

2025



# The future of work is carer-inclusive

*Insights and actions for  
Australian employers*

Why employers should take a proactive approach to empowering carers on their team



An Australian Government Initiative



Carer-Inclusive  
Workplace  
Initiative

**This report has been produced in collaboration with Carers Australia as a part of the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative. Carers Australia delivers the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative, a program funded by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.**

*We acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present and future Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

### **About Women's Agenda**

Women's Agenda is an independent daily news publication 100% owned and run by women. Our team of journalists and researchers provide a vital perspective across daily news events and current affairs, including across politics, media, business, tech, climate, health and leadership. Published by Agenda Media Pty Ltd, founded by Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, this team also publishes Women's Health News and runs a growing podcast network, events, roundtables and regular research reports.

Get in contact with our team at [\*\*contact@womensagenda.com.au\*\*](mailto:contact@womensagenda.com.au)

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## A letter from

# Women's Agenda

More than one in ten people in Australia are caring for a relative or friend. This may be a child or an ageing parent but it may also be a loved one who has had a stroke, is grappling with a substance issue or a mental health condition.

Anyone can become a carer – the responsibility often falls on people unexpectedly. The work done by this cohort is valued in the billions but they often face immense financial, emotional and physical challenges.

As the co-founders of *Women's Agenda*, we have partnered with Carers Australia as a part of the [Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative](#) to investigate the powerful role workplaces play in supporting carers. Work is often an avenue for connection, purpose, community and financial security for people juggling these obligations.

Unfortunately, carers – who are overwhelmingly women – can suffer lifelong consequences for the responsibilities they take on for their loved ones in need. They are at greater risk of financial instability, poor career progression and poverty. These are issues workplaces can help change.

As entrepreneurs running a business with a growing team in a rapidly changing industry, we've felt the pressure that comes with ambitious goals, family and care obligations. We, ourselves, are among an increasing number of employers realising the critical importance of being carer-inclusive.

The number of carers is growing in Australia, which means there will be increasing demand for workplaces to offer support, enable flexibility and create safety for staff to come forward if they are juggling unpaid obligations with paid employment. The work that Carers Australia is doing through programs like the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative, funded by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, is critical to meeting the growing need for carer-inclusive employers.

Leaders and employers with caring needs of their own are helping to reshape how workplaces operate. They're pushing the boundaries of flexible working and building high-performance teams founded on trust, respect and accountability. Thanks to innovative leaders, emerging technology and a genuine openness to flexibility, some carers are finding workplaces where they can build fulfilling, long-term careers.

But for many, this is not the case. Our research tells us that although awareness is improving around the plight of family or friend care work, there is a gap in support, acceptance and practical implementation of workplace policies. There also appears to be a lack of understanding that not all carers are the same.

It doesn't have to be this way and we are proud to be contributing to the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative via our partnership with Carers Australia to design a new way forward. Through this research, we wanted to investigate why barriers to carer-inclusive workplaces persist 25 years after the [Carer Recognition Act](#) was set up. We also wanted to know where change is happening and what employers leading the charge are doing to achieve this.

Our survey of more than 250 people has resulted in some powerful insights including hard truths and opportunities for change. Whether you're a policymaker, employer or employee, we hope this research sheds more light on the important work being done today to create a future where people are not forced to choose between their careers and the important care obligations they must fulfil.

We hope this read inspires you to take some action in building that future.

**Tarla Lambert-Patel and Angela Priestley**  
*Women's Agenda Co-Founders*



## Introduction

ABS data shows there are an estimated 3 million carers in Australia, but the true figure could be much higher.

This is a high proportion of the Australian workforce. Many workplaces around the country have carers on staff, but the additional workload they're juggling is often invisible to their employers.

Our research as part of the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative has found that awareness is improving. Employers are getting better at recognising the competitive advantage that being carer-inclusive delivers. The reality is that employees on their teams will have care obligations – either now, or in the future – and that these demands will evolve over time.

However, there is much work to be done. Many carers want to work more hours.

They are a skilled and resilient pool of potential employees. It is a win-win for carers to do more paid work where they are able to do so – so what's needed to make it happen?

Carers Australia CEO Annabel Reid says the launch of the federal government's [National Carers Strategy](#) and its support of programs like the [Carer Inclusive Workplace Initiative](#) are making an impact.

“We overlook how many people are carers,” says Reid.

“We need to encourage employers to challenge their own assumptions and stereotypes that they might have about who is a carer. We know 400,000 carers in Australia are young carers aged 25 and under. They're in the workplace too.

“It's also important to think that if the number of carers increases, it's not an option to be care-inclusive, it'll become a necessity. It'll be such a substantial chunk of the workforce that will need that flexibility that the workforce has to shape around it.

“Any employer who is wanting that competitive advantage, or a carer who wants to learn more about balancing caring responsibilities and employment, should go to [carerinclusive.com.au](http://carerinclusive.com.au).”

## “ We can't ignore it or avoid it ”

In one study of nearly 150 organisations certified by [Family Friendly Workplaces](#), only 45% were found to be tracking how many people on their teams have caring responsibilities. This means more than half of the employers analysed did not know how many people in their workforce were balancing paid duties with unpaid care.

When employers are not aware of the carers in their workforce, it can add to the heavy burden many struggle through day to day. Many people fall into caring roles unexpectedly – a close relative or partner may experience a stroke that leaves them with a disability, a child may need additional care or a parent may be experiencing a number of challenges due to their frail age.

Under Australia's *Carer Recognition Act 2010*, carers are people who provide unpaid care, support, and assistance for a person who may have a disability, medical condition, mental health or substance abuse issue, terminal illness or is frail aged. Carers who receive [financial support](#) from the government are also included in this definition

Over the past decade, governments – at state and federal level – have been working to better recognise and support the contribution that carers make. The [National Carer Strategy](#), released in 2024, highlights that the cost to replace unpaid care with its paid equivalent would be somewhere near \$80 billion with more than half of primary carers providing 20-plus hours of unpaid care each week.



The strategy also notes that women make up more than half of these carers and a significant portion (25–30%) are [culturally and linguistically diverse](#). University of Sydney Researcher Myra Hamilton wrote in *The Conversation* that unpaid caring can lead to a number of [interruptions to a woman's earnings](#) over their lifetime. It's one of the key reasons why their employment needs to be better protected.

Workplaces play an important role in ensuring carers are supported and empowered in fulfilling their obligations while building healthy lives. Although some workplaces do so successfully, others are not as carer-inclusive.

“With an ageing population, and that's not the only reason people care, but it means that the demand for carers is increasing,” says Reid.

“More people themselves are undertaking caring duties, more people have to consider that and they're thinking about their future. Some of the people thinking about that are managers and people in a workplace with the ability to influence how the organisation responds because caring is a constrained choice.

“People don't choose to care. It's something that happens in life that you respond to.”

## Financial stress a common experience

The 2025 [Carers Wellbeing Survey](#) by Carers Australia, which heard from nearly 11,000 people found more than 60% had experienced at least one significant financial stress event in the previous 12 months. For some this meant going without meals, being unable to pay bills on time or having to ask for financial assistance.

“It really shows that carers suffer financial distress more than other Australians,” says Reid.

“Carers are three times as likely compared to other Australians to be poor or very poor. This is because often the caring responsibility can become so high that carers can't work.”

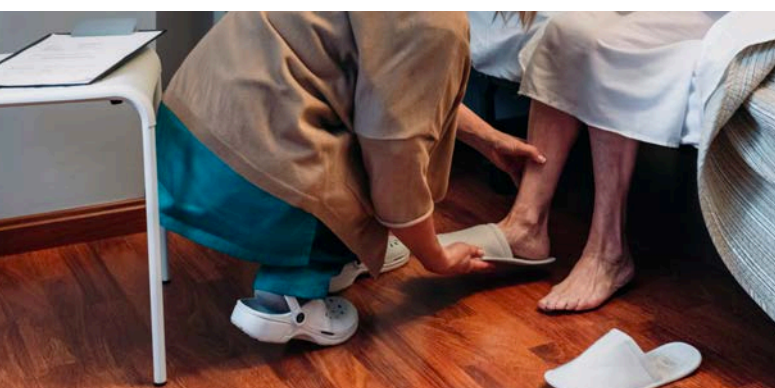
When workplaces function in a way that carers are forced to reduce hours or switch into jobs where they earn less, it can have a crushing impact on their ability to provide for themselves and their families. It can also disrupt career progression, productivity and their ability to contribute to the economy.

This often places people in a catch-22 where their earnings drop and expenses grow as a result of the unpaid care work they do.

“Carers have heightened expenses compared to other people because they're often supporting the person they care for and there might be additional expenses like transport, wound management, medications,” says Reid.

“So carers have higher out-of-pocket costs and carers are earning less money.

“Workplaces are absolutely key in being able to engage and continue engaging carers in paid employment, which helps prevent quite dire financial outcomes that can happen to carers.”



## Workplaces offer connection and purpose

Beyond finances, workplaces also offer community, connection and purpose. For many carers, their work is often a powerful avenue to stay connected to people and a purpose beyond the unpaid obligations they are faced with.

“Working gives people things over and above the money they earn,” says Reid.

“It gives them a sense of agency over their own lives, a sense of control in what they do and choice. And for some carers, it can help prevent isolation. It helps bring some balance to the carer's life.

“So people are looking to their workplaces to see how they support them during that time.”

When workplaces are not set up to support carers, a person with caring responsibilities can also face stigma from colleagues which can add to their psychological stress. This adds to other impacts they may be experiencing physiologically, financially and mentally.

Carers matter deeply to the fabric of Australian society and are essential to its ongoing function. Our workplaces and broader systems must reflect this.

That's why the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative has commissioned [Women's Agenda](#) to investigate what needs to happen now to drive this change. Our survey (which collected responses in October and November 2025) explores how well-equipped workplaces are in supporting carers, where there are shortfalls and what employers who are getting it right are doing.



# Key Findings

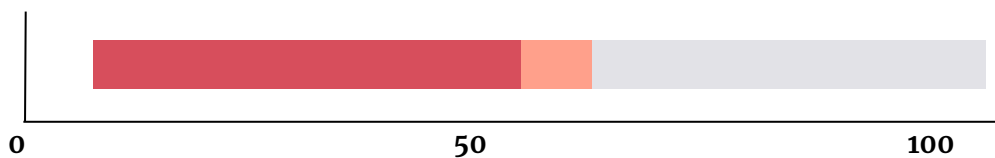
We received more than 250 responses to our survey from large and small workplaces around Australia. Their responses reveal that progress is being made but a majority (80%) also believe employers can do more to better support carers.

## Who responded to this survey

- We had 256 survey respondents
- More than a quarter (26%) are responsible or have oversight of workplace policies for employees with caring obligations
- Majority based in capital cities, especially Melbourne and Sydney
- A notable proportion (41%) of the respondents work in large organisations (500+ team members)

### ▶ HOW VISIBLE ARE CARERS IN THE WORKFORCE

- Most respondents believe visibility and awareness of carers is improving



- More than half (56%) of respondents believe awareness of carers and their responsibilities outside of work has improved

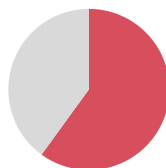
- Nearly half (48%) believe it's somewhat improved
- A fraction (8%) say it's improved significantly

- Despite this, close to 2 in 5 respondents do not believe awareness has improved



### ▶ PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYERS AND THEIR APPROACH TO CARERS

- Nearly 60% of respondents say carers face stigma when requesting support



- Almost 1 in 5 say workplaces have the resources – budget, staff, systems – to support carers effectively
  - However, only 2% of these respondents strongly agree this is the case



- Just 1 in 10 are in a workplace with a dedicated employee resource group or similar network for carers

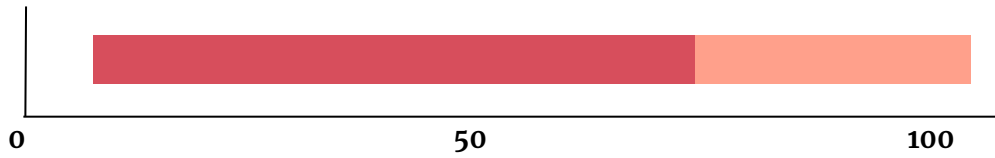


- 2 in 5 respondents believe the workforce they're in is aware of their rights to flexibility and support
  - However, 23% strongly disagree with this statement



▶ **MANAGERS WITH CARERS ON THEIR TEAM**

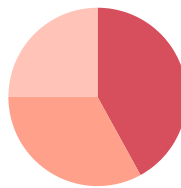
- Some carers face barriers at work because managers don't understand their needs (85%)



- More manager training needed to understand care policies (81%)
- Managers are improving support for carers on their team (37%)

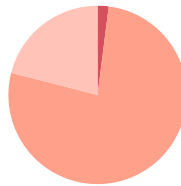
▶ **MY WORKPLACE HAS EFFECTIVE POLICIES IN PLACE TO SUPPORT CARERS**

- Yes (42%)
- No (33%)
- Neutral (25%)

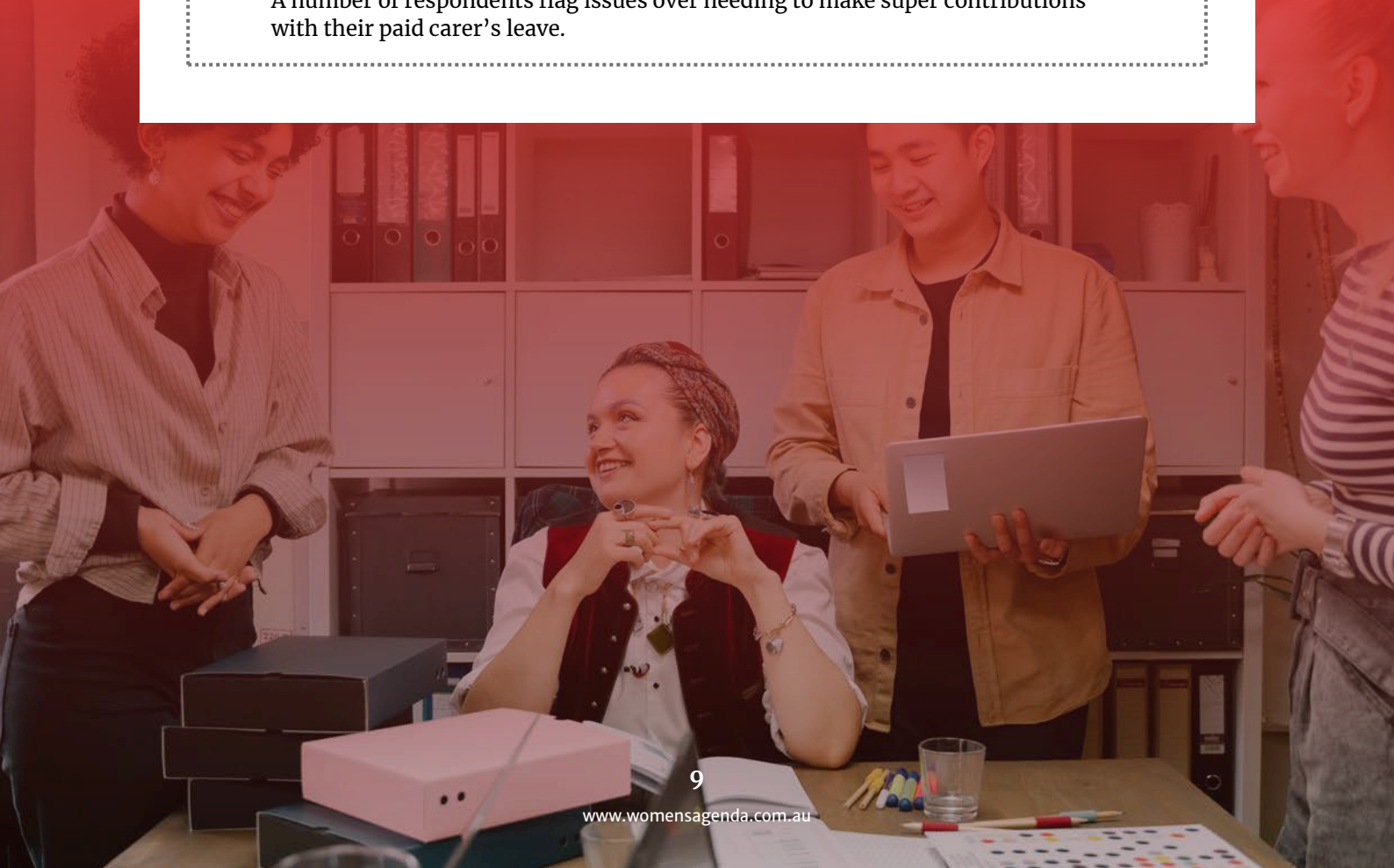


▶ **MY WORKPLACE HAS POLICIES IN PLACE TO ADDRESS LONG-TERM FINANCIAL DISADVANTAGES THAT CARERS FACE**

- No (77%)
- Yes (2%)
- Neutral (21%)



A number of respondents flag issues over needing to make super contributions with their paid carer's leave.





## Challenges to creating

# carer-inclusive workplaces

Employers have obligations to meet when it comes to supporting employees who are carers. This includes the provision of personal, carer's or compassionate leave as well as flexible work arrangements.

Reid says workplaces have a lot to gain from doing more than the legal minimum required. There is a strong business case for this.

Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative has enabled hundreds of workplaces to become recognised as carer-inclusive. It has found [several benefits](#) when employers offer flexible provisions that allow staff to combine paid work with their unpaid caring duties.

Most notably, employers report that a carer-inclusive workplace has a competitive advantage. This includes:

- Improved staff retention
- Reduced turnover costs
- Reduced stress and sick leave
- Reduced absenteeism
- Improved staff morale and engagement
- Improved Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

Unfortunately, some workplaces are missing out on these benefits and losing great talent by failing to properly support those with caring obligations. A number of perceived challenges contribute to this. Our survey respondents say workplaces can have good policies in writing but there is fear or discomfort among employees to even tell managers that they are a carer.

This suggests that the issue is not necessarily in workplace policies. In fact, a strong proportion of our survey respondents say their organisation has effective policies in place to support carers. But the problem appears to be in how these are executed and awareness among staff to make use of them. Just 19% of our survey respondents say their workplace has resources in place to support carers.

Almost two-thirds of respondents (59%) believe carers still face stigma when requesting support. This shows that change needs to happen in workplace culture and manager awareness of the experiences of carers.

## Managers not getting it

### Survey respondents on the issues carers face at work

“There’s a lack of understanding from management and HR – a high burden of proof is required to demonstrate the caring role.”

“Managers block use of available resources at the ground level. Employees have little recourse other than reporting above the manager's level which is daunting and likely dangerous to keeping your job.”

“As a private global company, resistance to additional leave is widespread.”

“There is limited awareness of the diversity of carers and their needs.”

## Barriers to discussing and accessing support

A well-written workplace policy is only effective if it functions practically. If employees are largely unaware of the support available, unsure of how to make use of the provisions or worse, fearful of requesting it – the workplace policy is failing and carers are paying the cost. Ultimately, employers suffer costs too through loss of talent, poor staff morale and impacts on productivity.



## Employer barriers to

## being carer-inclusive

### Survey respondents open up about barriers for carers at work

“The return to office mandate has worsened outcomes for employees who are carers. Policies are vague when it comes to flexibility meaning it’s up to managers to interpret. This results in the policy being applied differently across the organisation. I think it helps when leaders have experience as carers too.”

“I work in a small organisation and know that budget and resourcing are the biggest barriers.”

“The public service doesn't allow enough day-to-day, week-to-week flexibility given how reactive or episodic caring can be. You can access flexibility by agreement but it still feels rigid and not feasible some days. That makes it stressful when things don't go as planned.”

“I try to give everyone the flexibility they need when they need it, but it’s hard as a small business owner to do that. We don't have a big team with excess resources to pick up the gap. I have to do it myself.”





A [parliamentary inquiry](#) into recognising, valuing and supporting carers found more education is needed to help reduce the stigma and harmful gender stereotypes associated with caring roles.

The inquiry found that in professional settings, carers still feel significantly under-recognised and excluded in workplaces – an issue that has not improved since the *Carer Recognition Act 2010* was set up.

The findings in our survey reflect this with a number of respondents noting that although awareness of carers has been improving, the actual support they get and stigma they face continue to be key barriers.

- **Stigma and anxiety:** carers do not typically broadcast the fact that they are managing an unpaid role once they leave work. Their reluctance to tell employers is compounded when colleagues and managers fail to recognise they are performing under additional pressures and then block them from accessing support.

This can make employees feel less valuable and force other carers on the team to stay silent.

- **Career and income insecurity:** when carers are not properly supported in a workplace, their performance may be impacted. The incessant need to meet all obligations at work while trying to do all that's required in their caring role may not be sustainable. In workplaces not structured in a carer-inclusive way, this can manifest in issues like reduced productivity and absenteeism which may prevent a worker's career progression.
- **Workplaces not fulfilling their obligations:** employers are legally required to support carers through mechanisms like flexible working and minimum leave entitlements. Workplaces can get into trouble if they create an environment or culture where carers are fearful or discriminated against.

# Make Flexibility the norm

*Victoria's Commissioner for Gender Equality in the Public Sector Dr Niki Vincent*



When Dr Niki Vincent was early on in her career, remote hours and flexibility were not a normal part of the working world. This was something she was determined to change.

"I was always able to negotiate the flexibility I needed to manage a large young family, part-time study, and community commitments," she says.

"As soon as I got into leadership roles myself – some 25 years ago – I made flexibility the norm for everyone in the workplaces I led: private, not-for-profit, and public.

"My current Commission is a fully flexible workplace where caring needs are proactively accommodated for people of all genders. This approach is both ethical and essential. We have a responsibility to use taxpayer funds effectively and efficiently, and that means maintaining a genuinely high-performing workplace – one that also cares for the people who make that performance possible."

Dr Vincent says a high-functioning team is not possible when some employees are struggling to balance unpaid care, mental health or disability needs.

"Supporting these needs is not an act of generosity, it is an act of sound leadership," she says.

"It's a proven driver of performance, engagement, and retention.

"Our staff engagement surveys show very high satisfaction, and we have exceptionally low turnover. The lesson is clear: when workplaces truly care for their team members, their team members will deliver. Those organisations that fail to adapt will continue to lose skilled talent, especially women in mid-career and senior roles."

Psychological safety, acceptance and flexibility are core tenets of a carer-inclusive workforce. And all of these can only be fostered with healthy workplace culture.

"Culture changes when leaders model it, measure it, and make it matter," says Dr Vincent.

"Employees need to know they can disclose caring responsibilities without stigma. The evidence shows that where senior leaders share their own caring experiences, it normalises disclosure and shifts peer attitudes.

"In my own team, we explicitly recognise that most of our team are carers in some form and / or have other reasons for wanting to work flexibly.

"We talk about this from recruitment onwards. Every employee has a flexible arrangement, and we treat this as a productivity and wellbeing strategy, not a concession.

"We also embed accountability – employee surveys track how well staff needs are being met. You can't have a 'healthy culture' without evidence of how it feels for those living it."

# The burden on carers

When workplaces fail to properly support carers on their teams, it can place immense pressure on these employees to perform in a sustainable way. This can have lifelong consequences.

The federal government's [National Carer Strategy](#) outlines some of these impacts, noting the disproportionate levels of care women provide as primary carers can have "significant impacts on their lifelong economic security". This comes from disruptions to work that lower superannuation accumulation, career progress and opportunities to step into leadership roles.

One study led by Carers Australia and the National Carer Network found that Australian carers lose an average of [\\$392,500 in wages](#) by age 67. They are also estimated to lose \$175,000 in superannuation.

Considering the billions of dollars in work that carers contribute, the system – including workplaces – is failing this critical group in society. Many carers that *Women's Agenda* has spoken to describe the balancing act between unpaid care and paid employment as having two full-time jobs.

One study led by researchers at Melbourne University's Medical School says caregivers for diverse groups such as cancer or dementia patients can suffer [psychological and physical morbidity](#) from the ongoing stress they experience.

"The effects of caregiver stress have been characterised as 'widespread and unnecessary suffering, isolation, fear, error, and at times bankruptcy,'" the researchers write.

The study notes that the stress and anxiety caregivers experience can lead to physical illness. Reduced work and leisure time are contributors to this stress along with disruptions to family life.

This study and our survey highlight the critical need for carers to be supported by the systems and society they operate in. Workplaces have an important role. Employers can help alleviate some of the stress that carers are battling everyday – and doing so means improved retention and engagement.

## Devastating burden often invisible

*Survey respondents on what they endure when workplaces fail to support them*

"I was bullied out of my role at an ASX-listed business because of my son's issues and the stress it placed on me. This made things a lot harder for me and made me consider taking my own life."

"When I say I'm a mother and a carer, people cannot possibly fathom what that means. It is so far removed from their own world experience. One day, unplanned, my son, his support worker and support dog came to my office. I could see the lightbulb in my colleagues' eyes. It was good for them to experience five minutes of my world."





## Employers getting it right

As recognition of carers and their invaluable contribution continues to improve, a number of employers are realising how much there is to gain from building a workplace environment that supports and empowers employees juggling caregiving responsibilities.

WGEA data reveals workplaces are [embracing flexibility](#) like never before. Since the pandemic, many employers transformed the way they work and introduced remote policies that inadvertently helped people with caring obligations. An overwhelming majority of employers across the public and private sector now allow flexibility around hours, location of work and patterns of working.

WGEA's analysis of workplaces shows this is being done in a wide range of ways. Some [employers offer job-sharing](#) and flexible start or finish times while others may give staff the option to design their own rosters. Every workplace is different and each employee will have their own unique set of circumstances to navigate.

Proactive employers understand this and are structuring their workplaces in a way that is flexible and also enables flexibility.

Dr Vincent says it's promising to see progress being made but notes that there is a lot more work to be done.

"Flexibility has increased across many sectors since COVID-19 but most policies are still 'gendered', benefiting mothers of young children far more than those caring for adults or people with disability," she says.

"Male carers in particular report lower disclosure and take-up rates. So yes, awareness has grown, but genuine recognition – meaning cultural and structural support, not just policy documents – remains patchy and often dependent on individual managers rather than systemic practice."

## Workplaces getting it right

### Survey respondents on what employers are doing to support carers

“ I work in a federal government department and it has been by far the best workplace for normalising and supporting carer's leave. I think that strong policies supporting flexibility in addition to being able to access other staff to cover or support your work when on carer's leave plays a key role due to a high number of employees. Also I have found that the public sector's flexibility with delays in delivery of outputs due to carer's leave is something that does not exist in the private sector.”

“I lead a fully flexible workplace where the needs of carers are genuinely accommodated. This commitment comes from my own experience of caring throughout my career, and from a deep belief that workplaces must evolve to make this possible for everyone. Most of my team members are carers in some form – for children, people with disability, older family members, grandchildren and more. We make this clear in our job ads and discuss it openly during recruitment. Once people join us, we always accommodate their caring needs, whether that means short-term adjustments or longer-term arrangements. This approach has been central to the success of our high-performing team. Our staff surveys show 100% satisfaction on this front. Every person in our team – women, men, non-binary people, people with disability, and managers – has some form of flexible working arrangement that supports both their personal and caring responsibilities.”

## How organisations can make a difference

There are a number of common themes that come up in discussions about employers and their barriers to being carer-inclusive. In our survey, issues with flexibility, budgets, managers, competing priorities and resources were mentioned several times. At the same time, a number of respondents also noted that return-to-office mandates were having an impact on their careers.

As the CEO of Carers Australia, Reid has seen employers of all sizes navigate these issues. She says taking a problem-solving approach and being creative can lead to innovative breakthroughs.

“For smaller businesses, creating the flexibility needed is difficult,” she says.

“If you've got a small team of eight and someone needs to go missing at short notice, it can be hard to manage that. But I've seen those barriers become really good inspiration for innovation.”

In one example, Reid says a small business owner re-engineered her workforce so the workload on all staff was always 90% capacity. This buffer allows for others to step in if a carer has an emergency and has to leave at short notice.

“Everyone has spare capacity to step in so it's kind of a village approach,” says Reid.

“She has engineered it into their workflows so that it doesn't stress other staff members. That's a clever way to address one of those barriers.”

For carers juggling unpaid obligations with work, Reid says getting rosters in advance can be very helpful because it allows people to plan things like medical appointments or other support activities.

“For people who are in frontline roles, getting their rosters in advance makes a huge difference,” says Reid.

“If you want to book a medical specialist appointment, you're not going to book that in a week, it could take months to get in. Getting a roster in advance means a carer can plan those support activities.

“If a carer can even choose their own roster, that's better again so any AI tools that enable that are to be praised.”

The pandemic is a recent reminder of how complications at work can lead to innovation. Almost overnight, employers had to transform how they operate. Workplace productivity, video conferencing and management tools like [Slack](#) and [Teams](#) were picked up en masse.

Employers worldwide realised their staff could perform well while away from an office desk. Savvy employers are realising they can rely on staff who are juggling care for loved ones if they operate in a way that enables and capitalises on flexibility.

“Flexibility is usually what a carer will seek in a role and I appreciate not all roles can offer such flexibility but we're talking about patterns of work, location, hours and timing,” says Reid.

“That can make a big difference in a carer's life because they're usually incredibly time-poor. So if they can save a little bit on getting to and from the office or they know that they can take a longer break in the middle of the day to get the person they care for to a medical appointment, it means they can continue to work and manage that juggle.

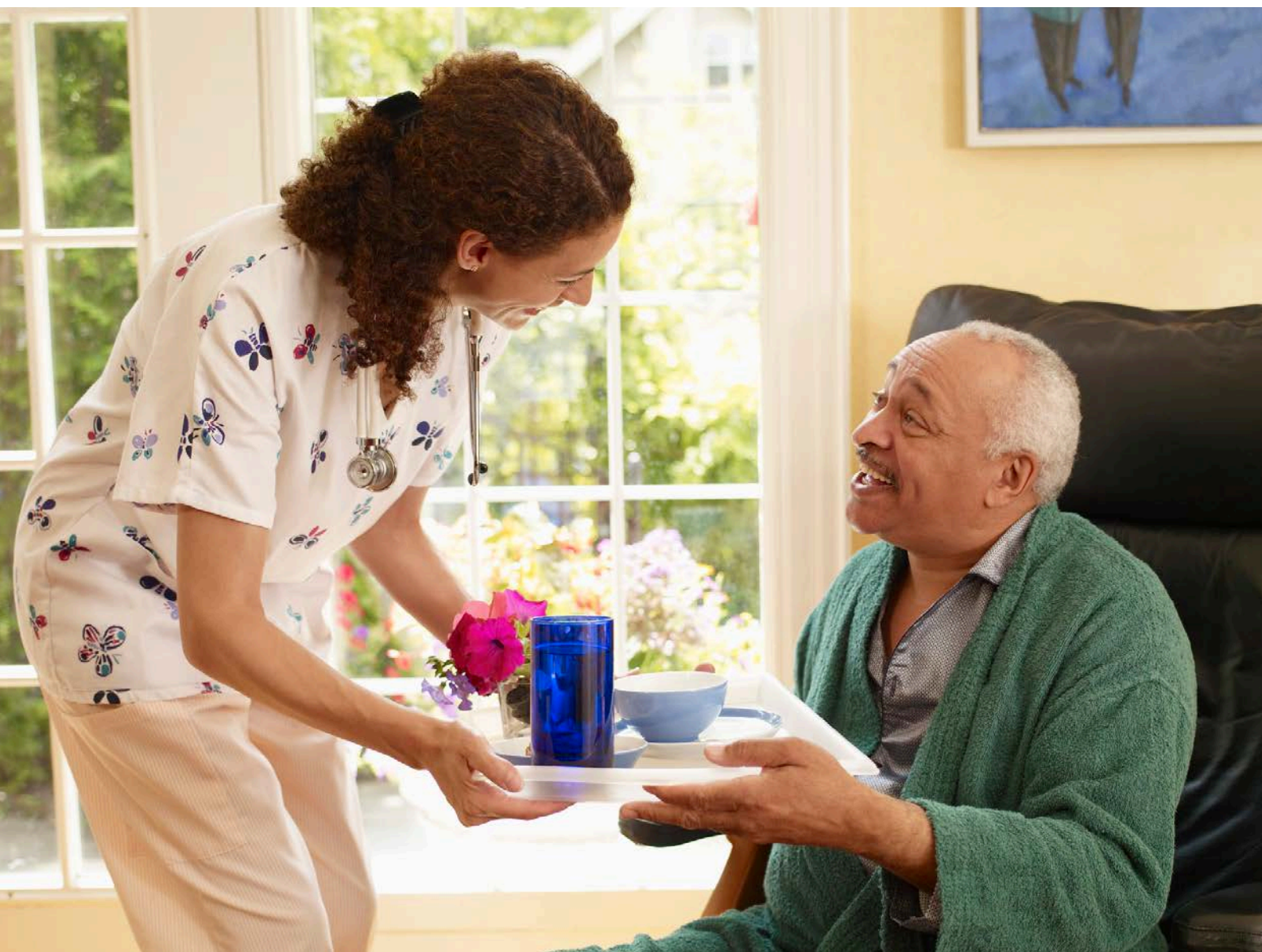
“The upside is that carers are usually really good at time management through necessity. They're the type of people you can trust with that flexibility.”

## Change starts at the top

Our survey respondents flag the importance of training managers in being care-inclusive to help with conversations, culture and implementing policies effectively. A workplace may have excellent policies in writing but they miss the point if managers do not understand them or empower carers on their team to use these without stigma.

Secondly, leaders who model carer-inclusive behaviour will encourage a psychologically safe environment – for example, a manager who takes time off for a caring responsibility is showing employees it is an acceptable part of the workplace.

Employers getting it right do so by raising awareness about the plight of carers and improving their own understanding of how to best provide support. Such partnerships can also help organisations navigate ways to overcome some of the issues they've had with fully supporting carers on their team.



# Lead by example

*Public Servant Erica Mellor\**

Erica Mellor began her career at a large law firm in the late 1990s at a time when workplaces were structured in a way that did not accommodate employees who also happened to be parents.

“Working long hours was normalised and expected and women who were mothers were not promoted if they didn’t do long hours,” she says.

“They had to work as though they didn’t have children. It was a high-stress, high-pressure masculine environment.”

Mellor was forced to leave the industry and picked up work as an academic.

“This was a relatively good environment for combining motherhood and work but the short-term contracts meant instability so I left when I had my second child then returned to law,” she says.

“I took a part-time role in a small law firm where the two owners were a husband and wife with young children so they were understanding of caring responsibilities. However, the nature of the work meant that I still worked long hours and juggled it around my caring responsibilities leading to burn out.

“Part-time work is a trap for people with caring responsibilities because your output is still expected at the full-time level, and you end up feeling that you are failing as a parent and as a staff member (even if you aren’t!). You are stretched so thin that you are under constant stress.

“A lot of women I know who work part-time to manage caring responsibilities actually do so much unpaid overtime to manage their workload that they may as well be full-time.”

Mellor now works full-time in a federal government public service role. She says the normalisation of flexibility, work-life balance and non-gendered support policies mean people with a wide range of caring obligations are able to build sustainable

careers.

“It really helps in a workplace to make everyone feel it is safe to operate in a way that allows for management of caring responsibilities,” she says.

“My manager has young children and often adjusts her work hours to accommodate this, which is a great example to the team and the workplace.

“The public service is one of the most supportive environments for balancing caring and work responsibilities. This means that it attracts a lot of people who need to combine paid work with caring responsibilities, which then helps to further entrench and normalise the empowerment of carers into the work culture.”

Reflecting on her experience, Mellor believes the most powerful steps a workplace can take to empower employees with caring obligations is to ensure appropriate policies are in place, inform staff about these and then normalise their use.

“Lead by example,” she says.

“If you are a manager or leader, be visible in doing actions that relate to your caring responsibilities. For example, if you’re leaving early one day to care for children or you’re working from home when a child is sick, let the team know.

“If your team members ask for flexibility, changed hours or ad-hoc leave due to caring responsibilities, be supportive. Ensure that the workload and team is managed in such a way that staff members don’t have to feel bad for taking time away or doing flexible hours.

“Ensure that meetings are held between 9.30am and 2.30pm only, so that staff caring for school-aged children aren’t disadvantaged. Normalise balancing caring and work. You’ll get increased commitment and loyalty and outputs from staff who feel supported.”

# Recommendations

Demand for informal care is expected to [grow by 23%](#) in the next five years and the number of carers by 17%. Proactive leaders will see this as an opportunity to reshape how Australians work into the future.

The *Women's Agenda* and Carers Australia survey uncovered some key areas where change needs to happen. As employers embrace flexibility and remote working, respondents say there needs to be greater support, understanding and knowledge of the unique needs carers have. Carers face different circumstances and workplaces need to do better at recognising the diversity of these experiences.



# Small changes make a big difference



“ I really encourage employers, if they don't know much about carers, to start familiarising themselves simply with the concept, what we're talking about, who we're talking about, and what it means. Because even just starting to acknowledge that role and have conversations might be enough to enable small changes that can make a huge difference in the lives of others. It can also ensure you get good retention and good engagement from your workforce.”

Carers Australia CEO Annabel Reid

The federal government is actively working with Carers Australia to help more employers achieve this via the Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative, which offers organisations and small businesses [tools and tips](#) on keeping top talent who may have caring responsibilities.

As part of the program, employers can do a [self-assessment online](#) to figure out how inclusive they are and get tailored feedback on what changes they can make. The 11-question assessment is free and easy to complete.

Employers that achieve a high score receive a landmark that demonstrates their commitment to supporting workers with caring responsibilities. A media toolkit is also provided for those wanting to promote this and share insights with others.



# Inclusive teams that go the distance

## Wellways Acting CEO Nicole Kondogiannis

Leaders in the workplace have a powerful role to play in setting the conditions that enable carers to show up authentically and perform at their best. Wellways Acting CEO Nicole Kondogiannis sees it as an important responsibility that brings mutual benefits.

The non-profit is one of Australia's largest mental health, wellbeing and carer service providers with nearly 2000 employees working across 140 sites. Over a third of its workforce identifies as carers.

Kondogiannis says the organisation offers staff the option to anonymously report if they are a carer, live with a mental health issue or disability. This has given leaders in the organisation a sense of what people need and helps inform the type of support structures they build within the organisation.

Wellways also has executive leaders on the team with lived experience which helps create a culture that staff are valued no matter what their circumstances are.

To ensure people in a workforce feel comfortable in reaching out, Kondogiannis says a number of support structures can be put in place. She says the role of employers is not to be counsellors for staff, but rather to ensure that there are support structures and pathways in place so they have care around them when the unexpected happens.

"It's about understanding where the line of responsibility stands," she says.

"There's something about recognising if someone's needing additional leave, how can you support that for them to give them the space and connections across the organisation?"

Setting up this infrastructure can act as a buffer around employees making it safe for them to adjust how they work and continue to perform while they fulfil unpaid obligations. This could be done with an Employee Assistance Program to provide counselling support, flexibility around leave provisions for carers

or a dedicated Carer Employee Resource Group.

To help set these up, The Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative website has [materials](#) for you to implement in the workplace. Written by HR professionals in consultation with carers and industry, these resources will help shape your organisation's carer-inclusivity. Services like [Carer Gateway](#) (and [Young Carer Network](#) for young carers) also offer a wide range of free, local services and supports for carers that can be an invaluable resource for employers. Kondogiannis says the effort and investment made around initiatives like this are well worth it.

"Not providing flexibility and support, you run the risk of losing really good people from your workplace and when people do need that extra little bit of a leg up, if you can be an organisation that can do that, you reap the rewards," she says.

"People stay, they're loyal and they will do good work."

Every organisation will have challenges to navigate when designing high performance, carer-inclusive teams but Kondogiannis says creativity often leads to solutions. One issue she's working on at the moment is improving access to leave.

"One of my bug bears is when we look at carer's leave, part of that comes out of someone's personal leave balance," she says.

"And if people are tapping into that particular leave for caring obligations, that leaves less leave for them to take for sick leave. So we're wanting to get a bit creative around setting up a pool potentially where staff might be able to dip in and obtain a different flow of leave entitlements, just so we're not stretching people in that way.

"But we need to do a bit of consulting and co-design with our staff to see if that's something they think would work and how we would then make it work operationally?"

# Let's talk about it

Our survey reveals there are still many workplaces where carers feel under pressure to hide their obligations to employers. Managers can actively change this by opening up about their own experiences or encouraging staff to speak up about it in a way that feels safe.

Reid says culture is a critical part of carer-inclusive workplaces and this starts with the way leaders talk to staff about their own experiences in unpaid care.

“That actually makes it safe for other employees to even talk about being a carer,” she says.

“If you don't know someone's a carer you can't support them so that's really the first hurdle – make it safe to talk about caring.”

With training and resources like the [Carer Inclusive Workplace Initiative](#), employers can learn how to role model healthy conversations and open dialogue about the diverse needs of people on the team including the heavy burden of unpaid care.

Reid says this can feel overwhelming or awkward but it doesn't have to be. There are ways to handle these conversations with sensitivity and compassion.

“The journey to becoming a carer might involve some grief or trauma and a manager might understandably be wary of that conversation and won't want to upset people,” she says.

“The Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative helps with some suggested and gentle approaches to encourage a conversation without forcing people to reveal personal information that creates trauma in the retelling.”

## Training to be more carer-inclusive

Manager training is essential to creating a carer-inclusive workplace culture as these are the people who set the tone on what's acceptable or not. These leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and

awareness of policies available to support staff, their legal obligations to do so and how to ensure people on their team feel safe approaching them about these issues.

Additional training can be provided to encourage cultural safety and support for carers who may be Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse or from the LGBTQIA+ community. When employers invest in understanding the unique needs of people on their team and how best to support them, it empowers not just those in caring roles but it sends a message to everyone else that their workplace will back them through life's unexpected turns.

The rewards to employers who invest in such training and resources is vast. People who feel connected and supported by their employer tend to be more loyal and productive. Carer-inclusive employers that foster health, productive teams founded on trust, respect and integrity stand out for professional talent. They are also able to tackle some of the biggest challenges workplaces face: staff retention and talent recruitment.



## Making flexibility work

To make flexibility work, employers must prioritise strategies and processes that enable accountability, high-performance, collaboration and integrity. A workplace that builds flexibility into how it operates may offer staff the ability to design their own patterns of working or they may use AI-powered rostering so employees can adjust shifts and availability without adding to the administrative burden on managers.

Employers who track and identify carers on their teams will be better equipped at figuring out what their workforce needs to function well. Surveying staff and having open dialogue about how policies are being implemented and where the shortfalls are can help inform employers and managers.

Employers can also visit [Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative](#) which has materials that can be implemented in the workplace, including e-learning modules, practical advice, resources and more. These materials can help with redesigning expectations on staff, implementing healthy processes for performance and accountability and creating a more personalised approach to flexibility for their teams.

## Take an innovative approach

As an employer or business leader, there are a number of moving parts to manage as you grow a venture, oversee productivity and track profit margins. It's understandable that some employers hold concerns over the logistical challenges with managing a carer-inclusive workforce.

However, many of these issues can be solved with a little bit of creativity and an openness to innovation. For example, emerging AI tools like [RosterElf](#) or [HosPortal](#) offer solutions in managing complex rosters without as much effort or time.

"Rostering can be difficult if people need short notice leave and they don't know when they might need to respond to a crisis," says Reid.

"An AI tool can manage that instead of a human trying to juggle all those requirements, up late at night to make sure they've got staff on tomorrow. Those barriers are leading to really good innovations."

## Become recognised as carer-inclusive

The Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative supports organisations to create a more inclusive workplace for carers.

The free self-assessment tool lets you discover how inclusive your organisation currently is. You will receive a tailored report with insights to support your journey towards becoming a carer-inclusive workplace.

You will also gain access to a learning hub with modules, practical advice, resources and more.

The Carer-Inclusive Workplace Initiative website has materials for you to implement in the workplace. Written by HR professionals in consultation with carers and industry, these resources will help shape your organisation's carer-inclusivity.

Becoming an organisation that values diversity and inclusion will enhance your reputation as an employer of choice.

To start your self-assessment or for more information, visit [carerinclusive.com.au](https://carerinclusive.com.au).



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# Notes







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