



Living Two Lives: The Unseen Reality of Britain's Unpaid Working Carers

We look beyond the numbers and talk to two family carers about the impact it's had on their life, work and wellbeing.

“Most people don’t know they’re a carer.
They just think they’re being a good
daughter, a good spouse, a good sibling.”

Stephanie Leung,
Founder and CEO of KareHero



In the UK, an estimated **7.42 million people** are juggling paid work alongside unpaid care responsibilities. That’s **1 in 5** employees. Each year, **4.3 million more people** become unpaid carers – often suddenly, and rarely with preparation (Carers UK, 2022).

Behind most people living with an illness or disability, there is usually someone else quietly holding things together. Their work is unpaid, their role often unacknowledged. You won’t find “carer” in their job title.

They’re not listed in any HR database. But they are CEOs, sales reps, school teachers, and shift workers. And before they start their workday – or after it ends – they’re helping a parent bathe, coordinating care for a chronically ill partner, or lying awake at night, anxious about the future of their disabled child.

Carers shoulder dual identities: their own, and the responsibility of navigating an often complex, unresponsive health and social care system on behalf of someone they love.

This is not a fringe issue. The true number of unpaid carers in the UK could be as high as **10.6 million**, and that figure is expected to rise significantly as the population ages (Carers UK, 2022).

These individuals fill a critical gap in the UK’s social care infrastructure – a silent, unpaid, and largely invisible workforce. Their efforts are not just felt by their families. Shouldering those additional responsibilities has a ripple effect on the workplace, affecting productivity, retention, mental health, and overall economic stability. The estimated cost to UK businesses? **£8.2 billion** per year, according to Carers UK.

These statistics are stark. But behind every number is a human story. In this report, we step beyond the headlines and data points to share the voices of carers themselves – unfiltered, in their own words.

What does it really mean to be a carer?

Realisation – the label ‘carer’ is not clear

For many, the moment they realise they are a carer doesn't come at the start of the journey. It comes long after. And even then, it's rarely self-initiated.

“At first, I was just a son looking after my parents,” recalls Scott Underwood, a health and safety management consultant at Royal HaskoningDHV. “I first identified as a carer about a year ago...”

For Scott, it was only after the hospital started offering privileges that he began to see himself as a carer.

Mike Brook, a voice specialist at BT, describes a similar awakening: “It wasn't until I became chair of the Carers Network within BT that I really identified as a carer... it was only then that I realised I was actually taking on more of a caring role. One thing

I've learned, from talking to others, is that it's not uncommon for people to think that they're not carers.”

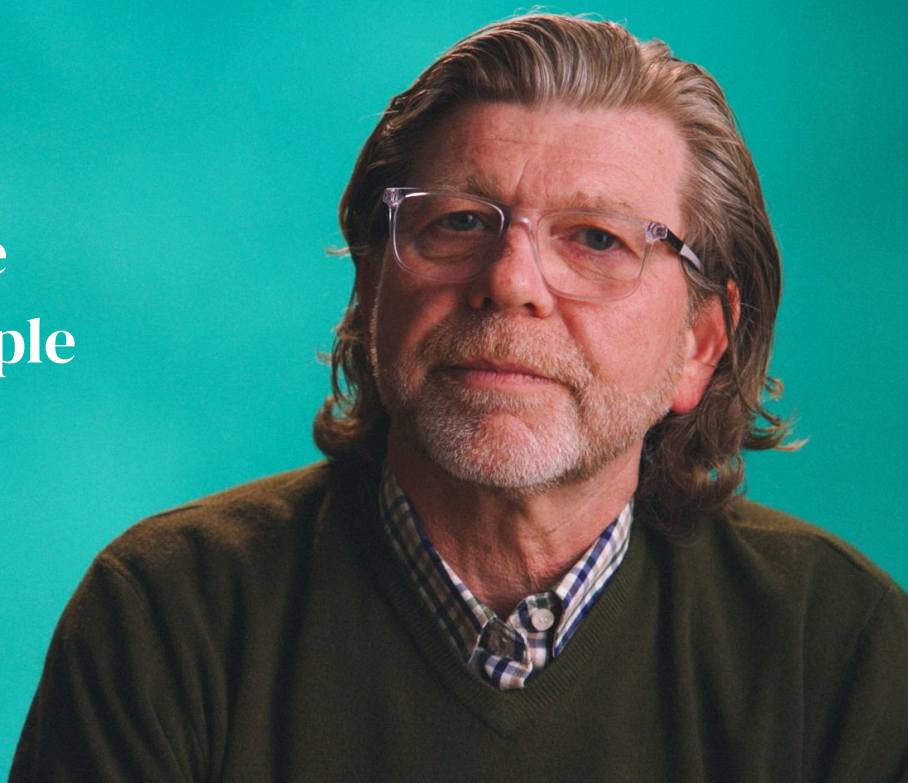
Stephanie had already left jobs and countries to care for her father before anyone gave her a label for what she was doing. “I was looking for a stairlift for my father... I called a charity and they said, ‘you're a carer’. I looked it up and realised, ‘Oh my God, there's millions of people like me’. I always thought I was the only one. It's a very lonely journey.”

This lack of recognition is widespread. According to Carers UK, 73% of people in the UK who are providing, or have provided, unpaid care in their lifetime – that's roughly 19 million people – have not identified as carers (Carers UK, 2023), despite having caregiving responsibilities.



**You feel alone.
When actually, there
are hundreds of people
doing this role.”**

Scott Underwood



The first step to support is recognition

The most profound truth emerging from these interviews isn't about burnout, grief, or logistics – it's about identity. This has consequences. It delays help-seeking. It hides the scale of the problem. And it leaves people believing they're going through it alone.

“I wish more people knew that there were lots of other people who are carers in exactly the same position,” adds Scott. “They're not professional carers, they're people at work, just like yourselves, who are taking this role on.” Recognition is not just semantics – it's about access.

Without the label, carers miss out on legal rights, organisational support, and peer communities. And often, the moment of realisation only comes when something cracks – emotionally, financially, or physically. “That's a misconception – that caring is something we all want to do. You

literally overnight, being thrust into a situation where you become a carer and it's not your choice,” says Mike. “In my case, I made a pledge to my mum and dad that I would do my utmost to keep them at home for as long as I could.

“But, you know, as much as we want to do it, it's often not practically possible. Others don't get that luxury of choice.”

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Impact: The cost you don't see

The reality of being a carer is that it's not a tidy side-role – it's an all-encompassing shift that touches every part of life. And while public conversation often centres on financial strain or logistical difficulties, carers themselves point most often to something else: the emotional toll.

"It's been, at times, traumatic. It feels like you're in a moment of crisis," says Mike. "The emotional and mental side was the bit that swerved me a little... I remember coming home one evening and walking into the house, and it just hit me – I almost broke down.

"There's just me and the dog, and suddenly the house felt huge and empty. There's no doubt about it, for a number of days while mum was still in hospital, I was going through a grieving process. It's quite ironic, because mum was still with us, but it dawned on me that she might not be coming home. That was definitely a shock for me."

For Scott, the pressure compounded, with both parents falling into physical and mental decline in quick succession – until everything cracked. "Looking after both my parents over the five years, while also trying

to fit in work and my own family life, has been physically and mentally demanding."

Scott has paid a high personal price. "My marriage broke down, and it resulted in me being signed off work for three months and having counselling for seven months."

Stephanie puts it bluntly: "It is not a part-time job; you can't just think about it when you have time. It is always there in the shadows, whether you like it or not. You often put your life on hold, or put yourself last, your own health last, or your own ambitions last. When someone is sick and relying on you, it can't wait. And so for many, it's not a choice."

The stories differ, but the pattern is the same: carers face a daily erosion of their own lives – relationships, careers, wellbeing. It is not a job you clock in and out of. According to Carers UK, 31% of those who have provided unpaid care said their health and wellbeing had suffered as a result of their caring role. Unpaid carers supporting loved ones spend an average of 26 hours every week providing care – the equivalent of more than three full working days (Care Management Matters, 2023).



The workplace divide: Why carers stay or leave

Behind every statistic about attrition or absenteeism is a person trying – and often struggling – to make caregiving work alongside employment. Every day, more than 600 people leave work entirely to care for a loved one (Carers UK, 2019) as they lose that struggle.

That's a decision that Stephanie has had to make – three times. “I've been working for more than 25 years now and throughout my career I've had to quit three times due to caring issues. The first time I did it was when I was 25. I was living in a different country and I resigned. I let go of my entire life to move back in with my father, to look after him.

“Now in my 40s, I did exactly the same thing a couple of years ago, because my dad had a stroke and a heart attack. I realised that if I wasn't there to try and sort out what was going on with him and help him get set up for care, then the chance of him dying was pretty high. I think the thing that really hit me is that 20 years on, I'm still facing the same issue. You can't walk away from it.”

“If you don't make your carers feel supported, often they've got no choice [but to leave].”

Mike Brook



Scott didn't leave work entirely – but he did rely on the flexibility and understanding of his employer to redesign his role around his caring responsibilities.

31% providing unpaid care say their health and wellbeing has suffered.

“My caring responsibilities changed my work life considerably. My role involves travelling, which I had to curtail. My employers were very supportive of that. I took a role which stopped me from doing international travel and focused just on the UK. But even then, I had to curtail my visits to between 1 to 2 days a week, to ensure that I had carers coming in on those days when I was away to make sure that mum and dad were okay.

Others, like Mike, manage to stay in their jobs, but never truly clock out. “You don't switch off. I'm working for BT from home most of the time. I'm always listening out for mum downstairs – I'll be on a conference call at night, when mum goes to bed, but listening to see if she's had a fall. It's happened before, it can happen again... I go to the gym as often as I can. When I'm on the treadmill, I'm always thinking, ‘Is mum okay?’ You don't turn off.”

In these stories, one thread keeps emerging: the value of employer support. Even small adaptations – from flexible scheduling to empathetic policies – can dramatically shift what's possible. The stories differ, but the pattern is the same: carers face a daily erosion of their own lives – relationships, careers, wellbeing. It is not a job you clock in and out of.

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What carers need – real practical help, not a signposting link

Every carer in this report spoke of complexity – not just in the emotional sense, but bureaucratic, medical, and legal. From coordinating hospital discharges to navigating eligibility assessments or finding a care home, the demands are staggering. And they fall on people who are already sleep-deprived, grief-stricken, and stretched thin.

“What you need is practical solutions to help everyone at every age going through that adult care journey. And we’re the only ones who do it,” says Stephanie, on why she founded KareHero.

“My advice to business leaders is, if you want to solve this, find out how many carers you’ve got, and then don’t go and find a solution just for eldercare. There’s lots of people in your organisation caring for more than just the elderly. Don’t go and find a cookie cutter, box-ticking, signposting solution. What carers need is practical support.”

It’s not just policy gaps – it’s personal cost. These testimonies have described what happens when that constant vigilance and effort goes unsupported. “One piece of advice I would give about being a carer, is to look after yourself: whether it be that spa or that massage or that place you want to take yourself to, it’s

really, really important that you do that,” says Mike. “Ultimately, if you fall off the tracks, then the loved one that you care for is going to be left stranded. I think it’s often overlooked how important that really is.”

If organisations don’t make their carers feel supported, they often leave them with no choice but to quit their job.

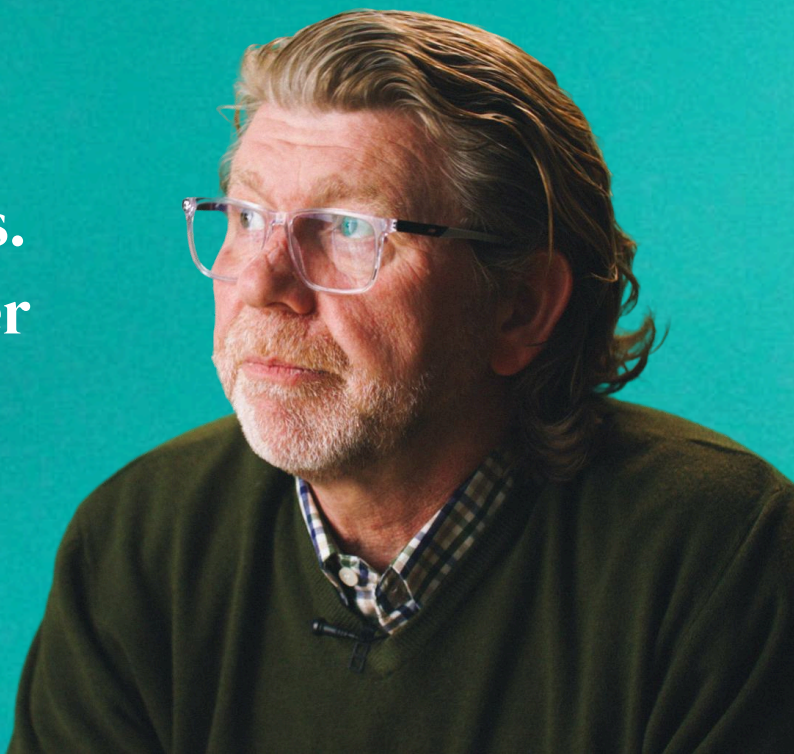
“They don’t want to give up their career,” adds Mike, “but if they’re not given the right support – and I’ve experienced this from talking to numerous organisations across the country – people will feel they’ve got no choice but to throw in the towel, and they don’t want to do that.”

At stake is more than just retention or compliance; it’s loyalty, trust, and long-term productivity. Because carers – those navigating a second life outside of work, often silently – have already demonstrated the qualities employers claim to value most.

“In our experience, carers are incredibly well organised and have very high EQ [emotional intelligence] – all the things that employers want,” says Stephanie. “If you support them, they will want to stay in your organisation.”

“At first, I was just a son looking after my parents. I first identified as a carer about a year ago.”

Scott Underwood



The opportunity: If you want them to stay, support them



Carers are not in the margins. They are 1 in 5. They are your managers, analysts, assistants, and leaders – and they’re doing two full-time jobs.

“You could be not a carer today and tomorrow you could find yourself being a carer for three months or three years – and then suddenly you’re not a carer again,” says Mike.

“The biggest risks for businesses who don’t look after their carers, is that you’ll lose the experience and knowledge of the people who, in many cases, have been with your organisation for the longest time, and they are difficult to replace. It’s really important to retain the knowledge and experience of the staff that you’ve got.”

Supporting families through the chaos of care

KareHero is the UK's first and only fully-comprehensive adult caregiver support service, helping businesses offer legal, financial and care support as an employee benefit solution to help employees through the entire care lifecycle of a loved one.

KareHero is on a mission to help businesses become carer inclusive, focusing on providing practical and essential support to caregivers and their entire family at every stage of their journey.

Contact our team to find out more about how our adult care support can help you future-proof your organisation.

Contact hello@karehero.com, or scan below to book a call with us directly.

Your own dedicated
Family Care Advisor

Hospital discharge
& emergency care support

Access to £5k + per employee
through funding experts

Same-day Legal Power
of Attorney

Personalised Care
Assessment & Care Plan

Direct access to vetted
quality care providers

Care Resource Hub

