

As Parents Age, Baby Boomers and Business Struggle to Cope

By **JANE GROSS**

Published: March 25, 2006

Nancy Goodman's employer, a telecommunications company in Boston, offers benefits to help employees care for elderly parents. But she found them nearly useless during four years of caring for her mother, who has [Parkinson's](#) disease, and her father, who died of kidney failure last year.

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C.J. Gunther for The New York Times
Edith Tusubira, right, a nurse, helped Bernice Goodman at the home of Ms. Goodman's daughter Nancy in West Roxbury, Mass. Nancy Goodman's company offers care benefits, but she says they are nearly useless.

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"They say they want to do the right thing," Ms. Goodman, 58, said of her employer, which she would not identify for fear of losing her job. "But when it comes down to it, they're not seeing the true picture."

Ms. Goodman's

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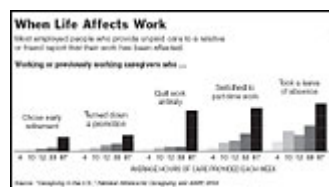
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Kent Burtis, right, a technician for Verizon in Bayville, N.J., gets lunch for his father, Ivan Burtis, each workday, but an aide does the morning shift. "It's kept me from slitting my throat," Kent Burtis said of that benefit.

lament is common, as corporate America scrambles to help the soaring number of baby boomers, mostly working women, whose obligation to frail, elderly parents results in absenteeism, workday distractions or stress-related health problems.

Companies are

responding, but experts say they often use child care benefits as a model when they do not suit the different and unpredictable needs of the elderly. In addition, at a time of cutbacks in expensive health insurance and pensions, the most commonly offered benefits are those that cost a company little or nothing, like referral services and unpaid leaves.

Ms. Goodman, for instance, tried her company's referral service to supplement inadequate staffing when her parents lived at an assisted living center in Connecticut. It was "like going to the yellow pages," she said, since it did not relieve her of the time-

consuming tasks of arranging for and supervising the services from afar. Ms. Goodman was also entitled to a year's leave of absence, a benefit a new mother might appreciate. But if she took a leave now, what happened if her mother lingered?

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Employees with ailing parents, more than 20 million nationwide, cite other benefits that would allow them to focus more on their jobs, like geriatric case managers to guide them through the mysteries of Medicaid and Medicare, or backup care for emergencies like a last-minute business trip. Companies that offer this kind of hands-on assistance generally pay for at least part of the service.

But they are rare. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, which represents more than 200,000 human resource and other corporate officials, 39 percent of its members said in 2003 that elder care benefits were "too costly to be feasible." Only 1 percent of their companies subsidized any elder care benefits last year. And only 3 percent offered the emergency backup care — subsidized or otherwise — that experts say saves money by keeping workers at work.

"The perception among companies is that they can't afford elder care benefits," said Frank Scanlan, a spokesman for the society.

It is the largest companies that are the most generous, but even those often subscribe to the mistaken notion that the Mommy Track and the Daughter Track are the same, said Chris Gatti, president of the Work Options Group in Superior, Colo. Work Options, whose clients employ 400,000 people nationwide, provides in-home care for

children and the elderly.

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"These benefits fall under the same umbrella but are fundamentally different," Mr. Gatti said. "Child care programs are relatively straight-forward and easy to administer compared to elder care, which is a maze with lots of sharp corners and dark secluded places."

An individual supervisor can ease an employee's burden but still leave them vulnerable to management changes. Just 6 percent of employers have written policies about elder care, according to surveys by the Society for Human Resource Management, while 76 percent say they help employees on a case-by-case basis.

For Ms. Goodman, the one godsend since her father died and her mother moved into her Boston apartment has been permission to work at home. But that is likely to change with a new boss. "I'm walking on eggs right now," Ms. Goodman said.

The distinctions between child care and elder care have become apparent as the first of the 77 million baby boomers turn 60 and their parents live past 85, joining the fastest-growing segment of the population.

The most obvious is that children's schedules are predictable — a school holiday next Monday — while elderly parents' needs — a trip to the emergency room — are crisis-driven. Also, children are raised at home; an elderly parent often lives far away.

Guiding the decisions of an elderly parent also requires mastery of arcane legal, financial and medical matters.

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