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Do you employ staff?

Supporting Employees with Unpaid Carer Responsibilities

What is an Unpaid Carer?

There is not one definition of what an unpaid carer is, but a commonly agreed upon definition is as follows:

“Someone in full or part time employment, who also provides unpaid support, or looks after a family member, partner or friend who needs help because of their age, physical or mental illness, or disability.”

The care provided varies greatly depending upon the circumstances of the situation, but it could range from spending a few hours a week helping someone with their food shop, cooking or housework, to providing emotional and personal care on a daily basis, by helping someone to wash, dress, clean, feed or move themselves around the home. This responsibility can be something a person has warning of, i.e. providing care for an elderly parent is rarely shocking or unexpected, or it could be a sudden and shocking change in someone's life, as the result of an accident involving a family member, or the birth of a disabled child.

The 2019 “Juggling Work and Unpaid Care Report”, commissioned by Carers UK, has shown that being an unpaid carer is more common than people realise. As many as one in seven of us will be juggling paid work and unpaid caring responsibilities. As we are living with an ageing population, the number of people with caring responsibilities will only rise as time goes on.

The Effect on Employer and Employee

In many ways, lots of people with unpaid caring responsibilities feel as though they have two jobs. Understandably, this can lead people to become stressed, worn out, and vulnerable to both physical and mental illnesses. A 2016 survey by Carers UK showed 66% of unpaid carers have reduced their working hours or left work completely,

because they have felt they have no other option. 4% of respondents in the same study said they felt their work had suffered, and a further 28% of people reported not pursuing, or turning down, a promotion because of their caring responsibilities.

Employers will also be feeling the effect of people juggling paid work and unpaid caring responsibilities, whether this is due to a downturn in productivity, the time spent managing productivity / performance or absence issues, or the cost of training and recruitment when the employee eventually decides they need to leave the workplace. The unfortunate result of unsupported, unpaid caring responsibilities is that many employees who are considered valuable or an asset to their Company, are choosing to leave employment, or significantly downsize their role, which then causes skill shortages and the loss of investment for the employer.

The Government regularly considers and debates upon the suggestions put forward by charities such as Carers UK, but as yet there has been no agreement upon whether statutory Carers Leave is necessary and therefore the Government's stance is to currently encourage flexible working in the workplace.

How Can Employers Help?

You can only support an employee if you are aware of their caring responsibilities, so the first step is to develop a Company culture that focuses on openness and encourages communication. Many employers have an "Open Door" policy that enables employees to raise any issue, but as well as having the policy you should make sure people know they have the option to discuss work and / or personal issues with their Line Manager / employer. Many Companies fall short by having the policies or procedures in place, but not regularly communicating them to all employees.

One such policy employees should be made aware of is the right to Flexible Working. Employees with 26 weeks or more continuous service have the legal right to request Flexible Working, although you can offer it to employees from day one of their employment if you would prefer to. There are many ways flexible working can help those with unpaid caring responsibilities, such as:

- Reduced hours
- Annual hours, that can be managed around the employee's responsibilities
- Compressed hours
- Working from home / teleworking
- Staggered hours
- Term-time working
- Job sharing

Alternative ways you can offer support to an employee with carer responsibilities, without using the flexible working procedure, are as follows:

- Allowing the employee to keep their mobile phone on / near them during working hours
- Providing private access to a phone
- Signposting the employee to external support and services

- Operating a Health and Well-being programme (see our 2019 April HR Update for more information)
- Giving employees the opportunity to purchase more annual leave

You can only offer what your resources will allow, but by supporting your employees and offering flexible initiatives, you are more likely to keep valuable employees in your Company. Your flexibility is also likely to result in more loyal and engaged employees, who are appreciative of the support they receive from their employer, and are therefore more likely to stay in your employment long-term, which helps you to see a return on your investment with the employee.

How Can We Help?

If you have any queries relating to the content of this newsletter, or any other HR related topic, please don't hesitate to contact us via hradvice@hasslefreehr.co.uk