

Workers with aging parents need resources, flexibility

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Work-life Columnist

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Some say it is a quiet crisis ready to explode. Others say it's upon us now and employers are ill-prepared to handle its fall-out. Strangely enough, this crisis regards a natural and predictable process: aging.

By 2030, one in five Americans will be over 65. As Americans' life expectancy increases, so does the number of people providing informal care to their aging loved ones. Approximately one in four households in the United States is involved in caring for an aging adult. Kentucky statistics reveal that 1 in 6 adults provide care for an older or disabled adult. Two-thirds of these adults work, and trends suggest this percentage will increase in years to come.

U.S. employers, collectively, lose between \$17.1 billion and \$33.6 billion per year in productivity due to informal caregiving, according to the Metlife Caregiving Cost Study. The average annual cost to businesses per employee for those with intense caregiving responsibilities is \$2,441, and the average cost per employee per year for all full-time employed caregivers is \$2,110. These expenses are associated with absenteeism, partial absenteeism, presenteeism, workday interruptions, educating supervisors how to manage employees with elder-care responsibilities and replacing employees who quit because of their caregiving responsibilities.

"Caregivers struggle trying to navigate the medical system and the maze of elder-care resources available in communities. Programs such as Medicare and Medicaid are constantly changing, not to mention confusing to caregivers," said Terri Kanatzar, elder-care coordinator at the University of Kentucky. "Caring for an elder, regardless of their condition, can be very stressful, time consuming and cause considerable work-family conflict."

"Growing old is not something that we talk about much in our everyday lives. Aging and medical services for older people has its own language. Not many people know the difference between social and medical models of adult day centers. They'll need to know about this if they want a place to send their mother while at work," according to Dr. Robynn Pease, University of Kentucky's work-life director.

Employed caregivers are almost as likely to be men as they are to be women. Forty percent of caregivers may require time off from work, 20 percent may be forced to quit their jobs because of caregiving demands and 11 percent may ask for a leave of absence. As well, it is likely that employees with elder-care responsibilities will use work time to make phone calls to coordinate care, speak with health care providers, or simply to check in with their family member.

"Employers benefit from having experts on staff or providing employees access to elder-care specialists to help employees correctly identify elder-care needs and services. Otherwise, employees spend countless hours, sometimes at work, trying to find the right care for their needs. It's a very time-consuming, frustrating and anxiety-ridden experience that can often impede productivity at work," said Pease.

Employers can establish a range of strategies to assist employees with elder-care responsibilities. First, incorporating the management of work-life issues — such as elder-care — into supervisor and management training is a first step to creating a work environment that fosters open communication between employees and supervisors about such issues.

Secondly, providing access to workplace flexibility can ease the strain associated with elder-care for employees in certain positions. "Flexibility can be extremely helpful in allowing the employee control over their schedules, so

they can take a parent to the doctor or help with day-to-day caregiving responsibilities.

Third, employers may consider subscribing to an elder-care resource and referral service that could assist employees with a variety of elder-care issues, such as considering out-of-home placements, caring for a family member with Alzheimer's disease or managing caregiver stress. "Flexibility might be helpful for the local caregiver, but a long-distance employee caregiver may need more information and support because they cannot always be there, and finding resources are even more of a challenge from far away. Access to an aging specialist gives employees the opportunity to seek the most current information available, the guidance and support to make an informed decision and ongoing support and counseling over time as the situation changes, as it often does when you are taking care of an aging parent," Kanatzar said.

Over 50 percent of Lexington's population is 35 years or older, and nearly three quarters of these adults are employed. The trends are clear: an increasing number of employees will be managing elder-care responsibilities, and for some, this will be in addition to raising children. Employers who do not understand and accommodate the demographics and demands of the 21st century workforce by implementing innovative workplace practices may suffer unnecessary costs.

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