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Caregiver Stress

By: Jerry Amernic

Valdina Woods is a teaching assistant in Oakville, ON, with a 90-year-old father who lives in his own house. Her mother passed away two years ago and her father now suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He has lived in the same house for 55 years and doesn't want to move into a nursing home or **retirement** residence. One morning, he fell in the bathroom, cut an artery in his head, and spent two weeks in hospital. Woods now has a caregiver come in every morning to prepare her father's breakfast and take him to his daily senior's program.

"I keep my cell phone with me at all times when I'm at work," says Woods, who visits her father every day on her lunch break to run errands for him. "My employer is very good about this, but it would be a big problem if I was a teacher who had to be in the classroom all day. There wouldn't be anyone who could take over the class."

Focus For The Future

The caregiving community is making this issue a focus for the future because the need will only be increasing and employers may not be doing nearly enough when it comes to their employees who are providing care for elderly parents, and doing it on company time. As Canada's population continues to age, and more and more people are living longer, the burden increasingly falls on working family members, usually sons or daughters, to shoulder the brunt of the load looking after their mothers and fathers. Today, a great many people – 40-year-olds looking after 70-year-olds or 50-year-olds looking after 80-year-olds – are having big problems at work with this issue and getting stressed out.

A Statistics Canada study, 'Balancing Career and Care,' says in the year 2002, more than 1.7 million Canadian adults aged 45 to 64 were providing informal care to almost 2.3 million seniors who had long-term disabilities or physical limitations. Of those caregivers, 70 per cent were employed and many of them, especially those working full-time, were being pulled in two directions. The numbers say that 66 per cent of the 828,000 Canadian women and 78 per cent of the 787,300 Canadian men who provided care to elderly family members held down a job. Women especially felt stressed due to balancing their responsibilities, as they were the majority of caregivers. In the study, 82 per cent of Canada's working women devoted considerable time to caregiving.

When greater levels of caregiving are combined with higher levels of employment, the result is higher proportions of stress on the job. The study also said among women caregivers who were still working, 21 per cent reported that the need to provide care would be a likely reason for retirement. And among those who had already retired, one in five said caregiving was a reason.

"Three in 10 workers in the 45 to 64 years of age category are caring for a senior," says Karen Seward, senior vice-president of business development and marketing at Shepell-fgi, a provider of health and wellness solutions for employers and their employees. "On average, they devote 29 hours a month caring for a senior parent. Even if they do it on offbusiness hours, it has an effect on the workplace."

The phenomenon of workers who call to say they won't be in for the day has a name. It's 'casual absenteeism' and it is becoming a growing problem in the workplace. "People take time off work to take their elderly parent to the doctor and they won't use vacation days for this sort of thing," she says.

Seward says corporate Canada should be paying more attention to this issue because it's costing businesses money.

Granted, many large companies, such as financial institutions, have eldercare support programs which help their employees navigate an often unresponsive healthcare system on behalf of their aged parents. But then again, many big companies don't.

And what about smaller companies in the 100 to 200 employee range? Seward says "These companies say they can't afford such programs, but I tell them they're paying for it anyway because their people are using company time to look for information. If employers take a good hard look at the demographics of their workplace, they'll find out pretty fast how many people are caring for elderly parents."

Home Instead Senior Care is a non-medical care and companionship service for seniors with 21 locations across Canada. The company has prepared a report on caregiver stress and the results paint an alarming picture of increasing pressures suffered by family caregivers. For example, it found:

- 76 per cent of the 8,000 family caregivers who took the company's stress test reported that the needs of their aging loved ones are overwhelming
- 91 per cent of family caregivers who did the test said they have episodes of feeling anxious or irritable
- 73 per cent of the family caregivers have disturbed sleep patterns

Bruce Mahony, who runs two Home Instead Senior Care locations in Toronto, says many of his clients are faced with the burden of looking after elderly parents in some way and also have children of their own at home. What's more, the elderly parents often live in a different part of the country so the long-distance aspect comes into play. This, he said, can have serious impact on one's work performance.

"If this is becoming a problem in an organization, action needs to be taken," he says. "Very often, EAPs (Employee Assistance Programs) step up to handle the eldercare portfolio. But many companies who want to retain older workers – people in their 50s and up – will have a better chance of hanging on to them if they have a program in place to look after this sort of thing.

Assist Employees

Eldercare providers go into companies and tell the employee assistance people about services that can assist employees who might need help. Indeed, the problems of working people trying to deal with their elderly parents goes beyond taking them to the doctor. There can also be a wide range of legal and financial concerns.

Dealing with the healthcare system is another issue. It can be a bureaucratic nightmare in terms of time searching for information. That is where eldercare consultants come into the picture.

They help employers avoid the issue of 'presenteeism,' an HR term referring to distractions that take up time at work. Dealing with all the demands of elderly parents is becoming a big chunk of this today and 'presenteeism' is most definitely on the rise.

They will go into an organization and do seminars that effectively arm employees, or their managers, with the tools to help them navigate the healthcare system, never mind the legal system. The idea is to prepare workers before a crisis takes place.

Unfortunately, most people don't do that. The degree to which Canadians are unprepared for their own aging is, in fact, alarming. "Fewer than 50 per cent of Canadians have a will," says Mary Ellen Tomlinson, of Senior Care Options Inc., "and even less have a Power of Attorney. But what if something happens, an elderly parent has a stroke and is suddenly incapacitated. Then the children need legal documents for access to their parent's safety deposit box. If they don't have such documents, even having Power of Attorney won't matter." Eldercare consultants give employees the tools to handle a crisis before it happens.

"If you're an HR manager, you should take cost-effective steps that have an immediate payback so your people won't be costing your organization time and money," says Tomlinson. Employers must be armed with information to help their people navigate the healthcare system, as well as the legal and banking systems. In the long run, it will be a good investment." ■

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