

Caring Enough to Flex, Flexing Enough to Care

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Family members have multiple and often complex responsibilities, obligations and commitments at home, at work and in their communities. Families excel at finding adaptable and creative solutions, but as studies have shown, employed family members *want* their managers' respect for their lives outside of work and *need* flexibility to effectively manage their many life roles.

Employed family members across Canada are increasingly requesting flexible work arrangements (FWAs) in order to provide care for immediate or extended family and friends. FWAs can greatly enhance a person's ability to achieve work and life quality while providing care, whether it's for a child, an elderly or ill parent, a sibling or spouse with a disability, or a close friend who is dealing with a chronic illness.

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The care provided can vary in type, nature and duration (see chart), and is shaped by the unique circumstances of the individual requiring care. While some care requirements are predictable, thus giving caregivers a higher degree of control over their time and resources, other situations can be more complicated. For example, if an elderly parent or grandparent requires occasional daily care, a caregiver can plan in advance which care responsibilities (such as grocery shopping and yardwork) get done on particular days outside of work hours. On the other hand, palliative or end-of-life care can be very unpredictable and stressful for family members who have to navigate the health care system while grappling with the impact of the impending loss of a loved one.

When a family member experiences a sudden and/or unexpected illness or injury, such as a heart attack, stroke or torn ligament, family and friends jump into action to provide care and support. For employed caregivers, this may mean seeking out and approaching their supervisor or employer to explore FWAs for a predictable or an indefinite period of time. A manager's or employer's response can have a significant impact on families and family life.

	Occasional daily care	Episodic care	Continuous/ long-term care	Palliative/ end-of-life care	Recuperative care	Home care
Caregiver involvement	Moderate to intense	Moderate to intense	Moderate to intense	Intense	Moderate to intense	Moderate to intense
Duration	Long-term May span years	Short- to mid-term May span days, weeks, months	Mid- to long-term May span months, years	Unpredictable Typically three to six weeks but could last months, years	Short- to long-term May span days to years depending on condition	Short- to long-term May span days to years depending on condition
Degree of control	High and predictable Easy to plan in advance for changes to work and life responsibilities	Limited and unpredictable Impossible to plan for in advance	Mid to high Periods of high control can be disrupted with periods of mid-level control	None	None to high Depends on condition, e.g. pulled muscle vs. hip replacement after an unexpected fall	High and predictable Easy to plan in advance for changes to work and life responsibilities
Example(s)	Groceries, yardwork, transportation	Treatment-related care e.g. appointment in response to arthritis flare-up	Chronic and/or progressive illness or disability e.g. Parkinson's, Alzheimer's	Care in hospital, palliative care facility, community or home environments	Recovery following surgery, pneumonia, stroke	Supporting independent living e.g. support service coordination, safety and security assistance

Recent rulings from the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal have highlighted the complexity of family care needs and, consequently, the value of FWAs. The Tribunal has heard several cases where the need for flexibility to provide care was not accommodated and employers were found to have discriminated based on *family status*. According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, family status refers to the “status of being in a parent and child relationship,” including diverse familial relationships that may not be bound by blood or adoptive ties but are centred on *care, responsibility and commitment*.

A manager’s or employer’s response to a flex request can have a significant impact on families and family life.

The need for flexible or customized work arrangements and workplace accommodations based on family status will continue to increase as Canada’s population ages and the *formal* and *informal* care needs increase in response. Formal care refers to the paid services provided by an institution or an individual for a care recipient, while informal care refers to unpaid care provided by family, friends and volunteers. Often, a mix of formal and informal care is included in treatment or recovery plans. For those providing informal care, managing their own personal and family responsibilities and health care services accentuates the need for flexibility, as care demands are rarely static and tend to fluctuate over time.

Within the labour force, flexibility is often thought to be available only to managers or applicable to white collar workers or professions. However, a recent publication by the Families and Work Institute, *Workflex and Manufacturing Guide: More Than a Dream*, found that even in the manufacturing sector – which is often perceived as having rigid workplace requirements – a growing number of companies have found ways to accommodate their employees’ care needs. Such needs are now being met through creative and innovative FWAs, resulting in increased employee satisfaction and productivity.

One employer in manufacturing offered to pay for half of the fifth work day for employees who met their weekly goals, thereby allowing workers to use this as paid leave in half-day increments. Another employer focused on *cross-training* – training employees in multiple positions in the production process – as a way to increase overall flexibility and versatility among their workforce while ensuring that all stations remain covered to meet the continued needs of the organization.

With precarious employment, seasonal jobs or self-employment, flexibility may be inherently built into work. However, employees who are managing care responsibilities may be the ones paying a higher cost when it comes to lost wages due to absenteeism or reduced workloads.

Families are society’s most adaptable institution – a trait that is rooted in their constant need to adjust to ever-evolving environments. As organizations of all kinds consist of diverse family members, all of whom face unique realities, flexibility is key to the resiliency of families, the labour force and economy, and our greater society.

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Aging and Caregiving in Canada

- 8.1M people provided care to a chronically ill, disabled or aging family member or friend in 2012.
- 13M people said they had been a caregiver to a family member or friend at some time during their lives.
- Among family caregivers, 39% primarily cared for their father or mother, 8% for their spouse or partner and 5% for their child. The remaining (48%) provided care to other family members or friends.
- Seniors are projected to account for approximately one-quarter of Canada’s population by 2036.
- By 2031, the number of centenarians (those aged 100+) is projected to reach more than 17,000.

Source: Statistics Canada