

SENIOR CARE

Accommodating Employees Who Serve As Senior Caregivers

Aging population impacts business operations and its bottom line due to the effects of senior caregiving on staff. The average worker will spend more years caring for a senior than they will care for children. Caregiving falls on women more often than it does on men. How does this issue impact your business and what can you do to ameliorate its effects?

The senior population is large enough that it is statistically improbable that any employee could avoid caregiving issues. These events most often occur for employees in their 40s 50s and 60s. While couples have nine months to prepare for a baby, the role of senior caregiver usually begins with an emergency telephone call. The surprise leads to an adrenaline rush as our bodies prepare for fight or flight. Prolonged exposure to stress causes deleterious health effects. Thus, your bottom-line health care costs can be improved by preparing and supporting staff who are senior caregivers.

One worker stated that his mother was still able to drive and care for herself. He recalled that, last February, he had taken her to the ER four times. He commented that these previous emergencies could lead to his future caregiving role. Most employees have not had a conversation with a senior professional. Does your human resources department have information available? Do you know about the "Lunch & Learn" program for caregivers run by the Area Agency on Aging for Lincolnland and its Caregiver's Conference on Aug. 16? Did you know about the caregiver support programs

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through Third Age Living at St. John's Hospital?

When discussing care plans after the telephone call, many adult children recall events that were actually indicators but not recognized. When emergency calls come to your employees, they must take time off to handle the crisis. Is your business prepared for that? If the emergency comes during your busy season, have you cross-trained others to keep things going if an employee is out? What would happen to your business if you were out? We have tornado shelters in this area — does your business have a senior caregiver support shelter system?

The effect on the employee goes beyond the time away from the office. Other caregiving related calls will happen during the day. Doctors, medical labs and nursing services operate during business hours. Staff who have been up all night may be more likely to have accidents or become ill themselves. What policies for family leave does your company have, and are these shaped for the special needs of senior caregiving?

Every workplace has celebrations of baby showers or funeral gatherings. Aside from social functions, these events herald a new status for the employee. They can become forums for advice, support or information-sharing. Our culture has not yet evolved a social forum for the new senior caregiver. It is helpful for a new

caregiver to know of others in the same situation. Who is the "social leader" in your organization? Does she know the current senior caregivers? Could she be assigned to put staff in touch with the new caregiver?

Part of the stress adult children experience comes from the aging process. Parents will often tell out-of-town children that they are "fine." Parents may not

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ask for help before a crisis occurs. Simultaneously, adult children, aged 40-to-65, are in the most responsible portions of their careers. Thus, caregiving crises collide with the rising duties on the job. One adult child, a business owner, received a call from the police department. Her father had forgotten to pay the telephone bill and service was cut. He fell crossing an icy street to reach the neighbors. Her parents lived out of town. Employees who expect their parents to ask them for help will rarely receive such a request. In fact, as the capacities of the parent begin to diminish, they may be even more insistent on their autonomy.

This is the first time in human history people are living to ages of Biblical length.

Information geriatric professionals are learning has not filtered down to the average employee. One way to improve your bottom line and keep your employees in good health is to create a conduit for information by offering lunch time sessions, to discuss caregiving. An adult child said that his mother lived out in the country. She called him one night, fearfully, because a strange car was driving up the road to her house. He did not know which authority was responsible for her safety, nor did he have that telephone number. Sometimes a stress-reliever for the employee is as simple as acquiring basic information ahead of events.

Employee stress can also come from the interpersonal dynamics of adult siblings facing the parent care issue. To keep good staff, help them to keep good relations as they deal with these parent-related issues: another good lunchtime forum topic.

Another adult child asked, "When are they going to offer a course called, 'Becoming a Parent to Your Parent?'" She explained the emotions involved in the role reversal as well as her efforts to recognize that her parent as an adult. There are a number of books on this subject or this topic could be a lunchtime discussion. Would the capital expense of putting together a small lending library be less expensive than paying for the health care and operations costs incurred from senior care?

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