



Diversity **E**quity **I**nclusion

Short-Case Series

When Care Arrives Home: Informal Caregiving and
Workplace Flexibility in Lithuanian SME

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Case theme: raising awareness on DEI issues in SMEs

When Care Arrives Home: Informal Caregiving and Workplace Flexibility in Lithuanian SME

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Abstract

This teaching case explores the managerial challenges that arise when an employee becomes an informal caregiver. The case follows Jonė Petrauskienė, a newly appointed Export Director in a Lithuanian manufacturing small and medium enterprise (SME), whose career advancement coincides with the sudden need to care for her ageing father. As Jonė's caregiving responsibilities increase, tensions arise between professional expectations, the company's international expansion strategy, which requires frequent travel, and her ability to meet these demands. The case emphasises the often-unnoticed role of informal caregivers in the workforce, focusing on the challenges faced by the sandwich generation. It explores how caregiving responsibilities intersect with workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues, particularly in shaping career opportunities, influencing managerial expectations, and guiding organisational responses to work-caregiving conflicts. Learners are invited to analyse the managerial dilemma faced by the company's director, evaluate possible organisational responses, and consider the role of HR professionals in supporting employees as they navigate caregiving responsibilities. The case also introduces the institutional context of caregiving support in Lithuania and encourages discussion on ethical leadership.

Keywords: *informal caregiving, sandwich generation, workplace flexibility, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), SME management, leadership.*

The case relates to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth; and SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities.

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Unexpected Reality of Informal Caregiving in an Ageing Society

Imagine a typical European professional in mid-career, balancing work deadlines and family responsibilities, who suddenly finds themselves helping an ageing parent with everyday needs, all without any financial compensation. This is the often overlooked challenge of family caregiving in ageing Europe.

Across Europe, millions of adults provide regular care for older parents or relatives without any pay. They manage daily chores, accompany them to doctor visits during working hours, and offer emotional support, all while keeping their jobs (Lithuanian Disability Forum, 2021). This vital help keeps families strong and communities connected, but rigid jobs and weak support systems make it tough to balance everything (Cattaneo et al., 2025).

Statistics reveal a significant reality: 12% of adults provide care for individuals aged 75 and older, or for those under 75 who have disabilities. This equates to millions of people, with 7% of working-age adults (ages 18-64) balancing caregiving responsibilities alongside their paid employment (Ikeda et al., 2024). Caregivers make up 10-25% of the population and contribute to 60% of the long-term care needed for older relatives with chronic health issues. By 2050, the demand for caregiving is expected to increase by 50%, resulting in an estimated 11.9 million years of care time. The greatest impact will likely be felt by individuals aged 50-59, many of whom remain in the workforce (Cattaneo et al., 2025), suggesting that today's young professionals will face these challenges in the future. Additionally, most EU Member States are experiencing strong and growing fiscal pressures within their long-term care (LTC) systems. In 2013, public LTC expenditure in the EU averaged 1.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, by 2060, this share is projected to rise to 2.7% of GDP (European Commission, 2019).

Moreover, despite progress in gender equality in the labour market, caregiving responsibilities remain highly gendered. In the European Union, women spend an average of 5.7 hours caring for older family members or relatives with disability, in addition to their already disproportionate burden of household chores. In contrast, men spend an average of 4.8 hours on similar caregiving responsibilities. This demonstrates that unpaid care work has a greater impact on women (Eurofund, 2018).

For many, the transition to caregiving often occurs gradually and unexpectedly.

A Promotion Worth Celebrating

Jonė Petrauskienė¹ closed her laptop and allowed herself a quiet smile. The video meeting had just ended, and the outcome was better than she had hoped. After several months of negotiations, the German distributor had finally confirmed a partnership agreement with their company. It would become one of the largest export contracts the firm had secured in years.

Just three months earlier, Jonė had been promoted to Director of the Export Department at Baltic Engineering and Components, a Lithuanian manufacturing SME employing around 80 people. She had spent nearly 15 years working in the export department, steadily building relationships with clients throughout Northern Europe. Several of the company's key clients had initially been developed through Jonė's personal contacts and negotiations. This promotion represented a significant milestone in her career - one she had patiently awaited while raising four children.

Her manager, the company's director Jonas Vysniauskas, had congratulated her personally. The company's export expansion was one of the director's top strategic priorities. Nearly 70% of the company's growth was expected to come from international markets in the coming years.

"Expanding exports is critical for us," Jonas had said in front of the team during their weekly meeting. "Jonė, you know the markets, and you have proven you can build trust with partners."

The new position came with greater responsibility. Jonė now oversaw international sales strategy, coordinated distributors in several markets, and represented the company at international trade fairs. The role required frequent travel, sometimes several weeks each quarter.

Driving home that evening, Jonė felt proud. For the first time in years, her professional ambitions seemed aligned with her life stage. Her four children, born within a few years of each other, were now finishing secondary school.

However, family life still required constant attention. One of her sons was preparing for his final mathematics exams and had recently started working with a private tutor to improve his chances of gaining university admission. The tutoring sessions were expensive but necessary. Two other kids were excellent at sports, and participation in sports competitions was considered routine, but preparation often required extra expenses. Managing the schedules and needs of four teenagers already required careful coordination.

Between school schedules, exam stress, and everyday household routines, the family depended on Jonė's coordination - meals, logistics, and daily support. Still, compared with the intense years of raising small children, she felt she was finally entering a stage where her career could move forward.

A Visit to Her Father

Just as Jonė began to feel that her personal and professional life were finally becoming more manageable, a new family responsibility emerged.

A few days later, Jonė drove to visit her father, Antanas, who lived alone in a small town about an hour away. Since her mother had passed away the previous year, Jonė tried to visit him regularly. Despite living in very modest circumstances, her father had always valued independence and preferred living in his own apartment.

When she arrived, she noticed small signs that something had changed. The kitchen stove was still on, although no one was cooking.

"Dad?" she called.

Antanas appeared slowly from the living room, leaning heavily on the doorframe.

"Ah, Jonė... I must have forgotten about the stove," he said with a tired smile.

During the visit, Jonė noticed that he struggled to move around the house. Several unopened letters lay on the table. Later that week, she accompanied him to a doctor's appointment. After the examination, the doctor spoke calmly but firmly.



“Your father’s balance is unstable, and his memory may be declining. I would not recommend that he continue living alone,” said the doctor.

A Family Decision

Within weeks, the situation became clearer. Antanas had difficulty managing daily tasks and had already experienced two minor falls at home. In Jonė’s family, a care institution for older parents was not seen as optional.

“Parents raised us,” her father used to say. “And when they grow old, children take care of them.”

After briefly discussing the situation with her husband and children, Jonė decided that her father would move into their home. Her decision was driven primarily by a sense of moral obligation rather than a careful evaluation of alternative care arrangements. The transition took place quickly, and her dad was pleased with the arrangement. A spare bedroom was reorganised, and Antanas arrived with a few personal belongings and family photographs.

Navigating the Care System

Jonė was unsure how to balance her work responsibilities with the increasing care needs at home. With four teenage children preparing for important school milestones and a father whose health was declining, Jonė found herself in the challenging position known as the "sandwich generation," where adults simultaneously support both younger and older family members.

During an informal lunch conversation, HR manager Vita Pranskienė advised Jonė, “You should not try to handle this on your own. The social support system provides financial benefits once care needs are officially recognised. Let me help you understand the process.”

With Vita’s help, Jonė explored whether her father could receive official recognition of his care needs. In Lithuania, older individuals may qualify for financial support if a medical commission determines that they have a disability and special needs requiring constant care or supervision. However, the process required several medical assessments and administrative steps. Friends warned her that the procedure could take months. Until then, any support would need to be organised privately.

To ensure her father’s safety during working hours, Jonė hired a caregiver to visit the house several hours each day. The additional expense, combined with her son’s tutoring costs and the everyday expenses of a household with four teenagers, began to put pressure on the family budget.

The First Tension at Work

Meanwhile, work at Baltic Engineering and Components intensified. The company had ambitious export goals for the coming year. During a planning meeting, the director outlined upcoming travel plans.

“There will be two major trade fairs this spring,” Jonas said. “And we should visit the German distributor again before summer.”

Joné hesitated. She knew extended trips would now be more complicated. Her husband worked shifts as a technician, and the children were preparing for important exams. After the meeting, she approached the director.

“I wanted to ask whether some meetings with the German partner could be handled online for now,” she said. “My father recently moved in with us, and I am organising his care.”

Jonas listened but appeared uncertain. For the first time since her promotion, Joné realised that the role she had worked so hard to attain might now be judged against expectations she could no longer fully meet.

“When we discussed the promotion,” he replied, “I assumed you would be able to travel regularly. International markets still depend on personal contact.”

A Difficult Balance

In the following weeks, Joné balanced her professional commitments with new caregiving responsibilities. Her father needed daily assistance, and the household was busy as the children prepared for final exams and one son attended math tutoring. At work, the company’s export plans were accelerating, with a management meeting discussing upcoming international travel for trade fairs and client visits in the next quarter.

Later that afternoon, Jonas reflected on a recent discussion with the HR manager about creating a Deputy Export Director position. Joné, a key export professional, had built strong client relationships, and replacing her expertise would be challenging. The company’s international growth relied on an active presence in foreign markets, and if Joné could not travel regularly, expansion could slow. Jonas considered appointing a Deputy Export Director to support Joné and manage international travel in her absence. The director also understood that Joné’s father’s health situation was not temporary. Situations like Joné’s are increasingly common among employees in the sandwich generation, who must balance professional roles with caregiving responsibilities for two generations.

Jonas now faced a difficult managerial decision: should the company adapt Joné’s role to accommodate her caregiving responsibilities, maintain the original expectations of the position, or restructure the export leadership team to ensure both business continuity and employee support?

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1Note: This case is based on a real professional experience. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, the company name and the names of the individuals involved have been changed. Any resemblance to actual persons or organisations is purely coincidental and serves only to illustrate the issues being studied.