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Essay

Carers: a business responsibility and social opportunity

By David Grayson

Caring for friends or relatives is part of daily life for many, and employers as well as their employees have much to gain if the needs of carers become part of corporate responsibility

Many of us are caring for an elderly parent, a disabled or seriously ill loved one, or a neighbour. In some instances, this is for a short, intense period. For example, when a friend or relative is hospitalised and then in convalescence, and needs our help. In other cases, caring may extend over many years or even for your entire life.

Often we don't think of ourselves as a "carer". We are just doing the best we can to look after someone we care about. Indeed, I wouldn't have described myself as a carer – in my case for a 90-year-old mother, still determined to look after herself in the family home 160 miles from my own home.

In turn, my mother had patiently nursed my late father as he became increasingly disabled and immobile. She never described herself as a carer. She was simply fulfilling her marriage vow: "in sickness and in health". Like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain in *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, for all those years, "speaking in prose" without knowing it, we are often "carers" without ever knowing it or acknowledging it.

At any one time, one in seven employees within any workplace in the UK will be carers – and that does not include parents looking after their children. The statistics are surely similar across Europe. As public spending cuts bite, more people live alone, medical technologies advance, longevity extends and populations age, voluntary caring is likely to become even more widespread. A new House of Lords all-party report on the UK's lack of preparedness for an ageing society provides plenty of backing for this expectation.

Businesses need to recognise themselves as

employers of carers. Companies that embrace corporate responsibility and sustainability need to think about what responsibility they are going to take for the carers in their workforce; and how to integrate their policies to support their employee-carers as a coherent element of effective workplace practices.

Employers of carers

At the risk of giving yet more ammunition to critics of corporate responsibility – encompassing an ever-expanding basket of issues and challenges – effective strategies to support employee-carers with short- or long-term caring roles need to be seen as part of the responsibilities that forward-looking organisations accept.

A quick trawl of the websites of five leading, international corporate responsibility coalitions with the search terms "carers", "employee-carers", and "caring" shows no returns for three of the five coalitions. One has one reference to a 2010 report about helping categories of unemployed people back into work, including unemployed people with caring responsibilities; and the other refers to a members' round-table on grandparents as carers.

I vividly remember – as chairman of the UK's National Disability Council, appointed by the British parliament – doing a similar survey of international coalitions in 1996 (albeit with phone calls to the coalitions rather than website trawls in those days) about whether they had integrated disability into their initiatives and were helping member companies, as providers of goods and services and

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as employers, to integrate disability into their diversity strategies. At that stage, none of the organisations did (although in the UK, Business in the Community had been active in establishing a separate, dedicated coalition: The Employer's Forum on Disability).

A follow-up round-table with coalition leaders was revealing. The coalition leaders in 1996 were honest and straightforward. They had backgrounds in race-equality or the environmental movement or women's rights or in business. But none of their personal journeys had involved disability.

Happily, things moved on. Simon Zadek, for example, played a significant role in helping the Employer's Forum on Disability to develop the business case for being disability-aware and inclusive as employers and as marketers, build links to a number of coalitions, and internationalise.

Today, corporate responsibility coalitions and responsible businesses will generally see disability-proofing as an integral part of being a responsible business. The challenge is to do the same for caring – but in far less time than it took on disability. Happily there are already networks and some practical experience to learn from and build on.

The challenge for business

In the UK, 300,000 people a year are forced to give up work to care. According to a new survey from the polling organisation YouGov for the British charity Carers UK – whose board I have just joined – just over 1 in 5 UK adults have seen their work negatively affected as a result of caring. This includes 4.5% of respondents (which would be the equivalent of 2.3 million of the adult population) who said they had given up work at some point to care for others, and 5.8% who have reduced their working hours.

The impact is highest among 45-54-year-olds, where more than one in four reported that caring had taken a toll on their work. Carers UK has highlighted the impact on family finances of giving up work or cutting working hours – including the risk of financial hardship and debt and the long-term damage to carers' careers and pensions. Previous estimates also indicated that the cost to the economy of carers being forced to give up work to care had reached £5.3bn in lost tax revenues and earnings and additional benefit payments.

One of Carers UK's projects is Employers for Carers (EfC), an alliance of more than 70 major employers including the retailer Sainsbury's, telecoms company BT, financial services group PricewaterhouseCoopers and the utility provider British Gas. EfC recently ran an employer business benefits survey (launched in November 2012) to which 223 organisations responded. The survey's key findings include:

88% of organisations responding were aware of staff that are caring for/supporting older, sick or



2.3m carers in the UK could be more economically active

disabled family members or friends.

Flexible working (94%), flexible/special leave (83%) and remote working (50%) were among the most popular ways employers used to support carers in their workforce, followed by in-house information/signposting (40%) and other workplace support/employee benefits (29%).

56% of employers said they address carer support on a case-by-case basis and 44% through organisation-wide policies. However, many of these suggested that most of the time they use a mix of these methods.

The majority of employers considered that supporting carers in their workforce had either "a major" or "some" benefit in:

- their ability to attract and retain staff;
- reducing recruitment and training costs;
- reducing sick leave and absenteeism;
- increasing productivity and improving service delivery;
- producing cost savings and increasing staff morale; and



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- improving staff engagement, people management and team working.

A seven step approach

Applying the seven step model to embed responsible business practices that Adrian Hodges and I developed in *Everybody's Business* (2001)ⁱ and *Corporate Social Opportunity* (2004)ⁱⁱ to responsibility for carers, might look something like the following.

(1) Identifying the triggers. The trigger for the company might be an analysis of unscheduled absenteeism or employee departure statistics and exit interviews, showing a high number of avoidable resignations because of caring becoming seemingly incompatible with the day job.

(2) Scoping what matters. Companies then need to scope the most material issues without being intrusive, getting to know your staff and what their circumstances are. This should show the extent of the caring that employees are doing, and the costs to the business of the avoidable loss of talent when

employee-carers quit, with consequent productivity losses etc.

(3) Making the business case. The business case should emerge from the scoping exercise, first in terms of direct cost-benefit analysis, even before taking into account more intangible and long-term benefits in employee engagement and advocacy, external reputation and potentially even marketplace insights.

(4) Committing to action. Then the company needs to commit to action with an explicit set of policies for employee-carers that are consistent with corporate culture and circumstances. These will preferably be linked to corporate initiatives that build learning and good practice both for the company itself and for other employers, by collaborative initiatives through organisations such as EfC or one of the other networks for employers and work-life balance/diversity and inclusion, which are increasingly being contacted by employers about wider caring issues.

As always, company leaders speaking out consistently on the topic is essential if employees are to believe the messages they are receiving. My Carers UK board colleague, Ian Peters, managing director of Residential Energy at British Gas, is clear about the business benefits of supporting employee-carers.

He says: "I know that in British Gas, several years of having in place a well communicated carers' policy combined with a 750-strong and well-facilitated carers network hasn't just been about being a good employer, it's been good for business. We've seen reduced workplace stress and improved retention of experienced people, which in turn has led to higher customer satisfaction and lower recruitment costs."

Separate GlobeScan data suggests a majority of employees don't think that their employer's communications generally on "CSR" is honest. A 2012 12-nation GlobeScan Radar study shows 58% of employees agreeing with the statement "there is a gap between what my company says about CSR and how we actually behave".ⁱⁱⁱ

It is even better if business leaders are willing to talk about their own caring roles – and best if some business leaders very publicly take advantage of their own organisation's caring policies, to work part-time temporarily or even take a short-term leave of absence. We know how walking the talk is a powerful example for others. (Although I can visualise market reactions and the feverish debate it would prompt among City analysts and business journalists about whether the business leader concerned was up to his or her job. And as a separate debate entirely, sadly one might also imagine differences in reaction depending on the gender of the chief executive concerned.)

(5) Integration and gathering resources. Having official policies is one thing but they have to be integrated in the organisation. Managers have to be

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trained on the spirit and letter of the new policies; the company needs to learn from experience; policies and examples of their implementation, along with access to internal and external resources, should be built into the company's intranet and knowledge systems.

Companies will need to encourage all staff to be aware of and understand the organisation's policies on diversity and equal opportunities, including support for carers. This includes ensuring that all staff have easy access to employee manuals, intranet, staff newsletters or any other information for employees.

As with employees taking extended maternity leave, it helps to find creative ways of keeping employees on long-term leave for caring, in touch and upskilled so that re-entry to the firm is faster and more likely to succeed. This requires managers having a flexible mind-set, being prepared to "think outside the box" and to compromise, and being approachable and consultative.

The really lucky (and astute) organisations may find new marketplace insights from their proactive policies for carers. For example, the installation of smart meters for electricity usage might be used to spot aberrations from the well-established routines of elderly people living alone eg the kettle always switched on before 9am, between 2pm and 3pm for the afternoon cuppa etc. This could alert family carers – often living a long way away – to potential difficulties, and thus provide extra reassurance to employee-carers. It could also become a commercial service.

(6) Engaging stakeholders. As with any other aspect of responsible business practices, the wise company engages stakeholders and builds partnerships – in this instance, encouraging staff with caring responsibilities to set up their own support group or join an existing network if the company has one. Companies have an obvious need to engage both employee-carers and other employees who may be negatively impacted by extra work or sudden need to cover for employee-carers etc. There are also clear benefits in the company joining coalitions and employers' networks to share learning and good practice – and thinking about sharing in turn the emerging experience as part of wider corporate responsibility and sustainability knowledge exchanges with suppliers.

(7) Measuring and reporting. Finally, companies need to measure and report on performance and use this to drive continuous improvement. Is there an opportunity for some international human resource management (IHRM) Masters students, IHRM consultants doing pro-bono work or thought-leadership, IHRM professionals or academic experts to analyse corporate responsibility reports to identify both what leading companies are doing and how they are explaining what they are doing to their stakeholders? This could be an opportunity also to involve some of the coalitions.



Successful disability-aware businesses prove the case for caring-awareness

Employee-carers are going to be more numerous in the coming years. Common sense alone, let alone social justice and a need to improve the quality of life of carers and people needing care, points to using every available channel to improve practice. But beyond this, we can see that the business case for developing carer policies and better integration of caring with corporate responsibility is emerging. The following are among the benefits:

- retention of key staff (reduced recruitment and retraining costs);
- resilience of staff (improved health and productivity/reduced stress and sick leave); and
- recruitment of talent to the workforce.

In short, positive results all round – a win-win for employers and employees. And business-led corporate responsibility – especially for companies headquartered where the population will age dramatically, such as China – can learn from the experience of Employers for Carers in developing good practice guidance for member companies. ■

- David Grayson and Adrian Hodges, *Everybody's Business: Managing risks and opportunities in today's global society*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2001.
- David Grayson and Adrian Hodges, *Corporate Social Opportunity!: Steps To Make Corporate Social Responsibility Work For Your Business*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing, 2004.
- "Most corporate employees perceive gap between their company's CSR commitments and behaviour," *GlobeScan Featured Findings*, 10 August 2012.

The business case for developing carer policies is emerging

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