



The Work Couch

Navigating today's tricky people challenges to create tomorrow's sustainable workplaces

RPC

Season 3

Episode 12 – Carers Week Special (Part 2): Intersectional nuances, wellbeing and creating carer-friendly workplaces, with Rachel Pears and Zahra Lakhan-Bunbury

Ellie: Hi and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment. Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. Every other week we unpack those thorny HR issues that people teams and in-house counsel face today and we discuss the practical ways to tackle them. My name is Ellie Gelder, I'm a Senior Editor in the Employment, Engagement and Equality team here at RPC and I'll be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curveballs that it brings to businesses today. We hope by the end of the podcast that you'll feel better placed to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial and inclusive way.

Today, in part 2 of our Carers Week special, and picking up on this year's theme of caring about equality, which highlights the inequalities faced by unpaid carers, including a greater risk of poverty, social isolation, and poor mental and physical health, we're discussing the intersectional nuances of caring and the impact it can have on wellbeing.

Sadly, and far too often, carers of all ages are missing out on opportunities in their education, careers or personal lives just because of their caring role. And it's an everyone issue because ultimately every one of us at some point in our lives is likely to find themselves in a situation where they are either caring for a loved one, or being cared for themselves.

And joining me once again to share their insights on these challenges, as well as how employers can create carer-friendly workplaces, I am thrilled to welcome back two passionate advocates for carers.

Firstly, our own Rachel Pears, who is Associate Director for Responsible Business and Employment Counsel at RPC and is a carer herself. Rachel has over time built and led RPC's brilliant and award-winning responsible business team. She's also spearheaded RPC's collaboration with the national charity Carers UK, which culminated in the [Mind the Caring Gap report](#), which garnered widespread press attention.

And on that note, we also welcome Zahra Lakhan-Bunbury, who is an account manager at [Employers for Carers](#), which is the workplace arm of Carers UK. Zahra works with leading organisations such as government departments, world famous retailers, and local authorities to identify and share best practice for supporting carers in the workplace.

So hi to both of you. Thank you so much for coming back on The Work Couch today.

Zahra: Hi, nice to be here, thank you so much.

Ellie: Zahra, can we start off by looking at how people are identifying as carers and shine a light on the fact that 75% of people who have caring responsibilities don't actually consider themselves carers, which I guess is a challenge in itself. Can you just talk a bit about that and also explain the types of care that we're looking at?

Zahra: Absolutely. At some point in our lives, we're all going to be impacted by caring, either giving it or receiving it. And we know that 12,000 people become carers every day and two thirds of adults are expected to care at some point in their life. But it's absolutely what you say, Ellie, in terms of many don't consider themselves carers and that is probably the sort of core of our work that we do at Carers UK is helping carers identify as carers. And it might sound really strange, especially those who maybe aren't carers or sort of looking outside in and thinking, well, obviously, it's a carer, you do what you say on the tin, you're caring for somebody. for myself personally, and it'd be interesting to hear Rachel's light bulb moment, but myself, it took me so many years to recognise myself as a carer. I think it was 16 years. And on average, our research shows that it takes two years generally. But there are so many factors that affect that. And for me, it was, I was just looking after mum. I was just a daughter. And we hear that term so many times, all the time, in any context of relationship, really. I'm just a parent. I'm just

a spouse. I'm just a partner. I'm just a sibling and I'm just helping I think there is this sort of element of perhaps a bias of what we think when we think of carer. Perhaps we think of it somebody really involved in especially personal care, maybe with an elderly relative, you see this image of helping someone out of a bath or with their shoes, helping them with their clothes. And actually it's that, but it's also so much more and presents in so many different ways. And we actually had a campaign that we ran just last year, which was 'This counts as care' to show, you know, really showing people that everything they think is care. It probably is, whether you're living in the house with the person you care for or not, we can be carers doing it remotely as Rachel was doing with her parents, you know, just from afar. And the other elements, I think, first, we've got the language and how we talk about it generally in society. We don't really chat about caring. It's much easier to talk about parents looking after sort of children milestones when you've come back into the office and say, "I had a birthday party or kids were doing this". Don't often talk about, "I was in A & E for 12 hours" or "Mum drank some water today.

Yay", you know, we don't celebrate that sort of thing. I certainly didn't want to feel like a broken record, you know, going back into the office on a Monday and people saying "How was your weekend?" and they would look at me and just be like, I don't think I want to ask, because I probably still had the bags from being in the hospital or just having very uncertain hours and days, which is fine. That is caring, actually. But there might be other elements such as cultural elements that we have to consider.

For many, caring is just something you do as part of a family. Many perceive caring as a duty to a family member. In some cultures, the word carer doesn't exist. So if it doesn't exist to them, they're not going to recognise themselves as a carer. They're not going to use that language. There's a lot of stigma as well around coming forward as a carer, not just personally or within friends and family circles, but...there is that sort of, "But you know, you're looking after your family, why would you use that word? It's so clinical". Or, you know, you don't want to say it at work, because suddenly someone's going to associate that word to determine your capacity, capability and competence, when actually, carers will give you so much more and then some. But you know, you're already wondering if you're going to be judged and overlooked for promotions and things. Some people think that the type or amount of care they do isn't enough. So there's almost like a baseline standard. I have to be there for X number of hours, but actually checking in on someone with a phone call or seeing if they're okay or if they need some groceries, that's still caring. If you're doing that over a year, that's still caring. If you're doing that over two months or like myself, if it was a gradual process, it's not just sudden.

But we know that actually, from looking at it and talking to carers, those who took longer to identify missed out on support as a result of them not knowing. They miss out on getting help for themselves or the person they care for. But I think the ultimate takeaway there is If they're not doing it or if they don't know how to talk about it, then what can we do to support that? And can we normalise those conversations? And can we make it easier to meet the carers where they are so that they can turn around and say, "I think that's me".

Ellie: Thank you. just wanted to pick up on that point, Rachel, being mindful of the differences between different types of care. Zahra mentioned you might talk about your child's latest milestone or something, but there is a big difference between caring for a neurotypical child, for example, and a neurodivergent child or caring for an adult. So many different factors. I'd just be interested in your view on that.

Rachel: Yeah, such an interesting distinction. And I think probably people in the caring community feel quite strongly at times about kind of all being bunched together in one category, because it is really different. I think someone explained it to me once where, usually often having a child and then caring for that child is a choice that people make actively go into and of course, you know, if your child then winds up with a health condition or a disability or something, you know, you still kind of come at it from a place of choice and so that it's a different dynamic. I think also when you're parenting, there's an expectation that of course you will be the sort of decision maker for the child and have kind of general control for a period of time over the child's kind of activities and choices, et cetera. Whereas I think when you are caring for an adult, often, again, I'm totally generalising, but often it's something that's kind of thrust upon you or you kind of wind up doing it because of a need, because of a crisis, because of an emergency, but it's not necessarily something you have gone out to do or planned it in your life calendar of events. I think it's a different feeling as well. And it's definitely a different dynamic too when you're trying to navigate the adult care system, having to sort of manage a grown-up's day-to-day activity, life, whether they...have ever been capable of doing it themselves or not. I know from caring for my parents, there was a regular ongoing kind of question in my head about at what point are they not able to be independent? And I'm sure my definition and their definition was quite different. But it's challenging.

They've both been completely successful, self-sufficient grownups for decades. Who am I to kind of waltz in and say, "Right, I've got it from here, guys, you can't handle it anymore." It's a very difficult conversation to have with someone. And nobody wants to kind of accept if their health is declining or that no one wants to kind of say, "You're right, I can't do that anymore" think you often see it in conversations about somebody moving out of a home or things like that as well. And then you've got sort of the middle kind of caring. So you've got your elder care and your childcare and your parent carers. And then I think

often the middle group are often overlooked because then there's people who might be caring for, as Zahra said, a spouse, a sibling, a friend, whatever it might be, but somebody who's kind of more your contemporary.

And that also has a completely different dynamic that will be a different relationship. And, again, different expectations. I spoke to one woman whose husband had a long-term health condition and, just their marital relationship and dynamic meant that... He was quite demanding of her in terms of what he expected her to do for him. He didn't want to bring external people in to help, which put a lot of onus on her. So there's all different dynamics. Similarly with parents, the sort of switch from all of a sudden having to parent a parent. It's a very challenging evolution for many, I think. So I think it's important to... distinguish sometimes and acknowledge that different types of caring will require different types of challenges and needs at different times.

Ellie: And I just want to hear in a bit more detail about the groundbreaking work that you and the responsible business team at RPC have been doing to move the dial for carers, particularly in the legal sector.

Rachel: Yeah, was a bit of, I mean you can probably guess it was a bit of a passion project of mine. But yeah, mean so thrilled we were able to do it and in partnership with Next 100 Years and Dana Dennis Smith OBE as well as Elizabeth Rimmer from Law Care which is of course the legal sectors charity that supports mental health and well-being for professionals working in the legal sector. We ran a survey online which had about 235 responses from people across the sector. So solicitors, paralegals, barristers, judges, you know, kind of full range of seniority and sort of types of roles. And then, within RPC, we conducted about 40 one-to-one kind of confidential interviews with carers here, just to kind of get a bit more detail and understanding around the stories, the lived experiences of kind of what it's like to care. And again, we spoke to people who are caring for disabled children, partners who were, unwell, parents, the full range and, and yeah, we, we published the report almost a year ago now. We had some, I think quite stark, sadly unsurprising statistics that came out of it. 89% of the respondents to our survey identified as women. Read into that, what you will, that might be that more women happen to see it, more women decided to click into it and engage with it. It could be that more women actually see themselves as carers. Maybe men are caring, but they don't see themselves as carers. So you could look into that how you can, but it was quite a high number.

We had a real interesting kind of conversation with people around even the identification of being a carer. Most people again used that the dreaded "just" word, "just looking after XYZ". So there was a lot of that and we sort of looked as well into the different definitions of carer that exist in different um, in different places and different resources, whether it's an NHS website, the, Carers Leave legislation, depending on if you're applying for disability living allowance or carers allowance or whatever it might be, it seems like there's different definitions that sort of add further murkiness to the water. We found 73% of our respondents had to take their own annual leave for their caring responsibilities. I kind of can commiserate with that having had to take annual leave for years to go back and forth to New York. And, you know, it's a double-edged sword because, you know, not only are you having to use up time that you've could be using to have some fun and do something else. It's also actually time that you should be resting, recuperating instead of, you know, the spirit behind the working time rules that we have in the UK here, which, for carers in particular is really important because there is that extra kind of, you know, physical and mental wellbeing kind of angle to caring. We found that 57% of our survey respondents felt that their career was impacted due to their caring responsibilities. So whether that was promotion, pay, how their performance was managed, what progression they were able to kind of go for. Actually some carers we spoke to said they felt actually guilty for any sort of thing that the organisation might have given them to support their caring role that they didn't feel like they could then ask for anything else or expect any promotion or pay increase or anything else. They were just kind of grateful for whatever they got, which I thought was such an interesting psychology. We had 66% of our respondents had said they had either unpaid or no support at all. So they were kind of having to run their caring responsibilities solo. And only 30% of them said that where their organisation provided support, they took advantage of it and used it. So I think there was also a real sense of people not, either not knowing about whatever support there was available or not feeling able to use it. I guess coming back to some of the points we talked about earlier around the stigma around caring. 77% of our respondents said their mental health and 70% of respondents said their physical health were affected by their caring role, which is not surprising at all. In fact, I would have thought it would be even higher because not only is caring tiring, relentless, potentially physically tiring if you're having to lift or, carry things or whatever. But also all of the admin, red tape and the processes that you're having to navigate are exhausting. And then to add the layer of kind of emotional investment into that, because it's a loved one, you know, it really does take its toll.

I think one of the things that came out, really loud and clear was that flexibility was absolutely key. I don't think carers that I spoke to anyway felt that they needed loads and loads of things. They're managing it, they're doing it, but they just need a bit of flexibility and a bit of kind whatever you want to call it, compassion, empathy, understanding, just so they can get everything they need to do done. Most carers, I think, are kind of accepting of what they have to do. And it's a big to-do list, but they can do it. they're used to it. They don't want to necessarily let anything go, but they just need some space to be able to do it all. And I think, you know, as part of that, this sort of understanding piece around managers and organisations, you know, understanding that and what carers might need in order to succeed and thrive at work. So yeah, lots of really

interesting stats, just to sort of add to the absolutely brilliant research that Carers UK puts out regularly. I mean, their research is phenomenal if anybody hasn't come across it yet. It's so, so thorough and interesting and important. But yeah, it was really great to be able to be part of just looking at impact of caring responsibilities in the legal sector because we are quite a high performance, fast paced little corner of the professional world. yeah, interesting to see how it's unfolding here.

Ellie: Yeah, and so great to give people the opportunity to actually talk about their caring responsibilities, know, to give them a reason to actually talk about it. It was, it's fantastic. And Zahra, one aspect I just wanted to pick up with you then is just the impact that caring responsibilities can have on somebody's wellbeing, physical and mental health.

Zahra: Yeah, absolutely. And thanks to Rachel for sharing that insight into the legal sector specifically. And if we sort of magnify that out to what our research shows us just talking to carers just widely across the UK. And if I take you like on a little chronological tour highlighting all of our research because we do it consistently and so we can have that data to cross reference from a few years ago to now and show what's happening in those areas. I think wellbeing, mental health and physical health comes up consistently in terms of that physical and mental load that carers carry every day. And I don't think we talk about it, we don't really talk about that impact and what does it feel like to be responsible, caring for somebody's physical and mental health, whilst also trying to live your life in the way that you want to, having to make sacrifices that you may not have chosen to make but find yourself in a position where you have to because you literally somebody else's life is dependent on your time and energy. And as much as you can provide, sort of equates to how well they are is almost that mentality care is sort of forge and there isn't processing time for all of that. And we know how important that is in the mental health space about processing and understanding and being able to release and you know, all of those brilliant mechanisms, but carers probably don't factor that in at any point because they are surviving in order to help someone thrive. And our research in 2019, found that unpaid carers were seven times more likely to say that they were always or often lonely. when we think of mental health, we do think of burnout and anxiety and stress. But there is this recognising trend in terms of loneliness. And I think that feeds straight into all of that, because as humans, we value connection and ability to forge relationships and social time. And we found that moving a couple of years forward in 2021, our survey found that 90% of carers said that they had felt lonely. And that's a big statistic. If you think about how many people are becoming carers every day, if we think there are over 5 million in the UK and 12,000 every day, 90% of carers said that they felt lonely. That's quite sad. It's sort of, even as a carer myself, I don't think I appreciated the data in the way that I do now. And the data actually gave me an insight into the life I was leading when I was leading it and not able to think about those things. But it was sort of heartbreaking to think, goodness, carers are doing so much they're doing a service to their families and their communities that actually, when we put it in monetary terms, it equates to 184 billion pounds a year, which is the value of care. That's a staggering number. I don't even think I could count to 184 billion if I tried. But if we also take it a little bit more into how caring and loneliness may impact different types of carers we did some research looking at the LGBTQ + I community and actually carers within that community were more likely to experience loneliness when compared to perhaps heterosexual carers and I think that was also really insightful to then start layering different types of caring experiences and I think when we're talking about the impact of caring on mental health, think we have to take all of those things into consideration to give space and to give that safety to allow everybody to come and be part of that conversation. So many carers have poor mental health, but this is getting increasingly worse. And maybe we can analyse or start thinking about why is that right now? What else is going on in our world that could be impacting carers? Because everything that's affecting all of us is still affecting them when they turn the news on, when they...have to spend how much in the supermarket.

And carers who are not in paid employment are more likely to have poor mental health. 43% of carers who had given up work to care said they had bad or very bad mental health. that's really, again, interesting to see the impact of staying in employment and what that provides in terms of mental health. And how do we help carers they're there, stay in work, but also how do we support this feeling of overwhelm because it's so easy to be overwhelmed as a carer. I could attest to that a hundred times over. I probably had a million moments of overwhelm in any one day. but can we do anything to help that mental health load or that physical health load that carers put to the bottom of their priority list?

Ellie: So I'd like to now move on then to how employers can foster carer-friendly workplaces. You've mentioned a few things, but just wondered if you could both identify like the key things that you or carers have identified as being the most helpful to help them balance their responsibilities and to avoid that burnout. So Rachel, if I can start with you.

Rachel: Yeah, I think, as I said earlier, flexibility is so, important. Kind of understanding, you know, it doesn't have to even be a formalised arrangement, but just the option if you can, for hybrid, agile working where there is some trust. I always say, actually, I think it's really interesting how we you know, we aim to recruit the most brilliant talent who have all of these incredible, you know, qualifications and types of experience and whatnot. And then as soon as they're in the door, it's like, if we can't see you, then we don't trust that you're doing the work. And so I think there's an element of trust that needs to be introduced more widely within organisations because I think flexible working has gotten a bit of a bad rap. But actually, I think if you treat people like grownups and it's done well, and of course there are other processes you can rely on if it's not working. But I think the starting point should always be to trust people to kind of get the work done and almost judge on output rather than just face time. So that would be probably my number one.

My second would be the sort of awareness raising around, especially with your managers, making sure that managers are equipped to understand what it might entail, how to support somebody who's caring in their team, and what they can do to signpost and support. So I think...those two probably are the biggies for me.

Ellie: Zahra, what would you say to that?

Zahra: Yeah, absolutely. I'll jump right in because I think that's what we see just echoing obviously, Rachel is a wealth of knowledge and spoke to exactly what we hear from carers, which is the flexibility, the understanding managers and then being recognised for their value. And our research shows that it's one in seven who are juggling work and care and that 600 leave a day because they can't do it anymore, can't juggle work and care anymore. If we sort of sit between those two big stats, what we're looking at is what would help them. So I would add to just the tools, so paid leave, you know, since the Carers Leave Act, yes, now we have many organisations saying that they do now have a policy for carers leave, but making it clear that it is for carers, if you can, just making sure that if it's possible to enhance that. But really providing that awareness and training for managers, providing that awareness of how you talk about it, the definitions, the language you're using, making it as inclusive to carers as possible so that they're not having to hunt around or try and find themselves in the policies that are for them. And definitely one thing I would say, which really helps to make care of friendly workplaces is enlisting senior leaders and creating that psychological safety because if you can show it from that space and really role model what it means, the values and culture then do begin to change and it begins to be okay to say and admit that you're a carer and come forward because it's one thing to identify but you might identify and tell no one in which case that's still not helping, you're still carrying this big thing with you.

So if we want to be authentic, but also recognise that carers are in every network group, in every policy, everything applies to them in the same way. It's just adjusting to make sure that they're actually spoken about because they're valued just like everyone else.

Rachel: Yeah, I would just say, actually echoing everything Zahra just said, but just add on that I think there's a real need in terms of that role modelling to sort of not shy away from vulnerability. And Zahra sort of said something earlier about, you know, asking for help and how we almost need to sort of change our thinking where actually maybe it's really resilient to ask for help when you acknowledge that actually something is too big or too much or too overwhelming and actually knowing your limitations and knowing kind of when you need to phone a friend or have a bit of space or whatever it is, actually maybe that's kind of real resilience. So yeah, I think there's more of that that we need to kind of be promoting in the workplace where it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to talk about when maybe you weren't at your best because frankly it happens to everyone. But I think there's this culture, certainly in professional services, where everyone is again meant to be kind of just untouchable and unbreakable, which just is not realistic.

Ellie: Absolutely. I completely agree with that and thank you for those really practical ways of supporting colleagues, which is, as you said, can just make the world of difference between someone staying and leaving their career so that they can continue to be an asset to their organisations whilst also managing their caring responsibilities, which as you've both alluded to, that they both benefit the person, but also the organisation. So thank you both so much for speaking today, for your honesty and your insights. It's been a real pleasure to speak to you both.

Zahra: Thank you.

Rachel: Thank you.

Ellie:

If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website: www.rpclegal.com/theworkcouch. Or, if you have questions for me or any of our speakers, or perhaps suggestions of topics you would like us to cover on a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at theworkcouch@rpclegal.com – we would love to hear from you.

Thank you all for listening and we hope you'll join us again next time.



RPC is a modern, progressive and commercially focused City law firm. We are based in London, Hong Kong, Singapore and Bristol. We put our clients and our people at the heart of what we do.