



Strategic HR

How to support the 'sandwich generation' at work

By Janet Stone

28 March, 2023

How can HR professionals facilitate a flexible environment that helps 'sandwich generation' employees manage their personal and professional obligations?

Over recent decades, people have been having children later in life. In combination with life expectancies rising, this has resulted in a sandwich generation.

This group of people, usually in their 40s or 50s, are sandwiched in the middle of carer responsibilities that include both school-aged children and elderly parents. With sub-groups including 'double sandwich' and 'triple-decker sandwich' individuals, such as people in their 60s helping to care for their grandchildren while their children are at work, and also caring for their own parents who may be in their 90s.

Mid-life has been reported as a time of high stress. The most time-stressed people in Australia are in the 35 to 44 age group, according to the [HILDA \(Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia\) survey](#), with almost half of respondents reporting being chronically time-stressed.

This is closely followed by the 45 to 54 age group, 42 per cent of whom reported being chronically time-stressed. Stress has been widely acknowledged to have detrimental effects on health, wellbeing and life satisfaction, as well as impacting employees' work quality and commitment.

[Mercer's 2022 Australian Benefits Review](#) reported that 89 per cent of Australian organisations do not offer assistance to employees with childcare responsibilities beyond [parental leave policies](#), and 92 per cent of Australian organisations don't offer assistance to employees with elderly, aged care or disability care responsibilities.

With numbers in the sandwich generation predicted to rise, and [one in five organisations experiencing higher](#)-than-normal employee turnover of people with caregiver responsibilities, this shortage of wider-reaching employee caregiving benefits is an opportunity for employers to adjust their HR policies to position themselves favourably to retain and attract talent in a competitive market.

Support with policy and cultural change

Here are some tips to consider that could help you better support employees who fall into the sandwich generation.

1. Leadership mindset

These midlife years are when individuals often hold senior roles that shoulder large amounts of responsibility.

"I think the starting point is actually shifting of a mindset," says Karen Gately, Founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo. "It's about the attitudes we have around how work is done. The traditional way of managing people was to have them in front of us, and that was the primary way in which leaders were able to observe and measure whether or not people were being successful.

"If we're going to truly offer flexible work practices that this group needs, we need leaders to get more sophisticated in the way in which they set expectations and manage performance," she says.

"The fundamental point here is that people have busy, full lives. How can employers lighten their load or ease their burdens?" – Karen Gately, Founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo

Leadership training could help facilitate a 'leaving loudly' culture to normalise senior-level staff leaving to tend to their caring responsibilities, such as picking up their kids from school. This will create an organisational culture that destigmatises having to prioritise multiple carer responsibilities.

Businesses need to review how they manage productivity, adds Gately, so mindsets focus on outputs of the role as opposed to hours spent in the role.

2. Flexible work arrangements

Flexible work arrangements should be reviewed to further support the sandwich generation, says Gately.

"It's thinking differently about what the output is of a job and having less focus on the hours within which [work is] done. Obviously, that's going to depend on different businesses and their operational requirements."

Business leaders can also consider moving beyond the confines of 9-5 work hours and instead embrace flexibility within each work day, such as split hours across the day, a [compressed working week](#) or a nine-day fortnight to create time for personal responsibilities, says Gately.

HR may even review some full-time roles that could be achieved on a part-time basis or as part of a [job-share arrangement](#), suggests Gately.

"There's still a mindset with a lot of leaders that certain roles need to be full-time, but what they often forget, or don't appreciate, is that a lot of part-timers are actually more productive because they have fewer hours within which they need to deliver. There needs to be a mindset shift around what it really takes for most jobs to be done."

Flexible workplace provisions that allow employees to combine paid work with an unpaid caring role are essential to enable businesses to foster a productive, efficient and effective workforce, according to [Carers Australia](#). It cites the following benefits of providing specific workplace arrangements for carers:

- Reduced costs of employee turnover
- [Increased productivity](#)
- Improved service delivery
- Reducing employee stress and absenteeism.
- Attracting quality hires
- Increasing staff morale
- Building a resilient workforce.

It's also worth noting that as of June this year, certain [employees will have more recourse with the Fair Work Commission](#) should an employer refuse their flexible work request. This includes people over the age of 55, carers of school-aged children or those with general caring responsibilities (i.e. of a parent, ill family member or someone who has experienced family and domestic violence).



3. Offer practical support

You might also put together support packs that can be accessed on your organisation's online hub with links to relevant content.

[Carers Australia's website](#) is a great place to collate useful information.

If an employee has an ageing parent who is starting to have health issues, businesses could look to provide training sessions, insights or toolkits around how to navigate the aged-care system and services that are available, says Gately.

"That [sends the] message, 'My employer understands me and my reality.' There are resources that organisations can provide to their workforce to take the pressure off, such as childcare provisions, dry cleaning/laundry, or meal service provisions," says Gately.

"There are so many things [you can do] if you get creative about it. The fundamental point here is that people have busy, full lives. How can employers lighten their load or ease their burdens?"

4. Review leave policies

Progressive leave policies have been shown to [help curb high turnover rates](#). Offering additional carer's leave above what's currently listed under the National Employment Standards could be considered.

This could include:

- **Grandparent leave.** Not only does this normalise senior executives taking carer's leave, as mentioned earlier, it also does wonders for employees' wellbeing by helping to connect them with their family during those crucial early years.
- **Loyalty leave.** This can be offered as a benefit for employees who've been with your company for multiple years – e.g. two extra days for every year served, capped at eight days.
- **Life leave.** Many companies offer employees access to leave – sometimes paid, sometimes unpaid – to tend to unforeseen personal things that pop up. The flexibility of this leave allows employees to use it in a way that suits them. That might be to welcome the birth of a grandchild, niece or nephew, to help care for a sick family member or to help transition an elderly parent into a retirement home.

5. Continued communication

Once your new HR policies have been established, make sure managers and leaders are openly talking about and promoting them to ensure employees are fully aware of the range of flexible options available to them. This can't just be seen as "another HR thing", it needs to be embraced by the whole company.

"We have a talent shortage and we have an ageing population. So, if businesses want to have any chance of being able to tap into the available talent, they've got to be supportive of people in various stages of the employee lifecycle," says Gately.

"I think the cohort of people who find themselves with those pressures is a significant size of our workforce. So if businesses want to be able to attract, retain and leverage people, then, in my mind, it [makes sense] to understand that cohort and what [support] they need from an employer."
