

MARCH 2, 2023 | WORK NOW

Creating a Supportive, Inclusive Workplace for Caregivers

Hosted by the **Kendall Square Association**, Yuqi Wang

Moderator and Speakers

Moderator: Donielle Buie, The Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard

After a career in biotech/pharma market research, Donielle took on the role of Work-Life Manager at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT in 2018. She is now the Director of Broad Experience and Total Rewards, which includes Benefits, Compensation, BroadLife and Onboarding. In this capacity, Donielle leads a team of Broadies who are focused on helping to attract, support, and retain amazing talent at Broad.

She is a working mother of four, who has successfully negotiated working from home with young children, climbed the corporate ladder and then left for 4 years to care for a child with health challenges. Donielle returned to her career and also started WifeMotherLeader to share her experiences as a working wife and mother. She now coaches other women who are trying to build a family and career at the same time. Donielle earned a BS in Biomechanical Engineering and an MA in Education Policy, both from Stanford.

Speaker: Tom Weber, Massachusetts Business Coalition for Early Childhood Education

Tom Weber is the Executive Director, Massachusetts Business Coalition for Early Childhood Education. He is also currently the Early Childhood Development Fellow at Eastern Bank Foundation.

Tom, a Lynn, Massachusetts native, joined the Eastern Bank Foundation as a Foundation Fellow in 2019 and transitioned into his current role as Executive Director of the Massachusetts Business Coalition for Early Childhood Education in 2021. Prior to his current role, Tom was the longest-serving Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care.

He is determined to make early childhood education more accessible, affordable, reliable and responsive for working families, more rewarding for early childhood professionals, and a point of differentiation in attracting and retaining a strong and equitable workforce across the Commonwealth.

Speaker: Aoife Brennan, Synlogic

Dr. Aoife Brennan is an experienced physician scientist and drug developer responsible for the successful clinical development and registration of multiple transformative medicines. Aoife has served as Synlogic's president and chief executive officer since May 2018. She joined Synlogic in September 2016 as chief medical officer.

Prior to Synlogic, Aoife spent six years at Biogen, most recently as vice president and head of the Rare Disease Innovation Unit, developing programs from pre-clinical to commercial. She has led programs across multiple therapeutic areas including the successful late phase

development & registration of SPINRAZA® (nusinersen) for spinal muscular atrophy and ALPROLIX® and ELOCTATE® for Hemophilia B and Hemophilia A, respectively.

Aoife serves as a member of the Board of Directors of Cerevance and Fibrogen, Inc. She holds a medical degree from Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland and has completed post-graduate training in internal medicine, endocrinology and metabolism. She has completed post-doctoral training in clinical research and metabolism at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and is a graduate of the Harvard Medical School Scholars in Clinical Science Program.

Discussion

1. What were common practices, resources, and/or policies that companies provided to working parents *pre-pandemic*?

Tom: Employers have undergone a rapid evolution around how they approach the issue of caregiving. Based on the coalition's pre-pandemic surveys, there was only mild curiosity from employers about how caregiving impacted employees. This attitude shifted dramatically during the pandemic as employers needed to react to the shutdown of the caregiving system: the sudden prevalence of hybrid schooling at-home schooling, along with the permanent closure of caregiving for a period of time upended the childcare giving system, for example.

In later stages of the pandemic, employers' interest about the intersection of childcare and caregiving, broadly, and acute labor force challenges grew. Now, there's an acknowledgement among most employers that the challenges of caregiving is not a temporary feature of the pandemic, but rather a significant, permanent issue. As a result of this, some employers have moved from merely providing work flexibility to supporting caregiving employees by implementing concrete actions to support the needs of their workers.

This evolution has been really clear to me based on employer surveys.

Employers that have once offered ad hoc caregiving benefits to employees are now starting to integrate more robust support as a necessary part of employees' benefit packages, and employee retention strategies. Based on our research, the economic impact from the need for caregiving is \$3 billion through productivity loss and loss of income due to absenteeism at work.

Aoife: I have 3 kids, and I always saw childcare struggles as a personal problem. However, **during the pandemic, it became a company problem and a business issue.** Synlogic is a small company with a diverse workforce;

pre-revenue, we employ 17 employees. During the pandemic, we implemented a relationship with Care.com, which allowed our employees to find and choose caregivers that work best for their needs. To be sure, the childcare infrastructure hasn't kept up with the work component, and we haven't solved this challenge yet. Nevertheless, **we have to make sure whatever solution we use does not have unintended consequences that introduce bias for women.**

Donielle: The Broad is a nonprofit research organization, and we've had to innovate along the way. For example, we partnered with Bright Horizons early on in the pandemic to open a childcare center for our employees and affiliates. We didn't continue with this, but it **taught us to be creative and flexible, and use it as a learning opportunity for other things we can provide to caregivers.**

2. How are companies getting information from working parents about what they need to succeed in the workplace?

Tom: Employer attitudes and behaviors have changed, but we don't see a lot of evidence of this shift in the way employers are addressing this issue. We surveyed employers before the pandemic, the overwhelming answer was no, there was no formal dialogue happening internally about the challenges of caregiving. The conversations that were happening were ad hoc, and there was very little intentional, proactive dialogue.

Recently, we surveyed our members again and the answer was that none of them are formally engaging their employees. I have two theories, which is 1) employers typically view caregiving as a private matter that families need to bear privately. The expectation is that families have figured out solutions to this in the past, and they'll figure it out in the future. It's a taboo topic to talk about at work, and 2) employers are concerned about raising a topic that might elevate expectations on them to respond and act. For these reasons, my coalition plans to launch a community of practice to learn more about what employer-driven solutions could be. **We're going to build a toolkit for employers so that they can begin to have these conversations with their employees.**

Aoife: We do an anonymous survey each year about how we can support folks. Caregiving doesn't come up in survey responses, though, it comes up in one-on-one conversations. I'm very open about being a mom in STEM, however, we are taught not to ask questions about caregiving during the hiring process or even at work. One thing we are trying to do is to teach our people how to

navigate our internal work system.

3. What were lessons learned or best practices or innovative solutions coming out of these efforts?

Tom: All employers should model and demand a culture that thoughtfully makes caregiving a welcoming conversation. It opens the door to have a deeper understanding of what caregiving needs are, and how to collaboratively design some solutions to address them.

One innovative caregiving solution I've seen is to provide working parent resources and supports such as:

- Contracting with or providing access to local childcare opportunities,
- Thinking about how to formalize flexible schedules, and being more intentional about it so there are no unintentional consequences that arise from this style of work. Working untraditional hours is great, but if employees are working through the night, then that's not a sustainable and helpful model long term,
- Making changes to benefit packages (e.g. providing childcare vouchers, subsidizing child care), and
- Thinking about opportunities for advocacy and community-wide efforts

Aoife: Be intentional that you don't end up with a two tier work system where you have flexible work employees and in-person employees. We've tried to think about how our people can have facetime and still have flexibility. We're currently piloting a working structure where, four weeks a year, all our employees are on site everyday. During this time, we schedule training programs, networking opportunities, and other chances for our people to have face time with each other. We've learned that giving parents and caregivers advance notice is good.

Donielle: The Broad offers a \$2,000 flexible spending account to employees who can use it to address their caregiving needs. In addition, we heard prior to and during the pandemic that [additional non-monetary support](#) is hugely valuable. We are also trying to address our employees' holistic caregiving needs by focusing conversations on the intersection of caregiving and mental health: caregiving responsibilities wax and wane during different stages of life, and so do employees' stress and mental health as they engage in caregiving duties. So we are really committed to figuring out how Broad can provide support to our employees.

Audience Q&A

Question: Tom and Donielle listed some examples of what employers can provide that seem to work well for their employees/member organizations. Is there a centralized resource where we can see best practices or get ideas based on what other organizations have done?

Tom's Answer: There isn't sufficient guidance for employers on this topic. **One of the things I'm in the process of creating is a community of practice where learners can share and develop resources to use, and to build a forum where employers can share ideas for scalable solutions.**

Question: What are your suggestions for equitable solutions in organizations that have a large portion of the staff who have distinct in- person responsibilities (program management, warehouse/truck driving) vs. other departments who have the luxury to be remote? How do we make it feel like any employee, in any position, can balance caregiving responsibilities?

Tom's Answer: It's vital that employers are speaking to employees on these matters and thinking about the individual needs of these families. There's no one size fits all approach - you're going to have to approach this being mindful of the diversity of your company's workforce.

Donielle's Answer: Having conversations with front line managers about this is important. One question to consider is, "what is your company putting in place to accommodate for pieces of your employees' life that work so they can be on site, and when they can't, how is the company supporting them?" Another thing to consider is that there are other benefits that impact caregivers in significant ways, such as offering paid sick time, and paid leave policy.

Question: What role do you see employee-run groups (i.e. ERNs or ERGs) for caregivers in this current environment?

Donielle's Answer: ERGs can play a great role in helping to share feedback and ideas about the needs of employees. They can be a voice and advocate for new resources and policies. Further, they can be a valuable partner to leaders who are committed to listening to employees and not assuming they know what people need.