

## Alzheimer's Disease in the Workplace: Findings from a Survey of Human Resource Professionals

This paper reports on the findings from a web-based survey of human resource professionals concerning Alzheimer's disease in the workplace. Responses were obtained from 103 persons representing diverse areas of the country. In each locale, an announcement describing the study was placed in the SHRM newsletter and persons were invited to respond.

Approximately one third (36%) of the respondents was employed by a non-profit company with another third (33%) employed in a service industry. A slight majority, 58%, were directors of their HR department. Almost half, 49%, had a college degree and 39% had graduate degrees. Most, 63%, had been in their position for more than 6 years. Seventy six percent worked for companies with less than 500 employees and 60% stated that there were only 1 or 2 people in the HR department.

The majority, 88%, was female with half being 55 years of age or older and 44% being between the ages of 35 and 54 years. The majority of the respondents, 78%, had someone close to them who had been a caregiver for a person with Alzheimer's disease, and 6 of the respondents stated that they were presently the caregivers. In addition, 73% had someone close to them who had the illness.

All of the respondents had experiences with employees who were caregivers of a person with Alzheimer's disease. The most common issue that they dealt with was the schedules of these employees, arriving late or leaving work early or absenteeism. Many (51%) also requested changes in their work schedules due to their caregiving.

Most companies, 70%, had no specific policies for family caregivers with the majority relying on the Family and Medical Leave Act. A few stated that they did permit more flexibility to these employees and also had telecommuting as an option.

Only 18% had any training in working with caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease. However, most, 92%, stated that they would be interested in such training. They were similarly interested in receiving more information about the illness.

Approximately 35% had dealt with employees with symptoms of Alzheimer's or another type of dementia. The most frequently reported symptom was a decline in the quality of work followed by a lack of motivation or initiative. Forgetfulness was the most common issue reported by 35% of the respondents with missing work reported by 34 percent. Very few reported having to change an employee's tasks or work due to symptoms or having let someone go because they could no longer do their work. Of employees who were let go, 11% were younger than 65 years.

Half of the respondents (49%) felt uncomfortable discussing with the employee his or her symptoms and its impact on their work. Only 2% had any specific policy in place that dealt with dementia. The majority (90%) were interested in receiving training on how to address the issue with employees. Among the areas in which they would like the training were:

- Awareness of the illness,
- Treatments,
- How to identify dementia,
- The legal rights of the company
- How to approach the subject with the employee,
- Warning signs

- How to differentiate stress from symptoms
- How to train and educate managers about the illness

The respondents provided additional comments about the issue of Alzheimer's disease in the workplace. These were particularly helpful in illuminating their experiences and concerns.

Among the comments were:

- It will be increasingly important with an aging work force
- Most experiences have been with caregivers but it is expected that it will also increase among employees themselves
- It is important to now become proactive by increasing understanding and education of employers
- HR had to deal with employee results and the impact the employee has on the business. Training to better understand how to be flexible is important as is training the employee to understand their own limits
- It would be important to be able to spot the symptoms and treat the problem before it becomes a crisis
- It is very disturbing for staff to watch a long-time colleague decline. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to inappropriate decisions about keeping them as an active employee long beyond their ability warrants it.
- This is a serious issue with so many tentacles that don't hit home for most people until they know someone who is diagnosed
- There are multiple competing issues that include, but are not limited to, individual privacy, employee/union rights, etc. that make it difficult to assist an employee displaying symptoms

- This is a tough issue to approach with management and with families; it takes someone to educate people. I would really like to be involved. In my case, the impact and stress on my family was devastating and at that time there was very little help or recognition of the disease so they just over medicated my father. He eventually lost his job. Now my brothers and sisters all fear the same will happen to us.

### Summary

The findings from this pilot project indicate that those responding have had experience both in their personal lives and in the workplace with Alzheimer's disease. They believe it is a serious workplace concern that will become even more important as the work force continues to age.

As is common with web-based surveys, there is an initial bias that occurs among respondents, as those most likely to participate are those who feel an immediate urgency or connection with the issue. This limits the ability to make generalizations from this pilot study. However, the findings and the comments of the respondents testify to the impact that dementia can have on the workplace

The findings from the pilot indicate that this is an important subject that employers are beginning to confront and that there is a definite interest in receiving more information and training. Moreover, as persons are beginning to delay retirement as long as possible, it is a subject that will become even more significant. As one respondent commented, it is important to become "proactive" rather than reactive when dealing with an aging work force.

Workplace policies and practices have been developed around the issues of drug abuse, alcoholism, and HIV/AIDS in the workplace. Employers have learned how to handle these

problems, how to discuss them with employees, and how and where to refer them. The aging of the population necessitates that similar awareness and education now being given to Alzheimer's disease, a major public health problem, whose impact is felt across the population.