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ENTERPRISE Career Moves

The great American juggle:
Our careers and care-giving

By Judith Briles



Deep into your Monday morning routine, you are silently grumbling, "Where is Martha? We've got a major project to complete and present at the end of the week."

Magically, your phone rings, with the missing Martha on the line. Martha is not so cheery; her call is loaded with bad news. During the weekend, her aging mother fell and fractured her hip. Her siblings expect her to be the front person for care. After all, they live in other states. She tells you that she will carry her laptop with her and stay in contact to assist with the project.

Being empathetic, you wish her and her mother well, but your gut says this is not good. She is basically out for most of the week; you've got a deadline looming; Martha's input was/is critical to the success of the presentation and the odds are that you are now a solo act; and this could just be the beginning of major demands on her time and energy.

Time and money

Katherine Carol is a Denver-based business and organizational coach and consultant who works with companies by helping them focus on what matters most (www.tangoresults.com).

"Caregiving costs for employees adds up to big bucks," she says. "Martha is the typical caregiver -- a woman in her mid-40s and employed who will spend 18 hours a week caring for a family member."

Carol said one in five caregivers provides "constant care" or at least 40 hours a week, nearly two-thirds of caregivers are working full time or part time and more than half have had to make adjustments in their schedules, including taking time off, coming in late, dropping back to part time and quitting work.

CareGivers.com reports that there are 22.4 million U.S. households involved in family care giving. The total unreimbursed expenses for all these caregivers are in the neighborhood of \$1.5 billion and

the lost wealth will be nearly \$700,000 in that individual's lifetime as a caregiver. This lost income results in fewer contributions to Social Security and reduced contributions to pension funds.

What is not figured into this is the increased medical care for caregivers as the toll of stress-related illness adds up over time. It's huge -- unpaid care giving for ailing adults is estimated at \$200 billion per year.

Workplaces lose productive time from valued employees who were reliable and able to give that extra push when necessary to get jobs done. The challenge becomes how to create stable and predictable supports while providing answers in an unpredictable cultural and personal crisis.

The stress factor

Last summer, my beloved Heart Mom died. Joyce was the primary caregiver for several years when her husband Bill was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Not wanting others to

Katherine Carol's *Tango Times*

know that he had it, or how much home life was deteriorating, she bore the great burden of his care. She avoided any discussion about his condition, often making excuses for it.

Family members begged her to get help. I remember a phone call with her when I told her that I feared the stress would take her before it ever did him. A year before her death, she finally got some help when he turned violent and the situation couldn't be ignored. Bill was placed in a facility specializing in Alzheimer's. It was too late.

Do you know a caregiver? My guess is that most of you do, or have known someone in this position. You know them by the circles under their eyes and the sense of isolation and foreboding floating around them as the cloak of hopelessness covers their broad shoulders. It's common for them to deny, as Joyce did, that things are tough and sometimes overwhelming.

Chances are all of us will experience either being the caregiver or being cared for, even if for a short while. So what do we do? We deal with the reality and prepare for the inevitable.

As business people, you are good at planning. You just have to figure this new scenario into your strategic planning. What if a key person is out for an extended time, or frequently has to miss key appointments?

Carol recommends for employers to:

- Cross-train or build teams designed to cover for each other.
- Look at employee benefits to find ways to ease the economic impact on the employee.
- Be willing to do some job carving.
- Determine if there are nonessential activities another employee can handle so that the employee's talent remains focused where it is needed at all times.

For you, don't put off having a family discussion so that the responsibility of care giving doesn't fall on one family member. Also:

- Build your support network -- someone to care for the caregiver.
- Have a confidant that you can talk to about the stress of care giving.
- Create a caregiving plan so you can better manage your time, the paid caregiver's time and the needs and desires of the individual who needs the care.
- Do some exploring. Are there other career options that are less stressful?
- Could you start a small business or do your work out of your home?

There are no quick fixes. It means doing things differently than before. It means negotiating with employers, even your staff, to meet your needs and reach their goals.

It is good to care for and honor our loved ones; it is a gratifying journey that forces us to grow in ways we couldn't have anticipated. And, if you are the caregiver, you need to take care of you as well.

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