

Employees who are caring for an aging relative are faced with many difficulties. The author suggests that employers can do more—through employee assistance programs, long-term care insurance and other benefit offerings, or helping employees find the services they need—to help employees navigate both medical and long-term care systems.

Aging in Place:

Supporting Caregiving Aids Both Employer and Employee

by Hugh Lytle

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of Employee Benefit Plans

It's not hard to imagine the impact on a company's productivity when an employee suddenly must devote time and energy toward the care of an aging loved one. Take the example of an employee whose elderly father has fallen and is in the hospital. The employee is likely to be away from the office, both physically and psychologically, for a significant amount of time as future care options are planned and arranged.

Caring for a parent or family member requires a focused effort. Caregiving responsibilities inevitably impact absenteeism and productivity for employees. And it is not only the individual who is affected; these disruptions can affect broader teams within an organization.

Whether employees are struggling to care for elderly family members or starting to worry about their own futures, aging is fast becoming one of the most challenging issues facing the U.S. workplace.

The Population "Mushroom Cloud"

The world's population is undergoing a historic reallocation. According to current projections, the number of people aged 60 and older in the United States is expected to double by the year 2050.¹

Unfortunately, an increase in chronic disease and cognitive impairment is also occurring. One in four Americans has more

than one chronic condition; more than 75% of the elderly suffer two or more chronic ailments. The number of people aged 65 and older with Alzheimer's disease, the most common type of dementia, is estimated to reach 7.7 million in 2030—an increase of more than 50% over today's numbers.²

These two facts are especially disturbing given that the working population, which provides most of the needed care and financial support for aging adults, is decreasing. In the United States, the working-age population will grow a mere 15% over the next four decades—a steep decline from its growth of 62% between 1950 and 2010.³

Already nearly 20% of employees care for a senior, according to various industry estimates, and we are just now experiencing the tip of the iceberg.

The Effect of Aging on Employees and Employers

Aging and the issues that go with it pose challenges for families and employers alike. One startling statistic: 40% of those caring for an elderly relative use 17 days of unpaid leave per year and 10% of their income to do so.

Meanwhile, a 2009 NAC/AARP survey on caregiving in the United States found that 60% of family caregivers for people

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with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias were employed full-time or part-time. Of those who were employed, two-thirds said they had to go in late, leave early or take time off because of caregiving; 14% had to take a leave of absence; 10% had to reduce their hours or take a less demanding job; and 10% had to quit work entirely or take early retirement due to caregiving.⁴

According to a recent study by the MetLife Mature Market Institute® National Alliance for Caregiving, the total estimated cost to employers for all full-time staff who also provide elder care is \$33.6 billion (a \$2,110 average per employee).⁵ Because their average age is only 47, many of these caregivers also have children at home. They are the *sandwich generation*, caring for both dependent children and parents—most while working full-time. Typical challenges these employees face include:

- Financing the care for their aging loved one (limited insurance coverage often means paying out-of-pocket for expenses)
- Modifying the home environment to accommodate the needs of older individuals
- Coordinating both clinical (e.g., nursing care, medical equipment, prescriptions) and nonclinical care (e.g., feeding, dressing, transportation) needs.

The challenges are greater—and the amount of caregiving time increases substantially—as an aging loved one's cognitive impairment worsens. Perhaps it is not surprising that as a result of these stressors, caregivers are themselves unhealthier. Studies have found caregivers are more likely to suffer increased blood pressure and insulin levels, impaired immune systems, and increased risk for cardiovascular disease. As many as half report depressive disorders or symptoms;⁶ several studies have shown caregivers use prescription and psychotropic drugs more than noncaregivers.⁷

The problem is not going away. Unpaid family caregivers will continue to be the largest source of long-term care services in the United States; by 2050, their numbers are expected to increase by 85% over the statistics from 2000.⁸ Simply put, the cost—financial, occupational, physical and psychological—of providing care is unsustainable using present methods. However, cost

is symptomatic of the real malady: the lack of a single, unified source of information to help merge all of the disparate aspects of caregiving—especially for those who wish to age in their own homes.

Employee Need: A Single Point of Access to Trusted Services

To help with caregiving challenges, employees need easy access to information about trusted support services for the aging. Unfortunately, it's difficult to get this guidance in today's fragmented system of delivery.

Caregivers must try to organize efforts across two entirely separate delivery systems—medical and long-term care. While they can turn to doctors, hospitals and other medical institutions for their loved ones' health care needs, they must find a completely separate set of resources to ensure "daily living" requirements are met.

Take the example of an employee whose parent is diagnosed with diabetes. The employee will arrange with medical professionals for the necessary diagnostic tests and doctors' visits. But medical professionals seldom can assist the employee as he or she tries to locate resources to help

- Transport the parent to and from doctors' visits
- Ensure the parent is eating properly
- Supply necessary personal assistance
- Provide companionship and support.

And when these two different elements of care are in place, there is unfortunately little collaboration and coordination between the various activities. It is extremely difficult to obtain a 360-degree view of the aging individual. Yet major decisions about the senior's ability to continue living independently require nothing short of a full-circle approach. Knitting together both of these now-separate worlds is overdue. With today's technology, there is little preventing "one-stop shopping"; resources where employees can find and evaluate the full spectrum of services they need to support the aging process.

Independence Trumps All

Health, life and long-term care insurers all sell insurance. But what many people really want to buy is independence.

Though treated like a disease, aging actually is a process. During this process, care can occur in a variety of settings, including medical institutions (e.g., nursing facilities), assisted care centers or homes. Increasingly, seniors are opting for independence as evidenced by *aging in place*, the growing trend of remaining in one's home safely, independently and comfortably.

For many seniors, independence may be more valuable than life itself. According to one study, when asked what they fear most, only 3% of seniors feared dying; 26% feared loss of independence.

"Time of Crisis" Society

Two things are clear: Most individuals prefer to age at home, and enabling that process is difficult. But Americans seldom plan for long-term care. Just as many people seldom go to the doctor until they are sick, they seldom investigate aging issues until a catastrophic event forces their attention. During a crisis, they must accumulate a tremendous amount of information in a relatively short time.

Fortunately, the concept of planning for long-term care is beginning to take hold. The Community Living Assistance Services and Support Act (CLASS Act) that Congress passed on March 23, 2010 addresses long-term health care insurance issues. This voluntary, federally administered, consumer-financed insurance option will provide cash to help participants pay for needed services as they age. By expanding the availability of long-term care insurance, it opens a new avenue of discussion among employees and employers.

Proactive planning is the gold standard. At a minimum, however, ensuring independence for the aging requires:

- **Finding, evaluating, securing and managing providers.** In home care, quality management is inconsistent at best (nonexistent at worst), with little way to measure care provided against outcomes. A fee-for-service environment, home care has unpredictable pricing. With no oversight of clinical appropriateness, it possesses potential for fraud and abuse.
- **Finding, evaluating, securing and managing caregivers.** Finding assistance for needs ranging from personal care to help paying bills and answering phones is difficult. Service

delivery and management are fragmented, provided largely by small providers or informal organizations.

- **Arranging transportation for the senior or various caregivers.** In the United States, nine million seniors live at least one hour from their nearest relatives. There may be as many as seven million long-distance caregivers.⁹
- **Modifying the home for care.** According to a recent survey by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), 70% of remodelers made home modifications to support independent aging, ranging from adding grab bars and installing higher toilets to widening doorways and enhancing lighting. Clinical research has demonstrated that making an environment more “Alzheimer’s-friendly” allows a sufferer to delay dependence as long as possible.
- **Planning how to finance care.** Many erroneously assume Medicare or other health insurance plans will pay for many of the costs of aging. In truth, most expenses are borne out of pocket by the elderly themselves or their caregivers.

Health plans must adapt products and systems to an aging population to meet changing needs. Plans can offer solutions to increase their value to and change their relationship with members. This is an important opportunity for employers as well.

So Many Options, So Little Time: What Employers Can Do

There is no doubt that the graying of America impacts employers. Absenteeism while employees tackle the daunting task of coordinating caregiving is only one facet. So-called presenteeism, when employees physically are on the job but mentally engaged in care coordination, further pressures productivity.

The task at hand is this: Employers must proactively consider the kinds of tools and benefits they can offer to help mitigate the effects of this growing trend.

With more working adults caring for aging parents, a shift in expectations is beginning to occur. Employees are starting to turn to employer-sponsored benefits for assistance. Human resources and compensation managers increasingly are viewed as information resources.

Interestingly, most employees are not looking to their employers for long-term care cost compensation. What they truly want is help finding the right solutions for helping loved ones stay independent.

Employees coordinating caregiving today typically spend hours searching the Internet, making calls and conducting interviews to find services such as transportation, home-delivered meals and respice care. But they often are unaware of the best options available. One recent study of Alzheimer’s caregivers found that 75% had unmet needs.¹⁰ A study of California caregivers found that 75% did not know where to access services they would have used.¹¹

Many employers recognize this need, and some provide support via employee assistance programs (EAPs). Given the historical low awareness and limited utilization of these programs, however, employers may want to consider more vigorous promotion of the available employee benefits. The key is to be proactive. Here are three suggestions:

1. Find out which programs within a current EAP are being used most often; highlight them on the company intranet, at benefit fairs or similar means.
2. Create programs to raise awareness of EAPs as a broad-based, positive employee benefit.
3. Provide easy access. For example, an HR manager could send a short e-mail discussing a terrific benefit available through the EAP, with a convenient hyperlink to the appropriate Web site to learn more.

Employees already are accustomed to their employers promoting health awareness and wellness initiatives through such efforts as these. It is fairly commonplace to receive a company e-mail with a link to a Web site where answering a few questions results in a customized wellness profile. Employees are comfortable taking health assessments, getting diet and exercise tips, and learning about preventive health activities. Wellness programs, in fact, provide a solid business model for employers to follow.

The same concepts can be applied to promoting caregiving support and independent aging.

Several emerging solutions hold promise for allowing employers to play an important role in planning and resource

management. They will allow organizations to deliver enhanced value to employees and demonstrate a strong commitment to helping them manage a crucial need.

The CLASS Act provides a potential starting point, acting as a catalyst to drive discussion about long-term care insurance and heighten awareness of this type of coverage. Understanding that the CLASS Act will lead to expanded availability of long-term care insurance at a more affordable rate, employers can begin to facilitate the conversation and consider offering new competitive benefit options.

In the near future, high-quality objective assessments that combine trained staff and national networks of independent contractors are expected to be available. The assessments will produce evaluations ranging from simple health status determinations to complex estimations of functional and cognitive abilities. Currently, most assessments focus on only a limited aspect of the aging process.

Until such comprehensive assessments become commonplace, though, employers can turn to local resources such as area offices on aging and not-for-profit organizations (e.g., Alzheimer’s associations) for tools that primarily evaluate social needs. Medical professionals often will appraise medical needs.

The challenge is finding holistic evaluations of an aging loved one’s social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive and medical requirements. Typically, employees must use multiple links on the Web sites of not-for-profit groups to compile a detailed status report. The most advanced solutions consolidate all of the necessary considerations—financial, home care, etc.—into a single, objective assessment, providing an expert, fact-based, nonbiased view from which to make informed care decisions.

Coordinating caregiving and independence support can be a time-consuming, angst-inducing activity. By harnessing the power of the Internet and other emerging technologies, it now is possible to connect all the people and entities that enable someone’s independence, from family and caregivers to transportation services.

Medication therapy management (MTM) programs, for example, are simple telephone-based initiatives that bring

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physicians, pharmacists and seniors together to ensure correct drug combinations and dosages. Pharmacists can pre-package medications into daily “rip-packs” they then ship to the senior’s home. Typically, employers can look to their health plan providers or pharmacy benefit management companies for available MTM options.

Customized social networks provide a forum for sharing information and providing and receiving updates on an older individual’s status over time. While such

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networks for the aging currently are few and far between, one only has to look to examples such as CaringBridge to see the potential. CaringBridge is a nonprofit organization that provides personalized Web sites to link family and friends with those hospitalized due to serious illnesses and health conditions.

While public-access Internet and e-mail systems pose problems in regard to the confidentiality of health information, closed-loop networks of secure e-mails and text messages between families and clinicians, in particular, are growing. Even so-called intelligent homes, while still in their infancy, show promise. These electronic home monitoring systems use device readings to sense deviations in the activities of normal living. If the refrigerator door is not opened by a certain time, for instance, an alert can be activated.

There is clear momentum toward such networks and technology to help caregivers coordinate the assistance of needed professionals and resources. Many are still in very early stages of adoption, but soon will provide forward-thinking employers a way to help employees better understand situations and improve care for those with the most complex needs.

Enabling Care Convergence

To make aging with independence more affordable and accessible for millions of individuals, employers may want to take a greater role in driving awareness and change. By supporting the demands of caregiving, businesses can provide a valuable service to their employees and protect their productivity. Leaving employees to struggle through crisis-activated caregiving with little more than piecemeal Internet searches and random phone calls is not a viable approach. Employers are uniquely positioned to make a positive impact on this growing population’s needs.

To do this, employers need to provide better guidance and access to reliable resources; caregiver support programs should not be buried in thick benefit handbooks. Proactive involvement—engaging employees and promoting programs that demonstrate a corporate commitment to caregiving activities—is the first step.

Current health care reform efforts and the CLASS Act provide a natural platform for reaching out to employees. While they do not address all aging issues, they nonetheless raise awareness about services now available. Whether it is long-term care insurance or assessment tools that provide employees with the services they need to help a loved one age independently, these tools should be offered to help employees accurately assess the health and living needs of those for whom they are caring.

This kind of change, coupled with a better understanding of aging independently and how to best support that, affords employers a unique opportunity to

adapt to the new demographics knocking at our door. **B&C**

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