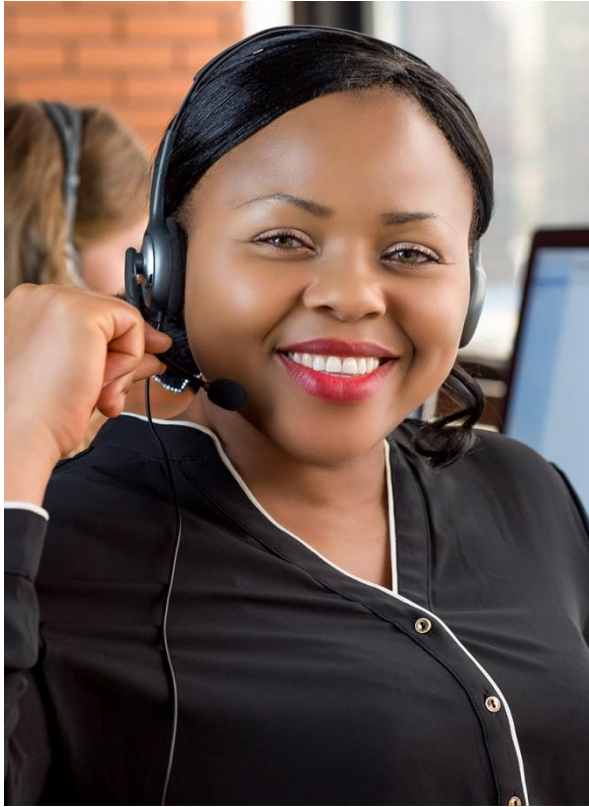


# Toolkit



## STARTING & SUSTAINING A CARERS' NETWORK

### About carers in the workplace

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Caring for an ill, older or disabled family member, partner or friend will have an impact on most of us at some point in our lives. Already 1 in 7 people in the UK workforce have caring responsibilities and this ratio is set to increase as people live longer and retire later. Recent Carers UK research identified that as many as 600 people a day in the UK give up work to care, often because they face a caring crisis without knowing where to go for information and support. And yet, caring is still an issue which people find hard to discuss and plan for in the workplace.

#### Who are carers in the workplace?

Employers for Carers uses the following definition to describe carers in the workplace: *Carers are employees with caring responsibilities that have an impact on their working lives. These employees are responsible for the care and support of ill, older or disabled family members, partners or friends who are unable to care for themselves.*

### About this toolkit

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This Toolkit has been produced by Employers for Carers (EFC) to help you to:

- think about what sort of carers' network would work for your organisation
- think about how best to start and sustain a carers' network
- reach out to carers in your workforce who might not realise that they are caring and enable them to access the network and other carers' support

### Carers' networks

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Networks can reach the parts that other support can't reach – the peer to peer support they bring can provide the informal help that can really make a difference for carers. This includes both practical tips from people who have been in similar situations and emotional support which can help carers to feel less isolated and manage the stress of juggling their job and caring role.

## Starting a carers' network

### Identify carers and ask them what they want

It is good practice to identify carers in your organisation and ask them what they want and need. Decide with carers what sort of network you want to set up:

- a virtual network
- an informal face to face carers support group
- a network which combines both the above
- a formal carers staff network run by employees with a chair, terms of reference, aims and objectives and active support from HR

Some of this will depend on the size of your organisation and your budget, however it is important to remember that networks are not expensive or disruptive to run. Do remember that people are less likely to join solely employer-run groups and therefore where possible employee-run networks with support and endorsement from HR/managers work best.

Virtual networks can provide cost effective support. During the current tight economic times there are real benefits in flexible networks which can provide support for carers virtually. Rather than viewing employee networks as a cost, this type of network should be considered as an inexpensive and time saving way of providing support which can benefit both carers and managers.

Virtual networks can also be helpful for employees who are caring at a distance as well as for those working remotely/ working shifts/ and those who may not have access to a computer in their day-to-day job.

Employee surveys have also revealed that some carers prefer online contact as this can be more anonymous, flexible and discreet (although face to face contact is also highly valued for some forms of support).

Remember that a carers' network is the one of the most inclusive types of networks to set up as anyone of us can - and in all likelihood - will become a carer.

### Publicise and promote your carers network

Define what you mean by carers, publicise this and continue to do so. Carers are not a static group; two million people will become carers or stop being carers every year and people often only take on board information that is relevant to them at that time.

Networks need to advertise themselves and the information and support that is available through a variety of mechanisms including leaflets, posters, awareness raising events, intranets, information sent out with payslips/staff newsletters/union newsletters etc.

Publicity and information needs to ask questions such as ‘do you look after’ a relative, partner or friend rather than ask ‘are you a carer?’ and use examples that resonate with people. To help communicate the support available to staff you could use logs written by employees discussing why certain policies are important to them.

### **Establish the aims and objectives of the network**

It is good practice for your network to have some aims and objectives, or for a more informal network a general purpose. It will help you to describe your network and engage people. Some examples of objectives could be:

- to provide a forum for mutual support where staff with caring responsibilities can share ideas and experiences
- to provide practical information and support to staff with caring responsibilities and their managers
- to communicate with carers and help to tackle the isolation/loneliness that they can often feel in the workplace
- to raise awareness and understanding of issues and organisational support for staff with caring responsibilities
- to work with HR and line managers to ensure policies and practices are carer friendly
- to ensure that staff with caring responsibilities have equal access to training and development opportunities

### **Sustaining a carers’ network**

#### **Find senior level role models**

Carers Networks work well when led by a member of staff with experience of caring (either current or a former carer) and essentially a network needs the support of senior management. Ideally a designated senior manager who can act as a carers champion, particularly in the initial stages of setting up a network but, to ensure a successful and sustainable network, ongoing senior level engagement is key.

Senior role models are essential so that senior managers can see themselves ‘reflected’ in the issue, caring affects employees across the board regardless of job title. It is also of great benefit to the workplace culture if staff at senior levels are seen to be accessing policies and support; walking the walk – not just talking the talk!

In the longer term, the most successful and sustained networks combine a key driver with a senior sponsor/champion.

## **Promote networks as a useful resource for managers as well as employees**

Networks also need to be seen as an operational service, not an additional 'thing to do' for busy managers - the practical support that such networks give to carers can actually help to alleviate pressures on busy line managers.

Senior managers can help to change the way the organisation thinks about the network - by reinforcing key messages about what workplace support is available and how to access it, networks can help save time for line managers as well as communicating information to employees.

Networks can also provide useful information to managers about how they can best support carers in their teams, practical tips and do's and don'ts for example.

## **Use networks to communicate support for carers**

Organisations often have good policies in place but it is sometimes the case that staff do not feel comfortable using them. Therefore, networks can play a useful role in working with HR teams and managers to communicate the message that it is 'OK to be a carer' and demonstrate that people are successfully taking up the support on offer. They can also help to foster a 'trust based' relationship between line manager and employee and thereby enhance motivation and loyalty.

As well as providing a forum for mutual support for carers, networks can work with HR to develop more carer-friendly policies, recruitment practices, training and development opportunities.

Carers have also reported that even if they do not take up the support on offer such as joining networks, just knowing that help is there if needed has made them feel much more supported and motivated at work. It also helps to create a carer-aware culture in the workplace where people feel more able to access any support on offer such as carers leave or flexible working.

## **Carers need support at all levels of the organisation**

Although concerns are sometimes expressed about carers' networks being used mainly by support staff, it is often these staff who are in most need of help. They are less likely to have the support mechanisms of higher paid colleagues who may be in a better position to pay for additional care and support or have a partner who can afford to give up work to help with care. Senior managers are also more likely to have greater autonomy in terms of their diaries and working flexibly etc whereas employees at lower levels often have less choice. However, it is often through peer to peer support that carers receive the best support and practical advice and this applies across all levels of an organisation.

## **Don't stop with a network**

Some people are not 'joiners' so may never register for a network or attend meetings, whether face to face or virtual. However, networks can still play a key role in supporting these employees. Networks can provide a wealth of information and source of support for working carers; information should be publicised to all staff regularly so that people know where to go if and when they need to.

## **Top ten tips**

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- 1.** Ask carers what sort of network they want – face to face or virtual, formal or informal.
- 2.** Find a senior level person - a carers champion - to endorse the network and maintain senior level engagement/endorsement. If this person has had experience of juggling work and care even better.
- 3.** Start small - don't overcomplicate the start-up of a network, it will take time to develop and for people to engage.
- 4.** Don't underestimate how hard it is to identify carers and for carers to identify themselves.
- 5.** Promote and publicise the network and what you mean by carers and do this regularly; carers are not a static group and people will often only digest information when it becomes relevant to them.
- 6.** Tell people the purpose of the network.
- 7.** Ensure that time is allowed to both arrange and attend meetings – this is where senior level engagement/endorsement is key.
- 8.** Promote the network as a useful resource for managers; not as an extra thing 'to do'.
- 9.** Set up focus groups on particular issues to keep the network fresh and people interested.
- 10.** Hold a social event so that people can get to know one another.

## Three next steps

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1. Tell your employees that you are a member of EfC and that all our resources are available to them. Circulate the EfC website guide so that all employees can register on the EfC website and access these resources.
2. Tell your employees that you want to develop a carers' network and ask them what they want to get out of it. Contact the team at EfC to let us know that you are setting up a network as we can provide further advice and put you in touch with other EfC members who are doing this in their workplace.
3. Make it OK to talk about caring and encourage people to join the network or access other forms of support.

## Contact Employers for Carers

T: 020 7378 4956 E: [client.services@carersuk.org](mailto:client.services@carersuk.org)

W: [employersforcarers.org](http://employersforcarers.org) | [efcdigital.org](http://efcdigital.org)