

How to Care for Care Professionals, Marta Elvira

Article published in Expansión on February 3, 2025

Who will help me when I am older and can no longer take care of myself? This is a question many of us in Spain ask ourselves, where the population is aging, and our families are becoming increasingly smaller.

According to projections from the National Statistics Institute (INE), the percentage of the population aged 65 and over, currently at 20.4% of the total, is expected to reach a peak of 30.5% around the year 2055.

This means that, in 30 years, one in three Spaniards will be 65 years or older, and the reality is that most will need some help with daily activities. Even if a family member takes on all or part of this work, depending on our needs, we may have to rely on professional caregivers at home, in a day centre, or in a care facility.

Despite the vital importance of these workers' roles, they are not talked about enough. And when they are, they tend to be portrayed in extremes, either as angels on earth or merely as cleaners forced to deal with the worst aspects of physical decline. In our country, caregivers are often immigrants, mostly women with a low level of education.

Anyone who has witnessed the aging of a relative or friend knows how important it is to have the extra help of a trusted professional. At a time when the impact of artificial intelligence on employment is a major concern, we must remember that caregiving is precisely the kind of work that machines cannot fully replace, as it requires a human touch.

Still, companies in the sector are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain qualified caregivers who are passionate about their work. Salaries are not proportional to the skill, dedication, and challenges involved in providing quality care. Additionally, the gap between the highest and lowest earners continues to grow due to increasing organizational inequality.

According to a report from the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, the long-term care sector has reached over 600,000 workers in recent years, a figure that will continue to rise. "However, the high added value, societal impact, and importance of attracting more personnel to the care sector are currently not reflected in the low prestige and precarious working conditions of the field," the report concludes.

The Meaning of Work

While the solution to these problems is complex, one key element is the meaning of work. Numerous academic and practical studies show that people who find meaning in their work are more productive, more satisfied, stay longer with their employers, and are more loyal.

To understand what gives work meaning in the specific context of caregiving, we conducted interviews with numerous professionals employed in various companies in Spain and one in the United States. Analyzing the interviews, we identified four aspects that generally contribute to giving their work meaning:

- **It is skilled work.** Caregivers who find meaning in their profession believe they have a special understanding of the people they care for. They prevent suffering by detecting any changes in health and intervening appropriately in coordination with healthcare professionals.

- **It has impact.** They enhance the dignity and quality of life of the people they care for by recognizing their humanity, being present with and for them, ensuring their physical comfort, and fostering their autonomy and participation in various activities.
- **It is a source of personal development and continuous learning.** Caregivers learn from the people they care for, from their work, and about themselves, allowing them to refine their skills and identify their strengths.
- **It is an enriching relational job.** The deep and affectionate relationships they establish with the people they work with are a source of meaning.

However, finding meaning in work is not solely intrinsic to the individual; it also arises from those around us, whether in personal or work environments. Caregiving is unique in that caregivers often maintain relationships not only with their employers and clients but also with family members and other people involved in the care.

For this reason, we interviewed friends, family, supervisors, and colleagues of care workers—those in their personal and professional networks. Another interesting observation is that these people significantly influence how caregivers value their work and whether they can speak about it meaningfully.

Regarding caregivers' expertise and worth, some managers and supervisors in these institutions reinforced the meaning of their work by consulting them on symptoms and the nature of care, including their observations and interventions in shared documents within and outside the organization. They also involved them in decision-making processes, recognized their contributions to the quality of care provided, and appreciated their handling of difficult situations.

This approach gave more visibility to caregivers' expertise and their contribution to the quality of life of those they care for—something that is very important for families who may not always be able to properly assess caregivers' competence.

Conversely, we often found managers who ignored or minimized caregivers' roles, deferring solely to doctors or nurses and undermining their sense of worth. Regarding their friends and family, many caregivers felt they could only talk about the positive aspects of their work. If they mentioned the negatives, they were often urged to change jobs due to the challenges. Caregivers told us it would be helpful if their loved ones appreciated the positive value of their work and supported them during tough times.

Creating a virtuous cycle is essential, as well-valued occupations typically offer more opportunities for decent work, fair pay, and better working conditions. Therefore, for many reasons, including their positive impact on society and before we need their services ourselves, we must care for care professionals by properly recognizing their work.

[THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE was published in SPANISH](#)