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## Inquirer Editorial: Bosses must be creative

December 26, 2011

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As federal and state governments pull back on child-care aid and struggle to find affordable ways to help families with problems of elder care, family advocates are looking to the private sector for more help. They're urging employers to let caregivers have more flexible schedules to ease the burden of looking after young children and frail parents.

Doing so can actually pay off for both the worker and the employer, as suggested by researchers writing for the Future of Children's Work and Family project, a collaboration between Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.

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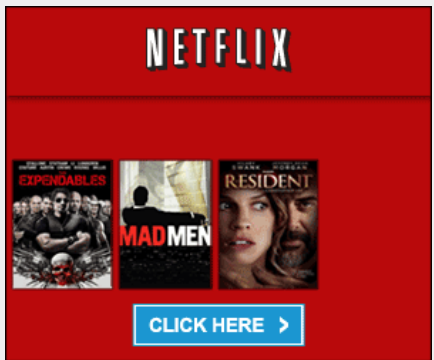
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Flexible schedules can allow caregivers to work around their family obligations, which cuts down on unexpected absenteeism and the firings that can result. It would lead to higher productivity and a healthier workplace environment.

While employers would have to get better at scheduling, that is a lot easier than covering for someone who suddenly fails to clock in or dealing with a distracted workforce. In some instances, employers can allow a caregiver to leave for part of the day to address a home emergency and return to complete his or her work.

When caregivers are fired from work for living up to their responsibilities at home, it's an expensive move for the employer, too. Replacing even a minimum-wage worker costs about 20 percent of the worker's salary, according to Heather Boushey, of the Center for American Progress.

While she and coauthors haven't given up on government supports for caregivers, they have taken a realistic view. Government never did much for middle-class workers who don't meet income guidelines for subsidized care. And, given budget constraints, government is even less likely to expand care services.

That means working families are going to have to ask their employers to take a creative look at family-work conflicts.

Advocates also suggest that community organizations, such as after-school and elder-care programs, should have more flexible hours so they can provide help when workers need it.

Forward-thinking companies such as Texas Instruments and Kraft Foods are among those helping employees take care of their families. At Texas Instruments, some workers can adjust their schedules or telecommute. Kraft found a more satisfied and loyal workforce when it allowed hourly workers to swap shifts and take single-day vacations to cope with family needs.

Comp time, split shifts, and job sharing are other tools employers can use to give employees some flexibility.

Added to the pressures of caregiving, workers have had to cover for others laid off in this sluggish economy. They have watched their own salaries shrink. It's only fair that employers, which have been able to survive a rough economy thanks to employees' extra sweat for less pay, work this out.

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