



## **THINKING ABOUT FINDING A JOB**

### **Why work? The importance of working for carers**

Combining a paid job with caring responsibilities is not easy, but the benefits often outweigh the difficulties. For many carers having the option to seek, secure and maintain paid employment alongside their caring responsibilities is very important.

Here are just a few of the reasons that carers give for wishing to work:

- To have an identity that is nothing to do with being a carer
- To have some independence
- To earn and have some money of their own
- For social contact/meeting other people
- For job satisfaction and a different challenge and stimulation
- For confidence and self-esteem
- To benefit the whole family

### **To have an identity that is nothing to do with being a carer**

Carers often see work as a means of establishing an identity outside of their caring role. Although many choose to do something completely different there are some carers who prefer a job that makes use of the skills and experience that they have gained through being a carer.

### **To have some independence**

Employment can be a means of regaining lost independence. Often this is linked to a sense of personal identity but for some carers it can include greater financial independence and (perhaps) less reliance on state benefits.

### **To earn and have some money of their own**

Being in paid employment does not necessarily mean that you will be financially much better off. Most carers recognise this but choose to work anyway because of the satisfaction that they get from earning some money of their own. Even small increases in household income can make a significant difference – for example in enhancing feelings of financial security, avoiding debt and not having to borrow from other family members.

For social contact / meeting other people

For many carers, having a paid job is a way of getting out of the house and meeting other people. It enables them to talk, socialise and make friends with a wider circle than they would normally come into contact with. This is important for a lot of carers who might otherwise feel stuck or 'trapped' at home with limited opportunities to get out and about. Having a job can also reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

### **For job satisfaction and a different challenge and stimulation**

Many carers find their caring role rewarding and fulfilling. At the same time, however, they want the challenge and stimulation of doing something that will stretch their minds and enable them to use other skills and talents that they possess. Being able to do a job that is interesting and challenging is seen as one way of achieving this. Work also provides the opportunity to focus on other things besides caring and this can help reduce stress and anxiety.

### **For confidence and self esteem**

The experience of paid employment can help boost feelings of confidence and self esteem. Some carers also believe that it makes them more interesting as individuals and gives them more to talk about.

### **To benefit the whole family**

Most carers recognise that having a paid job is likely to benefit other family members (including the cared for person), as well as themselves. Working can provide a break for both cared for and carer, increase household income and even bring about an improvement in family relationships.

## **Thinking about the kind of work you want to do**

If you are thinking about returning to work, there are a number of issues that you will have to consider. Some carers are very clear, not only about the kind of work that they want to do, but also when they want to work and for how many hours each week. Others will need more time to decide which is the best option for them. Carers often say that it is important that they do not feel rushed into making any decisions. If they do return to work, it has to be at their own pace, when they feel the time is right and only after they have thought about all the arrangements that they will need to make.

Getting back to work is often a much longer process than simply looking for the right kind of job and then applying for it. You may feel that you need to brush up on certain key skills first, or retrain for a different type of job. You might also want to explore options such as voluntary work, perhaps as a stepping stone to paid employment.

Thinking about these issues is an important starting point for most carers, so it is worthwhile reviewing them in a little more detail here.

### **What kind of work?**

Of course, when it comes to work, carers have widely differing opinions. Some want to do something that is entirely unconnected to their caring role in order to have a complete break, while others want a job that is closely related or linked to it. Still others look for the kind of job that will build upon their caring experiences and enable them to influence change in the future, such as social work.

As well as the type of job, you will need to think about the level of responsibility that you are willing to accept. Although many carers are reluctant to take a job that will involve any kind of pressure additional to their caring role there are some who feel that a certain amount of responsibility is necessary to stimulate and challenge them. They argue that this would not necessarily cause any extra stress or pressure because they would be doing something they enjoy.

Even if you think you already know the type of job you want there is no need to make any hasty decisions. You can afford to take your time and make sure that whatever choice you make is the right one. But try not to let things drift too much. Although it can be easy to delay taking action because the time or circumstances are not quite right remember that, if you keep putting something off, you may never get around to doing it!

### **Full-time or part-time**

As well as the kind of work that you would like to do, you will need to decide whether you want a full-time or a part-time job. For many carers, finding a part-time job – particularly one that will ‘fit’ around their caring responsibilities - is the preferred option, at least to begin with. When thinking about the number of hours that you would like to work, keep in mind possible flexible working options such as flexi-time, job-sharing and shift work. For parents caring for a child with a disability, term-time work is often a popular choice as it removes the difficulty of having to find childcare cover during school holidays.

Although working hours are an important consideration, there are other advantages and disadvantages to working full or part-time which you will probably need to weigh up. For example, there are often better career prospects, pay and employment entitlements associated with full-time jobs. A part-time job, although it pays less, usually presents fewer problems in terms of cover and can sometimes be fitted around existing caring responsibilities. Another important issue is the effect of your earnings (based on the number of hours that you work), on benefit entitlement, particularly Carers Allowance. See the section on ‘money and benefits’ for more information about this.

## **What constraints do I have?**

The greatest area of concern for many carers thinking of returning to paid employment is alternative care. You will need to consider whether such care is actually necessary and, if so, the kind of options that are available. We will be taking a closer and more detailed look at some of these in the next section. Another dilemma which a lot of carers face is the risk of losing money and benefits. Some carers feel they simply cannot afford to lose their entitlement to benefits such as Carer's Allowance or Income Support and this can limit their employment options quite considerably. If you are in this position you might want to look at other options, such as voluntary work, which would allow you to keep your benefits whilst still being paid out of pocket expenses.

Many carers are also concerned about the effect on their benefits of short-term working. At the present time it is not possible for a carer to get a job and maintain an entitlement to certain benefits if the job does not work out for any reason or if they are only employed on a temporary contract. Having to reapply for benefits is a time-consuming process which can cause anxiety and stress, as well as short-term financial problems.

Carers who do not have access to their own transport may be subject to further constraints. In particular they may feel that they need a job that is relatively close to where they live and does not involve a lot of travelling time.

## **Some other options to consider**

Traditional ways of working can be a barrier if you are trying to combine the responsibilities of caring with a paid job. For this reason it is worth considering some of the other options that may be available such as working from home, self-employment and agency work.

### **Working from home**

Working from home does not appeal to many carers, but it does have certain advantages - for example you will not have to worry about making alternative care arrangements and you can organise your workload with a high degree of flexibility. On the other hand it will not provide the same sort of break from caring that you would get in a normal work setting or the same opportunity to meet and mix with other people.

### **Self-employment**

Self-employment is attractive to some carers, not only due to the (potentially) quite flexible working hours but also because of the satisfaction that may derive from being your own boss and having control over your working life. There is a wide range of jobs available to the self-employed, including: hairdressing, computer consultancy, cleaning, training, plumbing, window cleaning, childminding, ironing, decorating and driving instruction. However, for some people being self-employed involves too many responsibilities and can be

stressful. Depending on the type of business, start-up costs can also be quite high.

#### Agency work

As with home working and self-employment, agency work allows a certain amount of control over when you want to work. On the other hand rates of pay are often low and you may miss out on other benefits such as holiday entitlement and sick pay. Nevertheless, it can offer a 'gentle' route back to work and may help boost your confidence.

### **Taking the first step**

The decision to look for paid employment can be a very difficult one, especially if you have not worked for some time or are low on confidence. Some carers have found it helpful to tell as many people as possible, including their immediate family and the person (or people) they care for, that they are thinking of getting a job. Others discovered that getting themselves more involved in their local community, joining a carers group, or doing voluntary work was a good way of building up confidence. Undertaking some form of learning or training can be yet another springboard to work for some carers. There are many routes that you can take in preparing and planning for work and only you can decide which is right for you – but the most important step is always the first.

For some carers getting a paid job is not an option they are able, or want to, consider. However, that does not mean that they cannot start thinking about working at some stage in the future if their circumstances alter or they change their mind. There is nothing to lose by exploring the options and opportunities that are available now and to make plans for the future.

We hope the following sections will help you to take that 'first step'.