

News

Most workplace carers 'hiding in plain sight'

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By Annie Makoff

Study urges more support and information, as experts suggest new legislation may be needed

More than three in five employees (62 per cent) do not believe they have any colleagues who care for ill, older or disabled relatives – even though 1 in nine people in the workforce are now working carers, according to a new study.

In the survey from Carers UK, published to coincide with Carers Rights Day today (24 November), nearly half of respondents said they 'would not feel confident' helping co-workers receive additional support and information from their employers.

Carers UK said it wanted employers, HR departments and key decision-makers within businesses to raise the profile of working carers and to improve access to financial and emotional support both inside and outside the workplace.

As part of this, the charity presented three key recommendations for employers. These included publicising policies to "create a culture of inclusion and support", increasing the visibility of carers issues by "signposting to existing carer-friendly policies" and engaging with relevant forums and resources to help HR better support carers in the workforce. Even among those who managed or were aware of carers in the workplace, a striking number (64 per cent) did not direct them to further sources of information.

Katherine Wilson, head of employers at Carers, a Carers UK initiative, said three million working carers were "hidden in plain sight" as they did not discuss their caring responsibilities. Carers UK puts the total number of carers in the country at 6.5 million, 58 per cent of them women. It expects the figure to reach nine million by 2037.

In June 2016, People Management warned that businesses risked alienating working carers by failing to provide adequate support, while employees were having to use annual and sick leave to care for elderly relatives.

Acas has warned that the UK's ageing population is likely to have far-reaching effects on the workplace, with thousands of workers experiencing increased pressure to juggle work with caring responsibilities.

Clare Sheridan, principal at Aon Employee Benefits, told People Management it was a "growing concern" and a "major burden" for employers, as well as the sandwich generation who are frequently looking after elderly relatives and their own children.

"Caring for elderly relatives can affect you mentally, socially, emotionally and physically and it can feel quite

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kind of support.

"It's always in the employer's best interest to support working carers because they don't want to lose their skills and expertise," he said. "There are already structures in place to implement policies such as flexible working legislation and maternity leave, so the models are already there for the employers to adopt."

But Dan Jones, director of innovation and change at the Centre for Ageing Better, said it was important for employers to make policies for working carers available for everyone in a non-discriminatory, inclusive way – rather than trying to identify and target specific employees.

He called for more clarity in current flexible working legislation to aid understanding of the grounds for refusing flexible working requests.

Making the case for further legislation to protect working carers, Jones said: "We want to see legislation that gives carers the right to return to work following absence. Returning to work after parental leave is guaranteed and we think there should be no difference for carers.

"Crucially, employers need to be more open to flexible flexibility. You can have a set timescale when you're likely to return to work with childcare, but the nature of caring means you need to be more flexible as time off can fluctuate depending on health needs."

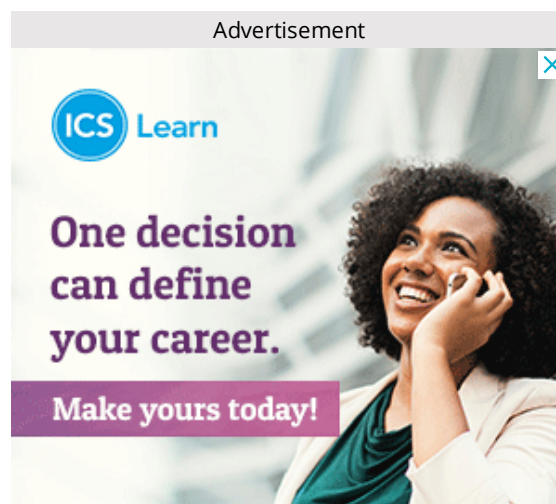
Phil Allen, partner and employment lawyer at Weightmans, said some legislation providing protection and support to carers existed. The right to request a change to working hours or place of work now applies to all employees – irrespective of their reasons for asking.

"However, there is a need for a balance, and employers can refuse such requests if they need to for business reasons. In our experience, many employers will try to accommodate such requests, or make alternative suggestions, if they are able to do so," he said.

Many workers are probably unaware of the right to a reasonable amount of unpaid time off to make arrangements for care of a dependant or because of unexpected disruption or termination of care arrangements, he said. While this is limited and aimed at alleviating short-term problems, it gives carers who require time off in an emergency some legal protection.

"One proposal in the Taylor review is for the right to request flexible working to be extended to cover temporary changes, as it is currently limited to a request to permanently change working arrangements," said Allen.

"Such a change might be sensible and may assist both employers and employees in reacting to changes in care requirements. Employers are currently able to voluntarily agree temporary changes."



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