

SCAN Issues Paper, August 2018

The Strategic Carers Action Network (SCAN) is a forum for non-government organisations and government agencies to collectively identify and address carer related issues across NSW. In April 2018 Carers NSW held a SCAN meeting themed around the issue of '*Supporting carers in the workplace*'. This issues paper reports on the key concerns raised by carers, service providers and stakeholders who participated in the meeting. It outlines carers' need for greater workplace flexibility, as well as investment in initiatives that support carers and former carers to re-enter the workforce.

Balancing paid work and unpaid care

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, there are approximately 904,400 individuals in NSW who provide unpaid care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail aged.ⁱ Three in every four carers (76%) are of working age (15-64 years).ⁱⁱ



Employment can offer a range of benefits to carers, including increased self-esteem, a sense of purpose, social support and a break from the day to day tasks of caring. However, balancing work and care can be demanding and stressful, especially in an unaccommodating workplace. Many carers report compromised career progression, reduced work hours, or exiting the workforce altogether, all of which can have serious long term impacts for their financial wellbeing.

Employer support

In many situations the impact of caring on employment could be mitigated through a workplace culture that recognises the importance of caring and the challenges that working carers can experience. This requires a multi-faceted approach to organisational recognition of carers, including the development of inclusive policies and procedures and raising awareness amongst managers and staff about caring responsibilities. Together these strategies can enable carers to make use of the various supports that are available to them in the workplace which may assist them in balancing work and care.

Workplace flexibility

Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, all staff with caring responsibilities who are employed on a full-time or part-time basis, or who are long-term casuals, have the right to request flexible working arrangements. These arrangements may include working from home, job-sharing or changes to start and finish times, amongst others. Even though a carer has the right to request flexible working arrangements, this does not necessarily mean their request will be granted, as an employer can deny a request on 'reasonable business grounds'.

The benefits of flexible working arrangements for both employees and employers include: reduced psychological strain and work-life interference, staff turnover, absenteeism and increased workplace productivity.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite this, carers often encounter difficulties in requesting flexible working arrangements often due to managers who do not understand the demands of a person's caring role. In particular, research has also shown that there is often a penalty for men requesting flexible working arrangements due to gendered norms regarding unpaid care. Significant cultural change is required in Australian workplaces to actively support working carers to utilise flexible working arrangements.^{iv}

Career progression

As a result of the challenges of balancing paid employment and unpaid care, many carers report limited career progression opportunities or working in a different industry to their industry of choice. In 2016 According to the Carers NSW 2016 Carer Survey, of the 725 working carers who responded to the survey (37% of respondents), 38% reported that they had refused a new job/promotion, while 42% reported working in a lower level job or interrupted career progression and 32% reported changing jobs as a result of their caring responsibilities.^v Increased opportunities for part-time managerial positions or job sharing of senior roles are one strategy to enhance career progression opportunities for carers.

Returning to the workforce

Former carers often report difficulties re-entering the workforce, particularly if they have been out of the workforce for a number of years to provide care. In particular, carers may have a gap in their resume, or their skills or experience may be out-dated.^{vi} In addition, the contacts and networks acquired during previous employment may no longer be employed or may have changed roles. Former carers without formal qualifications or experience may find this an even more challenging transition.^{vii} While there have been some initiatives to address this issue such as the SkillsLink2Work tool developed by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS), carers commonly report requiring more extensive and personalised support to re-enter the workforce.

Carers NSW recommends that:

- 1. Australian workplaces consider their current practices and policies and consider ways in which they can further support working carers through initiatives such as awareness raising, actively promoting the use of flexible working arrangements and encouraging management to champion carer support.**
- 2. Legislation such as the *Fair Work Act 2009* be strengthened to enable carers to request flexible working arrangements after six months in their job and establishing an appeal mechanism to support the rights of working carers.**
- 3. Increased investment is made through financial support or employment support services to assist carers (including former carers) to re-enter the workforce.**

ⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: New South Wales, 2015*, catalogue no. 4430, Carer Tables, Canberra.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nijp, H., Beckers, D., Geurts, S., Tucker, P., Kompier, M. (2012), 'Systematic review on the association between employee worktime control and work–non-work balance, health and well-being, and job-related outcomes', *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp.299–313; Skinner, N., Pocock, B. (2014), *The Persistent Challenge: Living, Working and Caring in Australia in 2014. The Australian Work and Life Index 2014*, Centre for Work and Life, University of South Australia: Adelaide; Timms, C., Brough, P., O'Driscoll, M., Kalliath, T., Ling Siu, D., Sit, C. and Lo, D. (2015), 'Flexible work arrangements, work engagement, turnover intentions and psychological health', *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 53, no. 1, pp. 83-103.

^{iv} Australian Human Rights Commission (2013), *Supporting Carers in the Workplace: A Toolkit*, Sydney

^v Carers NSW (2016) Carers NSW 2016 Carer Survey, North Sydney

^{vi} McCarron, M., Breen, M., Cronin, P., Hynes, G., O'Sullivan, L. and McCallion, P. (2011), *Between worlds: the experiences and needs of former family carers*, School of Nursing & Midwifery, Trinity College, Dublin

^{vii} Ibid.