

## **Accommodating carers in the workplace: A mixed methods investigation in Quebec organizations**

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### CONTEXT

- While most carers are at work, they are led to work interruptions and at risk of losing their jobs because of their caring responsibilities.
- Family caregiving tends to take a toll on carers' well-being and general health.
- Women are particularly concerned with this issue.
- Supportive organizations and Carer-friendly workplace policies (CFWP) exist to support employed carers in balancing paid work and caring activities.

### Research Objectives

This research had two main objectives:

1. Assess the availability of, employee's access to, CFWP within workplaces in Quebec.
2. Explore organization managers' views about carer well-being.

### What is the importance of this research?

In 2018, one in four Canadians provided care to someone with a long-term health condition, a physical or mental disability or problems related to aging (Statistics Canada, 2021a).

Individuals with caring responsibilities are particularly subject to ill health and poor well-being (Berglund et al., 2015; Pinguart and Sørensen, 2011) as well as increased work-family conflict (Pavalko and Henderson, 2006). While some workplaces may offer CFWPs designed to help them reconcile work and caring responsibilities, the extent to which they are available and accessible in Quebec is under researched. If most research focuses on CFWPs for work-

life balance in general or parenting, our research sought to determine the availability and accessibility of CFWPs designed for employees with elder care commitments outside of work, and the extent to which accommodating them stand as a priority in workplace cultures.

Furthermore, despite the presence of CFWPs, work-life interventions often have unintended consequences and can lead to negative group inter-dynamics. In turn, this can deprive carers of workplace social support and negatively impact their well-being. In that sense, managers' attitudes and organizational support play a vital part in carers' well-being (Greaves et al., 2015; Zacher and Schultz, 2015). Thus, our study aims to capture managers' views about what strategies are likely to enhance employed carers' well-being.

### How was the study done?

#### **Data:**

Quantitative and qualitative data were used. The authors analyzed 122 responses from a questionnaire distributed to managers in several Quebec organizations, covering various industry sectors and a size range. The data was collected between October 2019 and the end of February 2020. There was also a qualitative analysis of 8 semi-directed interviews with managers from different organizations who had dealt with one or more employed carers in the past years. These interviews were led between July 2020 and April 2021.

#### **Analysis:**

We used a validating quantitative data design that is a form of triangulation research design seeking "to validate and expand on the quantitative findings from a survey by including a few open-ended qualitative questions" (Creswell, 2014, p. 65). A qualitative content (thematic) analysis was performed using the software NVivo.

## What did the researchers find?

While employees with adult and elder care responsibilities depend on access to a variety of workplace resources to maintain a certain level of well-being (Wang et al., 2018), our results suggest the current distribution of CFWPs within Quebec workplaces is unlikely to ensure them sufficient support to prevent or significantly mitigate negative repercussions. Eldercare responsibilities remain systematically perceived as less important than childcare or general work-life balance needs. Flexible work arrangements from which carers may benefit were most often only accessible by some or only a few employees.

Conversely, our findings show that the work role may be a source of well-being expansion for carers when their supervisors allow for, and enhance, feelings of autonomy, mastery, purpose in life, positive relationships (Ryff, 1989), as well as alleviate job-related negative affect (job stress, stigma). This type of “eudaimonic support” is however dependent on the employee’s early disclosure of their role as a carer. The earlier and the more transparent the disclosure, the better the outcomes on carer well-being, since it makes it easier for managers to find long-lasting solutions and to work at mitigating or preventing altogether negative repercussions of these accommodations on the work team. This in turn allows to maintain or enhance positive relationships and social connections at work for the carer. Nonetheless, our findings equally suggest that the relationship between employee disclosure and supervisor support might be mediated by employee characteristics (i.e., attitude, communication) and outcomes (e.g. absenteeism, productivity). In that sense, carer-friendly supervisor support is not systematic.

Our results thus support recent research findings showing that women face important opportunity costs and indicate the existence of a “poor caregivers” social subclass of women (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2021), in the absence of decent compensation for the care work (Tucker and Vosko, 2021). Women’s disposition toward care appears to benefit the state as they will sacrifice their own life to compensate for a lack of formal care services. Therefore, while it may be impossible for carers to remain employed full-time due to lack of sufficient and adequate care-related services, they should at least be able to access some compensation for the enormous opportunity costs that they face so as not to fall in the “precarariat” (Standing, 2013).

In the workplace, accommodating employees with adult or elder care is a complex situation, which requires training and education for managers. The anticipation apparently required of carers by their managers is a delicate matter, because caring is typically unpredictable (Hillbrecht et al., 2017). It is in carers’ interest to get professional advice and as many resources as they can, not only to inform their employer, but also for themselves, to protect themselves from negative impacts on their career. This is why it would be very important that workplaces provide visible and accessible referrals and information for employees with caring responsibilities. It is equally important to easily access resources outside the workplace, though private services, and the nonprofit sector.

## Key Message

Despite efforts to adopt an International Organization for Standardization (ISO) norm for carer-friendly workplaces across Canada (CSA group, 2018), access to CFWPs is not a given for carers in Quebec workplaces. Given the proportion of carers in the workforce (Sinha, 2013), current provisions are insufficient and unevenly distributed, which puts women at risk of becoming “poor caregivers”. Eventually, as the demands for care rises in time at both individual and societal scales, organizations will run out of resources to keep employed carers. At present, support is lacking from government to offer more generous and flexible paid leaves, compensation for lost work hours and help to transition to another job if necessary, as well as respite care services for employed caregivers to combine work and care.

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