

Aging Parents and Work-Life Balance

By Bill Colby

In 1963 feminist Betty Friedan wrote, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home – I want it all.” Would she have wanted the “all” many women have today – an email-infected 70-hour workweek, kids’ car-pooling schedule from hell AND nightly trips across town to take care of her increasingly-dependent father or mother?

Stories about caregiving for aging parents have filled the television airwaves this summer. Different shows approached the topic in widely different ways. Yet all shared a common, if unstated, theme – the work-life balance movement, like most things for us Baby Boomers, is starting to show some rust. And as Neil Young sang, rust never sleeps, a trait apparently shared by many of the caregivers portrayed.

The demands of caregiving for aging parents touch all parts of modern society – family, government, business. The effects on the workplace, in particular, are far-reaching. Forty four million Americans now provide unpaid care to an adult relative or friend. The AARP places the economic impact of “free care” at \$350 billion. And the most frequently reported workplace issue? Absenteeism.

Some workplaces are beginning to respond. For example, Fannie Mae, the federal home loan agency, instituted its Eldercare Program as part of an overall commitment to work-life balance. The program includes a guide for employees, paid family sick days, reimbursement for emergency backup care, and an onsite geriatric case supervisor. Early results have been encouraging – 94% of employees who used the program said in a recent survey that it had saved them work time.

Most workplaces, though, are only beginning to think about caregiving. That timing is good, because our country is changing, and graying, quickly. Pick your statistic – 80 million Americans over age 65 by 2030; 44 of the 50 states by that date having the elderly demographic makeup that only Florida has now; cases of Alzheimer’s disease poised to quadruple by 2050. Whatever the number, the caregiving challenges society faces today pale in comparison to those around the corner. Best to start figuring these issues out now.

When Betty Friedan said in 1963 that she wanted “it all,” all was easier, at least on the caregiving front. Life expectancy for a 42 year-old woman in 1963 (Friedan’s age then) was 68. A 42 year-old woman today can expect to live to age 82. Those demographics present pictures of two fundamentally different societies. In 1963, the huge population of increasingly-dependent elderly simply did not exist, because the medical knowledge and technology to keep most of us going until age 82 and beyond did not yet exist.

Consider two examples. In a 1961 survey, 90% of doctors answered that they would not even tell a patient that he had cancer, such a diagnosis being “very nearly a death sentence.” And it wasn’t until 1966 that the National Academy of Sciences would recommend that doctors try to begin learning the then-new life-saving technique called cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, or CPR.

Today, doctors have tools that they could not have dreamed of in the 1960s. But as millions beat cancer, heart disease, pneumonia, and stroke, those millions are living longer, which has dramatically increased the need for family caregivers.

The questions in families often start simply enough, though they don't seem simple at the time. Concerned adult children huddle together one Thanksgiving, whispering, "Is it time to take away dad's car keys?" From that point on, the questions keep coming, and only grow more difficult. Years later the group likely will find themselves gathered again, now around dad's hospital bed, asking, "Would dad want these IV antibiotics for this latest bout of pneumonia?"

I've worked on aging and end of life issues for twenty years. I'm convinced that the only real solution to tackle all of the questions about caregiving and our aging parents – from car-keys questions in the beginning to life-support questions at the end – is that we must do a much, much better job of talking with one another about the hard questions of caregiving.

What better place to start that discussion than the workplace? We learn from colleagues, support one another, and spend lots of time together. Many workplaces have personnel departments and education programs to spread information. Financially, addressing eldercare issues in the workplace makes perfect sense. Fannie Mae found that their Eldercare Program reduced turnover, attracted competitive talent, and improved the bottom line. Such positive business outcomes are a bonus to the main goal – helping employees in a time of need.

And that is a goal worthy of some effort in all of our workplaces.

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