

# Flexible working is important, but employers need a broader workplace strategy for carers

## How COVID-19 has created opportunities to better recognise and support carers in the workplace

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting the most vulnerable Australians has been a priority. The contribution of family and friend carers to this important objective has become more visible, however recognition for carers remains a challenge.<sup>1</sup> This series of briefings is intended to inspire positive workplace change to improve the lives and employment outcomes of carers.

When COVID-19 launched the world's largest 'work from home experiment,' it gave employers new insight into what is possible in terms of long-term remote working, which can work for some carers. This was the subject of Briefing 1.<sup>2</sup> However, what carers really need to balance paid work with caring responsibilities is multi-dimensional flexibility, the focus of the Briefing 2.<sup>3</sup> This third and final briefing looks at what else is needed to make employment viable and sustainable for carers, so that the benefits of keeping carers engaged in the workforce can be realised for carers themselves, as well as employers and society more broadly.

Throughout the pandemic, millions of Australian carers have continued to support family members and friends who live with a disability, chronic condition, mental illness or who are frail aged. The overall intensity of their caring roles increased, and many individuals took on caring responsibilities for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Often these carers were

supporting the people who were both most at risk of serious complications from contracting COVID-19, and most dependent on the continuation of formal health and social care services. The ensuing isolation and reduction in support led to increased pressure on carers, including those balancing their caring role with paid employment.<sup>5</sup>

For any employee, not only those with caring responsibilities, the blurring of the boundaries between work life and personal life can be detrimental and lead to burnout.<sup>6</sup>

Many carers report that this has been the case when working from home during COVID-19, as it was difficult to separate their paid work from what some have described as "their other job".

**Many carers put in an additional 40 hours or more a week attending to their caring responsibilities on top of their paid work.<sup>7</sup> While flexible hours and remote working arrangements can assist carers to balance their dual roles, without close monitoring and clearly stated expectations, these arrangements can become unsustainable.**

Carers working from home can also be susceptible to increased isolation from their peers, with opportunities for social connection compromised and digital fatigue a concern.<sup>8</sup> For many carers, participating in paid employment is also a form of 'respite', a break from the caring role that is critical for their own self-development and personal wellbeing. When conducted from home, where the person requiring care may also be present, work is less likely to constitute a genuine break.

When balancing the demands of paid work and caring responsibilities becomes untenable, many carers reduce their hours or leave employment altogether.<sup>9</sup> Inadequate, unreliable or expensive paid replacement care options, worry about the person they care for, and lack of employer support can place carers at greater risk of disengaging with the workplace.<sup>10</sup>

### Organisational and manager support for carers

Access to flexible working options can make a significant difference to carers seeking to balance paid work and care,<sup>11</sup> as caring responsibilities can be unpredictable or vary in duration and intensity. The support of managers and co-workers can also help employees to minimise career disruption and maintaining their well-being.<sup>12</sup>

Managers who have an awareness of and appreciation for the valuable work carers do, will be well positioned to speak to their staff about caring responsibilities. Fostering a culture in which carers feel comfortable disclosing their caring responsibilities and discussing their support needs is vital. The ability to disclose caring responsibilities is closely linked to employee perceptions of organisational support for caring<sup>13</sup>, with a UK report noting that a supportive line manager and employer was the most important solution to combining work and care.<sup>14</sup>

When an employee does discuss their caring responsibilities with a manager, it is imperative that the manager seek the carer's permission and guidance as to whether, and how, this is disclosed to team members and co-workers.

**For many managers, COVID-19 provided a window into their team's lives. However, many carers remain reluctant to disclose their role as a carer, for reasons such as stigma, discrimination or privacy for the person they care for. When employees feel unable to discuss what is occurring and 'hide' this part of their lives, it can increase the strain they experience.**

### Specific steps for managers to take

To develop a carer friendly culture, having manager support is vital. This can be achieved when managers:

- develop their own knowledge of the challenges staff face in combining work and care through education and papers such as this
- encourage carers to look after their own well-being and provide them with information on where to find support and resources
- consider how team design and job design can contribute to greater flexibility for employees
- model and encourage the use of flexible working arrangements
- communicate positive messages of support for carers
- share stories about employees and senior managers who successfully combine work and care
- encourage staff to utilise workplace policies for flexible leave
- in recruitment, ensure flexible working is advertised where offered.

### Specific steps for employers to take

Recognising carers as distinct from parents, as defined in the *Carer Recognition Act 2010*, is one of the first steps to take.

## Briefing 3

Understanding the carer population is also key, so consulting with carers to find out what support they need, by way of a survey or other consultation process, is also foundational. Using feedback and data, and taking a planned approach to develop a strategy of support, as part of an overall employee strategy (be it for inclusion, employee wellbeing or to bolster the 'people experience' strategy) will help embed carer support within the organisation. Ongoing review for continuous improvement will ensure support remains effective.

Many employers have taken considered and innovative steps to support carers in the workplace. A National Carers Week webinar held in October 2020<sup>15</sup> heard from a range of employers about practices and innovations they had integrated into their workplaces. Along with 'mainstreaming' flexible working, initiatives included:

- recognising carers as distinct from parents in workplace policies and communications
- the creation of a 'carer hub' from which relevant resources, supports, information, policies and procedures were linked
- a carer employee network group which provided peer support, consultation on internal policy and the opportunity to understand how others in the organisation have managed work and care

**Prior to COVID-19, carer wellbeing was already known to be consistently, considerably lower than for the general population, with psychological distress considerably higher.<sup>16</sup> Evidence from 2020 indicates that, along with other Australians, carers' health and wellbeing has taken a further hit.<sup>17</sup> Balancing caring and paid employment, especially where flexibility and support is not forthcoming, can be a major stressor for carers.**

For some carers, being shown a quiet room to take and make calls is helpful. 'Lunch and learn' carer education sessions or the sharing of carer specific information on internal communication channels and platforms are other ways to foster a carer inclusive culture.

### **General wellbeing support and carer specific support**

Many resources to support mental health are available at no cost and can be shared and promoted to employees, whether or not they have caring responsibilities. Employers that do invest in mental health programs for employees are making a wise investment, with a PwC study commissioned by Beyond Blue finding that Australian workplaces can expect a positive gain for every dollar invested in workplace mental health.<sup>18</sup>

While mainstream options like Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) benefit carers, carer-specific supports and interventions lend more tailored support. Carer Gateway, for example, offers online, phone based and in-person support to carers across Australia. This includes free carer-specific counselling and connecting with other carers who have had similar experiences.

When employers provide links to, or promote external support such as Carer Gateway and the member organisations of Carers Australia in each state and territory, it increases the potential for carers to become aware of these resources and to be directed to information specific to their role as a carer.

**At least 1 in 9 Australians are carers,<sup>19</sup> and anyone can become a carer at any time. Making changes in the workplace to ensure genuine and sustained support for carers, who make such a valuable contribution to our society, is well overdue.**

**COVID-19 has demonstrated that employers can implement changes that might once have seemed impossible. With many employers integrating progressive workplace initiatives, now is the time to ensure recognition and support for carers is included.**

## Resources

- **Carers + Employers** has information on carer friendly workplaces and you can download “10 tips for a carer friendly workplace” from the website.
- **Carer Gateway** is the access point for carer support nationally.
- Each state and territory has a carer organisation to advocate for and support carers. Links to each can be found [here](#).
- **Head to Health** can help you find digital mental health services from some of Australia’s most trusted mental health organisations.

## References

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