

## Spotlight on carers

*To celebrate Carers Week (8-14 June 2020), IP Ability speaks to three IP professionals about their personal experiences as a carer.*

Under normal circumstances, around [1 in every 8-10 UK adults](#) is a carer for an older, disabled or seriously ill loved one. And we are not under normal circumstances. When lockdown happened, it thrust an estimated 4.5 million more people into caring roles, according to [figures from Carers Week](#).

Many of these people would not define themselves as a “carer” – they might not recognise that the things they do constitute a carer role, or perhaps are not comfortable with that word and its connotations. Whether they consider themselves a carer or not, they take on responsibilities that are not only vital to the person they care for but have a very real financial value for society too. Carers UK estimates that unpaid carers save the economy over £130bn per year.

These caring responsibilities can take their toll, both emotionally and physically. Particularly when layered with anxiety for the welfare of the person being cared for, and all of life’s usual pressures – including work commitments, finances and other family relationships.

*For all of these reasons and more, carers deserve visibility, support and recognition. This Carers Week (8-14 June 2020), IP Ability spoke to three IP professionals about their very different personal experiences as a carer, the effect these experiences have had on them professionally, and how colleagues and employers can support carers in the best way possible.*

### **Marianne Privett, Partner at AA Thornton and co-lead of IP Ability**

Marianne’s husband developed serious back problems when their eldest child was very young. “Over the course of 18 months it deteriorated until he spent all day, every day in debilitating pain, meaning that he couldn’t care for our daughter, couldn’t help out around the house, and needed help with some aspects of self-care. At the same time, I was gaining increased responsibilities at work and found it hard to achieve a work-life balance,” she says.



*Marianne Privett: “To be honest, I didn’t see myself as a carer . . . However, I did need to request adjustments at work, and I did need understanding from friends and colleagues.”*

Thankfully, Marianne’s increased responsibilities at home did not have a significant negative impact professionally. “I am lucky that AA Thornton is a supportive employer who (before they were legally required to do so) considered my flexible working request and granted it without challenging it.” A flexible working arrangement, with some days working from home and variable start/finish times, made a huge difference, she explains. “I simply wouldn’t have been able to work full-time without



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that flexibility. I didn't want to reduce my hours at that time and didn't think I should have to reduce my income due to my personal circumstances."

One thing that would be helpful is more flexible educational and networking events, which can prove impossible to attend when juggling caring responsibilities. "I'm hopeful that increased acceptance of flexible working and online delivery of events will be a positive outcome from the pandemic," she says.

### **Empowering openness**

A problem many carers face is not being empowered to be open in the workplace about their caring responsibilities. Some may not even recognise that they are acting as a carer, or feel uncomfortable with the "carer" label. "There's definitely a stigma", says Marianne, "and, to be honest, I didn't see myself as a carer until a counsellor I was seeing for bereavement therapy used the term.

"I think I thought that, because my life wasn't as difficult as someone who had to give up work entirely to care for a relative, I didn't deserve the label. However, I did need to request adjustments at work and I did need understanding from friends and colleagues when making plans.

"Creating an open and understanding workplace environment is key. Carers should not feel the constant need to explain or justify the personal impact their caring responsibilities have – something that can be both frustrating and upsetting", explains Marianne. As the Diversity and Inclusion partner at AA Thornton, Marianne encourages partners and line managers to consider how best to support staff so they can thrive.

"On a personal level", says Marianne, "my carer role has reminded me that others may be facing challenges that aren't immediately obvious. I believe this has made me a more compassionate line manager and colleague."



### **Chris Clarke, Senior Patent Attorney at Vectura Ltd and IP Ability committee member**

Chris's younger son (aged 13) has a learning disability, similar to Prader Willi syndrome. "He has very limited speech, behavioural difficulties, disturbed nights and is always hungry. So he requires almost constant supervision and looking after him is exhausting."

Through caring for his disabled child, Chris has had to learn to be more resilient. "I think [this skill] transfers to professional situations", he says. "And I also have a different perspective on what is really important – which helps me not to get too stressed in the work environment."

His carer role has also had its costs. "I have chosen to turn down opportunities for career progression, and have not taken on other things that I would have liked to have done (such as becoming a tutor or examiner for patent attorney exams), because I felt that I might not have the capacity to cope with the additional demands."

*Chris Clarke: "When the people at the top . . . are open about their caring responsibilities, it empowers everyone else to be too."*



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Speaking with Chris, it is clear how crucial and influential an employer’s attitude to caring responsibilities can be. “Old school” attitudes to family roles (‘a husband earns the money, a wife does the caring’) and working practices (‘home working is skiving’) still exist, and can drive carers away from a company entirely. On the other hand, providing a supportive working environment is a win-win.

### Self-care is vital

For all carers out there who might be feeling stressed, weary, or in need of support, our interviewees have these words of advice:

“The key thing is to make sure that you take care of yourself. It’s really difficult - especially at the moment when many of the usual support mechanisms are not available – but if you don’t look after yourself, you won’t be able to care for others so well. Having overnight respite care for one or two nights each month is the thing enables my wife and I to stay sane and have some time for each other. Sadly, that has been stopped during lockdown, so our date nights aren’t currently possible. However, we did manage a lunch date recently instead, when our older son took his younger brother out for a walk/picnic for a couple of hours. So my tip is to remember that respite is essential, and to try to be creative about how you can get it in the current circumstances” – Chris.

“If you’re feeling overwhelmed try to think about what you can do within your circumstances that would give you a break. It might not be much, maybe just a hot bath with fancy bubble bath, but if you dedicate some time to doing something just for you it might help” – Marianne.

“It’s difficult to craft a one-size-fits all mantra of support. In general, I would advise all carers to take especial care of themselves. There is a reason why the airlines insist that parents/guardians put on their oxygen masks before they fit the children’s: you can’t help or care for others if you don’t care/help for yourself” - Julie

“I’m pleased to say that my current line manager is very supportive and happy to make allowances for occasional disruptions to my work routine in order to cope with my son’s needs.

“Going forwards, Vectura has been thinking about how the company will emerge from the pandemic and what the new normal will look like. The company view is that that agile working can lead to improved job satisfaction, better work-life balance and increased productivity – and that empowering and trusting everyone to think about how and where we work in future will deliver the best outcomes for the business. This is hugely inspiring, and will certainly have a positive impact on me in future.”

Chris finds it easy to talk about carer responsibilities, and has not encountered any stigma. “Many of my colleagues have caring responsibilities, either for young children or elderly parents, so the general level of understanding is good.” Even so, one of the good things to come out of the current pandemic is that people have been more open about their caring responsibilities, he observes. “Juggling work and caring responsibilities has become much more visible while we’re mainly working from home and schools are closed (for example, children crashing Zoom/Teams meetings, etc.)”

Vectura has encouraged employees to post stories and pictures on its internal website while staff are working remotely, to help people stay connected. A number of these have been about caring – for example, sharing tips and advice on how to organise virtual parties and support for elderly parents, or relatives with dementia. Colleagues at all levels of the company are getting involved in these conversations, which is important, Chris notes. “When the people at the top of the organisation are open about their caring responsibilities, it empowers everyone else to be too.”



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## Julie Barrett, Founding Consultant at Purposive Step Consulting – for IP-related businesses and careers – and active contributor to IP Inclusive

Julie's personal experiences span a range of carer responsibilities, from a mum with dementia to a partner with cancer through to a daughter with a 10-year chronic and mutating disease. "They include caring at home, caring in hospital, and myriads of outpatient visits to clinics, consultants etc. They involved caring alone, caring with family, and being part or head of a team of carers and medics. Each ending was very different."

Asked how her carer roles have impacted on her positively as an IP professional, Julie says: "I think above all I learned to do a great deal on very little sleep! I became super-efficient; time was precious and I seemed to do everything at 100 mph."

However, the positive impact for her was more the other way around, she says. "My work became essential to maintaining my sanity, especially during the height of the various crises."

In terms of any negative impact being a carer has had on her professionally, Julie stresses that you have to decide on your priorities. "I always knew mine was family, and my work/career has always given way to their needs. I am in no doubt that I would have had a very different career and performed my more senior roles better, had I not prioritised those who needed my help/support. I would also be retiring on a much higher pension!"



*Julie Barrett: "We need to 'normalise' and de-stigmatise carer responsibilities."*

She confesses that she became fairly intolerant of people without responsibilities for others who she felt were not pulling their weight at work, and who raised minor obstacles as to why they couldn't do something or be somewhere. "Of course, this was probably unfair of me: their 'minor' obstacles may have felt just as great to them as my 'major' ones did to me, and my intolerance was undoubtedly unhelpful at times."

There are many things that companies can do to make things easier for carers: a sympathetic approach helps, but it needs to be coupled with practical solutions. Julie recalls going to see HR once to talk about the difficulties she was experiencing. "The HR person was properly sympathetic, but apart from suggesting that I take some holiday (not a practical answer!), didn't or couldn't help in any other way.

"I think now that they could perhaps have suggested a meeting with the rest of the senior management team, to help prioritise issues, perhaps get some temporary additional help, and at very least to make the team aware of the strain I was under personally."

Shorter in-office working weeks and flexible working hours have proved vital for juggling Julie's work and home responsibilities. "Also essential was my absolutely brilliant assistant. She covered my



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back, reminded me of appointments otherwise forgotten, put urgent matters in front of my nose, rang to keep me updated on what others were doing, searched out directions to yet another different clinic, and, possibly more importantly than all that, reminded me to eat lunch and drink lots of water!”

Julie experienced a huge stigma attached to any type of caring duty – whether for well people, people who generally needed support, or young people who could not yet be expected to support themselves. “It is a lot better now in many places, but there are pockets where that is not the case,” she says. “We need to ‘normalise’ and de-stigmatise carer responsibilities.”

Being open about personal circumstances is, of course, a highly personal thing, and an approach that suits and supports one person might be well out of another person’s comfort zone. “I feel it is also important to get the balance right: too much emphasis on ‘supporting and publicising’ the caring or domestic side of people’s lives can hurt some as much as it can help others,” she observes.

Julie says that networks which provide an outlet for venting frustration may work well for others, but for her are counter-productive - what she has needed most as a carer are practical solutions. “For example, I would have found it useful to have met others who had successfully used the social services/healthcare system and knew their way around the myriad procedures and forms etc. That could have saved time, frustration and energy.”

***Carers Week runs from 8-14 June 2020. Thanks to all carers out there: we celebrate and applaud you – IP Ability***

### Foster an open workplace environment

If you are an employer keen to understand how best to support or celebrate employees who have caring duties, our interviewees share the following personal suggestions:

“My view is that employers should be more aware of the possibility that their employees may have caring responsibilities. Then keep your eye out if an employee/team member seems to be having difficulty or is trying to juggle a lot. Symptoms include: frequently being late for or leaving early from work; loss of concentration/seeming distracted; increased use of office time for private phone calls; irritability; being excessively noisy or quiet; constant tiredness; mopping eyes in the toilets.

“Be brave and gently ask if anything is going on, and specifically probe whether they have a lot on or extra responsibilities outside of work. Then take the lead from the employee – they may want to keep it all quiet, not be treated any differently etc, or they may be happy to tell people and get help. We’re all different!” – Julie.

“Many people are carers in one form or other (and if they aren’t now, they may well be in future). I felt very encouraged and empowered by others being open and sharing their stories, especially when senior leaders joined in” – Chris.

“Providing an open environment when all employees feel able to discuss their personal circumstances should encourage those with caring responsibilities to come forward. It helps if employers don’t challenge their employees when they ask to do something a certain way (unless they have a very good reason to do so). The employee has almost certainly thought things through before making the request and shouldn’t be made to explain their circumstances as a justification” – Marianne.



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