

Employees may have a wide range of family obligations that impact on their working lives. The care of ageing parents, partners or other relatives are responsibilities that are often taken on by family members. Elder or spousal care may take a number of forms, ranging from direct care giving to the handling of medical, financial and legal issues. In other cases, older employees may wish or need to spend some time caring for grandchildren.

Some employees will be concerned about how to manage these responsibilities while continuing to work full-time and may benefit from being able to access information about what forms of government, private and not-for-profit assistance is available. Others may be interested in reducing their working hours or varying their starting and ceasing times to better suit their caring commitments. Still others may feel stressed by the increased responsibility and this may have the potential to impact on their work performance.

Research on the effects of employees providing elder and spousal care found that on average three days per employee per annum were lost and a further four days were disrupted due to aged care issues. Time off could be for a medical emergency, taking the person being cared for to the doctor or dentist or to handle administrative matters. Elder care is also more likely to involve male employees and to become a larger issue than child care because it involves issues of dignity, rights and choices for both the aged relative and the employee which are not as pronounced as in child care.

The extent to which employers accommodate the needs of employees with family responsibilities is an emerging issue. The Queensland *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* now prohibits discrimination on the basis of the attribute of family responsibilities. This attribute was added by amendment effective from 1 April 2003. Family responsibilities include a person's responsibilities to care for or support a dependant child of the person or any other member of the person's immediate family who is in need of care or support.

Immediate family means (a) the person's spouse or former spouse (this includes defacto partners, regardless of sexuality or gender); (b) a child of the person or the person's spouse or former spouse including an ex-nuptial child, stepchild, adopted child or past or present foster child of the person or the person's spouse or former spouse or; (c) a parent, grandparent, grandchild or sibling of the person or the person's spouse or former spouse. A number of recent industrial law cases indicate that the requirement to work full-time, or to start and finish at certain times or to attend a particular workplace must pass the test of reasonableness. Employers are not expected to create meaningless jobs, but they are expected to genuinely consider options for real work that needs to be done and will need to be able to clearly demonstrate why an employee's role cannot be varied to accommodate family responsibilities.

Possible strategies and actions include:

- Encouraging employees to talk to their supervisors or managers about any concerns they may have in terms of balancing work and elder or spousal care or caring for grandchildren. Flexible work practices, special responsibility leave for caring purposes and employee assistance programs may be able to assist. For more information about flexible work practices see '*Flexible Work Options*' on this CD.
- Providing managers and individual employees with information about where to find out about elder care support services or child care services. Elder and spousal care support services include information about being a carer, community services, respite care, counselling and financial entitlements.

- Building the capability of managers to support and encourage the use of flexible work practices to help both young and older employees to better balance work and life, to better understand the impact of care giving on their employees and to assist them to manage in a flexible working environment.

Source: Department of Employment and Industrial Relations 'A Guide for the Queensland Public Service: Managing an Ageing Workforce'