



# Bringing out the Best

A qualitative study of success and challenges  
faced by mature aged carers in NSW  
in combining care and work

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# Introductory Note

The women who participated in this study were caring and nurturing. While they came from myriad backgrounds, they were all committed to their caring responsibilities despite significant personal hardships. Several had the compound challenge of caring for not one, but two family members: an aged mother and father; two bickering aunts; a disabled husband and a son with Asperger's Syndrome. Some had cared for parents now deceased and then assumed responsibility for another family member. All faced their unique personal challenges with discipline and kindness.

They conveyed the idea that caring 'brings out the best' in a person. Accordingly, this report is called '*Bringing out the Best*'.

Listening to the stories of these women has been both confronting and rewarding. Hopefully, the findings of this study can help more women across the state combine their caring responsibilities with paid employment.

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Over the next 20 years our economic well-being will depend upon keeping older workers employed. An impending labour shortfall will need to be met by retaining mature age workers, including those with caring responsibilities.

'*Bringing out the Best*' is a qualitative focus-group study of the successes and challenges faced by mature-aged women, aged 45 years and over, in combining caring and work in NSW. The focus group discussions sought to chronicle the experiences, motivations, aspirations and needs of mature age women carers in relation to work.

The study is part of the *Mature Aged Carers in the Workforce Project* of the Women's Equity Bureau of the NSW Office of Industrial Relations under the *NSW Carers Action Plan 2007–2012*. The *Mature Aged Carers in the Workforce Project* aims to assist NSW private sector employers to attract and retain mature age workers with caring responsibilities in an era of looming labour shortages.

The study was based on four focus group discussions. Two focus groups were held in Sydney (one for working carers and the other for non-working carers), and these were replicated in Lismore so that the views of carers living in both the city and country could be heard.

The participants in the study were women aged 45 years or over with care for an elderly person. Women participants were chosen primarily because they constitute around 70 per cent of primary carers in NSW.

All participants were primary carers providing 20 hours or more care per week. It follows that initiatives to assist mature age carers with heavy caring responsibilities to find and retain employment will also be of benefit to those with lighter caring responsibilities.

## Why be concerned?

If the ageing issue is not addressed the pool of labour necessary for the most productive use of resources will not be harnessed, and this will negatively impact on the productivity of the nation and individual businesses. Some salient statistics on the relationship between an ageing Australia and those who care for aged people are:

- there are 748,000 carers in NSW. Over half of carers who provide ongoing assistance provide at least 20 hours of care a week;<sup>i</sup>
- there will be a national shortfall of an estimated 195,000 workers by 2010. NSW is expected to experience the greatest shortfall;<sup>ii</sup>

- women will be a greater potential source of labour than men. The female labour force will increase by 867,600 to 4.9 million between 1998 and 2016, an annual growth rate of 1.1%. By comparison, the male labour force will increase by 631,700 to 5.9 million, an average annual growth rate of 0.6%;<sup>iii</sup>
- there are now five people of working age to support every person over 65. By 2047 this will fall to 2.4 people. This means there will be a smaller tax base to support older unemployed people;<sup>iv</sup>
- about 25 per cent of the population will be aged 65 or over by 2047. The rate of ageing will increase after 2010.<sup>v</sup>

## Key Findings

Combining care with work is determined by both need and choice. Although most participants took on caring responsibilities willingly, they made many personal sacrifices to do so. As one woman said, *'I know it is a choice but it's still hard.'*

While the motivation for carers to work was strong, it often came into conflict with powerful emotional and cultural factors. Many participants felt they were the ones best able to care for their relatives and that, in a crisis, caring would take precedence over work.

All believed their caring experience gave them special attributes that would appeal to employers: pride in their caring role and their work, maturity, reliability, loyalty, resilience, resourcefulness, perseverance, a sense of responsibility, organisational and communication skills, empathy, compassion, tact, and the ability to communicate with diverse community members.

However, most felt they had poor employment prospects because of low education levels and perceptions of outdated skills. Those who worked were mostly employed in low paid sectors of the labour market and felt stiff competition for jobs from younger, better educated people. Those who had not recently worked because of caring responsibilities felt particularly disadvantaged in terms of gaining work, but many expressed a desire to re-enter the workforce post-care.

Education and training were seen as the key to securing and retaining jobs, and participants felt that training for mature age people needed to be delivered with caring responsibilities in mind. Some thought their own caring responsibilities made them well suited for work in caring roles, for example in aged care facilities.

Most felt it would be very difficult to work full-time and care for loved ones, but a few managed to do so. While most thought permanent part time work with predictable hours would best accommodate workers with caring responsibilities, they felt that a lack of marketable skills relegated them to casual work.

A feeling of resignation about the lack of entitlements attendant upon casual work was evident. Participants seemed well aware that they had little bargaining power to ensure fairness in their working conditions, and consequently most flexible working arrangements were not seen to be available to them. Job-sharing was seen as difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises. Working from home was seen to be

suited to those at the top and bottom tiers of the employment ladder such as professionals working away from their offices and telemarketers working at their kitchen tables.

Other flexible arrangements like gradual retirement, pay averaging, flexible and unpaid leave, and the use of sick leave as carer's leave were seen to be mainly available to permanent employees of large organisations. A couple of participants believed paid leave for elder care should be made available to older workers. Given the common use of mobile phones, participants felt that access to a telephone at work was not necessary. At any rate, telephone access was seen to assist only when the care load was light and there were other family members nearby to respond. For the types of jobs at which participants worked, taking a relative cared for to work was not seen as feasible.

Although largely resigned to casual work, mostly with few flexibilities, participants nevertheless felt that employers, supervisors and co-workers needed to more fully appreciate the importance of flexible working arrangements for mature aged workers with caring responsibilities.

Participants said they would reward employment flexibility with loyalty to their employers, that work 'felt different' when their personal situation was acknowledged and when they were respected and valued as a person and as a worker. Most thought greater emphasis should be placed on promoting their worth as potential employees among the organisations likely to hire them – small and medium-sized businesses.

Their educational disadvantages, their isolation, and the challenging circumstances in which they provide care signify that these women most urgently require support in combining care and work, and that they would benefit from workplace initiatives which recognise and accommodate their caring needs.

According to participants with significant job-seeking experience, a solutions-oriented approach needed to be taken by carers to find a suitable job. Each carer's situation was seen as unique and requiring flexibility from both carer and employer. Based on these discussions, six considerations in combining caring and work emerged from their combined years of experience.

### **1. Be practical about balancing work and care**

Participants felt that '*something would have to go*' unless they could find a job with flexibilities that suited their particular circumstances. There were personal issues to consider: whether the quality of care they provided would suffer if they took a job that did not meet their needs; relationships with other family members; and the effect on their own health and well being.

## **2. Carers wanting work need to seek out opportunities that fit within their own needs**

An active approach to finding work was encouraged, through:

- assessing the hours available for work each week and when those hours could be worked;
- assessing other requirements a carer might have, such as the need to leave earlier or start later on certain days, or other needs as specified;
- looking for organisations that needed workers at those times and which could accommodate other needs of carers;
- approaching employers directly without necessarily waiting for jobs to be advertised.

## **3. Some felt it best to be honest and upfront with prospective employers**

Some participants said that it was important to be honest and upfront with prospective employers about their caring situation at home and the consequential work flexibilities required, rather than to take a job that was unsustainable in the long term.

## **4. Others wanted to get a job first and discuss flexibilities afterwards**

Several told how they secured continued employment by '*getting a foot in the door*'. Some initially accepted unsatisfactory job conditions and subsequently obtained more flexible working arrangements.

## **5. Carers wanting work should present a solution that makes an employer want to hire them**

Several participants noted, '*Nobody wants to hire a problem.*' They felt the need to 'sell' their unique personal attributes and to show how this meant that their needs could be accommodated at work to the advantage of the employer.

## **6. A prospective employer needs to be fair**

While all participants were proud of their work and prepared to work hard, they felt that, in return, an employer should try to meet their needs for work flexibilities. However, many felt they had little bargaining power to ensure appropriate flexibilities.

All participants found caring could be isolating and stressful. Improved mental health and an improved relationship with the person under care were seen as key benefits of working.

Accessing vital support services that could enable a carer to go to work could be difficult to find and hard to accept for the carer as well as the person under care: *'They [support services] are not easy to get into and they are not that easy to access'; 'We feel guilt inside if we accept Home Care'.*

Participants believed their role as carers was undervalued by governments, noting that it would cost significantly more to replace their home-based services with formal facility-based care. All felt that public support services for carers needed to be in place alongside supportive employment policies for them:

*'Depends on the support services that are available. Maybe society needs to think this through if they want people to stay in their homes. If it is left up to individual families, I don't think it will be possible [to keep older people at home]. Families with money will purchase support. They will have that set up while other people will be struggling.'*

Money was a concern but was not always a significant motivator for the participants to work, although a lack of superannuation entitlements was a looming worry for some. Their commitment to caring came from the heart. Aged care facilities were mostly seen as the last option - it was important that ageing relatives were lovingly cared for in their own homes for as long as possible.

Most agreed that it was *'an end of an era'* of children looking after elderly parents. Several conceded that their children *'weren't brought up like us'* to care for their aging parents. They rarely expected to be cared for by family members in their own old age. Nevertheless, participants were aware that young people were often deeply influenced by cultural attitudes to caring for older people.

## Options to consider

1. Develop an awareness campaign among NSW employers promoting the benefits of engaging and retaining mature age workers, including those with caring responsibilities, in an era of looming labour shortages.
2. Promote the benefits to NSW employers of providing flexible work practices, especially permanent part time work with predictable hours, as significant measures to attract and retain mature age workers with caring responsibilities.
3. Promote the benefits to NSW employers of utilising the experience, skills and aspirations of mature age women workers with caring responsibilities who wish to work in 'caring' roles in home-based care, aged care and community facilities.
4. Promote the benefit to governments and employers of prioritising and enhancing initiatives espousing the value of the role of carers who combine caring and work.
5. Promote the benefits to government and business organisations of skills development and training programs for mature age workers, including those with caring responsibilities, in recognition that mature age people are a major source of untapped labour for the future.
6. Promote the benefits to government and business organisations of programs to make support services more accessible to mature age workers with caring responsibilities, so that they can maintain their connection to the workforce, work more productively, and ensure that the person cared for is well looked after.

# About the focus group methodology

The participants in the study were women aged 45 years or over with care for an elderly person. Women participants were chosen primarily because they constitute around 70 per cent of primary carers in NSW.

A non-directive technique was used to moderate the discussions. Where possible, direct questions were avoided and spontaneous discussion was encouraged. The study did not aim to quantify findings of qualitative research or draw distinctions between the views of the participants. Rather, it sought to allow the participants to tell their stories about caring and work. Participants made key points in their own words and verbatim quotations from the discussions were included.

In consultation with the Women's Equity Bureau of the Office of Industrial Relations a general guide was developed to facilitate discussion. The following issues were explored among each group:

## **Among carers who have remained in the workforce after assuming caring responsibilities:**

- motivations and attitudes toward caring and work;
- dynamic between working carers and colleagues, and between working carers and family members;
- employment experiences, including:
  - how changes to workplace flexibilities were negotiated;
  - what the changes to employment conditions were;
  - problems and challenges encountered;
  - how well the new working arrangements are working;
  - whether the worker is now better able to combine caring and work;
  - whether the new working arrangements have helped the worker stay in the job;
  - whether the worker would have left the job if the new working arrangements had not been put in place;
  - whether the employee will now continue to work for the employer and if so, why;
  - whether the worker feels more loyal to the employer because the workplace flexibilities allow her to combine work and caring;
  - what employment practices do employers need to have to retain mature age workers with caring responsibilities.

## **Among carers not in the workforce but who would like to combine caring with work:**

- motivations and attitudes toward caring;
- aspirations and attitudes toward work;
- dynamic between carer and other family members;
- barriers to workforce participation, including:

- what are the concerns about combining care and work;
- what workplace flexibilities would need to be in place to attract them into the workforce;
- what employment practices do employers need to have to attract mature age workers with caring responsibilities;
- what changed family circumstances would support the carer combining caring and work.

Participants were asked to discuss the following potential flexible working arrangements:

- gradual retirement or down-shifting;
- part-time work or job sharing;
- pay averaging for purchasing additional annual leave;
- taking full or partial long service leave;
- flexible schedules that vary from week-to-week;
- seasonal or part-year schedules;
- working from home;
- assisted technology;
- unpaid leave;
- providing older workers with opportunities for training.

Towards the end of each group discussion, the moderator left the room to allow participants to collaborate in a group exercise. Each group was asked to come up with a creative concept for an imaginary television advertisement promoting the benefits to an employer of engaging mature age women with caring responsibilities. The notes from each group exercise are in Section 3 of the report.

The sample for the study was drawn from the general population. Recruitment was conducted by J&S Research Services and was kindly assisted by the Disability and Aged Information Service Inc. Lismore and Carers NSW. Participants were guaranteed anonymity in that their comments would be reported on a no-names basis. They were given the option to be contacted for further research and communication associated with the project and the names of those granting permission have been provided to the Office of Industrial Relations.

Sydney fieldwork was conducted on 11 December 2007 at the Parramatta City Group Rooms and Lismore fieldwork was conducted on 13 December 2007 at Invercauld House.

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# About the Participant Carers

Participants fitted the mould of carers state-wide. According to the *NSW Carer's Action Plan*, carers tend to be:

- female;
- aged 45 or over;
- less likely to be employed;
- on lower incomes and frequently dependent on government benefits.

Most had low education levels. Of those who worked, most were employed in low-paid sectors of the labour market. Their sources of income included:

- living with a pensioner either in the pensioner's home or with the pensioner in their home;
- spouse currently working full-time;
- money earned from their own jobs;
- already in retirement and living off superannuation;
- carers allowance;
- carers payment;
- Centrelink.

All participants were primary carers providing 20 hours or more care per week. It follows that initiatives to assist mature age carers with heavy caring responsibilities to find and retain employment will also be of benefit to those with lighter caring responsibilities.

# Key Findings

## 1.0 The motivation for carers to work is strong but it comes into conflict with some powerful emotional and cultural factors.

While many participants saw working to be as much about 'getting away' from care for a time as about earning money, money shortages exacerbated the problems of caring for elderly relatives for most. Paid work made it easier to bear the burden of care, not only because it lessened the financial load, but because it provided vital outside contact and conversation.

- 1.1 All participants found caring could be isolating and stressful. Improved mental health and an improved relationship with the person under care were seen as a key benefit of working.

**Respondent 1:** *I worked in catering. I loved it. Wished I was back there. I was able to speak to other people.*

**Respondent 2:** *Yeah, you miss it big time. I was able to do 3 – 4 hours during the day and get someone to look after Mum. But now, the way she has progressed, I can't do a thing.*

**Respondent 1:** *After a while they kind of divide themselves off, particularly with dementia.*

**Respondent 2:** *Ah well, that's true enough for me. My Mum can't talk. She sort of sits there and looks at you.*

**Respondent 1:** *I know that Mum won't be with us forever and I wonder if I will ever be able to pick up again [with my own family]. I might say, 'Come on Steve [husband], let's go' and he might have forgotten about me. It's so hard.*

*With my work I do childcare in a fitness centre. I think you do need to do some outside work. Coping? Only just. I have got to see a psychiatrist. I am over it. People ask how you put up with it. Well, you don't have any choice. You're looking after someone who is not well but it eats at you. It's like a cancer. You've got to have another life and be kind to yourself.*

*If I didn't have that job, I'd go crazy. I drive from Blacktown to the Eastern Suburbs everyday just to work.*

**Respondent 1:** *I like the money.*

**Moderator:** *Is that all there is to it, money?*

**Respondent 1:** *No, no, you like the conversation. It is much better than talking to the same deaf person every day, 'What did you say?'*

**Respondent 3:** *Work is a break for me because I am meeting different people all the time. [It's] just like having a break away from home. It's not that I don't like home, because I do, but it gives me confidence that I can do more things. I don't feel as trapped. Working makes your brain work again and makes you feel alive again.*

**Respondent 4:** *That's so spot on. As far as employment goes, I would like to have a few hours to go out and talk to people again.*

- 1.2 Many felt they were the only one who could properly care for their relatives. It was not seen as a choice. When push comes to shove, caring trumps work.

*If I have to give up work, I will give up work. I can't leave my Mum on her own.*

*My sisters, one is in America and one is in Newcastle. But it means that I'm it here in Lismore.*

*My friend had another carer but they weren't very kind to her. So, I took her on. We've always been there for one another and she doesn't have anyone else.*

*I have a sister and a brother but they are all busy. My brother comes to see my Mum once a week. If I wasn't around, we would have to make some decisions.*

*My Mum would have to be in care. She can make a cup of tea but there is no way she could be on her own. The nurses come and shower her and look after her pain medication. All of that stuff would just fall in a heap if I wasn't there. I have a sister who comes to stay twice a year for three weeks.*

*I've got a sister in Canberra. She is a busy lady. She works full-time. She'll come up for three days to see Mum and to stay with me. She goes back and might ring once a week. I have a brother in New Zealand and he might ring once a month. And I have a brother just up on the Gold Coast and he rings up and says, 'Can you bring Mum up [from Lismore] to see me?' And, I think, 'Come on.' So I sort of get quite resentful. I am doing everything. I have a husband and two sons. I have a life but everything comes back to me.*

- 1.3 For some, caring for the elderly was deeply ingrained in their culture.

*I was looking after my brother for a year before he died from cancer. It is so much a part of our culture [Filipino]. I share it with my sister. When I need to have a rest or I have an appointment or I'm working outside, I get my sister or my niece to go over.*

- 1.4 Aged care homes were seen as a last option and, for some, unthinkable.

*My Mum couldn't go to a nursing home. She would just die. It is not an option.*

*We have to look after her. She couldn't go to a nursing home. She is 98. She would die.*

*I don't think they would care for them like I do. There are too many people for the nurses.*

*My parents were quite old when they had me, so I was quite young when I started to look after my parents. Now they are gone, I am going through the same thing with my Auntie. She really doesn't want to go into a retirement*

*village and she has even talked of euthanasia. She talks about the time that I can't look after her.*

1.5 Accessing support services could be difficult and hard to accept for the carer as well as the person under care.

*Nurses come into the home to determine the level of care that is required. Maybe a nurse has to come to help with showers. Sometimes they recommend Meals on Wheels if they [the person cared for] will accept that. Chemists will deliver blister packs. Woolies will even pre-package food. But you have to have military-style organisation in order to do it. They are not easy to get into and they are not easy to access.*

*I've put on a brave face and have had someone come from Home Care and I have learned to say, 'Okay. Yes, I'll have help.' At first, I felt really bad because I felt like I was incompetent but then I learned to accept help.*

*We feel guilt inside if we accept [Home Care].*

**Respondent 1:** *I couldn't bring anyone in to take care of my Mum if I was at work. She would say, 'Who is that? What are they doing here?'*

**Respondent 2:** *They're scared if they see someone else in the house.*

**Respondent 3:** *My mother won't allow anyone else in her home.*

**Respondent 4:** *I used to get the Home Care people to pretend they were friends. You introduce them as a friend who is going to stay here while I go shopping for a few hours. But you can only do that for so long. My mother has dementia and when she gets agitated she goes wandering. One time I had to lock the gate and she was outside yelling to the neighbours, 'Help, help, they've locked me up.'*

1.6 Participants stated that carers were undervalued by society and that society needed to think through the value carers provide. All felt that public support services for carers need to be in place alongside supportive employment practices.

*I find money really hard. I find that we don't really get recognised or compensated for what we do. If you were to put the people we care for in a nursing home or some other care facility, it would cost a lot more.*

*Depends on the support services that are available. Maybe society needs to think this through if they want people to stay in their homes. If it is left up to individual families, I don't think it will be possible [to keep older people at home]. Families with money will purchase support. They will have that set up while other people will be struggling.*

1.7 When services cost money there are other considerations:

*If I were to take a job and work for a modest wage, I don't know what that is but say it is \$500, I would be paying most of that out to have someone to come and look after my Dad. He won't go to respite.*

## **2.0 While most participants wanted part time work, they were resigned to casual work and felt that flexible working arrangements were limited mostly to permanent employees of large organisations.**

A feeling of resignation was evident about the status of the work most participants felt they could expect to find. Of those who worked, the majority were employed in low paid sectors of the labour market. While most felt it would be very difficult to work full-time and care for loved ones at the same time, a few managed to do so. Most desired the protections of part time work but felt that a lack of marketable skills resigned them to casual work with its lack of leave entitlements and security of employment.

For this reason the flexible working arrangements discussed were not seen by the participants to be readily available to them. Instead, they perceived them to be limited mostly to permanent employees of large organisations. Participants thought greater emphasis should be placed on promoting their worth as potential employees among the organisations more likely to hire them – small and medium-sized businesses

- 2.1 While they would have liked permanent work, many were resigned to casual employment because casual work was mostly the only work available for older women workers with lower levels of education.

*These days, most people are working casually. It's very difficult to get a full-time job. And those people don't even have any sick leave or holidays or anything so if they don't go to work, they don't get paid so they push themselves to work longer and harder.*

**Respondent 1:** *These days the jobs are all casual. There aren't any full-time jobs anymore, they're all casual.*

**Respondent 2:** *For our age they are.*

- 2.2 Part-time hours were felt to be the best option. Job-sharing was seen as difficult to organise for small and medium-sized enterprises.

*I would probably do part-time work. Not full-time.*

*I can't afford to work full-time because I have to be home to look after my husband. If I could work full-time I would have a better lifestyle.*

*I had a friend that was working [at an art gallery] and she needed to lighten the load. So, we shared the role and then when she got a new role, I transitioned to that. But that would be hard to organise with a business. The Council [where I now work] is pretty good.*

*You balance it but it's hard. I have got my two daughters, my part-time job and my Mum.*

*Maybe that's possible [job share] in a big company but who has time to organise that in a small business?*

*Maybe two women should go looking for a job together. Then, they can work it out between them about who works when.*

2.3 Care responsibilities often limited employment opportunities. For some, the level of care required fluctuated, making it difficult to keep working.

*[I work] but it just depends on how Mum is. My manager is very flexible with me. Sometimes I work ten hours, other times I work twenty hours. Sometimes I take work home with me. Right now my sister is here, so I am able to work more.*

*I can never do anything spontaneously. My daughter has suffered quite a lot because of Mum. She doesn't even bother now; there is no point in asking me to go shopping.*

*With casual work there is a problem. The employer will say, 'Can you come in on short notice?' And I have to say that, 'I can't, I have a sick relative at home.' That's run against me as well.*

*[From a teacher] Flexibility is a great thing but it is not always available. Even casual teaching is difficult because you have got to pick the phone up straight away in the morning and be able to work that day.*

*When I worked as an Assistant in Nursing, I was looking after an elderly lady, maybe 6 hours a week and it was always on Tuesdays and Thursdays. But then Mum got sicker and I stopped taking care of that other woman so I could look after Mum. It wouldn't work now anyway because she was allocated another carer. Now, if I was still working with her, I would have to forget about working because my Mum is about to get out of hospital and she will need full time support [making work an impossibility].*

2.4 Other flexible arrangements like gradual retirement, pay averaging, flexible and unpaid leave were seen to be mainly available to permanent employees of large organisations.

*I think it depends on the size of the business. If you're a small business like us it is not that easy. We like to think that we are flexible with people but there is a limit to what we can do. If you are a much larger organisation with more resources than these sorts of options would be possible [Spouse of a business owner].*

*Larger employers, yes; smaller employers, no.*

2.5 Participants supported using sick leave as carer's leave, but felt this entitlement would only be available for permanent employees of large

organisations. A couple of participants believed that paid leave for elder care should be made available to older workers.

*There is one more [useful arrangement]; the ability to use your sick leave as carer's leave.*

*I used to work in the public service and they allow employees to take sick leave as carers leave but I don't think private employers have that outlook on things [for casual employees].*

**Respondent 1:** *At the hospital where I work they have 14 weeks paid maternity leave but I think they should have parental leave ... to look after your [elderly] parents if the need arises...'*

**Respondent 2:** *Yes, but if you don't work in the public sector or you don't work for a large organisation, they won't be able to offer that. They [the carers] still have to carry the full load of care but they don't get any recognition for that. Sometimes, I just think there is nothing there. I just have to keep working. I am not like my sister who has masses of superannuation.*

**Respondent 3:** *That is the difference between having your own business and being employed. You have to make allowances for yourself. No one is going to do it for you.*

**Respondent 4:** *The people at the top leave it to the other people to care. It could be that they are out of touch with what is really involved.*

- 2.6 Working from home was seen to be suited to those at the top and bottom tiers of the employment ladder such as professionals working away from their offices and telemarketers working at their kitchen tables.

*I don't care, I will do anything. I will do telemarketing from my kitchen, if I have to. I have done it before.*

- 2.7 Given the common use of mobile phones, participants felt that access to a telephone at work was not necessary. At any rate, telephone access was seen to assist only when the care load was light and there were other family members nearby to respond.

- 2.8 Taking a relative who was cared for to work was mostly not seen as feasible.

*I think that is an impossibility [taking an elderly relative to work]. Maybe if you worked as an Assistant in Nursing in a nursing home.*

*You've got to be kidding me. She would be sitting there saying, 'bugger, bugger, bugger.'*

### 3.0 Participants felt disadvantaged compared to younger workers, but strongly believed a compelling case could be made to employ them based on their personal attributes and the special experience they have gained through caring.

- 3.1 Participants felt stiff competition for jobs, especially from younger, better educated people.

*With the amount of jobs available, they are taking the higher qualified people, the younger people, the people with fewer commitments. How I know that is that I have experienced that myself when I have looked for work.*

**Respondent 1:** *I think it depends on what kind of job you are going for. But I think the young ones have more of the gift of the gab for interviews than women our age.*

**Respondent 2:** *Yeah, they have super duper resumes.*

**Respondent 1:** *The young ones use it as a stepping stone, so older women are more likely to stay put.*

- 3.2 They shared common traits with other mature aged workers, such as reliability and a strong work ethic.

*We will stay to see the job done. The young ones will arrive at five to nine and talk with their colleagues until ten past nine. Then, at two minutes to five, they will be packing up and out the door.*

*The responsibility of running a household gives you a sense of responsibility of what has to be done.*

**Respondent 1:** *They get to trust you. They know that you will stay till 7:30 to close up if you have to. They'll have you over a younger person.*

**Respondent 2:** *The younger ones want time off to go to the beach, or to be with their boyfriends, or they are always calling in sick because they had a hard night.*

**Respondent 3:** *My boss likes my work so she asks me what shifts I want to work and then she asks the younger girls.*

**Respondent 1:** *My boss can't hold juniors. They always say, 'I can't work today, I'm tired, I've got a hangover.' He's told me, 'We need more mature women.'*

**Respondent 2:** *We're responsible. We've got commitments we've got to look after.*

**Respondent 3:** *We've got life experience.*

*We have a business and my husband says that older women are more reliable. They don't call in sick because they have had a big weekend. They don't go home because they have a headache.*

3.3 Participants felt that motherhood had trained them to excel at time management and multi-skilling.

*As women, as mothers, we understand time management.*

*I love multi-tasking. All those things we don't even think about. We could be employed on doctors' wages...but we're not.*

*Our ad should have that Helen Reddy song, 'I Am Woman' in it. [Sings] 'I am strong. I am invincible. I can do anything.'*

*We're willing to give that little bit extra. Why? Because we're mothers we know what to do. You don't have to spend time telling us what to do because we know what needs to be done.*

3.4 They felt that caring for an elderly relative conferred special attributes on mature aged workers, such as resilience, resourcefulness, perseverance, and the ability to communicate with diverse community members.

*When you are presented with a situation as we are, it brings the best out in you. I could look after anybody after what I have done for my Mum.*

*You have to double up. My Mum used to love to drive but now she can't see so she doesn't get out that much. My son plays cricket but he doesn't drive yet. So, this Saturday I am going to take Mum when I drive my son to the cricket. I'm looking for ways that I can build more of that into my day-to-day activities because you just have to.*

*I am multi-skilled and I will do anything.*

*We can speak to doctors, nurses, old people, old people's friends. We can communicate with almost anybody.*

**Respondent 1:** *I come home and think I'm blessed because I have someone who depends on me. Being needed, it's the best feeling.*

**Respondent 2:** *When someone relies on you, you have more strength and more courage.*

*My husband runs a business and from time-to-time, he might ask one of his secretaries to stay behind to finish something. An older person will stay until it is done whereas a younger person will say, 'Oh, I've got to go.'*

3.5 Participants said they would reward employment flexibility with loyalty to their employers, that work 'felt different' when their personal situation was acknowledged and when they were respected and valued as a person and a worker.

*If I am treated with respect and treated with some compassion then I will be very loyal and work hard.*

*Once we feel understood, we go the extra mile.*

*If they accommodate you, you don't have that feeling like, 'I don't want to go [to work].'*

- 3.6 They felt that employers, supervisors and co-workers needed to more fully appreciate the importance of flexible working arrangements for mature aged workers with caring responsibilities.

**Respondent 1:** *I've worked for a large organisation and I've worked for a couple of bosses [there] and I've since become aware of things that my first manager never ever told me about. She knew that things were there like carer's leave, sick leave, and access to a telephone, flexible hours and part-time work job share. She knew all those things were there but she never told me they were an option to me even when I became a sole parent.*

**Respondent 2:** *Why didn't she offer them to you?*

**Respondent 1:** *She wanted me to work a full week.*

**Respondent 3:** *It would have been a hassle for her to organise. She controls a large staff, so to work out arrangements for everybody would have been a hassle to her.*

*At the workplace, we should have more talks like this to discuss our personal needs so that we can help one another out because not everybody is going to have the same personal needs. We could work it out, 'You do this on Monday, I will do that on Tuesday.'*

*You have got to find the right hours and the right job. I balance two jobs and two bosses and they are marvellous because they allow me to swap my shifts. I believe in the angels and they work everything out for me.*

*I have told my colleagues [about my caring responsibilities] but it's not a must; you don't have to. If you tell people, they are supportive.*

*I used to work in a mailing house. When I went to the interview I said that I could only work four hours in a day and they said, 'Fine'. But they never called. They gave all the shifts to the people who could work the long hours. I think I worked two days. They just forget about you.*

- 3.7 Each group was asked to come up with a creative concept for an imaginary television advertisement promoting the benefits to an employer of engaging mature age women with caring responsibilities. Their presentation notes, listing the various qualities they believe should be promoted, are contained in the shaded boxes on the following pages.

### **Advertisement A**

*Middle aged women's experience:  
Invaluable experience to your workplace  
Efficient  
Communicate and understand employees' situation  
Willing to work  
Time managers  
Multi-taskers  
Strong work ethic  
Share our needs with each other – I'm sure we could work it  
out between us*

### **Advertisement B**

*We're looking for independent, supportive workers who are:  
Reliable  
Honest  
Hardworking  
Caring  
Responsible  
Mature  
Strong willed  
Negotiable  
Flexible  
Satisfaction guaranteed  
Both balanced and satisfied*

### **Advertisement C**

*Whoever you are, we can take care of you. We have all different nationalities here. We have Filipino, Italian, Maltese and Aussies.*

*Do you need someone to care, someone to share, someone to be there and someone you can trust and rely on? Then give us a call. We have special people for ALL your needs.*

*(Sound unprofessional. Let them see that we are a homey bunch. Most importantly, all the nationalities)*

### **Advertisement D**

*Reliable, responsible and the best one for the job; people with the skills, attitudes and values that are right for the job:*

- *Organised*
- *Networked*
- *Communicate- with doctors, specialists, old people, old people's friends*
- *Positive – we get up and do this day after day and we keep going*
- *Respectful – We deal with older people all the time*
- *Non-judgemental – We don't judge when old people send their friends away*

*Caring creates a multitude of skills:*

- *Team – We have to work as part of a team*
- *Improvise – Something new comes up all the time*
- *Research*
- *Organise*
- *Plan*
- *Connect to community*
- *Ownership/responsibility*
- *Advocacy – We have to push for an extra 15 minutes of shower time each week*
- *Crisis management*
- *Manage chaos – We manage chaos every day*
- *Conflict resolution – We are great at conflict resolution and we do it everyday*

## 4.0 A solutions-oriented approach was seen as the key to securing work for mature aged carers.

According to participants with significant job-seeking experience, a solutions-oriented approach needs to be taken by carers and employers alike to find a working arrangement that benefits both parties. Each carer's situation was seen as unique and requiring flexibility from both sides. Based on these discussions, six considerations in combining caring and work emerged from their combined years of experience.

### 4.1 Be practical about balancing work and care.

Participants felt that '*something would have to go*' unless they could find a job with flexibilities that suited their particular circumstances. There were personal issues to consider: whether the quality of care they provided would suffer if they took a job that did not meet their needs; relationships with family members; and the effect on their own health and well being.

*I have had to work my life into my working life. I have had to give up things that I like to do so that I could work.*

*You've got to balance everything. My pay's not great but it gives me a lifestyle that works for me.*

*In my circumstance, I could ask for the hours I want. But it depends if there is a client that corresponds with the times you want. You will have to wait until there is one. You could try different agencies. If you went to another agency, it depends on how badly you want to work [Assistant in Nursing]*

### 4.2 Carers wanting work should actively seek out opportunities that would fit within their needs and constraints.

An active approach to finding work was encouraged, through:

- assessing the hours available for work each week and when those hours could be worked;
- assessing any other requirements a carer might have, such as the need to leave earlier or start later on certain days, or other needs as specified;
- looking for organisations that needed workers at those times and which could accommodate other needs of carers;
- approaching employers directly without necessarily waiting for jobs to be advertised.

*You look at the hours that you want and then you think what you can do and you go find a job to fit. Like I have childcare qualification and I thought of*

*working in a crèche in a gym. I called around to five or six and before long I had all sorts of jobs.*

*I work school hours. I don't work school holidays. I have six children so I have to be home during the holidays.*

#### 4.3 Some felt it best to be honest and upfront with prospective employers and family.

Some participants said that it was important to be honest and upfront with prospective employers about their caring situation at home and the consequential work flexibilities required, rather than to take a job that was unsustainable in the long term.

*I found work that suited the circumstances that I was in. I work in a canteen. I told them that I could only work so many hours. Then, I told my parents what the hours are so that they could organise their appointments around my work. I also have my young children and I get my parents to look after them.*

*I was offered a job working full-time managing a catering company. They said they would work around my hours and pay me cash in hand. I said no because I would be working 12 or 13 hours. I said, 'I don't work like that.' You need to be straight down the line or else it won't work.*

*I've learnt my lesson through life and you just ask for what you want.*

*Workers have to speak up. The worse they can say is, 'No.'*

**Respondent 1:** *Most employers nowadays tell you straight on. And if it is not for me, I tell them, 'This is not for me.'*

**Respondent 2:** *The secret is to ask questions when you are on the phone [enquiring about the job].*

**Respondent 3:** *It's not that we are children who are not able to talk about our needs.*

**Respondent 4:** *It's not just about the money. It's about your needs as well as the employer's needs.*

#### 4.4 Others wanted to get a job first and discuss flexibilities afterwards.

Several told how they secured continued employment by 'getting a foot in the door.' Some initially accepted unsatisfactory job conditions and subsequently obtained more flexible working arrangements.

**Respondent 1:** *I was balancing two part-time jobs. I was working at a shoe store and a handbag store. I really wanted to get into the handbag store but they would only give me Sunday work. So, I took the Sunday job and once they got to know me and my work, they offered me 3 or 4 days. So, they made room. And, they let me off at 4:30 so that I could go home to cook tea for my daughters.*

**Respondent 2:** *I think if you are a good worker, they will do what they can so they don't lose you.*

*I found a job and it turns out that they like me. They let me juggle the way I see fit because they don't want to lose me; I am a good worker. I've been a mother so I know how to multi-skill. So, I am quite lucky that I have found a pretty flexible place to work.*

#### 4.5 Carers wanting work should present a solution that makes an employer want to hire them.

Several participants noted, '*Nobody wants to hire a problem.*' They felt the need to 'sell' their unique personal attributes and to show how this meant that their needs could be accommodated at work to the advantage of the employer.

*I think you have to give employers a solution. You have to say, 'I have this situation in my life and this is how I think it could work within the framework of this job.' So you actually offer them a solution like, 'I can come in on short notice but it might be a ten o'clock start and I could work through until late.' However, just saying 'I have someone I care for at home and I might have to shoot off on short notice' leaves employers feeling vulnerable. Instead, you could suggest 'I just need five minutes to go to the phone to get someone to help Mum if she has fallen out of bed and I have this list of people to call on in the case of an emergency.'*

*Assuming that one is well-qualified for the job in the first place, it is incumbent on the employee to provide their own solution to the employer. If I can have a flexible lunch hour, so that I can go home and get Mum her lunch, then that would allow me to do this job and maintain my carer responsibilities.*

*If you want a job badly enough, you go straight to the employer and offer the solution in order to shift the thinking. If they want someone who is qualified and reliable, you can find a solution.*

*Get them to want you in their organisation.*

*We've got to sell ourselves as marketable and passionate for the job. We've got to convince them to want us as employees, [saying] 'I will be very good for you and you will be very good for me.'*

#### 4.6 A prospective employer needs to be fair.

While all participants were proud of their work and prepared to work hard, they felt that, in return, employers should meet their needs for work flexibilities. However, many were concerned that it was 'an employer's world' and that they had little bargaining power to ensure fairness in their working conditions.

*Be upfront in saying that you can be flexible. I have Wednesdays off but I could also have Thursdays off. So, I tell them that they can swap around from time to time if they need to. If you are going to ask for something, you have got to be prepared to give something in return.*

*It's really more of an employer's world out there.*

## 5.0 While combining care and work was not possible for some, many expressed a desire to re-enter the workforce post-care.

### 5.1 Lack of superannuation was a looming worry for some.

*We haven't done so well on super. We own our home but that's it. Now, we've started a business but it isn't carrying its own yet.*

### 5.2 Education and training were seen as key to regaining a foothold in the working world.

*You lose the experience that you had years ago and it is really hard to get that back. I think carers need to have some training so that when the time comes that they lose their parent, they have something to fall back on.*

*I got computer training in Parramatta. I am 57. A machine is daunting. I thought, 'This is just fantastic.'*

*I took some courses in Word and Excel and that gave me confidence to apply for some jobs that I wouldn't have before. I knew I was capable but I didn't believe that I was capable.*

### 5.3 Participants felt that training for mature age people needed to be delivered with caring responsibilities in mind.

*Hands-on training. The theory part you could do at home if you had all the materials to study.*

**Respondent 1:** *Or, you could go into a nursing home for a day or two. I could take Mum and I could do my training.*

**Respondent 2:** *Exactly what I am thinking too.*

**Respondent 3:** *Yeah, that's good. See how things are done and how you can get better.*

### 5.4 Some thought their own caring responsibilities would make them well suited to care for someone else when their own family responsibilities ended.

*I would like to look after the babies of mothers who have been on drugs and what not. I mean at least until they get that out of their systems and then give them back or something like that.*

**Respondent 1:** *I would like to work taking care of someone.*

**Respondent 2:** *When you think of all the experience you get looking after someone, it would be good to use that.*

**Respondent 3:** *I am amazed at what I have done. I can do anything now.*

**Respondent 4:** *There is no age limit either.*

**Moderator:** *Would you look after someone else?*

**Respondent 3:** *I think it would be easier. My mum is terribly embarrassed by some of the things I have to do. As you say, we would never be recognised even though we have years of experience.*

**Respondent 5:** *You would be a great person to take care of someone. Probably much better than the ones in the nursing homes.*

- 5.5 However, some felt distaste for nursing homes, suggesting that a future career in aged care facilities might not be appealing.

*I couldn't work in a nursing home. I can't stand to see all of those things that you don't like to see.*

## 6.0 Participants rarely expected to be cared for in their own old age, and several said they would not want it that way.

*I have two sons and one daughter. My daughter just finished her nursing so I said, 'How about you come down and look after your father while I go to the tennis?' Well, she came the day after I left and went back two days before I got home. It was a good test. No. I wouldn't expect my kids to look after me.*

- 6.1 Most agreed that it was 'an end of an era' [of children looking after elderly parents]. Several conceded that their children 'weren't brought up like us' to care for their aging parents.

**Respondent 1:** *I promised my mother and father that I would always look after them, but after having done what I have done there is no way that I would want my children to do what I have to do because I just feel there is too much on kids these days. They are spread out.*

**Respondent 2:** *Even if you ask them, they can't do it. They don't have time. It is different times. It is not the same anymore.*

*I don't think my kids will have time to look after me.*

*I also think it is a generational thing too. We became caregivers at a time when we had an extended family, whereas now we don't. I notice this even among my nephews. They have busier lives, they have a lot more things to pay off, like homes. They have more debt and they [and their wives] both work.*

- 6.2 Nevertheless, participants were aware that young people were often deeply influenced by cultural attitudes to caring for older people.

*I think if they see you caring for your parent they might think that they should do that in the future [Italian woman].*

*My son has a Thai girlfriend and the Thai people have this tradition of looking after their families. And she has indicated to me that she is going to look after my husband and me when we get old. With my other son, I don't know. It's not something you really bring up, 'Are you going to look after me when I get old?'*

- 6.3 It might not seem fair that today's carers will not receive the same family-based care when they themselves are older, but many participants said, 'I wouldn't ask that of my children.' Some were concerned that by relying on their children for care their relationships with them might be affected.

*I would hope so. My daughter is a nurse and she is surprising me by the amount that she is giving back, given our difficulties over the*

years. I am not sure I would want her to look after me because she is kind of a bully.

**Respondent 1:** I wouldn't expect anything from any of them. All I would ask is that they stay in touch with me.

**Moderator:** Why is that?

**Respondent 1:** There is a difference between having a good relationship with your children and having a wholesome loving relationship with your children that changes as you get older. In terms of the relationship between a child who provides care to a parent, it changes. It is not always healthy. It is no longer that willing relationship, a growing relationship. It turns into something where one person's needs and wants override another person's basic needs for sleep, for privacy, for emotional growth. It overrides those things and swamps that until you cease to be a person and become an appendage. You might mean it lovingly and all those things but it can override those things.

- 6.4 Others look to a supportive community to sustain them in their twilight years but they admit they can't necessarily count on it.

*I live in a very close-knit community. I would hope that we would continue to look after one another but they're not family, so it's different.*

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**NOTES**

<sup>i</sup> *NSW Carers Action Plan 2007-2012.*

<sup>ii</sup> Department of Employment and Workplace relations (2006), *Workforce Tomorrow: adapting to a more diverse labour market*, p3.

<sup>iii</sup> ABS Cat No. 6260.0, *Labour Force Projections 1999-2016*, p9.

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Government, *The Intergenerational Report 2007*, p19.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, p9.