



How Organizations Can Help Sandwich Moms Achieve Work-Life Balance

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Introduction

The sandwich generation consists of women who are simultaneously caring for dependent children and aging parents. Twenty three percent of adults in the United States are included in the 'sandwich' category. (Horowitz, 2022). Sandwich moms provide care, emotional support, and financial support to their minor children and aging parents (Owsiany et al., 2023). These moms often face challenges trying to navigate caregiving, professional responsibilities, and personal demands.

The University of Phoenix created a Career Optimism Special Report (2025) which explored issues faced by sandwich moms. The participants included 1000 sandwich moms and 1000 non-sandwich moms. The survey was conducted in 2025 between January and February. Approximately 89% of the moms surveyed were between 29 and 60 years old. Participants responded to questions regarding things such as emotional and financial strain and the cost of caregiving.

Organizations play a critical role in whether employees experience balance or chronic stress as more women take on dual responsibilities. Organizations who do not show enough support contribute to employee burnout, diminished institutional trust, decreased productivity, and hindered career development. Conversely, organizations who do show support contribute to workers who remain engaged and efficient.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues faced by sandwich moms according to the Career Optimism Special Report (University of Phoenix, 2025) and provide strategies organizations can use to effectively support sandwich generation moms. This paper begins with an examination of the various sandwich generation definitions. It then provides an overview of the challenges faced by sandwich generation moms, with particular attention to the issues identified in the Career Optimism Special Report (University of Phoenix, 2025). Lastly, the paper outlines organizational strategies that leaders can implement to support sandwich generation moms in achieving work-life balance.

Defining the Sandwich Generation

In 1981, Dorothy Miller created the term sandwich generation to describe individuals who take care of dependent children and aging parents in the same household. Researchers have varying definitions of the sandwich generation. Falkingham et al. (2020) defined the sandwich generation as individuals in their 50s and 60s while Noor and Isa (2020) stated the sandwich generation only contains women in their 30s and 40s. Hamalainen and Tanskanen (2021) defined sandwich generation care as a situation where an individual is sandwiched between caring for family members in two generations. Reyes-Jarquín et al. (2018) identified the types of support provided by sandwich moms: assistance with basic daily activities, complex activities, and leisure and social activities.

Several variations of the sandwich generation exist. The extended sandwich generation consists of caring for adult children and an aging parent simultaneously. The club sandwich generation is defined as individuals who care for at least three groups: minor children, adult children, grandchildren, and aging parents (Skubic & Smale, 2019). Economic factors such as the Great Recession, the Great Resignation, and the Covid-19 Pandemic caused some adult children to move

back home causing individuals to financially or mentally support adult children.

The sandwich generation is defined by three core components. First, the individual must provide ongoing care to at least one child which may include minor children, dependent young adults, or children requiring continued support. Next, the individual must provide emotional, financial, or physical care to an aging parent or older family member. This support may involve coordinating and attending medical appointments, assisting with daily activities, managing finances, or participating in long-term care and end-of-life decision making. Lastly, the individual must provide care for the child and aging parent simultaneously, rather than sequentially, placing the individual in a dual caregiving role that often increases time demands, emotional strain, and role conflict. The concurrent nature of these caregiving demands is central to understanding the unique challenges faced by sandwich generation moms in organizational and leadership contexts.

Issues Faced by Sandwich Moms

Because of the dual responsibilities, the sandwich generation faces several challenges. One major issue faced by sandwich moms is work-family conflict. Sandwich moms may have rigid work schedules or limited access for flexible arrangements causing them to make tough decisions. Sandwich moms may have to choose between going to work or caring for their aging parents. Working women with dual roles reported family responsibilities often interfere with work causing these women to request more time off or use sick leave (Aazami et al., 2018). Women report higher levels of absenteeism at work compared to male caregivers (Hammer & Neal, 2008). Additionally, sandwich moms may exhibit irregular work patterns and miss career advancements because of the extra responsibilities faced at home. Owsiany et al. (2023) found that sandwich generation caregivers have experienced more burnout than individuals who only care for their children.

Sandwich moms also face significant emotional challenges because of the complexity of managing dual responsibilities. Many experience emotional exhaustion, guilt, and anxiety as they attempt to meet the competing needs of their children, aging parents, and professional roles (Lei et al., 2023). Additionally, sandwich moms often experience heightened emotional distress because of the added pressures from managing the new family dynamic, making complex medical and care-related decisions, and providing sustained emotional support to aging parents. Over time, the collective obligation associated with these responsibilities can contribute to chronic stress, burnout, and diminished psychological well-being, particularly when adequate social or organizational support is lacking.

Another issue faced by sandwich moms is financial stress. Working women who have unpaid childcare responsibilities are more likely to experience depression and chronic health issues (D'Ovidio et al., 2015; McGarrigle et al., 2014). Lei et al. (2023) stated that approximately 36% of sandwich caregivers reported financial problems. According to the Career Optimism Special Report (University of Phoenix, 2025), sandwich moms reported that approximately 52% of their paychecks go toward caregiving costs while non-sandwich moms reported that approximately 23% of their paychecks go toward caregiving costs.

Career stagnation is another significant issue faced by sandwich moms. Approximately 59% of sandwich moms report feeling held back in their careers because of dual caregiving responsibilities (University of Phoenix, 2025). The extra responsibility of caring for aging parents, in addition to raising children, can result in limited opportunities for professional development, promotions, or leadership roles, particularly when organizations rely on rigid career pathways or expectations of constant availability. As a result, sandwich moms may reduce work hours, turn down advancement opportunities, or disengage from career growth initiatives, leading to long-term consequences such as wage penalties, reduced retirement savings, and diminished professional confidence. These patterns highlight the need for organizations to reconsider traditional advancement models to better support employers managing complex dual caregiving responsibilities.

Lastly, lack of institutional support presents another significant challenge for sandwich moms. Many organizations continue to design policies and benefits around single-role caregivers, offering limited resources for employees managing dual caregiving responsibilities. According to the MOM report (University of Phoenix, 2025), 38% of moms reported their employers do not provide enough on-site/subsidized childcare, while 66% indicated that existing benefits are insufficient to support both adult and child dependents. Lack of support from organizations leads to heightened stress, reduced engagement, and decreased institutional trust. Over time, feeling unsupported can lead employees to feel invisible or undervalued at work, increasing the risk of burnout, disengagement, and turnover. These challenges emphasize the critical role organizations play in shaping the work-life experiences of sandwich generation moms and highlight the need for intentional strategies that promote flexibility, inclusivity, and sustained work-life balance.

Strategies for Creating Work-Life Balance

Organizations can help sandwich moms achieve work-life balance while handling dual responsibilities. According to the Career Optimism Special Report (University of Phoenix, 2025), approximately 41% of sandwich moms look for schedule flexibility, 34% look for paid time off, and 32% look for remote work options while searching for employment. Fishler et al. (2025) suggest that flexible work arrangements and benefits may be a solution to meet the needs of employers and caregivers. Organizations can provide options such as remote work, flexible scheduling, or predictive scheduling which would allow sandwich moms to manage caregiving responsibilities without decreasing their productivity (Yucel & Fan 2023). Hakansson et al. (2019) reported that flexible work arrangements are limited to sandwich caregivers with higher education and professional status. Providing flexible options allows these moms to feel a sense of control which reduces work-family conflict and decreases burnout.

Another strategy that organizations can use to help sandwich moms achieve work-life balance is by providing supervisor support. Supervisors can demonstrate empathy and trust by initiating conversations about caregiving needs and by providing accommodating schedules that help moms manage dual responsibilities. Supervisors can attend professional development sessions that focus on how to provide support for dual caregiving. Additionally, supervisors can evaluate employers with

dual roles based on their performance instead of availability. Lastly, supervisors can provide flexible career paths and mentorships for dual caregivers so that they have promotion opportunities.

Supervisors can also play a critical role in supporting sandwich moms by revising their leave policies so that sandwich moms do not feel penalized for requesting more time off to care for aging parents. Expanded leave options may include options for paid family leave, designated caregiver leave, or flexible emergency leave policies that recognize eldercare responsibilities and childcare needs. When leave policies are clearly communicated and supported by supervisors, sandwich generation moms are more likely to use available benefits without fear of retaliation. These policies can reduce stress, boost institutional trust, and signal organizational commitment to employee well-being.

Conclusion

Sandwich generation moms consist of women who simultaneously provide care to dependent children and aging parents, placing them in a dual caregiving role that deepens time demands, emotional strain, and work-family conflict. These women experience unique challenges as they navigate professional responsibilities with expanding caregiving obligations. Findings from the Career Optimism Special Report (University of Phoenix, 2025) highlight the significant impact these demands, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, career stagnations, and perceptions of inadequate support. Many moms report feeling constrained in their career advancement and underserved by workplace benefits that fail to account for the intricacies of dual caregiving responsibilities, contributing to decreased institutional trust and workplace disengagement.

Addressing these challenges requires intentional organizational action. Strategies such as flexible work arrangements, inclusive leave policies, and supervisor training can help reduce role overload and normalize caregiving needs without penalizing employees. Additionally, providing access to childcare and eldercare resources, encouraging a supportive organizational culture, and restructuring career pathways to accommodate dual caregiving demands can promote sustained work-life balance. When organizations acknowledge and respond to the realities faced by sandwich moms, they not only enhance employee well-being but also strengthen retention, engagement, and increased organizational trust.

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