

PRoF Award abstract – Call 2015

Informal Care Friendly Human Resource Strategies

1. Research Outline

Acronym	ICFHRS
Project name in English	Informal Care Friendly Human Resource Strategies
Pitch (1 sentence)	A framework and toolkit for companies and organizations to support working informal carers in optimizing their mutual attunement of work and care.
Executive summary (max. 10 lines)	<p>By means of the European Social Fund, the Knowledge Point Informal Care of Howest University of Applied Sciences developed a human-resources strategy for companies that have informal carers amongst their employees. Our website aims at raising the awareness of employers about the presence and needs of employees who are also informal carers, and provides tools for companies that wish to develop a company-specific and informal care-friendly human-resources strategy. This includes a long-term vision and strategy, and tools for facilitating the communication between working informal carers and their supervisors. We encourage the adaptation of our model to the mission and beliefs of the company and to the unique needs of every informal carer. We also offer a do-it-yourself version for informal carers who want to think independently about the optimising their combined work and informal care.</p>



2. Cause and context of the research

Because of the ageing and greying of the general population, there are more and more people with caring needs. The professional and formal care infrastructure doesn't grow to the same extent. This means a growing amount of informal carers. Right now, about one out of five Flemish adults is an informal carer (Vanderleyden & Moons, 2010). Many of them are around the age of retirement, and most of them are women. There are some tendencies on the labor market that give reason to worry. Firstly, the systematical rising of the age of retirement. Secondly, during the past decennia women are stimulated to take part in paid employment to a higher degree. This means there is a growing population of people with needs against a diminishing pool of (possible) informal carers, *and* more people are forced into a scenario which combines informal care with a paid job. For many informal carers it is important to be able to keep their job. This could be because of financial needs, but as well because of the social contacts the job situation offers, and the satisfaction of doing different, fulfilling tasks at work. The paid job offers an opportunity to think of something else than just the caregiving, and establishes the possibility for a wider range of expression. People are stimulated to use different talents and skills. We can imagine this affects their sense of self and well-being in a positive way. Nevertheless, we should not ignore that for many of them the double task of both a paid job and the informal care is a much too heavy load. Often these employees, trying to meet their respective responsibilities, bump into organizational issues, since both tasks can be incompatible with each other at times. With our project we aim at stimulating the awareness in companies on this topic (the combination of informal care and paid work). It is a problem that often remains hidden until maybe the moment when someone gets sick or decides to stay at home because the combination became too much. The employment of informal carers is a topic that manifests at the crossroad of care and employment, and because of that, often remains untouched by both companies and professionals in caregiving. When organizations decide to invest in an ICFHRS though, there are many benefits in it also for them: employees are more productive and more loyal to their employers. There is a better retention of experienced workers and there is a better work atmosphere amongst colleagues.

- Vanderleyden, L. & Moons, D. (2010). Informele zorg in Vlaanderen. *Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering*, p. 1 - 27.

3. Innovation results achieved

The outcome of our project is **a format for developing a human resource strategy for working informal carers in companies**. The product is a **website** (www.mantelzorgvriendelijk-ondernemen.be) which consists of:

1. A **guide and action plan with information and instructions**. The guide aims at supporting and informing companies who want to develop their own human resource strategy for working informal carers. It gives an **overview** of the importance and

benefits of this informal care friendly human resource strategy, both for society and for companies.

The guide is built around three essential elements of which such a strategy consists:

- a vision about what it means for the company to be informal care friendly. This includes advice about how to anchor this new strategy in existing policies and strategies, such as work-life balance, family friendly policy, strategies about sustainability (MVO), etc.
 - a culture of open communication about the topic of 'work and informal care' in the company. This is our key element and goal of the Informal Care Friendly Strategy.
 - possible interventions for meeting the needs of informal carers who work in the company: already existing legal actions (such as working part time) but also new, sometimes small and company-specific actions.
2. A **toolkit** that consists of a wide range of tools which can be used in mapping and executing a unique informal care- friendly human resource strategy for the company at hand. The company is free as to which tools will be used, depending on the needs, wishes, possibilities and style of the company. The guide offers **support and insight** in the process of selecting and effectively using the tools. The following tools are part of the toolkit, and ready to use:
- A **self-test for employers** which gives a sense of the amount of informal carers in the company, reveals to what extent the company has already developed the three above essential elements, and what the strengths of the company are, on which the company can build to unfold their human resource strategy.
 - A **survey/scan** about the topic 'working informal carers' which can be completed by all employees of a company. Similar to the self-test for employers this scan serves as a 'first impression' questionnaire about the topic. *Both (complementary) questionnaires can be filled out online. An online feedback of the results for will be produced, in which answers of both tests will be gathered and compared.*
 - A **detailed package of workshops** in the company on informal care, targeting different groups of employees as well as the employer. The workshops are designed to grow awareness around the topic, to inform, to teach and coach both employees and managers in dealing with cases of working informal carers. The workshops are, depending on the target group, focused on the vision, open culture of communication and/or concrete interventions (one or more of the three essential elements of the strategy). By the end of the workshops, the company as a whole should be ready to take off with the informal care friendly human resource strategy. Companies have a choice as to what extent they want to use the workshops, and who they allow to be part of it.
 - A **'train de trainer' package** for consultants and coaches in companies as well as external consultants. The training transmits the skills needed in order to support companies in the transition to being 'informal care friendly', and teaches them how to use the package of workshops in companies.
 - **'Do it yourself' package for informal carers** who want to reflect autonomously on the topic 'combining a paid job with informal care'. Advantage of this package is that it can be used also by informal carers who work in a company that doesn't support them in their combined roles. It can also be used by informal carers who want to introduce this topic in the company where they work, or for managers who don't have a supervisor to discuss this attunement with.
 - **Competency profile for a 'Coach for informal carers' in companies:** a suggestion of competences such a coach should have. The coach is meant to centralize all

information about the topic 'combining informal care and paid work'. Both the employer and employees can get information on career planning for informal carers, and can be referred by the coach to useful actors in the field of informal care. The coach works closely together with HR-services and supervisors. He/she can get additional responsibilities like having confidential talks with informal carers, giving advice or coaching them in their career moves. The coach is not a full job in itself. Any chosen employee in the company can get these extra tasks, if (s)he be discrete, perceived as accessible, and has experience with or interest in the topic of informal care.

- **A document with information** on laws and regulations **and links** to useful actors, all in the field of informal care and/or work. The document can be used by HR-consultants, the informal care coaches or supervisors.
- **An overview of all kinds of possible Informal Care Friendly Actions**, small and big, a company can undertake.
- **Guidelines for a semi-structured conversation about informal care for supervisors and for the coach informal care**: a handout with useful questions, and basic techniques for a supportive conversation. The talk is aimed at active listening, informing the employee, referring him/her, and maybe coaching him/her in his/her career choices, all depending on the effective role the coach gets to play in this specific company. The guidelines are composed in a modular way which makes it easy to pick and choose the appropriate sections.
- **Files with roles** describing what both employer, managers, supervisors, HR-consultants, employees and colleagues of informal carers can possibly contribute to a human resource strategy apt to the company.
- **A poster** which companies can use for the purpose of growing awareness around the topic 'combining work and informal care' in the company.

The product offers a complete, accessible and concrete way for employers to build their own informal care friendly human resource strategy. *Depending on their own wishes and needs*, they can pick the tools they prefer to use and as such design their own (light, medium or full) version of the ICFHRS. We offer a *general framework* and tools which assist companies in filling this out in a creative way, meeting their unique culture and needs. In every unique case of a working informal carer, unique actions may be applied, since no two informal care situations are identical, and as such no two informal carers have identical needs. Every 'match' between needs and wishes of an informal carer and those of the organization is a unique one.

The website has plenty of **quotes and testimonies** from best practices, which can convince and support employers in investing in an informal care friendly human resource strategy.

4. Link to the PRoF values

○ minimal comfort: The website is designed in a user-friendly way. The user can use all tools independently and doesn't need any assistance or training to do so (except train the trainer). All tools take into account the mental, emotional and relational comfort of employees, supervisors, managers, employers and consultants. Key elements in all the tools are safety and the possibility to temporize ones own process, and use the tools and strategy to an extent that is comfortable for everyone concerned. We strive to create

possibilities, no privileges for working informal carers: we have actively included the needs of their colleagues and the organization they work for, in our model and tools.

- privacy: Organizations can independently work with the material and tools. For ex. the scan for employees is anonymous; the results are gathered and presented as a group outcome to the employer (all through an automatized online procedure), in which individual employees are not identifiable. Also in the tools and advises about creating a culture of open communication about the topic 'informal care', we stress the free choice every person has whether he or she discusses their situation of informal care giving with their employer and supervisors. This is reflected in the tools such as the guidelines for semi-structured conversation, in which discretion and transparency are essential qualities.
- security: Applying the format of ICFHRS ultimately aims to offer the informal carer the security that one can talk about things that are important for him/her with the organization, and (s)he can keep his/her job. This offers financial, emotional and social security. Also the company has the security of knowing why the employee possibly gets overworked, knows this is discussable, can work preventively on it, and can count on retaining the employee. Last but not least, the informal carer keeps on contributing to the social security system through keeping the paid job and contributes to relieving the care needs of a large part of the population. Here we can also refer to the precautions around emotional security that were taken throughout the action plan and the tools.
- anti-loneliness: Through maintaining work (fully, or partially), we aim at avoiding social isolation of informal carers. Also, through setting up a culture of open communication, there appears to be more empathy, more mutual understanding and willingness to cooperate amongst colleagues. Also, the willingness of an employer to talk about important roles and activities of the employee outside the work environment, enhances the sense of being seen and of well-being by the employee.
- non stigmatizing solutions: We avoid only naming the fact that informal carers may become overworked and eventually get burned-out our sick by the too many responsibilities. We explicitly focus on the strengths of informal carers and on the skills they have (organizing, empathy, certain knowledge and skills) that may benefit also their work. We have 'appreciative inquiry' as a source of inspiration throughout the project, and focus on positive choices, meaning and motivation (f. ex. in the do-it-yourself package: choices are made starting from what care/work means, how it fulfills the person and the balance he/she envisions for him/herself).
- inter generational: We notice that informal care often has a strong intergenerational component/character. We define 'informal care' open enough to include all sorts of informal care situations and social relations, as such also taking care of a handicapped child, older people, etc. We aim at growing consciousness in work settings about the diversity of informal care profiles. This to avoid that people only associate it with taking care of older parents.

- respect: Mutual respect between informal carers, their colleagues and supervisors is essential in the whole format, toolbox and culture we support. All needs are taken into account in the negotiation of actions which may benefit a certain informal carer. Informal carers report to feel more comfortable when they can return the favors they got in one way or the other, and also when they know no-one else gets too much work or responsibilities because they get (temporarily) less.
- flexibility: In fact, the whole format of being informal care friendly can be boiled down to flexibility, one way or the other, f. ex. being able to receive phone calls from the person in need, a parking place close to the exit, the possibility to start working a bit later and stay a bit longer, etc.

5. Applicable IPR rules

The project is funded by the European Social Fund. As such it is an intellectual property of ESF Flanders.

6. Information on the partners

Our partners are both profit and non-profit organizations with whom we cooperated in the development of the concept, essential structure and practical tools of which an Informal Carers Friendly Human Resource Strategy consists. We did interviews, focus groups, discussions with employees, supervisors and management, we tested our tools and refined them based on the feedback.

The partners are:

Vanden Broele Group: a cluster company including a Publishing unit, a Production unit, a Communication Agency and a Software Developers company
(<http://www.vandenbroelegroup.be/>)

GVO Groep: a group of 8 Nursing Homes in West-Flanders (www.gvo.be)

Landelijke Thuiszorg: a Flemish organization for home care (part of ONS/KVLV)
(<http://www.landelijkethuiszorg.be/>)



**landelijke
thuiszorg**



Additionally, throughout the whole project we had a group of professionals (employers, HR professionals, researchers, leaders in care institutions) who gathered every few months and gave us feedback on the content, methodology and output of the project:

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