

Compassionate Care Policies Make Good Business Sense

By Bill Greenhalgh

Like all Western nations, Canada is facing the effects of a rapidly aging population. By 2031, almost one-quarter (23 percent) of Canadians will be age 65 or older. This has many workplace implications, including developing plans for leadership succession, replacing older skilled tradespeople and accommodating older workers.

An additional consequence that is attracting a lot of attention is the need for compassionate care leave for workers providing end-of-life care for loved ones.

By 2020, the Canadian death rate is expected to rise 20 percent to 300,000 annually. And in Canada, hospices typically are not places but rather services offered in the home. According to the Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association (CHPCA), more than half of palliative care clients are cared for primarily by their spouses or partners and almost one-third by their children or children-in-law.

Obviously, this has an impact on workplaces, through not only prolonged absences but also increased stresses on workers providing end-of-life care to loved ones. Although both the Canadian federal and provincial governments provide employment legislation guaranteeing job-protected compassionate care leave for workers, many organizations are going a step further by implementing compassionate care leave policies that provide comfort to employees while boosting engagement and retention at work.

A recent survey by Canada's Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA), in partnership with the CHPCA, found that 59 percent of 692 organizations polled had formal compassionate care leave policies that recognize and accommodate employees' family and dependent care responsibilities for providing end-of-life care to loved ones.

Business Benefits and Legal Implications

While providing compassionate care benefits "speaks volumes about your culture"—as one survey respondent said—it's also good business practice, according to the survey results. A majority of respondents reported experiencing clear business benefits as a result of providing these policies, including increased employee engagement (61 percent) and retention (56 percent). And almost half (49 percent) said having such a policy makes it easier for employees to return to work and reintegrate after caring for a loved one.

Employers need to recognize that grieving is not a time-limited, linear process, and that an employee may still be in a fragile state a year after returning to work.

Companies may also face legal risks when compassionate care accommodation is not given. A recent decision by the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal (*Devaney v. ZRV Holdings Ltd.*) concerned an employee who had been terminated after continued absences from work to care for his terminally ill mother. The tribunal rejected the employer's claims that Mr. Devaney's absences were having a negative effect on the performance of his team, and found that the employer could have accommodated the employee's needs without undue hardship. Devaney was awarded \$15,000, and his former employer was ordered to develop a workplace human rights policy and related training.



Best Practices

Many organizations that do not have compassionate care leave policies offer accommodation on a case-by-case basis. However, a formal policy ensures both consistency across the organization and the good will that accrues from being known as a compassionate employer.

Besides leave provisions, a compassionate care policy should include provisions for flexible work hours or alternatives such as working from home. In some situations, a caregiver may be able to keep in touch with colleagues online or via smartphone. Expecting a normal level of output might be unrealistic, but keeping the employee engaged is probably more beneficial than losing him or her altogether.

When a bereaved employee returns to work, his or her privacy must be respected, although it may be appropriate to ask if the employee has spoken with co-workers about the loss. Employers can provide the individual's colleagues with information about how to support a grieving co-worker, which is often available in pamphlet form from local funeral directors. Employers also need to recognize that grieving is not a time-limited, linear process, and that an employee may still be in a fragile state a year after returning to work.

Ultimately, compassionate care policies demonstrate to employees that the organization is there for them and that they don't have to choose between keeping their job and providing end-of-life care to a loved one.

Providing compassionate care accommodation is one way to reduce caregiver stress and avoid employee burnout. Workers who are supported through situations like this are more loyal and more likely to stay with the company. [WL](#)

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