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ABSTRACT

The Sandwich Generation refers to individuals who have multiple caregiving responsibilities for children under 18, as well as parents, grandparents or other aging relatives. Employees who are the caregivers cannot help but bring the stress of the situation to the workplace. Existing research suggests that these responsibilities take a toll on caregivers, their family relationships, and on their roles as employees. Consequently, career counselors are in a key position to provide guidance to help members of the Sandwich Generation navigate their multiple commitments to families and employers. This chapter provides suggestions for career counselors working with clients in the Sandwich Generation, including: presenting options for flexibility; coaching clients on ways to negotiate with employers; assisting clients in recognizing new skills learned from these added responsibilities; and helping them to appreciate the values of continually changing roles. (Contains 13 references.) (GCP)

Career Counseling for the Sandwich Generation

by

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Career Counseling for the Sandwich Generation

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The Sandwich Generation refers to individuals who have multiple caregiving responsibilities for children under age 18, as well as parents, grandparents or other aging relatives. Employees who are the caregivers cannot help but bring the stress of the situation to the workplace. Seventy-two percent are women, generally between the ages of 35 and 60, a time when their careers may be in jeopardy, a time for support from career counselors and mentors.

Employers are often insensitive to these needs. Eighty percent of Human Resource professionals say that baby boomers are being crunched by these pressures, but 90% say their organization offered no services to caregivers beyond referral.

How are these middle-aged adults faring as they strive to meet the challenges of multiple work/family responsibilities? Existing research suggests that these responsibilities take a toll on caregivers, their family relationships, and on their roles as employees. Consequently, career counselors are in a key position to provide guidance to help members of the Sandwich Generation navigate their multiple commitments to families and employers.

Caring for an elderly family member often involves a considerable investment of one's time, energy, emotions, and in some cases, financial resources. By directing their efforts toward a needy grandparent, caregivers experience a decrease in the resources that they have available for other family members. Research demonstrates that the stresses caregivers experience in their caregiver role are related to poorer outcomes for their relationships with their children. For example, Hamill (1994) found that mothers reported poorer communication with their adolescent children when they felt more burdened in their relationships with grandparents; there was a trend in the same direction for fathers.

Family Friendly Organizations

Organizations that address these issues, offer progressive family benefits and are sensitive to work family conflicts are described as "family friendly organizations." Specifically, these are organizations that (1) help employees manage time pressures (e.g., offer vacation, sick leave, personal leave and flex-time), (2) provide formal programs to encourage family development (e.g., maternity or paternity leave; child or elder care programs), and (3) promote an informal culture that is sensitive to family needs (e.g., allow employees to make phone calls home and take short amounts of time off for emergencies) (Marshall & Barnett, 1994).

Organizations that have created family supportive environments receive positive attention in the media, and are often included on lists of the “best places to work.” Although many organizations have begun to make changes in their benefit packages and have started to witness the positive effects of family friendly environments, others are still reluctant to do so.

One reason for this reluctance is a misunderstanding about the scope of family friendly policies. Many managers, employees, and human resource professionals perceive that large-scale initiatives (e.g., maternity leave, on-site childcare, formal flex time policy, telecommuting, and job sharing) are necessary to help employees balance work and family demands. While these formal programs can be beneficial, they are often costly and time consuming to develop and maintain. Thus many organizations are not able to offer them.

In contrast, there are critical informal aspects of the work environment (day to day flexibility, supervisor support) that are likely to benefit all employees and address work-life issues for employees at various stages of their lives. Given that informal family friendly strategies would be less costly, they are more realistic for small or medium sized organizations, and are things that employees can explore within their own organization.

Informal organizational changes may have the most profound impact on work and family conflict for Sandwich Generation employees because they affect their day-to-day activities and perceptions. Furthermore, when employees take advantage of informal “policies” or support systems within their own organization, it helps to reduce conflict and contribute to positive feelings about work life (e.g., Families & Work Institute, 1993). Some key components of supportive work environments include (1) day-to-day flexibility (e.g., through increased autonomy and decision flexibility), (2) supervisor and co-worker support, and (3) employee-supportive management policy. Each of these types of support has the potential to help all employees balance their work and personal life.

Both Formal and Informal Programs Help

Employees who are juggling the multiple roles of work and family can reap the benefits of both formal work-family programs and informal policies in numerous ways. Specifically, they can obtain access to formal policies and programs by exploring the types of benefits that their employer offers. For example, some organizations may have extended maternity leave, child-care center connections, eldercare referral, part-time work availability, telecommuting options, and job-sharing options. Often, employees are not aware of these options within their organization and therefore do not utilize them to their potential.

Second, employees can explore informal aspects of their organization in terms of possible changes that may not be part of a formal program. For example, an employee can work with management or with human resources to determine ways that they can increase their job autonomy, improve supervisor support of work-family issues, or increase their schedule flexibility on a day-to-day basis. Often, an organization will make changes in the schedule or workload of a valued employee so they will not lose the employee. For example, even if part-time work or job sharing is not the norm within an organization, a manager may set up a new program to avoid the turnover of a highly qualified or knowledgeable employee. If work-family concerns can be addressed, it will not only benefit the employee, but also the employer.

Career Counselors: Helping to Navigate Care-giving and Work Responsibilities

Career counselors can provide important professional services to those in the Sandwich Generation. The client can be given options for continuing in the organization, although perhaps serving in a different capacity. Counselors can provide strategies for dealing with the employer, for appreciating the value of changing roles, and for becoming aware of the managerial skills being used and their value in the workplace (Crosby, 1991). Career counselors who have family experiences will be able to offer special insight. While caregivers are not a majority in the population, many, especially the “baby boomers,” will go in and out of caregiving roles as children and elders age and responsibilities vary. The demographics of this era show that a multigenerational workforce has changed throughout the life-cycle, with different needs surfacing, many without warning (Kingsmill & Schlesinger, 1998). A telephone call that Dad has had a bad fall or that a teen has had a car accident can disrupt any workplace. Flexibility is required of both employer and employee when this happens.

The Employer-Employee Relationship

The Sandwich Generation caregiver has double the burden compared to other employees. If the employee is in a supportive workplace, problems can be resolved. When these emergencies occur, the caregiver/client must explain the problem to the supervisor (Bravo, 1995). This can be difficult in a hostile workplace, but it is essential. It is folly to mask the true reasons for family needs. Employers must recognize that the human condition is not perfect, and that everyone has family difficulties. If more is known in the workplace about individual needs, perhaps the one who has the crisis will feel some support. Personal questions are illegal in the hiring process. Therefore, many persons prefer to keep family problems hidden. Secrecy fosters suspicion among peers at work, as well as supervisors, causing guilt for the employee and a loss of productivity. Employees who explain their care giving responsibilities are sometimes surprised at the empathy and cooperation of employers.

The Need for Flexibility

Negotiation is important. Many flexible work-time options exist. The career counselor can provide the framework for the client to choose the best arrangement (Bravo, 1995). The main focus for the whole exercise will be for the work to get done (Kingsmill and Schlesinger, 1998). A proposal can be made that delineates responsibilities to others when the employee is absent, requiring agreement from peers on site. The peace of mind for the caregiver, which results from these arrangements, can improve the mental health and morale, as well as boost the caregiver’s productivity to as much as 150% (Vanderkolk & Young, 1991).

An issue of *The Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, Volume 12. #3 Fall 1996, was titled “Special Issue; Flexible Work Arrangements.” In this issue, options were defined and functions for implementation clearly discussed. They are listed here for the interested reader who might want to research them further: (a) flextime; (b) compressed work week; (c) regular part-time employment; (d) job sharing; (e) voluntary reduced work time (V time)

programs; (f) phased partial retirement; (g) leaves of absence; (h) work sharing; and (i) telecommuting/telework.

One of the misunderstandings that employers often have is that, "if I do this for Mary, I have to do it for everyone." Not at all. One of the main recommendations within the movement for work-life benefits is that negotiation takes place on a case-by-case basis. Supportive managers are aware that it is their responsibility to keep all their employees productive, and each one has to be creative so that an imbalance of duties does not occur (Kofodimos, 1993). Large corporations have policies and programs in place and are proud of being the employer of choice. Smaller organizations operate on an ad hoc basis for informal strategies.

Career Progress

The career ladder is long gone, so moving up is not the only direction for career progress (Kaye, 1982). If the caregiver is a team leader or part of a team, flexibility may be a more natural option. Team members can support a caregiver who still contributes but does it from home or another location by e-mail, FAX or teleconference set-ups.

Lateral moves may mean a change in function or responsibility, but not necessarily a change in status or compensation (Kaye, 1982). It is often a way to broaden existing skills, learn about other divisions within the organization, and make progress with new projects and new peers. "Plateauing" is another term for this type of change, and it is often considered as job enrichment.

Job downshifting, moving down in a realignment, may be necessary for a caregiver who is extremely burdened and cannot stay in place (Kaye, 1982). These trade-offs, when family demands are strong, may be the only way to stay employed, but can be seen as temporary (Vanderkold & Young, 1991). The danger here is misunderstandings of peers. Therefore, it should be clear to all that a move was made because of caregiver stress and a need for less responsibility. However, the client could become a mentor because of the change in relationships (e.g., a former boss is now a colleague), thereby alleviating some of the concerns of her peers and establishing a new relationship with others. At this point, counseling will become vital, as the client may feel that she/he has dropped off the "fast track" permanently. Perhaps the client can be helped to see positive benefits during this period. Changing roles and the assessment of caregiver skills are two suggestions for counselors to use in working with clients.

Changing Roles

The Sandwich Generation client changes life roles frequently (Crosby, 1991). Functioning as a daughter/son, wife/husband, mother/father, grandmother/grandfather, granddaughter/grandson, entrepreneur, or employee in the space of a few hours each day provides variety and challenges. Many women and men thrive on these changing hats and enjoy giving service to those they love (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Perhaps a new relationship is forged with a father or mother. When friction develops, caregivers report both positives and negatives at the same time! One of the most difficult transitions occurs between mothers/fathers and daughters/sons. The daughter/son may have to take control and make decisions, assuming a new unfamiliar role. However, some benefits of these transitions are that moving from one role to another can mean a change of pace, a change of place, a change of people, and a change of

activities. The workplace can become a haven. Dinner with a spouse or a hug from a child can make it all seem do-able. Clients can be reminded of these benefits as rewards (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000).

Caregiver Skills Assessment

Another contribution from a counselor could be focusing on skills. A caregiving role gives those in this position special skills. Together, or in a group, effective brainstorming might yield the following transferable skills (adapted from Bolles, 1985):

Functional Transference:

- 1. Communicating** Telephoning, composing letters, writing, speaking, training.
- 2. Surveying needs** Observing, examining, diagnosing, determining, attention to detail.
- 3. Being intuitive** Having foresight, interpreting actions and situations correctly.
- 4. Thinking logically** Researching, gathering information, analyzing, problem solving, synthesizing, evaluating.
- 5. Being creative** Improvising, selecting, designing, experimenting.
- 6. Nurturing** Showing empathy, expressing warmth and understanding, offering support, listening.
- 7. Managing** Accepting leadership, decision-making, finding financial and legal resources, taking risks, motivating.
- 8. Adaptive, Self-management Skills**

Patience, trust, honesty, self-control, courage, diplomacy, loyalty, optimism, resourcefulness, sense of humor, tolerance, generosity.
- 9. Knowledge Skills** Legal and financial benefits, contracts, wills, trusts, real estate transactions, employee compensation.

The skills listed can be amplified to fit each unique situation. A major skill most attributed to women is multi-tasking, and it is critical to surviving in the Sandwich Generation (Bravo, 1995). It is also a strong managerial skill made effective during motherhood and very valuable in the workplace.

Summary and Conclusions

As presented in this paper, career counselors working with those in the Sandwich Generation can present options for flexibility, coach clients on ways to negotiate with employers, assist clients in recognizing new skills learned from these added responsibilities, help them to appreciate the values of continually changing roles, and possibly save their careers.

A supportive workplace is a tremendous bonus for the Sandwich Generation caregiver/client. It is very difficult to function where an employer or peers are critical. The best counseling may be to assist in a transition to a different employer. Unfortunately, many organizations still operate with hierarchical management systems in an industrial-era mode. As employers continue to realize the importance and cost-effectiveness of retaining good employees, work-life issues will be validated. Until these changes, the Sandwich Generation will continue to struggle. Encouraging signs for this awareness are evidenced by the status of companies recognized both locally and nationally on "Best Places to Work" lists of *Fortune* and *Business Week* magazines.

Marriott International has launched a partnership called Corporate Voices for Working Families. The purpose of the new organization is to "develop aggregate messages and create a communication plan to deliver (the needs of working families) to elected officials" ("Corporate Voices' formed to influence policymakers," 2001). Although this is good news, social change happens very slowly. One comforting fact about being in this position is that life changes are inevitable and nothing is permanent. While crises seem insurmountable and endless at times, there are many avenues to explore and resources to use. It can be very challenging, but also a period of great growth for the client in the Sandwich Generation, especially with help from a skilled and empathetic career counselor.

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