

Canadian workers under growing stress

Mary Beadnell
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A recently released report, *Voices of Canadians: Seeking Work-Life Balance*, documents the stress and misery being experienced by thousands of Canadian workers, like their colleagues around the world, due to downsizing, industrial restructuring and the endless drive to increase profitability.

The survey is the second part of a report commissioned by Health Canada in a vain attempt to find solutions to what it sees as a national crisis. “Canadian couples are not having enough kids to replace themselves,” the report states. “Canada’s fertility rate fell to a record low of 1.5 in 2000. In addition, the Canadian population is getting older, estimates suggest that approximately 25 percent of Canadians will be 65 or older, in the year 2036.”

Economic stress has led people to delay having children. “In 1996 it took about a year and a half on the job, at an average wage, to earn enough to cover the typical annual expenditures of a family for items such as food, shelter, clothing, taxes, life insurance, gifts, health and personal care, interest on loans, and recreation. In other words, there needs to be two people earning income just to meet the economic needs of raising a family.”

Family life bears the brunt of the “time crunch,” with home-cooked meals and sit-down suppers being the exception rather than the norm. In addition to caring for their children, 25 percent of working families provide some form of support for an elderly family member.

The study surveyed 31,571 Canadian workers from the public sector (federal, provincial and municipal governments), private sector and not-for-profit organizations (organizations in the health care and education sectors). All were employed by organizations of 500 or more. In the private sector, they covered the manufacturing, telecommunications, high technology, retail, transportation, pharmaceutical, financial services, entertainment and natural resources industries.

According to the report, restructured working arrangements and employment relationships mean that only a third of the workforce works standard hours (Monday to Friday, 9 to 5) in a regular job at the employer’s workplace. About 25 percent worked 50 hours per week or more (counting overtime, travel and office work brought home) in 2001, compared to less than 10 percent 10 years ago.

Sixty-four percent of respondents commented on their difficulties in balancing their work and family lives, producing over 1,000 pages of text, reflecting hundreds of different

concerns and suggestions. The main themes were heavy workloads, management or cultures that do not support balance, the perception that one has to choose between career advancement and family life, constant change, lack of policies, temporary work and work-related travel.

Many spoke of the impact of downsizing and unrealistic workloads. One typical respondent stated: “The downsizing and amalgamations of the 1990s have impacted my work/family and lifestyle in the following ways: I work weekends and evenings because I have to, in order to keep ahead (this is the same with my co workers). Because I work long hours, this affects my family and my leisure time. Because of reduced leisure time, stress and anxiety have increased. Workloads are increasing not only because of reduced staffing but also as a result of the improved economy. We are being pressed to make unrealistic deadlines.”

Another commented: “In the past year, our employer has increased our workload by a minimum of 25 percent. We have received no monetary compensation for this. We have also experienced a 25 percent reduction in staff. The atmosphere this creates is very predictable—a nightmare. Our organization is underfunded and understaffed, and the negative impacts will be clearly visible to anyone who bothers to look. The effect on the ‘balance’ issue is also clear.”

Frustration and anger were commonly expressed. One respondent replied: “Let me describe where I work, and then you tell me why I have a problem with balance. 1. My employer’s demands are unrealistic. 2. My employer couldn’t care less about people, only the work and getting it done. 3. My work requires a lot of extra hours, but this is never repaid in time off when needed for outside appointments or personal or family matters, be it a doctor/dentist or other matter. 4. My employer is very selfish; they expect you to meet totally unrealistic objectives, work extra hours with no compensation of any kind. 5. My employer has the attitude that you are lucky to be employed with such a great company and you are not to rock the boat, no matter what. 6. My employer demands and expects hard work, long hours and no expectations other than your paycheque. 7. My employer does not regard loyalty, hard work, dedication, commitment to the job or extra hours worked. 8. My employer repays speaking up for yourself or others with a label—blacklisted—no future career—or forces you out of employment.”

Workers with families identified three particular problems: role overload, interference between work and family roles, and challenges associated with specific family circumstances.

Typical comments included: “Time is always an issue. I feel I am always rushing from one thing to the next. My husband and I are both working full-time and raising three children, and it seems we never get a break. I find I have to be super-organised so I can feel good at work and home.”

Delays in starting a family were frequently reported. One respondent explained: “Contractual employees do not have their contracts renewed if they get pregnant. This means that I cannot start a family until I can get permanent work—but that is easier said than done!”

Another commented: “I think it is important to note that with the advent of contract work being so prevalent, the stability of even having a family or buying a house becomes an overwhelming commitment. Therefore, many people like myself are delaying family life until later in life.”

The majority of respondents (approximately 70 percent) were frustrated with the behavior of their immediate manager. Their reasons included: immediate manager does not treat the employee with respect, and managers do not see their people management role as a priority.

Of particular concern is that teachers and nurses reported intolerable stress. A teacher commented: “At this point in the political climate, I try to avoid admitting I am a teacher! I used to put my heart and soul into my teaching career. I even chose not to have a family because of the demands on my time outside of school. Now I am told by the media that I am basically worthless! I would not recommend a teaching career for anybody at this point. I used to love teaching even though I had little time for myself. Now teaching is a job to pay the bills—acceptable but not loved.”

A nurse said: “The type of work I do can be very demanding and physically, emotionally and spiritually draining. Taking care of the elderly means we have all types of physical, mental and emotional needs to meet. This does affect my home life because I become emotionally drained. Last year we were so understaffed and overworked it was very hard. I had more trips to the chiropractor due to the physical strain on my body from bed-care patients and heavy workload.”

Lower-income families are under far greater strain. In the words of one worker: “Everything is going up except our pay cheques! Sometimes I think it would be better to quit my job and sponge off the government. Welfare! The government thinks I make too much, so no childcare subsidy for me! Daycare takes half my pay every month!... At this rate, there will be no such thing as middle class in 20 years or sooner!”

The report points out in one of its conclusions: “The comments with respect to financial strain suggest that balance is virtually impossible in lower-income families.”

Taken as a whole, the report graphically reveals that work/family life is under increasing pressure as people are

forced to work longer hours, in conditions where parents are denied adequate time and support to tend to the needs of their families. The quality of life for many working families has been significantly eroded over the past several decades, coinciding with worsening social inequality.

Yet, the report merely issues a series of pleas to employers and governments to reduce work-life conflict. It urges employers to be more supportive and flexible and to “reward output, not hours.” It recommends that governments become “model employers” and also provide childcare and eldercare programs. To address financial strain, it proposes tax credits and changes to the minimum wage.

These ever-so-polite suggestions fly in the face of the very economic dictates that are driving employers to demolish working conditions and governments to slash social services. As the report itself notes: “Global competition is putting increasing pressure on productivity.”

A complete transformation of economic, social and political life is necessary before ordinary working people will be able to spend more time with their families and friends, as well as to pursue social, artistic, recreational or educational activities. Only if society were organized and production planned for social need, rather than corporate profit, and scientific resources were dedicated to achieving sustainable use of the environment, could people work much shorter hours while enjoying far higher living standards.

A socialist society would provide free, high quality public housing, education, health care and childcare and properly funded support services for the elderly and disabled, together with free, high quality community kitchens, laundries, libraries and social clubs. Modern mass public transport systems would improve the environment and decrease traveling times. Most importantly, social capital would be devoted to providing specially designed facilities—educational, recreational and social—for all young people.



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