

FEATURE

How HR Can Support Caregivers and Overcome Leadership Gaps

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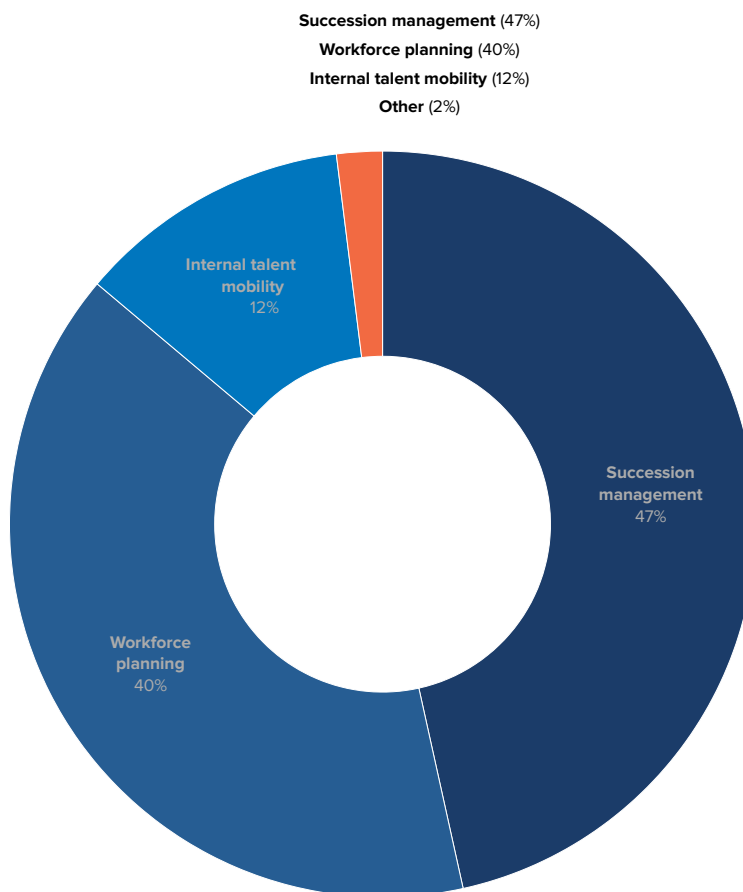


More than 70% of U.S. employees have caregiving responsibilities, according to [the Harvard Business Review - \(https://hbr.org/2024/11/your-employees-are-also-caregivers-heres-how-to-support-them\)](https://hbr.org/2024/11/your-employees-are-also-caregivers-heres-how-to-support-them). As the population ages, those responsibilities increasingly include caring for both children and aging parents simultaneously.

Those providing care to both older and younger generations, often called the “sandwich generation,” can feel squeezed between varying demands, especially when they also have full-time jobs. Not only can the demands of caregiving affect workers’ mental health, but it can also lead to problems at work. More than 2 in 5 working caregivers (42%) say their caregiving responsibilities hinder their career advancement, with unpredictable care needs interrupting work for 32% and trouble balancing caregiving with job responsibilities affecting 26%, according to SHRM’s [Care and Careers: Navigating Caregiving and Work Responsibilities - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf) research report.

Midcareer workers in the sandwich generation are increasingly responding to caregiving stress by eschewing promotions, reducing their hours, or stepping away from work entirely. Those decisions are quietly shrinking leadership pipelines and widening equity gaps, contributing to a persistent problem: According to SHRM’s [2025 CHRO Priorities and Perspectives - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/shrm-chro-priorities-perspectives-research-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/shrm-chro-priorities-perspectives-research-report.pdf) research report, roughly 1 in 3 CHROs (37%) say developing succession plans across the organization remains a significant challenge. For forward-thinking organizations, finding ways to support caregivers is not just empathetic; it’s a prudent leadership strategy.

CHROs' Top Priority Within The Talent Management Category



Source: CHRO Priorities and Perspectives, SHRM, 2025.

Sandwich Generation Strain

Nearly a quarter of working caregivers (23%) manage dual or multiple caregiving roles, such as caring for both children and elders, which is especially common among midcareer professionals in the sandwich generation, according to SHRM's [Care and Careers research report - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf).

For these workers, “life often feels like constant triage, where [they’re] deciding which urgent need takes priority in the moment,” said Danielle Pickens, CEO of LumiTalent. “To employers, this might look like a lack of dedication to an employee’s paid work. But to the employee, there are few other options. They are the fallback when school closes, a parent’s health unexpectedly takes a turn for the worse, or someone needs a ride to the doctor midday.”

Without broader societal caregiving structures and supports, sandwich generation caregivers must often make career trade-offs, Pickens said. That might mean turning down a new role that would require travel, skipping after-hours networking events, and opting out of — or being overlooked for — the leadership track.

“Just when sandwich generation caregivers have amassed the skills and experience to take on new leadership roles, caregiving ramps up,” Pickens said. “The issue isn’t [a] lack of ambition; it’s the lack of time, flexibility, and supports.” For example, 51% of moms in the sandwich generation have to leave a job due to caregiving responsibilities, according to one [study - \(https://www.phoenix.edu/career-institute/sandwich-generation.html\)](https://www.phoenix.edu/career-institute/sandwich-generation.html).

“This is contributing to the gender divide in most workplaces, resulting in fewer women in leadership roles,” said Leslie Forde, CEO and founder of Mom’s Hierarchy of Needs, which consults with employers on providing healthy workplaces for women. “That’s because the unwritten rules for becoming leaders, such as travel, response times, and time off, disproportionately penalize caregiving women.”

Related Article: Rising Caregiving Costs Take Toll on Employee Well-Being - (https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/employment-law-compliance/rising-caregiving-costs-take-toll-on-employee-well-being)

How the Strain Affects Employers

Dual caregiving employees may be consistently giving up opportunities for promotions or leaving their jobs entirely, but the fallout is also damaging organizations over time by reducing availability, productivity, and career progression for the very group that could fuel future leadership roles.

When organizations fail to make work compatible with caregiving, they “end up pushing out exactly the leaders who are seasoned, skilled, and primed to step into bigger roles,” Pickens said. “This flattens and narrows the pipeline so it’s less representative overall. This skews advancement towards who is most available, not who is most able.”

In addition, the loss of so many experienced workers and potential leaders disrupts the flow of productivity and forfeits the experience, institutional knowledge, and momentum that come with them.

Caregiving Affects the Future of Organizations

As demographic shifts and rising elder care demands continue to intensify pressures on caregiving workers, organizations must make caregiver support a core element of their workforce strategy. If they don’t, caregivers are likely to continue succumbing to burnout, absenteeism, and turnover, adding to costly gaps in leadership pipelines and succession planning.

As the traditional nurturers and default caregivers in many families and cultures, women are disproportionately affected by the caregiving struggle. That reality heightens equity concerns and weakens diversity in leadership representation.

For example, 46% of moms in the sandwich generation say their caregiving responsibilities have negatively affected their career progression, and 51% have had to leave a job due to caregiving responsibilities, according to a [study - \(https://www.phoenix.edu/career-institute/sandwich-generation.html \)](https://www.phoenix.edu/career-institute/sandwich-generation.html) by the University of Phoenix Career Institute.

When women step back or step out, those who fill the gap are often employees who can return to the office more easily, travel on short notice, or stay late to network after hours, Pickens said.

“

If a person’s aspiration is to be an executive leader, those jobs come with a lot of responsibility for anyone. But they become exponentially harder for women when they have outside responsibilities, like balancing both child care and elder care, which often affects how they’re able to show up compared with those who aren’t balancing those demands.”

Tamla Oates-Forney, CEO

SHRM Linkage

For example, SHRM’s [Care and Careers research report - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf \)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf) shows that in the past year, due to insufficient support for caregiving responsibilities, 28% of working caregivers have had to reduce their work hours, 21% have reduced their workload, and 14% have changed jobs for more flexibility. More than half of working caregivers with employment gaps cite caregiving as the primary reason (54%), and 52% say these gaps have had a negative impact on their transition back to employment.

When employers do not make accommodations for caregiving workers to manage those responsibilities, “the result is a leadership profile that skews away from women, especially midcareer moms, and toward employees without significant primary caregiving responsibilities,” Pickens said. “Over time, that creates leadership teams that are less representative, less diverse in lived experience, and less aligned with the realities the majority of employees face.”

Research: Care and Careers - Navigating Caregiving and Work Responsibilities - (

[https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf \)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/care-and-careers_worker-report.pdf)

How to Accommodate Caregivers and Build Stronger Organizations

The strain of caregiving on the sandwich generation may have the capacity to stall productivity, weaken leadership pipelines, and create inequitable workplaces, but employers can make changes to stop the damage. Organizations that take a proactive approach to supporting

caregivers report higher employee engagement (71% versus 48%) and recruitment (72% versus 53%) compared to those with a reactive approach, according to a SHRM research report, [The Caregiving Imperative - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/caregiving-imperative_hr-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/caregiving-imperative_hr-report.pdf).

“For someone who has caregiving responsibilities to be able to move into an advanced role, it’s important for both the employer and the employee to have an understanding of what the job requires and to have a conversation about how it could work,” Oates-Forney said. “If the individual wants to get to that role, they may have to make some sacrifices, but the employer also can make some accommodations to provide flexibility and allow the role to work for them.”

For companies that want to strategically support caregiving employees, the first step is to understand that the right approaches will be both long-term and individual. For example, when workers become parents, their caregiving needs may be accurately addressed with parental leave. But providing care for dual generations typically lasts much longer than the newborn stage. At least 80% of working caregivers anticipate the care they provide to be long-term, yet only 35% of HR professionals say their organization is effective at addressing the long-term needs of employees with caregiving responsibilities, according to SHRM’s [The Caregiving Imperative - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/caregiving-imperative_hr-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/caregiving-imperative_hr-report.pdf) research report.

“Often, leave is not the right answer,” said Deborah Hanus, CEO of Sparrow, a leave management solution. “Leave is great if an aging family member is nearing the end of life and you want to spend the last three months with them, but caregiving often lasts 10 or more years. For an employer to support someone going through this, there’s no one size fits all.”

The best solutions for each employee might vary, but employers can establish some basic parameters and policies to set up an environment that is equipped to accommodate those caregiving needs. That framework might include the following steps.

Collect caregiving data. Hanus recommends tracking caregivers in your HR system, just like any other group. Watch the data over time “to see if you’re retaining this group,” she said. To ensure your data is accurate, provide a safe way for people to identify themselves as caregivers without being penalized.

Create an atmosphere of psychological safety. Among almost 4,000 parents, mostly women, who have responded to a long-term [research study - \(https://momshierarchyofneeds.com/category/pandemic-study/\)](https://momshierarchyofneeds.com/category/pandemic-study/), hosted by Mom’s Hierarchy of Needs, less than 4% say they feel comfortable asking their employers for what they really need, Forde said. In many cases, the needs they say they’re afraid to ask for are things like autonomy, trust, flexibility, and enabling men as caregivers.

Employers need to establish “psychological safety” so that caregiving employees can ask for what they need, Forde said. “Teach managers to model vulnerability, allow people to share mistakes and not just successes, and give people space to comment and share feedback.”

According to [The Caregiving Imperative - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/caregiving-imperative_hr-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/caregiving-imperative_hr-report.pdf), only 36% of organizations provide people managers with resources on how to manage employees with caregiving responsibilities. However, those that do are significantly more likely to rate their managers as effective at supporting caregivers (83% versus 65%).

Expand caregiver support. Most organizations provide support for caregiving as it relates to starting a family, but today’s workers need more. Employers need to expand the caregiving support they offer to include caring for aging parents as well as older children, especially as tweens and teens face a widespread mental health crisis, Forde said.

“If you provide benefits for child care, consider providing the same benefits for elder care,” Oates-Forney said. “Figure out what you can do to provide an ecosystem of support by making sure your policies, procedures, practices, and benefit offerings reflect the evolution of caregiving.”

Offer flexibility. Remote work has been transformative for many people with caregiving responsibilities, but even for the many roles that can’t be remote, “there are other ways to provide flexibility,” Forde said. That might mean offering the ability to work in flexible locations, the freedom to pick up kids or visit a parent in the hospital, or help with transitioning a parent to a rehab facility, she said. It could also mean having open conversations about employees’ needs as they evolve and adjusting expectations when the team is shorthanded.

In addition to flexibility in scheduling and expectations, employers can better retain caregiving workers by developing more flexible career pathways. Caregivers don’t necessarily want more leave or fewer opportunities; according to Pickens, “many want stretch

roles that are designed differently.” She recommends three ways she has seen employers effectively accommodate sandwich generation caregivers:

- **Fractional roles** allow organizations to benefit from deep expertise and continuity without requiring a full-time presence.
- **Workload prioritization** allows caregiving employees to work with their managers to set priorities and focus on the work that matters most, “making a real impact without drowning in volume,” Pickens said.
- **Individualized flexibility** provides flexibility in when and where the work gets done while tying the work to clear results for accountability. This customized setup can “sustain performance while giving caregivers the space they need to manage their realities,” Pickens said.

Seminar: Senior HR Business Partner - Catalyst for Cultural Change - ([https://store.shrm.org/Senior-HRBP-Catalyst-for-](https://store.shrm.org/Senior-HRBP-Catalyst-for-Cultural-Change)

[Cultural-Change](#))

Retain Experience or Lose the Future

Employers who neglect to accommodate the needs of caregiving employees will continue to see those employees leave, particularly female employees. “If we’re consistently losing half of our skilled workforce over time, we lose institutional knowledge, mentoring, and a leadership pipeline,” Hanus said. “Especially in an age of AI, when many companies no longer need entry-level employees, we don’t need to lose this group of employees who already have experience.”

On the other hand, when organizations make efforts to design work around the seasons of life, they will be more likely to retain seasoned, high-performing leaders, protect succession pipelines, and build a realistic culture.

Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance journalist and content writer who writes regularly about finance, insurance, HR, health care, and education. Her work has appeared in Entrepreneur, Forbes, Fortune, CNBC, and many other outlets.

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