding aging relatives often have little choice but to solve them on company time. Even when an eldercare situation seems under control, feelings of anger, guilt and resentment may distract workers.

It is estimated that there are currently 34 million people caring for a loved one over the age of 50 who need assistance with daily functioning (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2001). Informal caregivers are important and the work they do saves the health care delivery system a great deal of money. Caregivers are often caught in multiple roles and face the challenge of juggling many responsibilities, including their role as employee and their duties at work.

Research indicates that one-third to one-half of all caregivers are employed outside the home. Employed caregivers sacrifice leisure time, and often suffer stress-related illnesses. Negative effects on working caregivers include time lost from work, lower productivity, quitting a job to give care, lost career opportunities and lower future earnings (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2004). Work disruptions due to employee caregiving responsibilities result in productivity losses of \$1,142 per year per employee (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2004). A person who leaves their job to care for a loved one stands to lose \$659,000 over a lifetime in salary, benefits, social security and pension.

An increase in the population of older adults will result in a corresponding increase in illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, heart disease, stroke, and various other chronic conditions. These disorders affect not only the individual, but can also have a dramatic impact on the family. Already, millions of working adults are juggling the competing demands of caring for a chronically ill or disabled parent, raising a family, and managing a career (Family Caregiver Alliance, 2004).

Yet employers are often times unaware of eldercare issues in their workplace; eldercare is often referred to as the silent productivity killer". According to the National Family Caregivers Alliance (NFCA). caregivers spend an average of 20 hours a week engaged in some level of eldercare responsibility. Even those who do not provide eldercare directly may be involved in finding resources, securing services, checking on providers, and other related activities. What does this mean for employers? Companies and organizations need to take into consideration the needs of their employees are struggling with the demands and responsibilities for caring for a loved one over the age of 50.

Companies should be working to change the culture of their workplaces to embrace and accept the realities of employed caregivers. This means offering expanded eldercare benefit programs that go beyond what standard EAPs offer, education and training programs specific to the needs of their employees, individual consulting with trained professionals, flex-time policies, and tax credits. The workplace needs profound rethinking and restructuring with needs of employed caregivers in mind.

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