

BALANCING ELDERCARE WITH WORKPLACE RESPONSIBILITIES, A MORAL COMPULSION



Studies regarding the elderly and those on whom they are dependent for their needs have revealed startling and disturbing statistics. Two that stand out merit discussion and debate. Failing to do so, will only be adopting an ostrich like stance and presuming that the problem does not exist. The number of U.S. workers who are looking after for one or both of their parents has increased more than three times in the past 15 years. Also there are nearly 10 million adult children over 50 years old responsible for an aging parents day to day needs. Forced to stay at home looking after their aged and often ailing parents results in increased absences from the workplaces. It is reported that companies are losing more than \$17 billion annually due to absenteeism and other issues relating to caregiving. Shockingly this pressing issue is not being given the attention that it merits. "I think we have a stigma about aging in this country, and I don't think anybody ever thought we'd have to be dealing with this situation," said Cindy Laverty, a caregiving coach and founder of The Care Company. "It used to be that people died in their 70s. Now they're dying in their 90s and 100s. So we have people who are either leaving the workforce to go take care of a loved one or they're missing a lot of days of work, taking unpaid leaves of absence, and it's adding up," she said. More often there is a lack of communication that is diluting the seriousness of the problem and preventing it from being debated and addressed. Companies don't realize that their workers have an aged parent at home who needs to be cared for round the clock and the workers whilst taking leave do not take their employers into confidence. Laverty said that our society has a strange set of rules for their loved ones. They'll brag and boast about their children but rarely talk about the elderly ones at home, a case of misplaced priority. "People don't usually have pictures of their parents or grandparents on their desks, so it's not a normative behavior — it's not completely accepted," said Gail Hunt, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Caregiving. "And so some people are afraid to seek help or flexibility from work. They worry that when the time comes for promotions or for layoffs, people will remember that they were the person who took the time off to take their mom to physical therapy." It is a disgrace and an embarrassment that you have to hide such a wonderful thing as caring for the elderly, from your employer for fear of repercussion. But it is also surprising that in this high-tech age, when every mode of communication is available, it defies logic why an employee and his employer cannot discuss and seek solutions to this issue. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if corporate America could work with the individual person who's just trying to do the right thing by their parents?" Laverty said. "Wouldn't it be great if we started to change the way we view this subject, knowing that it's going to happen to everyone? Caregiving doesn't discriminate. It's going to happen to the CEO, the vice president, down to middle management and the worker. And it takes an emotional toll." This looks like a problem that cannot have simple solutions and that it is extremely difficult for the employers to address. However, the solutions are relatively simple. The company will make life much easier for their employees who have caregiving responsibilities if they implement them. Employers should, instead of being critical raise the issue with their employees. Find out from them how best the company can help them. The company can even consider giving contracts to caregiving services and seek their expertise to assist the employees. "People don't realize that there are millions of other caregivers out there, and they feel so alone," Hunt said. "They feel like they're the only person struggling." Employers would have to offer their workers some flexibility. With their minds on their parents, they can hardly be expected to do constructive work. Productivity is going to be a serious casualty. Trust you employee, frame a time table that helps them work through the emotional demands of family life. They will pay back that trust a hundred fold both in efficiency and faithfulness. "When I talk to caregivers, they want to do the right thing," Laverty said. "They want to work; they want to take care of their loved ones. They just don't know how to do it." Of course it is not going to be a free ticket. The employee must make up for the lost hours and work during holidays or during weekends to compensate. For the employers, the investment is not too significant. What they may lose in number of man-hours lost will be more than made up in worker loyalty and allegiance that will have long-term benefits, the tangible benefits of which cannot be calculated now. Studies show that there are millions, and millions more are going to join them in the coming years, modern medicine growth has ensured that, more and more parents are going to need monitoring and care. Instead of feeling guilty that you are not doing enough and returning exhausted and stressed from work, address this issue with your boss. He is there to extend a helping hand. American moral values will make it very hard for him not to comprehend your dilemma.