

book review

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David Grayson (2017)

Take care: How to be a great employer for working carers

Emerald Publishing

344 pp

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It is well understood in Grayson's book that the programmatic advice promised by its title stands or falls on another question being satisfactorily answered: *why* be a great employer for working carers? This is duly addressed right at the beginning. The book is divided into three sections: 'Why care for carers?', which discusses current economic and demographic trends, and makes the business case for supporting working carers; 'Seven steps to being a good employer for working carers', which is the central, and most concrete, programmatic section, and the one most directly addressed to employers; and 'Building a movement', which presents further strategies for building networks that adequately support carers in employment, and suggests that creating a society that recognises, values and facilitates the work of caring alongside (and outside) paid employment is the best and most sustainable way of ensuring that carers are supported.

The facilitation of working carers is a challenge that employers must inevitably face, and so the approach to it is ultimately pragmatic and oriented towards the bottom line. We have largely accepted that work today often does not respect the traditional 9–5 boundaries, with many professionals answering emails through evenings and on weekends; employers must accept that, similarly, employees who accept this scenario have families whose needs may not respect the traditional workday. With ageing populations and the greater workplace participation of women (particularly as more and more families require two incomes to cover mortgages), employers will face the problem of retaining valued employees, who are often 'sandwich generation' carers, for both children and parents. The more variables in this equation considered – employee morale and loyalty, costs incurred in terms of recruitment, retention and replacement, and the pressures of growing skills gaps – the more irresistible the business case begins to look.

The second section lays out seven, sequenced steps that employers can take to create an environment that supports staff members with caring obligations: 'Identifying the triggers [to giving up work]'; 'Scoping what matters'; 'Making the business case'; 'Committing to action'; 'Integration and implementation'; 'Engaging stakeholders'; and 'Measuring and reporting'. It also examines the barriers to the successful workplace accommodation of carers, many of which are on the carer's side and chief

among which is carer self-identification. In a US survey, 50% of carers reported reluctance to reveal their caring role to their boss. In New South Wales, on the other hand – recognised as a region with a track record of pioneering supports for carers – 84.7% of working carers said that their boss knew about their obligations. Grayson provides short case studies of enterprises that successfully found ways to overcome these challenges. An important point is the crucial role of leadership in promoting a positive work environment for carers. As put by Ian Peters, the Chair of Employers for Carers, “CEO [chief executive officer] push is much more powerful than Human Resources pull”. The barriers for employers are not as many or as difficult as might be supposed meanwhile, and encouraging carer self-identification “doesn’t have to be complicated or expensive”, as many businesses can tweak or extend existing workplace policies.

If carers’ self-identification as such is important to their seeking help in balancing their obligations, there are roles for a wide range of stakeholders in creating a greater awareness of family caring in society, and highlighting the needs of carers who must balance their caring with employment commitments. The design or promotion of initiatives that support work and care reconciliation could fall to, for example: national or regional governments, or governmental agencies; non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and voluntary organisations; private employers or (sectoral or national) employers’ representative groups; trade unions; or professional associations for human resource management. There has been an advocacy-led push for caring to be recognised as a public health priority, but it is necessary for ageing societies fully to appreciate it as a pressing economic issue that, if supports are truly to be proactive, must be addressed by numerous actors and on the most macro-scale by the market and society as a whole. Grayson is emphatic that caring remains an ‘invaluable but undervalued’ activity. On this point, it is acknowledged that, at present, the business case can most readily be made for higher-skilled professionals, but there is every reason to expect that the business-led facilitation of employees’ caring obligations should serve to promote the value of caring in and to society as a whole.

Alongside the available research on balancing work and care, and the benefits for a society and its workforce of facilitating this balancing act, Grayson’s book presents the stories of working carers in their own words – including his own story of caring for his mother, Patricia, to whom the book is dedicated. The ‘personal touch’ works well and serves to buttress the general argument and recommendations in the book with the concrete experiences of those who have sought ways to juggle working and caring obligations. Grayson – the Chair of Carers UK and Professor of Corporate Responsibility at Cranfield University School of Management – has produced a welcome addition to the literature on balancing work and care, as well as a primer for employers that, one may hope, will help to make the issue of work and care reconciliation more a focus of public debate.

All royalties from the book go to Carers UK.