

Talking to Your Employer About Your Caregiving Responsibilities

You don't need to spend 30 hours a week taking care of a parent or other loved one to feel its effect on your work life. The unexpected emotional and practical strains of caregiving, combined with existing career responsibilities, can seem overwhelming.

For many caregivers, a little flexibility at work goes a long way. Flex-time (in which you set your own schedule, at least partially) and telecommuting can help you keep your responsibilities in balance, rather than in constant competition with each other.

The good news is that employers are becoming increasingly aware of the effect caregiving can have on productivity, and many have formal programs in place to address the issue. Whether or not yours does, negotiating time off or significant changes to your work schedule can be tricky. Here are a few tips:

- **Know your ABCs**—specifically, FMLA and EAP. It takes only a few minutes online to learn the basics of the Family Medical Leave Act and the Employee Assistance Program. Both can help you balance caregiving and career responsibilities, and the FMLA may guarantee you a certain amount of unpaid time off. Your HR department should be able to confidentially supply you with more information, as well as other caregiving resources.
- **Break the ice.** Even if you're not yet sure exactly what kind of arrangement you want to propose, it's usually a good idea to start talking to your boss about your caregiving duties as soon as possible. Trying to hide a major drain on your time and energy can leave your boss wondering why (for example) you've seemed distracted lately. Broaching the subject shows that you're conscientious about staying productive.
- **Anticipate misgivings.** Consider your proposal from your supervisor's perspective. For example, if you ask to work at home two days a week, what can you do to reassure your boss that you'll stay productive? You might suggest a regularly scheduled check-in by phone or e-mail. Always show that you're mindful of your proposed plan's impact on both your boss and your coworkers.
- **Flexibility goes both ways.** When you make a request, think of what you can give in return. For example, if you want to take a certain day off, is there a day when you can commit to working longer hours? Are there less desirable shifts you can agree to take as a part of a flex time?
- **Keep the conversation going.** Whether or not your initial conversation leads to a change in schedule or an agreement about time off, ask your supervisor if you can set a time to check in again. A regular meeting is a great way to prevent reservations from growing into resentments. The knowledge that adjustments can be made down the road is a great reassurance to most supervisors.

Throughout your discussions, keep in mind that what you're asking for isn't a favor from your boss but an arrangement that'll benefit both you and the company and enable you to remain a valuable—and sane—employee. If that doesn't seem likely with your current employer, don't be afraid to examine other, more accommodating employment opportunities, including part-time work.