

Working Carers
Carers Issues Workgroup project 2011

The Southern Services Reform Group, Carer Issues Workgroup is undertaking a project to raise awareness of working carers to both employees and employers, potentially encouraging longer workforce participation and support for carers.

1. Background Information

Carers want to work. “For many carers, work is what gets them through.

Maintaining employment can reduce some negative affects of caring, including social isolation.”¹ The research suggests that many carers who are not in paid work would like to be employed but juggling work and caring responsibilities is challenging. Work places can assist if they are open to being flexible and create a carer friendly workplace where working hours and leave arrangements can be negotiated.²

Maintaining employment after commencing a caring role is not only positive for carers but is also positive for the employer because it means retaining skilled and experienced staff.

Research and support for working carers is an international activity. In the UK (where trends are comparable with Australia’s), 1 in 7 employees are caring for someone who is ill, frail aged or who has a disability – it is believed that over the next 30 years this proportion of carers will significantly increase and it will be primarily affecting experienced workers.³ In Australia the majority of carers are female, aged between 35 and 54 years and like the UK this group are skilled and experienced workers. Current workforce participation of Australian carers is only 56.1% compared to 67.9% of non carers.⁴ The statistics lead us to believe that not enough is being done to support carers in the workplace even though research suggests it is what carers want.

¹ Government of South Australia, Department for Families and Communities, All in a day’s work.....2010

² NSW Department of Commerce, Office of Industrial Relations. Mature age workers with caring responsibilities, 2008

³ Employers for carers <http://www.employersforcarers.org/BusinessCase> 2009

⁴ Carers Australia, Access Economics: The economic value of informal care in 2010

An ageing population is one of the most important challenges affecting OECD countries in the 21st Century coupled with a shift from institutional care to community care. “It is important to understand that population ageing and shifts to home care for elderly persons presents a double burden for mid-age women.....” They (mid-aged women) “.....shoulder most of the elder care burden at this age but are also being called upon to meet labour force shortages as the labour force shrinks.”⁵ 2284 Australian workers were surveyed regarding their expectation of providing elder care in the next five years. 23% expect to be caring for an elderly person in that time frame. This will have a significant societal impact.

When a caring role commences there is frequently a partial or complete withdrawal from the workforce by the carer and interestingly when the caring role ceases there does not seem to be re-entry back into full time work. Australian research also suggests that when a caring role commences a significant number of carers will change jobs, reduce their working time or refuse a promotion.⁶

2. Working carers – Projects and innovations

a) Employed Carers Innovative Project –

“Employed Carers: Expanding the Options” Resthaven and Industry Partners (2008)

This project was a 2 year demonstration project and the objectives of the project were as follows:

- Research the needs of people in the paid workforce who are primary carers (HACC target group)
- Promotion of workforce participation and productivity
- Identify issues and solutions for sustainable respite services

The assumptions at the commencement of the project included the following - an understanding that quality of life is greater when carers are in the workforce and

⁵ Alison Page et al, 2009 Taking care: Mature age workers with elder care responsibilities, background briefing paper

⁶ Alison Page et al, 2009 Taking care: Mature age workers with elder care responsibilities, background briefing paper

employees don't always have a good understanding of the impact of caring and how it impacts on carers' choices about when and where they work.

Staff from 4 organisations were surveyed and out of 119 responses, 89 identified themselves as carers. 90% of the group were female, 71% were caring for someone over 65 years and 53% had no current supports in place. Half of the working carers felt comfortable to discuss their caring role with their employer (and half didn't) however a quarter indicated that they were not aware of the carers leave entitlement. When asked what would assist them to balance their load they said flexible working hours, access to carers leave, ability to take time off and make it up later and the opportunity for flexible care arrangements.

The conclusions reached were that working carers face massive challenges and that the term 'carer' is not well understood. Services were usually only accessed in crisis situations. It was also concluded that there was a need for extended respite hours, preference being in home respite and a larger case management component.⁷

b) A study was conducted in 2009 titled The Ethics of Caring in a Good Society: A national Conversation.⁸ It was backed by Carers NSW and the Macquarie group Foundation and conducted by St James Ethics Centre. The study gathered information from focus groups on various ethical questions. Two that are of particular interest are 'Can people be a carer and fulfil their work obligations' and 'Caring may impact upon careers'. A range of views are presented – some of the views are documented below:

Question 1 'Can people be a carer and fulfil their work obligations'

- "It's up to her (the carer) to make it work"
- "A competent, talented staff member will be able to juggle the conflict of caring with the needs of clients and stakeholders. Caring responsibilities

⁷ Sue McKechnie, Quynh Vu, 2008 Employed Carers Innovative Project – 'Employed Carers Expanding the options'

⁸ St James Ethics Centre, 2009 The Ethics of Caring in a Good Society: A National Conversation

should have little bearing in promotions or job offers. It is discriminatory, just as judging young mothers is.”

- “Both parties (employee and clients) are important to each other. The CEO has a duty to both, but if a compromise cannot be reached, the CEO may have to put “the needs of the many before the needs of the few.”
- “You also need to consider the needs/rights of the other employees who may have to carry a larger load to make up for her absences.”
- “We have to start deconstructing the ideal ‘unencumbered’ male worker model – workers have lives and companies should be structured so that they have contingency plans (ie back up staff, and staff who can multi task) in cases where they may need to cover or job share for staff unable to work as much due to care or other reasons such as ill health.”

Question 2 ‘Caring may impact upon careers’

- “I would sacrifice my career for my daughter.”
- “Since the Australian state abrogates its responsibility to people with a disability, people in this situation are required to step in and meet those responsibilities, and their rights suffer.”
- “This is a situation that almost every parent has to face: career versus parenting responsibilities. I’m not convinced they are mutually exclusive.”
- “The carer has a right to life. Work is a release away from the caring and helps you cope with the stress of caring. Support networks should enable career development but they don’t.”

What is notable about this research is the range of views about caring and working and possibly highlights the importance of carer education in the workplace.

c) Carers Victoria has been involved in two innovative projects to support carers at work (2007). They spoke with carers about what would make a difference in the work place and their responses are listed below:

- An understanding line manager who is flexible
- Access to emergency leave, paid and unpaid
- Access to additional planned leave

- Being able to work flexible hours
- Having information about where to go for help

The project responded by educating and informing managers in the 2 organisations they were working with of the issues employed carers face and the supports that are available.⁹

d) Working Carers Gateway is a website (www.workingcarers.org.au) funded by NSW Health which is aimed at helping people who are juggling working and caring roles. The site presents information to employers about creating a carer friendly workplace and gives a list of useful contacts. It also provides information to employed carers about workplace negotiations, workplace laws, workplace policies and practices and antidiscrimination laws. There are a variety of carer stories or blogs that have been posted and comments can also be posted in response to the blogs.

e) Government of South Australia, Department for families and Communities have developed a resource aimed at educating Managers and working carers. It is specific to the Department for Families and Communities and examines flexibility in the workplace. There is a guide directed at managers and a second guide directed at working carers. It is a multimedia package and working carer stories are presented, having a powerful effect. Below are some quotes from the package - All in a day's work.¹⁰

"He needs to mentally make the switch between his paid DFC job, to the role of de facto nurse, taxi driver, cook, friend and son. It's not so much the tasks that are taxing, but the constant worry for Dad's well being."

"....work is not only a way to keep paying the bills, it also offers some respite and semblance of lifestyle."

⁹ Carers Victoria, 2007 Maximising carer participation in the workforce

¹⁰ Government of South Australia, 2010 Department for Families and Communities, All in a day's work

“Simon is still trying to get the right balance in place between his work and home duties and is already seeing his own health suffering.”

“In an ideal world, Simon would love to reduce his hours so he can spend some time caring for Alf.....”

“Becoming a carer is not always a role you take up out of love or devotion for a friend or family member. Often you have little choice.”

“It’s like running from one job to another, working 15 hour days. There’s no such thing as time off.

“Ann is finding it tough to maintain relationships with co-workers who may think she’s having too much time off.”

“Colleagues are perceived to carry the extra work, feeling they are the ones with the burden, while the carer feels isolated because no-one really understands.”

“It can be a difficult journey to know what flexible work arrangement will actually suit a given situation.”

“The range and types of leave can cause confusion. It can be hard to ask for help, even if a carer knows what leave they are entitled to.”

3. Conclusion

This is by no means a complete overview of all working carer projects and research, but it is a sample of what is occurring both in this state and nationally. Evidence also demonstrates that the issues surrounding working carers are not just an Australian dilemma but also an international one. It seems apparent that ‘one off’ projects have occurred through a number of regional organisations targeting working carers but

have not necessarily continued so one can only conclude that work has begun but there is still 'much more ground to cover'. A number of working carer respite programs are responding to the respite requirements of working carers but they tend to focus on caring for the care recipient while the carer attends work or study rather than focusing on educating working carers and the workplace about the issues that they regularly face.

The background research has also raised the issue of middle aged women (skilled and experienced workers) commonly shouldering most of the aged care. They are facing the issues of juggling paid employment with their caring responsibilities – many in fact resign from their employment. It would seem appropriate that this demographic group is targeted with any new projects being undertaken.

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