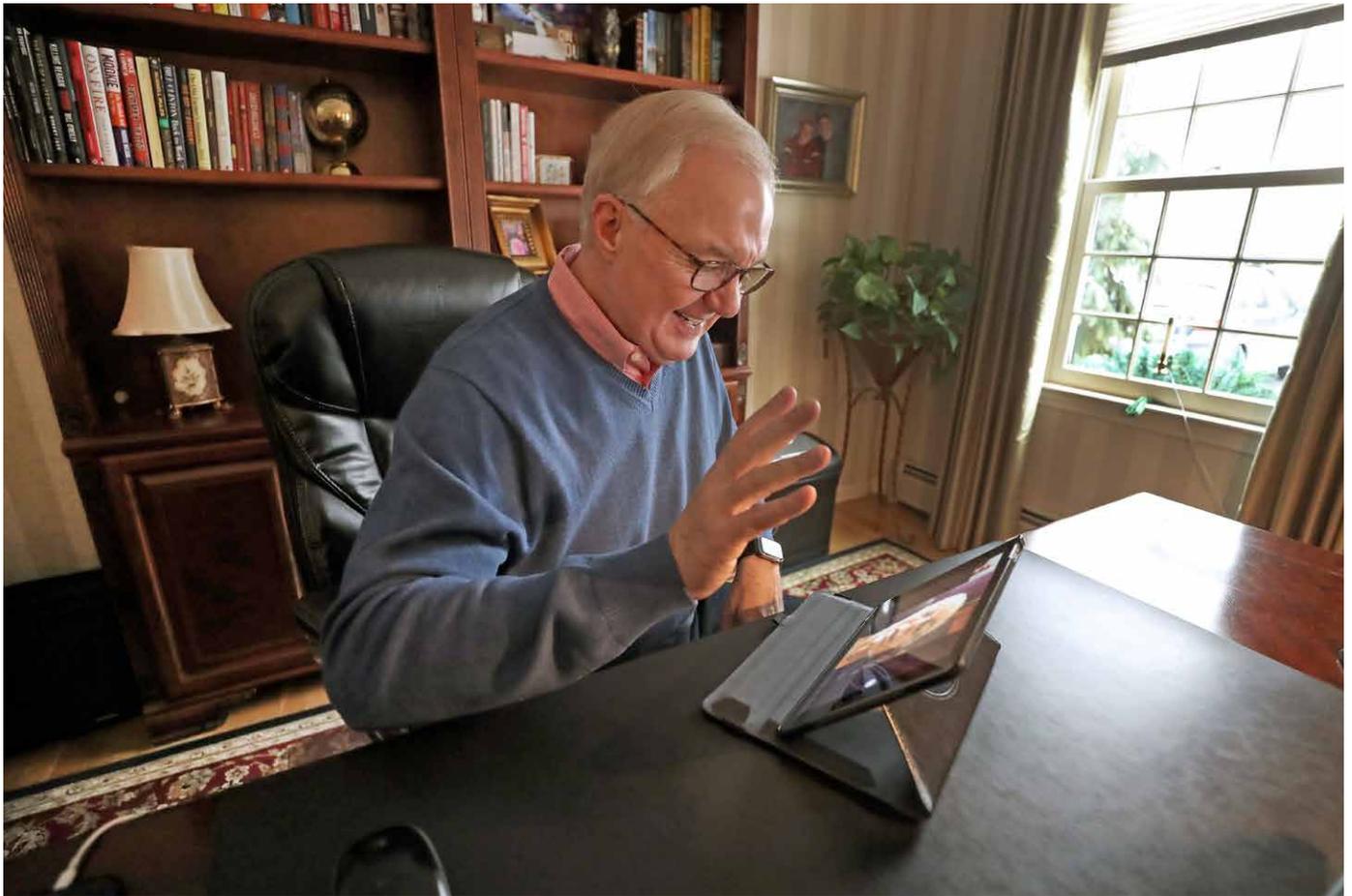


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As labor crunch tightens, employers offer more flexibility to those serving as family caregivers



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

From his Westborough home, Cigna New England president Mark Butler has a remote check-in with his elderly father, who lives in Vermont.

By **Robert Weisman**
Globe Staff

When his mother died two years ago, Mark Butler was thrust into the unaccustomed role of caregiver for his 89-year-old father, who has prostate cancer and kidney disease.

Butler, 63, the Newton-based New England market president for Cigna, had to find time in the workday to call his dad in Bennington, Vt., and help him navigate the health care system. Butler also began driving 220 miles round trip to accompany him to medical procedures.

“I realized, ‘Holy cow, this takes a lot of time, energy, and discipline,’” he said.

Butler had joined the ranks of the hundreds of thousands of working caregivers in Massachusetts juggling the demands of their jobs with shopping for groceries, paying bills, and sorting meds for older parents. They duck out of meetings to haggle with insurers. They come to work late after shuttling parents to doctor appointments.

These caregivers have long suffered in silence, fearing employers would assume their responsibilities meant lost productivity, absenteeism, and workday interruptions. But a worsening labor shortage, and the personal odysseys of bosses like Butler, are transforming corporate attitudes.

Drawing on his experiences, Butler sought to bring the issue front and center at a recent business roundtable retreat at Babson College in Wellesley that drew captains of commerce from the high-tech and biotech, real estate, construction, and financial services industries. At the same time, he's worked to create a more welcoming culture for employee caregivers at Cigna New England, which has 60 employees in Newton and 350 across the region.

"Workers used to be quiet about it," said Tom Riley, chief executive of Seniorlink, a Boston company whose technology aids family caregivers. "If you worked in the bowels of a business, you were petrified and you feared retribution if you talked about it. But that's changing. Nothing brings it home more than the 50-year-old CEO who suddenly finds that he's a caregiver and he can't get to that morning meeting because of his caregiving duties."

With the state's unemployment rate dipping below 3 percent, many employers are now seeking to accommodate working caregivers through more family-friendly leave benefits and increased flexibility about when and where employees work. Business leaders joined with their health care, education, and government counterparts last month to launch a Massachusetts Caregiver Coalition aimed at finding ways to support employees.

"It's seen as a talent retention and workforce development issue," Riley said. "Some employees have a half-time job as caregiver just at the time their careers are taking off."

More than 612,000 workers spend at least some of their time out of the office caring for older adults in Massachusetts, according to a recent report from the state Executive Office of Elder Affairs along with the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and the Massachusetts eHealth Institute. Many of these employees see themselves more as dutiful sons or daughters than caregivers. One survey showed more than four in 10 hadn't told their supervisors about their responsibilities.

"For the longest time, I never considered myself a caregiver," said Scott Williams, who leads the patient advocacy group at the Rockland-based biopharmaceutical company EMD Serono. Williams has spent years helping his aging mother cope with multiple chronic illnesses from a distance. He recently moved her from Eastern Pennsylvania to suburban Maryland, where his family lives.

The ranks of working caregivers are swelling partly because the over-65 population — their parents — are living longer than previous generations. To complicate the challenges, families are more spread out. And more of today's employees are having children later, so they and their partners are caring for young children at the same time as they're helping their parents.

Sara Quist, 42, Cigna's director of community engagement, is typical of a large subset of working caregivers raising children and caring for parents at the same time.

When her family gathered at Conte Forum in Chestnut Hill just before Thanksgiving to celebrate her son's 7th birthday and watch a Boston College basketball game, her 86-year-old father collapsed just before tipoff. "I could be a poster child for the sandwich generation," Quist said.

She took time off from her job to accompany her Dad to a workup at Massachusetts General Hospital, where doctors determined he had suffered an attack of vertigo.

Quist knew she was fortunate: She could have taken advantage of Cigna's four-week caregiver leave policy if needed. And throughout the ordeal, her manager was supportive, she said, even texting her early in the morning to ask how her father was doing.

"They let us bring our whole selves to work," she said. "If you share your caregiver story, people understand what you're going through and it makes it easier for others to share theirs."

Many aren't as lucky. They care for loved ones with conditions that persist for months or years, often with little or no help. Some talk of sitting at work near new parents who complain of being up at night with crying babies, afraid to tell them they've lost sleep trying to comfort parents with dementia.

And not all employers are sympathetic.

In a 2017 survey by Transamerica Institute, more than three-quarters of employee caregivers said the stress caused them to make changes to their jobs, ranging from switching to part time to quitting or taking early retirement.

Liz O'Donnell of Dedham first had to string together vacation days but ultimately left her job at a marketing firm after her mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and her father with Alzheimer's disease on the same day in 2014. Her book about her experience, "Working Daughter: A Guide to Caring for Your Aging Parents While Making a Living," was released last summer.

O'Donnell said she "felt so unprepared and so alone" at first. "I didn't hear anyone in the workplace talking about it," she said. "I didn't realize people in the next [cubical] or the next office might be going through it. And the open office design made it harder to talk when your parents called."

Marc Bernica, senior vice president for Boston-based child-care provider Bright Horizons, recalled hiring a product manager in the company's Colorado office who had had left her previous job because she felt that employer hadn't given her the flexibility to care for her aging mother. Bright Horizons tries to recognize and accommodate employees' outside commitments, he said.

"These are people who are in their peak earnings years, and of peak value to their employers," Bernica said. "We have to be able to think about their well-being holistically."

Sometimes that means enlisting colleagues to pick up the slack for working caregivers.

Meagan Silva, an executive assistant at Rockland Trust in Hanover, said she's grateful to the coworkers who cover for her when she has to take a call about the finances or insurance of an older relative struggling with depression.

"I have to take these calls on my work hours because that's when the insurance people are working," Silva said. "I have to be the voice for someone who's lost their voice."

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