RESEARCH BRIEF

A Virtual Workplace Intervention for Carers during COVID: Impacts and perspectives

The Intervention

An internal steering committee was formed within a partnered workplace, composed of carer-employees, HR, and researchers. A workplace intervention campaign was designed and rolled out within the span of 6 months; this intervention was aimed at fostering a more supportive workplace culture for carer-employees, and providing a generalist education on carer-employees for both managers and employees. Intervention resources that were created and distributed to the workplace included:

- o A list of federal/provincial resources document for carers
- o Recognizing burnout guidelines for managers
- o Tips for managers in supporting carer-employee documents
- o Standardized training for managers on CE issues and resources
- o Lunch-and-learn seminars for CEs

These resources were designed to help current carer-employees, as well as induce more compassionate behaviours from managers and non-caregiving employees. within the workplace.

Research Objectives

We evaluated the following questions:

1) How has COVID-19 impacted the workplace and the nature of caregiving?

2) What are the gaps within the workplace, with respect to baseline carer-supportive workplace culture?

3) Does our designed intervention improve work and health outcomes for employees?

What is the importance of this research?

Carer-employees (CEs) are active members of the labour-force who are balancing unpaid family care alongside employment responsibilities. The COVID-19 pandemic, laid across the backdrop of global population aging, has intensified familial eldercare demands and added additional strain to CE work-life balance. Workplace policies aimed at supporting CEs are known to be mutually beneficial for both employers and employees, with respect to reducing work-care conflicts, as well as increasing job satisfaction and employee health. This project examined the impact of a workplace policy intervention, aimed at promoting a carer-friendly workplace culture, as well as providing employees with knowledge and resources relating to carer-employees.

What was done

Objective 1
- o Data: semi-structured interviews with carer-employees (n=5)
- o Method: thematic analysis of interview transcripts

Objective 2
- o Data: workplace-wide survey (n=43), semi-structured interviews with carer-employees (n=5) and managers/HR (n=4)
- o Method: mixed methods triangulation of descriptive statistics, Kruskal-Wallis H test, and thematic analysis

Objective 3
- o Data: two rounds of workplace-wide survey, before (n=97) and after (n=139) intervention
- o Method: mixed methods triangulation of descriptive statistics, Wilcoxon sum-rank test, and thematic analysis

What did the researchers find?

Objective 1

- The home during COVID-19 has become a blended place, occupied by activities of care provision, paid work, and personal life.
- With the transition to remote working during COVID, CEs were struggling with work-life balance due to: the undefined boundaries between work, care and personal life, and the loss of the feeling of social cohesion at work
- Care burden and time spent caregiving has been higher during COVID-19, exacerbated by the closure of community carer supports and social/physical distancing, leading to increasing feelings of isolation
- However, benefits have included: increased flexibility in work and personal life and decreased work distractions

Objective 2

- Employees (both general employees and CEs) are in good health, with work outcomes such as job satisfaction, schedule control, work-family conflict and family-work conflict within normal range
- Family-supportive supervisory assistance among both caregiving and non-caregiving employees is low-moderate, with wide variation in support levels
- CEs report significantly less coworker support than non-carers ($p > 0.017$)
- Several actionable changes within the workplace were identified by employees and managers, including: greater visibility of existing carer resources, and standardized training of managers on carer issues

Objective 3

- Post-intervention, we did not find evidence of significant workplace-wide changes in employee health and work outcomes
- However, all interviewed participants spoke positively of the intervention and described increased knowledge and agency as a result of the intervention

So what?

These results suggest that there is greater awareness and knowledge (on a small-scale) within the workplace, acting as a foundational step for potential future culture and behaviour changes.

While we did not observe workplace-wide changes 3 months after the intervention, it does not mean that these changes will not appear in the future, especially as more employees become carers themselves, or as care situations change.

The positive reception of the intervention indicates this is a topic that employees and managers support.

Next Steps

Workplaces can consider the continued use of these resource documents and training videos, especially as COVID changes, or as new large-scale events unfold.

Workplaces can also consider re-implementing the intervention under non-COVID conditions as the presence of the COVID pandemic may have interfered with the potential intervention effects.

Publications

Ding, R. Y., & Williams, A. M. (2022). Places of paid work and unpaid work: Caregiving and work-from-home during COVID-19. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien*, *66*(1), 156-171.

Ding, R., Gafni, A., & Williams, A. (2022). Cost Implications from an Employer Perspective of a Workplace Intervention for Carer-Employees during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(4), 2194.

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