

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

Compassionate approaches for a hidden but growing concern

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Due to the aging of the U.S. population, rates of cognitive impairment and dementia in the workplace are on the rise. This creates challenges for employers, many of whom may not know how to best support employees who are experiencing symptoms of cognitive impairment. Conversely, employees may be hesitant to share with their employer the challenges that they're experiencing.

Symptoms begin gradually and are often acknowledged first at work. Diagnosis may be difficult in younger people, since the majority of individuals diagnosed with cognitive impairment are 65 or older. Nevertheless, most persons living with dementia never tell their employer of their cognitive concerns due to stigma or fear of losing their job, and most employers have no policies or education on dementia.

Declining performance can wrongly be blamed on depression, substance use, stress or other issues, and many workers are demoted or fired. A supportive company culture increases the chances that a worker will disclose cognitive concerns, allowing critical conversations to occur. Providing accommodations for employees who wish to keep working and are able to, based on job responsibilities and safety, can retain historical knowledge, preserve workplace teams, and create a positive work culture where employees feel safe acknowledging health problems. Dementia can cause a range of cognitive and physical impairments that may limit abilities used in a workplace setting. Dementia is a disease, and due to the limitations or impairments that may be experienced due to the disease, individuals living with dementia are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Workplace awareness, compassion and policies regarding dementia can therefore protect and support employees and businesses alike. Overall, companies need to create and foster a dementia-friendly workplace.

Recommendations regarding dementia in the workplace

- Provide training to human resources personnel and supervisors on the warning signs of Alzheimer's and dementia and on basic disability law through the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Encourage employees to seek medical advice for early diagnosis and treatment, maintain healthy habits, and manage their health.
- Educate any outsourced work resources (for example, third-party human resources teams) on the best way to support workers with disabilities to ensure they share your supportive company culture.
- Help employees fully understand disability benefits and retirement and work options.
- Consider accommodations that can be unique to workers and jobsites, including options such as:
 - Simplifying or modifying employees' roles, responsibilities, settings or routines.
 - Flexible hours.
 - Technology-based reminders.
 - “Buddy” employees.
 - Additional supervision.

- Include employees' trusted family members or friends, physician, and other members of the care team in discussions when feasible and desirable.
- Evaluate the status of any accommodations (from both workers' and the employer's perspective), adjustments that may be needed, and employees' interest in remaining at work versus retiring.
- Provide training for employees — particularly client-facing employees — on recognizing the warning signs of cognitive decline in the event they experience it in those with whom they interact.
- Help to positively transition those living with dementia out of the workplace at the appropriate time by providing support and allowing for a dignified exit.

Future directions

Corporate America can play an important role in promoting dementia-friendly workplaces and communities. Employers can foster trusted relationships with employees and their families through workplace events that build comradery and combat social isolation. Additionally, employers may consider flexibility in work-from-home options, which can ease family burden.

Additional system-level changes are needed as well. Legislation is necessary to protect the benefits of persons who are fired for performance reasons but later found to have had dementia. An easier process for employees and family caregivers to execute and utilize power of attorney documents should also be created and may lessen family burden. Addressing these and other issues will help ensure that persons living with dementia can devote their remaining years to the activities that give their life meaning and joy, including work, while at the same time providing tangible and intangible benefits to employers and coworkers.

Scenario 1

An experienced night nurse four years from retirement begins to notice lapses in her memory. Did she bring Room 110 the water they asked for? Did she document that the patient in Room 119 refused her Tylenol dose? Out of fear of how her employer might react, she tells no one about her lapses in memory but creates a new note-taking and reminder system for herself. Financially, she can't afford to quit, and she's not yet eligible for Social Security and Medicare. Things are less hectic for night nurses than they are for day nurses, but colleagues are beginning to notice things. "I always thought I might make a mistake on a medication. I never did, thank goodness, but it was demanding and exhausting."

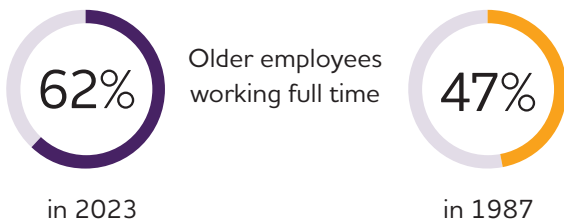
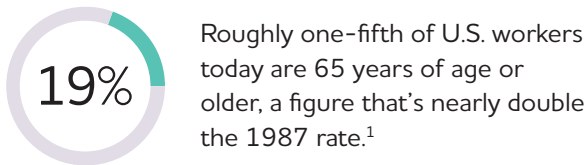
Scenario 2

A highly placed employee at a major internet security company is asked to help train a new associate. However, recently he's been struggling to complete some of his job responsibilities and finds he can no longer remember how to write a basic project plan. He retires, not telling anyone at work about the growing issues with memory and complex thinking. The company has a good retirement package and will never know he was experiencing younger-onset dementia or the potentially serious risks the employee's declining cognitive health may have posed to the business.

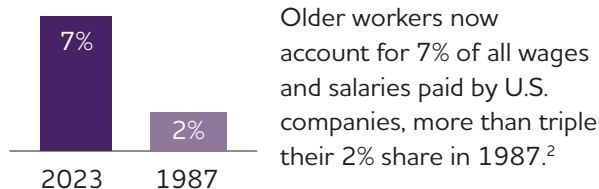
In any context, dementia and mild cognitive impairment (MCI) can be a frightening and uncomfortable topic, and most people associate it with individuals of advanced age. In the workplace, dementia is often discussed only when employees need additional support and flexibility to provide care for a family member (for example, a parent or grandparent) living with a disease that causes

dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease. However, dementia and MCI occur among workers as well, especially as their average age rises. Workplaces can no longer ignore this "hidden" issue, which can impact job performance, threaten the cohesiveness and effectiveness of work teams, and have potentially serious financial and legal implications for both the company and employees.

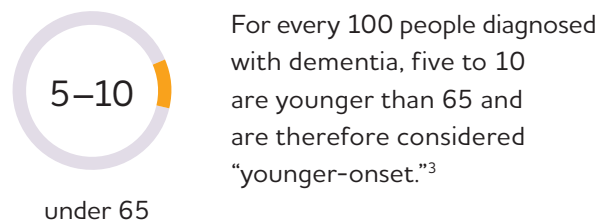
The U.S. workforce is aging.



They're also more likely to have employer-provided benefits, such as pensions and health insurance.



The greatest known risk factor for Alzheimer's and other dementias is increasing age. As workers age, their risk of developing a cognitive impairment increases.



A recent study estimated that, for every 100,000 workers aged 30 to 64, 119 develop younger-onset dementia, translating to:

3.9 million cases worldwide⁴

Due to underdiagnosis and a lack of studies on the topic of dementia in the workplace, this is most likely an underestimate.⁵

ENDNOTES

¹Richard Fry and Dana Braga, "Older Workers Are Growing in Number and Earning Higher Wages," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2023.

²See note 1, above.

³Xi-Chen Zhu, Lan Tan, Hui-Fu Wang and Teng Jiang, "Rate of early onset Alzheimer's disease: A systematic review and meta-analysis," *Annals of Translational Medicine*, 3(3): 38, March 2015.

⁴Stevie Hendriks, MSc, Kirsten Peetoom, Ph.D, Christian Bakker, Ph.D, et al., "Global Prevalence of Young-Onset Dementia," *JAMA Neurology*, 78(9): 1-11, July 19, 2021.

⁵Louise Ritchie, Debbie Tolson and Mike Danson, "Dementia in the workplace case study research: Understanding the experiences of individuals, colleagues and managers," *Ageing and Society*, 38(10): 1-30, June 2017.

To access the full report, prepared in partnership with Bank of America by the Alzheimer's Association, please follow this [link](#).



The Alzheimer's Association leads the way to end Alzheimer's and all other dementia — by accelerating global research, driving risk reduction and early detection, and maximizing quality care and support.

Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's and all other dementia®.

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