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The Importance and Challenges of Caregiving in an Aging Society

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Abstract
Purpose – The article presents the results of research on working time arrangements available and support offered to caregivers by employers and community organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – Both a quantitative and qualitative approach has been employed.

Findings – There are limited working time arrangements offered to caregivers, but community support that could help caregivers is not well known or used by them.

Research limitations/implications – The research on community organizations highlights the fact that these should try to make their support services better known. And a ‘right to request’ flexible working arrangements could also be useful.

Originality/value – The paper focuses on the problems of employed caregivers, which are found in most aging societies nowadays, including the EU.

Paper type – Qualitative and analytical paper.

Keywords – Caregiving, Aging, Caregivers, Carers, Women’s work, Domestic work, Working time arrangements, Flexible work, Right to Request.

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1. Introduction

Although many people find it both important and satisfying to care for a loved one going through a loss of autonomy, the role of caregiver creates a number of tensions and, above all, for many women, difficulties in staying employed. In this context, employers and community organizations can be an important source of support for caregivers, but these resources appear to be little known. As we were concerned with the issue of caregiving in a context of aging societies, as well as with the issue of work-life reconciliation in general, we looked into the situation of caregivers in particular and did some research on the support that can be offered by businesses and community organizations. Three major findings emerged from our research: 1) companies claim they offer measures but are not aware of the special needs of caregivers, in relation to other work-family needs (for example, children) and they often consider they are doing these people a favour in supporting them, without having real support strategies for caregivers; 2) community-based organizations could help caregivers reconciling work with caring for a relative; 3) we found that community services are not well known to caregivers, and perhaps some are reluctant to use them, or they do not always correspond well to needs.

Let us start by presenting a picture of the situation of caregiving, to understand its importance, and then look at the measures that can be offered by business organizations, before moving on to the option of communities’ support.

2. Aging and Increasing Caregiving

In Canada, as in many other industrialized nations, demographic changes are significant and an aging population is one of the major elements that accompany it. For example, in Canada in 2015, the number of people aged 65 and over exceeded the number of children aged 0 to 14 in the population for the first time. Aging is accompanied by an increased risk of disease and the number of people dependent on others. Often, given the limited amount of

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3 D.G. Tremblay, Articuler emploi et famille – Le rôle du soutien organisationnel au cœur de trois professions (infirmières, travailleuses sociales et policiers), Presses de l'Université du Québec, Québec, QC, 2012.
public resources in many countries, it is the family, and often women in fact, that are the main resource for the care of elderly people who are either losing their autonomy, sick or dependent. It is these family members, or the wider social network including neighbours and friends, who are referred to as close caregivers.

Since the majority of these people is employed, they often experience tensions associated with the difficult articulation between their care responsibilities and their professional responsibilities, which is costly for individuals and society alike.

Our research has shown that women in employment who are also close caregivers start by reducing their hours of work, and then, if they still can't reconcile work and care responsibilities, they end up quitting their jobs. Our detailed interviews with caregivers captured the case of women retiring earlier than expected because of care duties, resulting in financial difficulties especially when the person cared for was the spouse. Given the continuing aging of populations, the shortage of labour in many sectors, including women's sectors (health, education, hospitality, catering, etc.), as well as women's desire to remain employed, it is important to find solutions, which is why we have been interested in the support that the community sector can offer.

Indeed, while the support of supervisors and colleagues is important in the workplace, companies are not really aware of the difficulties associated with caregiving, they have little or no specific policies or practices in this regard and believe that the general measures offered in the company are sufficient for work-life reconciliation in general, as for caregivers. However, the necessary support is not always provided, and in general, employers are not very aware of the issue and challenges related to caregiving for elderly or sick parents (Figure 6).

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10 S. Nogues, Concilier emploi et soins à un proche dépendant: Du soutien organisationnel et personnel au soutien communautaire, 2018, Masters thesis, École des Sciences de la Gestion/School of Management, UQAM, Montreal, QC.
1), much less than they are for responsibilities related to children. Moreover, they do not make the issue of caregiving a priority as our data has shown that only half of the surveyed employers indicate it is a priority, while the other half consider that they are doing employees a favour in trying to meet their expectations\textsuperscript{11}. It is also noted that caregiving is less familiar to firms than issues of parenting or care for young children (Figure 1). Also, in any case, the workplace does not actually offer adequate or sufficient measures, according to our interviews with family caregivers\textsuperscript{12,13,14}, even though companies claim to have put in place a certain number of measures (Figure 2). Given this situation, it is important that other resources help caregivers so that they can stay in employment, should they want to do so.

Figure 1. Employers’ Experiences with Employees Who Have or Are Currently Providing Various Types of Care\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Employers’ Experiences with Employees Who Have or Are Currently Providing Various Types of Care}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{12} D.G. Tremblay, Conciliation emploi-famille et enjeux d’inclusion sur le marché du travail – Le cas des travailleuses proches aidantes, Presented at the conference Pour une approche inclusive du travail et de la formation, Tours, France, April, 2019a.


\textsuperscript{15} Retrieved from D. Lero et al., 2012, \textit{op. cit.}
Yet, very few researchers have looked at community resources as a possible source of support for employees who are also close caregivers. We found that, despite a relatively diverse community support offer, only a minority of caregivers use these services. The problem keeps on growing but it already concerns many Canadians, and many people in other industrialized nations.

The 2012 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS) indicated that 13 million Canadians aged 15 and over, or almost half of the population (46 per cent), had cared for a dependent relative at least once in their lifetime. Between 2011 and 2012, 8.1 million Canadians experienced care responsibilities, i.e. for support in day-to-day tasks (household chores, transportation), for physical and medical care (bathing, accompanying to the toilets, administering medicines) or for administrative assistance, including property management.

According to the GSS, caregivers spend on average three hours per week caring for a loved one, but this varies considerably depending on the type of care and gender. For example, it would be 10 hours a week when caring for a sick child and up to 14 hours to care for a spouse. In addition, women spend

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**Figure 2. Flexibility and Reduced Work Options**

- **Phase into retirement by working reduced hours over a period of time**
  - Rest of Canada: 50%, Quebec: 67%
- **Shift to part time without compromising job security or benefits**
  - Rest of Canada: 58%, Quebec: 53%
- **Partial leave or drop to part-time or reduced workload to fulfill caregiving responsibilities**
  - Rest of Canada: 41%, Quebec: 51%
- **Work reduced time on an annual basis for part of the year**
  - Rest of Canada: 22%, Quebec: 25%
- **Share jobs**
  - Rest of Canada: 18%, Quebec: 36%
on average more hours caring than men\textsuperscript{20}. In some cases, the number of hours is almost equivalent to a second full-time job. In fact, 60 per cent of caregivers, or 4.8 million Canadians\textsuperscript{21,22} combine care with paid employment.

Finally, the majority of caregivers who have a job is part of what is called the ‘sandwich’ generation, because they also have parental responsibilities with children.\textsuperscript{23}

Given the scope of their responsibilities, caregivers unsurprisingly show higher rates of fatigue, muscle pain, and heart and chronic disease than non-caregivers\textsuperscript{24,25}. They also face higher levels of stress, depression and guilt\textsuperscript{26}. Moreover, they are prone to impoverishment, especially among women, who often reduce their working hours or leave their jobs to care full-time\textsuperscript{27,28}. In 2012, this represented an estimated loss of CAD\$220.5 million for women and CAD\$116.3 million for men in Canada.\textsuperscript{29}

All of these challenges experienced by caregivers, who make up about 30\% of the Canadian workforce\textsuperscript{30}, also have negative effects on businesses. Some authors\textsuperscript{31} estimated the cost of the turnover rate associated with caregiving for Canadian employers at CAD\$3.8 billion. Scholars also reported that in 2012 in Canada, 9.7 million workdays were lost, 256 million hours of work were reduced and 557,698 employees left the labour market to care for a loved one\textsuperscript{32}

However, employment is important for caregivers. Indeed, in addition to securing an income, which is of paramount importance, having a job allows

\textsuperscript{20}M. Sinha, 2013, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{21}J. Fast et al., 2014a, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{22}M. Sinha, 2013, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{23}D.G. Tremblay, 2019b, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{24}L.N. Bialon, S. Coke, \textit{A Study on Caregiver Burden: Stressors, Challenges, and Possible Solutions}, in American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, vol. 29, n.3, 210-218.
\textsuperscript{26}L. Duxbury et al., 2009, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{28}Lilly, Laporte and Coyte, 2007, \textit{op.cit.}; Sinha, 2013, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{29}Fast, 2015, \textit{op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31}Fast, Lero, Keating, Eales and Duncan, 2014, \textit{op. cit.}
one to experience something outside the caring activity, to be valued and to maintain contact with other people.

4. Support for Caregivers

Canadian caregivers can benefit from government financial assistance, with the Family Caregiver Tax Credit, amounting to a maximum of CAD$6,986 in 2018\(^{33}\), or compassionate care benefits that allow an employee to take six months off to accompany a loved one at the end of life, at a maximum of $562 per week\(^{34}\). Under certain conditions, non-end-of-life caregivers are entitled to two days of paid leave, employment insurance benefits for caregivers. However, beyond that, many would need more regular support. In this regard, community actors can play an important role in helping caregivers navigate healthcare services\(^{35}\). There is no shortage of services, but rather an underutilization of these services according to several authors, and that is also what we have observed in our research. In addition, it appears that there is some reluctance on the part of caregivers to use such services, because they often feel compelled to help their parents or relatives themselves\(^{36,37}\). There may also be an overdose of information discouraging the search for help\(^{38}\). Scholarship has highlighted other factors explaining this underutilisation of services\(^{39}\), which we also found in our interviews: the heaviness or difficulty of the caring situation, the intensity of the needs of the person cared for, as well as caregivers’ own personal organization capacities and proactivity in looking for help and finding adequate resources. In our research, we have tried to


\(^{37}\) S. Nogues, 2018, op. cit.


determine how community actors contribute to the work-family balance of caregivers, and how they support them in their caregiving journey

5. Our Results on Community Support

We have chosen to investigate how employed caregivers benefit from community support through the lens of social support theory. Social support is found through various social ties with other individuals, groups and the wider community and is broadly characterized as an exchange of emotional and instrumental resources as a response to a given need. While emotional support typically refers to verbal exchanges and active listening, instrumental support is rather focused on concrete assistance. Regarding the methodology of our research, we opted for an exploratory design involving in-depth interviews with caregivers (23) and others with representatives of community organizations (12).

We have seen that while community services can be a resource to facilitate caregiving work, they are not always well known. Yet community services can provide respite for caregivers. In addition, emotional support through listening and counselling can reduce tension and help caregivers stay in employment, especially when there is no other support, in the workplace or elsewhere. This community support can be particularly important because it can keep employed caregivers stay in employment and not to have to reduce their hours, as we have seen in our interviews with women offering more than 20 hours of care per week. Furthermore, our results indicate that the emotional support provided by the community, through one-on-one meetings or peer support groups, is mainly used at times of crisis (exhaustion or burnout) or after retirement.

We found that employed caregivers mostly use respite and household services from community organizations and are much less likely to take part in the socialising activities offered by community organizations, while the latter consider that these activities (e.g. psychosocial help, peer support groups) are very important resources for caregivers facing a myriad of challenges.

Our research allows us to conclude with three main observations: on the one hand, our results show that companies are not doing everything they should to support caregivers, at least these people feel that the measures and support are insufficient and not always adapted to their situation. As a result, as noted

above, caregivers, especially women, will often reduce their hours of work and eventually end up quitting their jobs prematurely. On the other hand, the community sector is still relatively unknown to the public and caregivers, despite its importance in the Quebec and Canadian economy, and possibly as well in other countries. However, caregivers who are employed and add their caring responsibilities on top of their job, do not seem to participate in activities offered by the community sector, such as psychosocial or peer support, but rather mostly look into the services similar to those offered by the public services (household, respite), which are not always sufficient and can be costly.

6. Final Words on Workplace Accommodation and the ‘Right to Request’ Flexible Work

In the workplace, recent changes in Canada Labour Code (applicable only to Canadian companies covered by this code, and not to all Canadian companies) have granted employees the right to formally request their employer accommodations in order to attend to various life concerns. This ‘Right to request’ flexible work, which came into force on September 1, 2019 in Canada\(^43\), has been in force for several years in the UK, New Zealand and Australia, as well as some States of the US. Considering the importance of flexible work options (e.g. flextime, telework, compressed workweek, time off in lieu, etc.) for caregivers\(^44\), this right appears as an important progress in terms of employee accommodation, which is why we questioned in a previous work whether it would be particularly useful for employed caregivers\(^45\). While our review of existent findings revealed little evidence of positive impacts of this law according to studies led in various workplaces of Anglo-Saxon countries, a slight change was still observed towards a higher propensity of employers to grant more flexible options to employees in the UK, when


considering larger datasets at the country level and over the course of several years. Thus, the ‘Right to request’ concurs to foster a culture of accommodation and work-life balance more than it constrains employers in granting employees’ requests for flexible accommodation. Indeed, this right is no guarantee that employees will obtain the requested accommodation from their employer, since the latter can reject the request based on various business grounds. This implies that employees working in certain industries and types of jobs which appear harder to accommodate (e.g. a frontline employee in a manufacture or in a service firm) will have fewer chances to benefit from workplace flexibility compared to others (e.g. a white-collar employee in a bank). There has thus been concern that the Right to request, while it may concur for a change in corporate culture towards a greater consideration and respect for employees’ lives outside of work, generates further inequalities in the workforce and cannot be considered as a law that really protects workers. However, greater awareness of employee’s care-related needs remains an important outcome of this law, as it may invite managers and supervisors to be more understanding of, and more knowledgeable about, such situations which in turn is likely to positively affect caregivers’ well-being at work through supervisor support.

Given the growing proportion of caregivers in the workforce, more efforts should be done in the direction of accommodating employed caregivers. It seems important for employers to conduct anonymous surveys in order to determine what percentage of their workforce is providing care to a dependent adult or child with special needs, and what would these employees need the most in terms of accommodation. From there on, it would be beneficial to promote bundles of measures and practices (e.g. flextime, telework, care benefits, extended paid leaves, employee assistance program etc.) whereby employees would feel that they have a “safety net” allowing them to remain employed all the while pursuing their care duties. Finally, from a public health prevention and promotion point of view, workplaces constitute ideal pools to target special groups of the population for interventions. Therefore, increased collaboration between businesses and the community is strongly advocated for,

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50 S. Nogues, 2018, op cit.
in order to work towards a greater awareness of caregiving challenges, and towards more solutions for this major contemporary issue.
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