

## Switched On

**Ian Peters combines his high level British Gas day job with chairmanship of Employers for Carers. He tells Heather Greig-Smith that flexible working is one part of a strategy that makes complete business sense.**

Centrica (parent company of British Gas) Director of Customer Facing Strategy Ian Peters is no stranger to media vilification. Having moved from the banking sector into energy, he has been in the firing line over lending practices and energy prices. Yet the less-publicised side of the man, who faced a grilling from a select committee of MPs, is his long term advocacy of the caring agenda.

Sitting in a meeting room in British Gas's Staines complex, Peters tells how he only popped into Carers UK in 2003 to give some financial advice because of his banking and turnaround experience.

"They were in financial distress. I went down there for a couple of hours to see if I could help. Eleven years later I am still there," he laughs. "I fell in love with them – they are extraordinary people. I was struck by the commitment of the staff to what they are doing, and as I learned about the importance of the agenda in the UK given demographics, the economic impact, and the plight of carers, it engaged the rational side of my brain as well."

### **Good business practice**

Peters joined the board of Carers UK in 2003, becoming treasurer at the same time. He has been treasurer for 10 of the past 11 years and in 2013 became chair of Employers for Carers (EfC), Carers UK's employer membership arm.

While Peters has changed business roles since then, he has taken the caring agenda with him. It was something British Gas was doing but at a low level. "We upped our involvement in it from 2007. It's a key part of what we do. It's not a tick box compliance, but fundamentally good business practice."

He adds "At any one time one in nine of our employees will be carers. As the population ages you also have 'sandwich carers' caring for children and parents at the same time – a relatively new phenomenon."

British Gas offers a wealth of options for those juggling their working life with caring. They include taking a month's paid leave or altering working hours. The company, which employs 33,000, also has an 850-strong carers' support network. Earlier this year it became one of the first organisations to pioneer the Jointly app, which helps co-ordinate the care of a loved one. It purchased a license for 1,000 apps for its employees.

### **Flexibility and caring**

Peters says flexibility is key to helping carers remain in the workforce. "There is a very distinct carers' agenda but the flexible working aspect fits within the broader flexible

working agenda. The full month [of leave] will be needed from time to time by some people, but it's the routine flexibility that's more valued."

The need for flexibility in difficult situations is one Peters knows all too well. He worked from home when his wife was incapacitated by a knee injury in 2005 and couldn't look after their three children. "It was the hardest nine months of my working life," he says. "I was the MD of British Gas Business, a 3,000 people business, and I had to completely change the way I worked. Largely that meant working from home in three shifts: before the school run, in the middle of the day and then after the school run when they had been fed."

Peters is clear that flexibility makes business sense for many reasons, least of which are retention and recruitment benefits. "You get the double whammy. You avoid recruitment costs but particularly you avoid the experience drain."

"Retaining scarce skills in the workplace when employees have caring responsibilities is increasingly important, particularly for an organisation like ours. We've got 13,000 engineers we have invested two years' training in. Losing them has a big economic impact."

This attitude makes it easier to attract carers to the business. "It's more than flexible working, but that's at the core of it. If you have the right approach around empathy, flexibility and the provision of advice, you can improve your employer proposition. It translates to less absence because people have the right flexible structure so don't need to take it as unpaid leave and very high commitment levels."

### **Leading from the top**

Peters has championed the caring agenda from the top at British Gas. "If an organisation wasn't doing anything and wanted to get it off the ground, it would be much easier to do if it was sponsored from the top in a very visible way," he says. "Once it's matured and well-embedded, I think it's less reliant on that degree of active sponsorship. It's relatively self-sustaining now – it wasn't five years ago."

Making sure managers are flexible is also important and the company is rolling out training programmes on this. "If the line manager is empathetic that's hugely valued."

### **Growing awareness of caring**

The situation for carers has improved drastically, says Peters, largely because it is now on the political agenda. "There's more to do but there is a ball rolling. The issues are understood now and the economic case is pretty well proven." Importantly, EfC membership is growing as more organisations recognise the challenges facing the workforce.

Yet there are areas where progress still needs to be made, both within British Gas and beyond. Peters is concerned that the company's carers' network is too small. "one of the things we worry about is hidden carers. If we've got 33,000 people, we should have about 2,500 people in our network. 850 people is great – it's one of the biggest in the country – but I know there's a lot more out there."

While some people don't recognise themselves as carers, others may be reluctant to come forward. "We want to take the fear out of that and have to work particularly hard in areas that are male-led, such as engineering."

He adds that spreading support for carers to different kinds of business is important. While security company G4S has recently joined EfC, there are few blue collar organisations involved.

Peters' other concern is in transmitting flexibility for carers to SMEs, where the challenges in implementing these benefits are greater and the resources small. While the right to request extension is great news for workers, small companies can struggle. "For SMEs the impact of 20% of your staff being flexible is much harder than it is for an organisation of scale. It's absolutely the right principle, but there are challenges in making it happen. There is no magic wand."

### **Facing the future**

As well as wrestling with ways of helping smaller firms, businesses involved with EfC are hoping to link their carer networks to enhance support. There are even plans to use the day-to-day work of British Gas creatively. The roll-out of smart meters with modems connected to appliances could mean that if an elderly relative failed to turn the kettle on by a certain time an alarm would be triggered.

"We've got the emerging technical capability to provide something genuinely mould-breaking which would help carers and the people they care for," says Peters.

Ultimately, employees at British Gas should be able to fit their jobs around their other needs. Peters says the company's HR director is a case in point, working a four-hour-a-day contract until her child goes to school. "She felt she had to resign because of what she wanted to do. We have constructed something that works for her and when her child is in school and settled we'll be happy to have her back full-time."

Flexibility is ingrained in the culture of the business. Peters is clear that customer satisfaction improves when staff are happy and with an ageing workforce, this issue is moving up the agenda.