

Time to strengthen the policy focus on working carers

The fact that an ever-greater proportion of Europe's workers are classified as older workers creates a number of challenges in the area of employment and social policy.

Background

The increasing age of Europe's population and workforce has become a major policy focus at European level over the past few years. The European Statistical Office projects that by 2060 there will be only two people of working age (15–64) in the EU for every person aged over 65, compared with a ratio of four to one at present. The strongest push in this direction is expected to occur during the period 2015–35, when the so-called 'baby boomers', who were born in the two decades after the Second World War, start to retire (European Commission 2012).

The fact that an ever-greater proportion of Europe's workers are classified as older workers creates a number of challenges in the area of employment and social policy. From an employment point of view, one challenge is how to optimise older workers' active participation in the labour market and extend their working lives. Given the ageing demographic and the fact that many people are now living for longer, an increasing proportion of older workers have ageing or ill parents, spouses or relatives who need some degree of care. Responsibility for organising, or even carrying out, this care often falls on these individuals, which can result in extra pressure on them to balance their own working life with the care needs of their dependants. Some people – of the so-called 'sandwich generation' – will have responsibilities at both ends of the caring spectrum and be caring for young children as well as older parents.

The European Foundation's 2013–16 Work Programme highlights the longer-term challenge of how best to address population change in Europe, and calls for new measures for age management and the reconciliation of life in and outside work (European Foundation 2012).

The CIPD has commissioned research with the Institute for Employment Studies that examines the policy frameworks and initiatives on offer to support older workers in five European countries: the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany and the UK. In order to carry out a comparative analysis, these countries were chosen for their different industrial relations and social welfare systems (including pensions systems) in addition to their contrasting social and cultural norms, collective bargaining structures and social dialogue cultures. A key focus of the study examines the support that national governments, social partners

and organisations have in place to support older workers who have caring responsibilities. This EU Briefing summarises some of the study's early findings and highlights areas where policy-makers and employers need to take action.

Country-by-country comparison

There is an increasing recognition that employers and the economy cannot afford to lose working carers, notably those in the group aged 50-plus, who face the greatest care demands, but are also key to the labour force because of their experience. As a result, efforts to support carers who want to remain in work have gained urgency and are increasingly the subject of public debate – to varying degrees – in the five countries covered in our research.

In the UK, for example, there is growing demand for informal care, and the level of unpaid care provided by spouses and adult children in England and Wales is expected to rise significantly in future years. The Carers Trust estimates that, over the next 30 years, the number of carers will increase by 3.4 million (around 60%) (Carers Trust 2015). The UK has a range of important employment rights and benefits to support working carers, including older carers. These include the right to unpaid 'time off for dependants' – reasonable time off work to deal with emergencies affecting individuals they care for who live in the same household or are reliant on them. This allows working carers to deal with disruptions in care, make arrangements for long-term care when the need suddenly arises, and to respond when the dependants fall ill. It is at employers' discretion whether such time off is paid or not. Like other employees, carers have the right to request flexible working – including adjustments such as part-time work, flexi-time, homeworking and compressed hours. The Government also provides a number of benefits for working-age carers.

There are no official government measures in this area yet in the Czech Republic, although there is legislation that entitles employees caring for dependent family members to work part-time unless serious operational reasons make this impossible. There are also legal rights for employees to take time off to accompany relatives to medical appointments. The Czech National Action Plan for Positive Ageing for 2013–17 states that there should be support for the employment of family care providers and for the reconciliation of caring and employment, as well as consideration for those returning to the labour market after a long period of care provision.

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In France, as the population ages the caring agenda is gaining some profile in the public debate. Although there are no specific public policy initiatives in this area, general measures are under discussion that will help all workers with care responsibilities, and in practice these will benefit older workers to a considerable extent. At present, according to the French labour code, employees with at least two years' service have the right to unpaid leave to care for a family member who is disabled or has a severe loss of autonomy. The French Government recognises that individuals need to be in a position to balance their working and private lives to enable them to continue working, and that there needs to be a specific focus on women, who bear the brunt of caring responsibilities. It would like to reform the whole area of leave to support family life, and has asked the social partners to enter into negotiations on this topic. The Government would then use any social partners' agreement as a basis for legislation.

In Germany, the issue of care is becoming more and more pressing, with estimates that over 700,000 people will need care over the next 15 years, rising to 3.64 million by 2040 (Bohsem 2015). German law allows people to take time off to care for family members, either in the form of ten working days to organise care, or a six-month period of leave with full or partial absence from work for employees in organisations with more than 15 employees. Those taking short-term absence receive a care assistance allowance and those taking longer leave can claim an interest-free loan to compensate for loss of income. However, this legislation is controversial among some employers, and particularly smaller employers, who believe that they are unable to compensate for the temporary absence of an employee.

Denmark's strong formal care provision

The strong reliance on informal care provision by relatives in the Czech Republic, France, Germany and the UK contrasts sharply with the situation in Denmark, where there is good state provision for eldercare and the relatives of older people typically do not need to think about how to arrange and manage care. For example, one Danish study showed that less than 1% of survey respondents had received personal help from their family members or other members of their social networks, because the state provision is so comprehensive (Leeson 2004). However, some economists in Denmark note that, in the longer term, the Danish economy will be under pressure because of the ageing of the Danish population, which will put some pressure on the system as it currently stands.

Supporting workers with care responsibilities at company level

Our research finds that, Denmark aside, national-level policies to support workers who care for an elderly or ill relative are in their infancy. However, the case study organisations in our study have

developed some innovative approaches to helping people to balance their work and care responsibilities. And even in Denmark, where the state provides cohesive formal care provision, specific emergency situations sometimes need to be covered and some Danish employers help workers to cope with this by being flexible. At Arriva in Denmark (one of our case study organisations), for example, although there are no official company initiatives in this area, there is a lot of flexibility which supports both the employer and employees with caring responsibilities. The organisation is flexible in terms of employees' working hours and schedules, and the older workers in the organisation are also flexible when their colleagues are in need.

One of our German case study organisations, a medium-sized company in the chemical industry, has a specific set of measures in place to support workers with care responsibilities, set out in a policy on reconciling work and family life, adopted in 2007. The policy is overseen by a steering committee, together with the works council. The policy contains measures in four areas: co-ordination of family and work responsibilities; flexible work assignments; reintegration of employees temporarily exempted from work; and information and communication. To support the co-ordination of family and work responsibilities, the company created the position of a family co-ordinator, who functions as a contact point for employees and managers to help them reconcile work and family commitments.

The post-holder also co-ordinates the flexibility of work assignments and working time as well as the development of reintegration strategies. Since October 2011, the company has offered a free information service for employees who are caring for relatives. The company also offers a range of other types of assistance for the care of relatives (such as counselling and placement in recreational activities, education and travel services for patients and their relatives, living and housing counselling, and specialist advice on specific diseases). Further, employees who care for family members can be absent from work and receive pay for up to two months in very acute cases. It is also possible to extend the period to four months on a part-time basis. The payments are made from a company care fund and individual eligibility for leave is decided on a case-by-case basis. This provision was established in 2013 via a company-wide agreement, and goes far beyond the Care Leave Act of the Federal Government, which offers unpaid leave of up to six months or 24 months' part-time work.

What needs to change?

It can be difficult to combine caring with working life, and so efforts need to be made to ensure that older workers can do this effectively. Our research shows that, in countries where there is strong reliance on informal care provision, national

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governments and employers need to develop more creative and cohesive provision for people with caring responsibilities to help people balance work and caring responsibilities. Typically, the most effective type of support is likely to take the form of flexibility in working hours and/or the ability to take time off work.

Different countries have different types of provision in place on which to build, but employers could do more to tailor such arrangements to suit the needs of individuals. The often unpredictable demands that are placed on people when caring for a relative who is ill and/or old means that many organisations will need to think more innovatively about the kind of tailored support and flexibility that employees in this position may need. Employers could also consider providing other types of support, evident in some of our case study organisations – such as access to practical, expert sources of advice, support networks and counselling services.

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Changes and/or reductions to employees' working arrangements can help them to both manage care responsibilities and have a positive impact on their health and well-being. In many cases, working time can be reduced, rendered more flexible, or broken up in different ways. Our case study data demonstrate the extent to which some organisations are prepared to go in order to retain valuable talent, devising a range of creative working arrangements to appeal to the varied needs of their older employees. While the exact format of flexible working arrangements would need to be acceptable to both the organisation's operations and its social partnership arrangements, if applicable, the flexible working arrangements outlined here should serve as inspiration for employers across geographical boundaries.

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