

# End-of-life issues

How to handle end-of-life issues in the workplace

**E**nd-of-life issues are, of course, intensely personal. But the personal nature of the subject does not keep it from having an impact in the workplace.

End-of-life issues affect the workplace because they impact employees, who, in increasing numbers, serve as caregivers for ailing parents, siblings, partners and even critically ill children.

“With an aging population and with people living longer, more employees are becoming caregivers for a parent or loved one,” says Karen Merrick, an account manager for *LifeSolutions*, an employee assistance program (EAP) and part of UPMC WorkPartners. “Many of them are providing care for someone with a terminal illness, so how to deal with end-of-life issues is certainly an issue for many workplaces.”

*Smart Business* spoke with Merrick about end-of-life issues and how employers are supporting employees to meet these challenges.



**Karen Merrick**  
Account manager  
*LifeSolutions*

## How do end-of-life issues affect the workplace?

End-of-life issues affect the workplace because the size and scope of the problem is greater than most people realize. It is estimated by AARP that 44 million Americans provide unpaid care to an adult relative or friend. Nearly 60 percent of those caring for someone 50 or older are working full time, which means many employees may be struggling with end-of-life issues on a daily basis.

The common misconception is that end-of-life issues are private, family matters that would only really be of interest to a company's retired employees. This isn't accurate. As people are delaying retirement, they are increasingly juggling the responsibilities of work and caregiving. Many employees who are caregivers are not senior citizens.

## Why should an employer be concerned about end-of-life issues?

End-of-life issues impact a company's benefits costs and employee productivity in the form of absenteeism and presenteeism. It has been estimated that American businesses lose from \$17.1 billion to \$33.6 billion per year in productivity for full-time employees with caregiving responsibilities.

A report by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP indicated that one in five caregivers has had to take a leave of absence from work. A retention study by Pitney Bowes and Tufts University noted that one in five caregiv-

ers seriously considered permanently leaving the work force to deal with health matters. Each year an estimated 630,000 working-age adults will die. So, end-of-life issues do impact the company's bottom line.

For employers, providing support to employees makes sense because it is the right thing to do. Support that can reduce the physical/emotional stress on the employee/caregiver will result in the greater likelihood that the employee will emerge from this difficult period more resilient. That resilience will benefit the company in increased engagement and loyalty as the company has respected what matters most to the employee — their family and loved ones.

## What can an employer do?

Employers can support employees in a variety of ways. Reviewing existing policies around flexible work arrangements and leave of absence, including bereavement, is one step. Finding options that work for both the company and the employee is essential.

Providing information on end-of-life planning such as palliative and hospice care and advance directives is also something employers can do. This helps employees plan ahead, before life-threatening or life-limiting situations occur for themselves and their loved ones. The information can be in the form of

newsletters, webinars, seminars or online resource links. Some companies have chosen to make end-of-life education a part of employee wellness programs. Connecting end-of-life planning to wellness helps create a readiness to plan for death as a more natural part of life, like planning for retirement.

## What other resources are available for employers?

The National Business Group on Health (NBGH) has developed an employer toolkit around caregiving and end-of-life issues and their impact on businesses. Also, various vendors of services to employers can offer information, which should be packaged in ways that can be easily incorporated into benefit offerings and communication vehicles.

Many organizations embrace events such as National Healthcare Decisions Day. This is designed to encourage people to have thoughtful conversations about their health care decisions and about completing reliable advance directives to make their wishes known. It's not just about living wills; it is more important that the conversation take place.

## Can an EAP help?

An employee assistance program (EAP) can be a valuable resource to both employers and employees around caregiving and end-of-life issues. An EAP supports the employer and the employee in preparing to address these issues. For the employer, the EAP can assist with policy review and links to resources. It also educates the workplace about the impact of these issues personally and in bottom-line costs to the company. Finally, EAP professionals provide consultation to leadership and managers when faced with challenging employee situations related to caregiving.

On the employee side, EAPs provide assistance and resources for employees so they can be productive at work and enjoy their personal life. The EAP's trained professionals address the stress of caregiving, coach the employee on how to start the conversation about end-of-life planning and ultimately provide grief counseling. Some EAPs may be able to provide resources for legal consultation around end-of-life issues. An EAP is a good resource for materials/information on caregiving, palliative and hospice care, and advance directives. <<

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