Work, Care and the Carer-Inclusive and Accommodating Organizations (CIAO) Standard

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The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

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At some point in their lives, most Canadians will provide some type of care to a family member or friend with a long-term health condition, disability or aging need. Nearly 3 in 10 Canadians (28%) provided care in 2012, with age-related needs cited as the single most common reason for care requirements. With more seniors in Canada than ever – 6.6 million in 2019 – and projections showing that the number requiring care will likely double by 2031, this population aging means a growing share of Canadians will be stepping up to provide, arrange and sometimes pay for care in the years to come.

While research shows that caregiving can have positive impacts on caregivers, including (but not limited to) reported personal growth, stronger family relationships and increased empathy, it can also affect their work-family quality and well-being – a topic of growing importance to working caregivers, employers and society.

Most family caregivers are working caregivers

Nearly three-quarters of caregivers in Canada (6.1 million) are “working caregivers,” who accounted for more than one-third (35%) of Canada’s paid labour force in 2012. For some of these people, their time spent providing care amounts to a part-time job’s worth of hours in addition to their paid work, resulting in an “extended workday”: approximately 1 in 6 women and 1 in 10 men in 2012 reported spending 20 hours or more per week providing care on top of their work hours. Difficulties reconciling family caregiving with work responsibilities can have negative consequences for employees, employers and the economy. This can include frequent absences (44% of surveyed working caregivers report missing an average 8 to 9 days of work in the past year as a result of their caregiving responsibilities) and a variety of indirect costs to employers, such as lost productivity, employee replacement costs and training.

Research shows that Canada loses the equivalent of 558,000 full-time employees every year from the workforce due to the conflicting demands of paid work and care, and an estimated 50% of working caregivers are between the ages of 45 and 65, representing the most experienced share of the paid labour market. Furthermore, employers across the country lose an estimated $5.5 billion per year due to caregiving-related absenteeism.
A caregiving standard supports employers in supporting employees

To manage, mitigate and ideally prevent these negative impacts, the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) Group – a 100-year-old, not-for-profit and non-governmental organization that develops standards to ensure the health and safety of Canadians – collaborated with McMaster University to develop the Carer-Inclusive and Accommodating Organizations (CIAO) Standard.

Released in 2017, the CIAO Standard is an evidence-based, professionally verified framework for workplaces in Canada to support their employees who provide informal caregiving. Its aim is to avoid some of the negative physical and mental health outcomes for employees and their families that can result from role overload while they provide care.

The CIAO Standard was developed through rigorous consultation with a technical committee of experts representing a balanced number of volunteers from government, labour, employers and academia. These stakeholders refined the seed document of the standard, after which an extended public review was performed for critical feedback. The review revealed the value of the standard as an educational tool for employers.

“Even for organizations that don’t apply for the standard,” says Vanier Institute CEO and project advisory team member Nora Spinks, “using the rigorous process for education purposes or for planning and program design can be an effective organization developmental tool.”

Available at no cost from the CSA website, the CIAO Standard was created to offer workplaces a guide to minimizing the negative outcomes of conflict between caregiving and work responsibilities with a guaranteed minimum level of support and protection that goes beyond what’s offered by traditional employee assistance programs (EAPs). It allows employers to select the most appropriate elements for the context of their organization, as the effectiveness of certain standards may depend on the size of the workplace. CIAO provides case examples and stories to show employers how the standards can be implemented in their workplace.

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A caregiving standard can foster employee recruitment and retention

CIAO also addresses the hazards and risks that can be associated with caregiving and how they can affect well-being in the workplace. Since caregiving can be intensive, caregivers can experience increased stress or distraction in their jobs, as well as greater time stress as they accommodate the responsibilities of caregiving.

Depending on their line of work, the consequences of caregiver fatigue at work can vary, as it can lead to reduced vitals skills, such as decision making, communication, productivity or performance, attention, reaction time and ability to handle stress.14 These effects can lead to miscommunication, missed deadlines or lower work performance, or even increased physical risk for workers, their colleagues and clients or customers.
Psychologically safe workplace: A compatible and complementary standard

A psychologically healthy and safe workplace recognizes and eliminates or mitigates exposure to chronic stress. The world of work in Canada is evolving, and both employers and employees are more able and willing to recognize physical and psychological hazards in the workplace. Knowing that a workplace has a set of standards in place can be a determining factor in whether an employee chooses to stay or decides to leave as a result of their caregiving responsibilities.

In 2013, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) developed a standard for Canadian workplaces to support the mental health of employees. Similar to CIAO, the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace is a set of voluntary guidelines, tools and resources intended to guide organizations in supporting their workforce. These standards are complementary to the caregiving standard, and organizations can use either or both.

The standards are voluntary, but if they are part of education and awareness training, they can become adopted by the mainstream in workplaces and can help reduce absences, early retirement or quitting. The CIAO Standard fits with existing programs such as EAPs, fitness, medical, family or sick leave and work accommodations.

A caregiving standard contributes to the growing body of well-being standards in Canada

Similar types of standards have been developed in recent years. In 2010 in Quebec, the Work–Family Standard was released for private and public organizations as a reference on requirements to support work–family quality.

The standard includes guidelines on flexibility in the organization and scheduling, vacation time, flexibility in the workplace and the goods and services provided in the workplace. The goal is to make work–family balance a staple in human resources management in organizations. The Bureau de normalization du Quebec (BNQ) offers certification for employers who apply this standard to their organization.

Supporting employed carers going forward

The world of work is changing, and workplaces are better equipped to support their employees than ever, supported by a growing body of tools and resources. With the continuous population aging in Canada, more Canadians are going to balance caregiving and work in the years to come. By offering flexible hours and work, education, open communication and understanding, workplaces can mitigate the loss of employees and productivity and support caregivers and their families during a transitional period in their lives. As workplaces and employees continue to work to harmonize work and family responsibilities, resources such as the CIAO Standard will play an increasingly important role in supporting working caregivers in Canada.

The Carer-Inclusive and Accommodating Organizations Standard is available on the CSA Group website.

Emily Beckett is a professional writer living in Ottawa, Ontario.
New data on caregiving in Canada will be released by Statistics Canada in 2020.


8. Ibid.


11. Ibid.

12. Chair in Gender, Health and Caregiver-Friendly Workplaces.
