

Web-exclusive comment

What workers want: It's time to raise the bar

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SPECIAL TO GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE
SEPTEMBER 4, 2007 AT 1:00 AM EDT

Here's a sobering thought for Labour Day: Although the economy has roared ahead this decade, the quality of Canadians' jobs hasn't improved. The 21st century has been great for profits and productivity, but what matters to the average Canadian — the quality of their work life — has stalled.

Ten years ago, employers dealt workers a harsh hand of downsizing, contracting and cost-cutting. Today, those workers hold the trump cards, as unemployment bottoms out and baby boomers make the transition to their golden years. With so many employers admitting difficulties finding, keeping and engaging employees, the timing would seem perfect to give job quality a higher priority. But this has not been happening.

My research for a Canadian Policy Research Networks report, "21st Century Job Quality: Achieving What Canadians Want," examined dozens of job-quality measures to reach this conclusion. The biggest change since the early 1990s has been a 45-per-cent decline in unemployment. However, the hiring binge has not increased the proportion of full-time, continuing jobs.

Precarious employment persists. While more people work shorter weeks, the longer work week (more than 40 hours) has increased. Employers have been slow to adopt or offer flexible hours and schedules, something workers of all generations want. Information technology, and growing concern for the environment, should make telecommuting an easy move, but if this happens at all, it usually involves unpaid overtime on evenings and weekends. Basic benefits are being cut back, notably employer pension plans and supplementary medical insurance.

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Some employers are taking steps to manage talent and engage employees, essential in a knowledge-based economy. Yet we don't do enough to use and develop the country's human capital. In 2001, nearly one in five workers with university degrees were in jobs requiring a high-school education or less, an increase from the previous decade. And Canada's training record is mediocre and slipping compared to other OECD countries.

On the health and safety front, lost-time work injuries are down, but workplace fatalities are up. Sickness absenteeism has climbed in the past decade. Among the likely causes are the work-family pressures and job stress, although surprisingly, the latter is not increasing. Even so, approximately three of 10 Canadians experience high levels of job stress.

Consistent with stalled job quality, Canadians' job satisfaction has flat-lined. About one in three Canadians are "very satisfied" with their job.

Defining job quality to include 15 ingredients (from pay and benefits to work-life balance, recognition, career opportunities and the nature of the work itself), it's only about one in five employees who has high job quality on all measures. Big gaps remain for many others, especially in terms of training, trustworthy management and a healthy, safe environment.

Statistical evidence confirms that employees who have positive work experiences (developing their abilities, feeling challenged, making decisions, gaining recognition) in a healthy and safe environment with the support of management go home with a sense of accomplishment and look forward to returning the next day. And they are more productive because they can learn, contribute and take initiative.

Job quality is a bridge between individual Canadians' quality of work life and economic prosperity. Individuals, employers and society will reap substantial benefits by making better job quality a national goal.

Close to four of 10 workers are 45 years of age or older, making renewal an urgent priority. To stimulate action, we need better national job quality measures that give an integrated picture and track progress. A model is the European Working Conditions Survey, conducted in the 25 European Union countries.

To prevent employers, and regions, from cannibalizing each others' work forces, employers should raise the national bar for key aspects of job quality, such as flexible work arrangements, open communication, supportive supervision and health-promoting work environments. We need look no further than Britain, where management standards in employee development and work stress reduction are being adopted. These collective steps will help Canadians achieve the high quality of work life that they want, and deserve, and pave the way for future prosperity.

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