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ElderLife Matters For Caregivers and Employers

By Linda LaPointe

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Work & eldercare is a difficult marriage for the half of all employees who are caring for an aging loved one.

You may know the facts: The cost of absenteeism, shortened or interrupted work days is \$29 billion a year. The cost of replacing employees who leave due to eldercare responsibilities is \$4.93 billion a year. Many spend up to 8 hours per week on the phone with eldercare issues, come in late & take more time off. One half of employees care for dependent adults. Three fourths of elder caregivers are in the workforce. One third of caregivers acknowledge their eldercare responsibilities interfere with work.

These issues not only concern the employer, they also greatly concern the employee who wants to do a good job. Yet most caregivers don't know what kind of help or information to ask for and often tell Linda LaPointe, CaregiverCoach, "It's difficult to concentrate on a project when I feel like you should make a call or stop in to check on Mom & Dad." "Education is the key," LaPointe says, "so caregivers have some idea what to expect and how to help."

Having seen both sides of the aging situation as a former administrator and now as a Geriatric Care Manager, Linda LaPointe remembers the day she knew what she would do to help families in crisis. She tells us about it:

The 60ish man looked to be assisting his father from the passenger side of the car, when he suddenly and shockingly, in one swift movement, slammed the car door, leapt to the sidewalk and yelled, "You old f----- son of a b-----!", leaving the older man in the car.

Watching this from the next car, it was the final straw. I was determined to develop a simulation so that adult children of aging parents could get some idea what it must be like to grow old and how they can assist their loved ones, as so often they don't know what to do.

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The hurt, the fear, the anger, the defeat, the exhaustion; I'd seen it all, over and over again. I could not remember how many times I had told caregivers, "S/he isn't doing that on purpose just to upset you." Some, relieved, believed me. Others, resentful, would never believe me.

In My Shoes: Growing Old is now a boardgame. "People can attend days of lecture and seminars and not be as affected as when they spend one hour moving around the gameboard, living 'in my shoes', as one who is aging." declares Linda LaPointe, author of the simulation. She has watched players "come away with more understanding, patience and empathy after they have 'experienced' being an elder facing the many challenges, joys and losses." It is good for employee assistance professionals, administrators and direct supervisors as well as the workers who are caregivers.

LaPointe explains that we learn more when our emotions are called upon. We are engaged and energized by our feelings, not by facts. "When we can really 'feel your pain' we don't forget it."

Emotions impress or imprint upon our memories. "One woman thanked me for a 'beautiful piece of work'. I'm glad that so many have been positively impacted by it. I did it with great respect and compassion, yet kept the humor and a lighthearted, upbeat optimism." LaPointe is gratified when people are heard to say, "Now I really get it....in my gut."

Years in the making, this new and innovative learning tool, In My Shoes: Growing Old is now available to the general public, employers and long term care communities for training staff. Players will experience: physical, social, financial, spiritual & emotional aspects of aging common conditions of aging adaptive devices & treatments available to retain independence tips to age gracefully or to help others do so long term care & advanced planning options

It can be used over and over, and has an accompanying manual packed with instructions, information, resources and exercises which can be used to create a 1-8 hour educational session. Training can be fun & games. Step up to the challenge with In My Shoes: Growing Old.

Learn more, see the game or order from

or contact Linda LaPointe toll

free at 866.241.7009 or email at

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Linda LaPointe is a Care-Giver-Coach to families in need.

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Getting Your Employees' Attention Back to Work

By Michael Christian

ElderLife Matters For Caregivers and Employers

It is 9:00 am on a Monday morning. Do you know where your employees' attention is? Is it on work?

Picture this. You are at work. The phone rings. It is your aging father's neighbor calling to say that Dad is walking around outside in his pajamas and seems confused. You have a full day of meetings and deadlines. Your heart sinks as you try to figure out how to care for your dad and keep your job.

The phone rings again. This time it is the school nurse saying that your asthmatic child is having trouble breathing.

According to the American Productivity Audit, one-third of respondents said dependent health concerns were a top reason employees were not able to focus on their job while at work.

What you may not know is that the situations above can just as likely happen to a working woman as to a working man. However if a woman gets the troubling phone call, she is more likely to talk about it at work while the man will not (2003 National Alliance for Caregiving national survey).

Millions of working adults – men and women – are juggling the competing demands of caring for a chronically ill or disabled parent, raising a family, and managing a career.

Working caregivers sacrifice leisure time, and often suffer stress-related illnesses. Negative effects on working caregivers include time lost from work, lower productivity, quitting a job to provide care, lost career opportunities and lower future earnings. Eventually, some 16 percent quit their jobs to provide care full-time. Work disruptions due to employee caregiving responsibilities result in productivity losses of \$1,142 per year per employee. According to the Washington Post, researchers estimate that the cost of informal caregiving in terms of lost productivity to U.S. businesses is \$29 billion annually.

Caregiving Takes Work-Life Toll

A recent MetLife study dubbed "Juggling Act" revealed some of the productivity-killing adjustments that caregivers choose to make to their work schedules: 84% make phone calls 69% arrive late or leave early 67% take time off during the workday 29% make up work at another time

In addition, a national survey conducted by the National Alliance for Caregiving in 1997 found that two in ten working caregivers turned down the opportunity to work on special projects; almost as many avoided work-related travel. Forty percent of the survey respondents said that caregiving affected their ability to advance in their jobs.

What Employers Can Do

Here are seven measures you can take to reduce employee stress, increase productivity and decrease lost work time due to employee caregiving responsibilities. Offer "cafeteria style" employee benefits

which allow employees to select supplemental dependent care coverage to reimburse costs for in-home care or adult day care. Benefits also should cover therapeutic counseling for employees to help cope with the stresses of caregiving. Provide information on helpful Internet sites or resource

centers. Organize in-house caregiver support groups or coordinate with local community groups or hospitals so that employees can attend an outside support group. One of the most critical benefits for an employee with caregiving responsibilities is time. Flexible work hours, family illness days, and leave time are key. Data from the Bureau of National Affairs (1993) found that flexible scheduling improved job performance, decreased lateness and employee turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

Companies with 50 or more employees must comply with the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows for up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for a seriously ill parent, spouse or child, while protecting job security. Smaller firms can use the FMLA guidelines to provide support for individual employees. Hold a company "caregiver fair" or a series of lunchtime seminars on issues such as health care planning before a crisis hits or coping skills for caregivers. Offer private long-term care insurance coverage for employees, their spouses, and dependents.

Employers have a stake in designing responsive and effective programs to support their caregiving employees. Research has demonstrated that the cost to employers of lost productivity and other factors related to caregiving employees' difficulty in balancing work and family is high. Taking action immediately starts to increase productivity, lessen direct and indirect financial costs, and enhance employer/employee work/life relationship - which directly impacts on employee morale, satisfaction and retention.

Michael Christian is the President of Patient Advocate Solutions (PAS). PAS provides healthcare navigation and insurance resolution for consumers, employers and healthcare providers. Contact him at (732) 564-9800 or

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