

# How Governments Can Become Employers of Choice

BY GRAHAM S. LOWE

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**G**overnments want to become "employers of choice." Many are striving to be more flexible, knowledge-intensive and learning-based. Reaching these goals requires nothing short of bold new ways of organizing, managing, supporting and rewarding people.

A growing number of private sector firms have the same agenda. However, compared with private enterprises, governments are up against more acute pressures and constraints.

For governments, the demographic crunch caused by baby-boomer retirements has begun. Governments' skill requirements are rising, but not as fast as pay levels for their knowledge workers. Extensive reliance on information technology places a premium on its effective use. The pace and scope of workplace change has been staggering by any standard. And governments are highly unionized, requiring a more collaborative approach to change.

The key is taking an integrated approach to workforce renewal and workplace reform. According to a new study by Canadian Policy Research Networks, a national public policy think tank, some government work units are doing just that.

How governments respond to these human resource management challenges provide useful lessons for all employers.

## Knowledge and Information Technology

Governments are technology intensive, which is partly what makes them knowledge-based organizations. Information technology (IT), skill development and new forms of work organization are interconnected. IT's usefulness depends on the organizational context and whether it provides an optimum fit between IT and the users.

Governments train more than most Canadian employers. Yet this may not be enough in the face of rapid organizational and technological change and steady up-skilling. What's more, governments want to become learning organizations. This means anticipating the learning needs not only of knowledge workers, but of all staff.

## Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Governments face a demographic "crunch". This also requires new and more flexible approaches to human resource management.

A variety of recruitment strategies will be required for governments to meet their needs for new talent. This could include bringing in experienced, mid-career workers and offering more opportunities for secondments from other industries – which requires a loosening of employment rules.

Still, most recruiting will be at junior levels. Closing the resulting "experience gap" demands flexible work arrangements and careers – such

as phased-in retirement and lateral movement within and across departments for mid-career staff. This can speed up the transfer of knowledge from the departing generation to the new generation of civil servants.

Also needed is a realignment of public service careers with the rapidly changing context and content of government work. Moving away from bureaucratic careers could, for example, include the use of horizontally and vertically integrated work teams. These teams would bring together experienced senior staff with junior staff from across complementary functions, along with new recruits and student interns – a good way to foster mentorship and learning.

## Rewarding Work Environments

The growing proportion of knowledge workers in government is raising the bar when it comes to intrinsic job rewards. This calls for a holistic view of work rewards.

For one thing, governments can't match the salaries offered by private firms to many types of knowledge workers. So the attractions of government jobs that come from providing a public service, career development opportunities and challenging work must be highlighted. Equally crucial is providing a high quality work environment. CPRN's research shows that if governments can offer personally rewarding work, they stand a better chance of attracting and keeping motivated and skilled workers of all ages. Making job quality just a "youth" or "recruitment" issue sends the wrong signal to

older employees – which can be demoralizing. So providing all employees greater autonomy, opportunities for participation, recognition, feedback and information could build the motivation and commitment needed for optimum job performance.

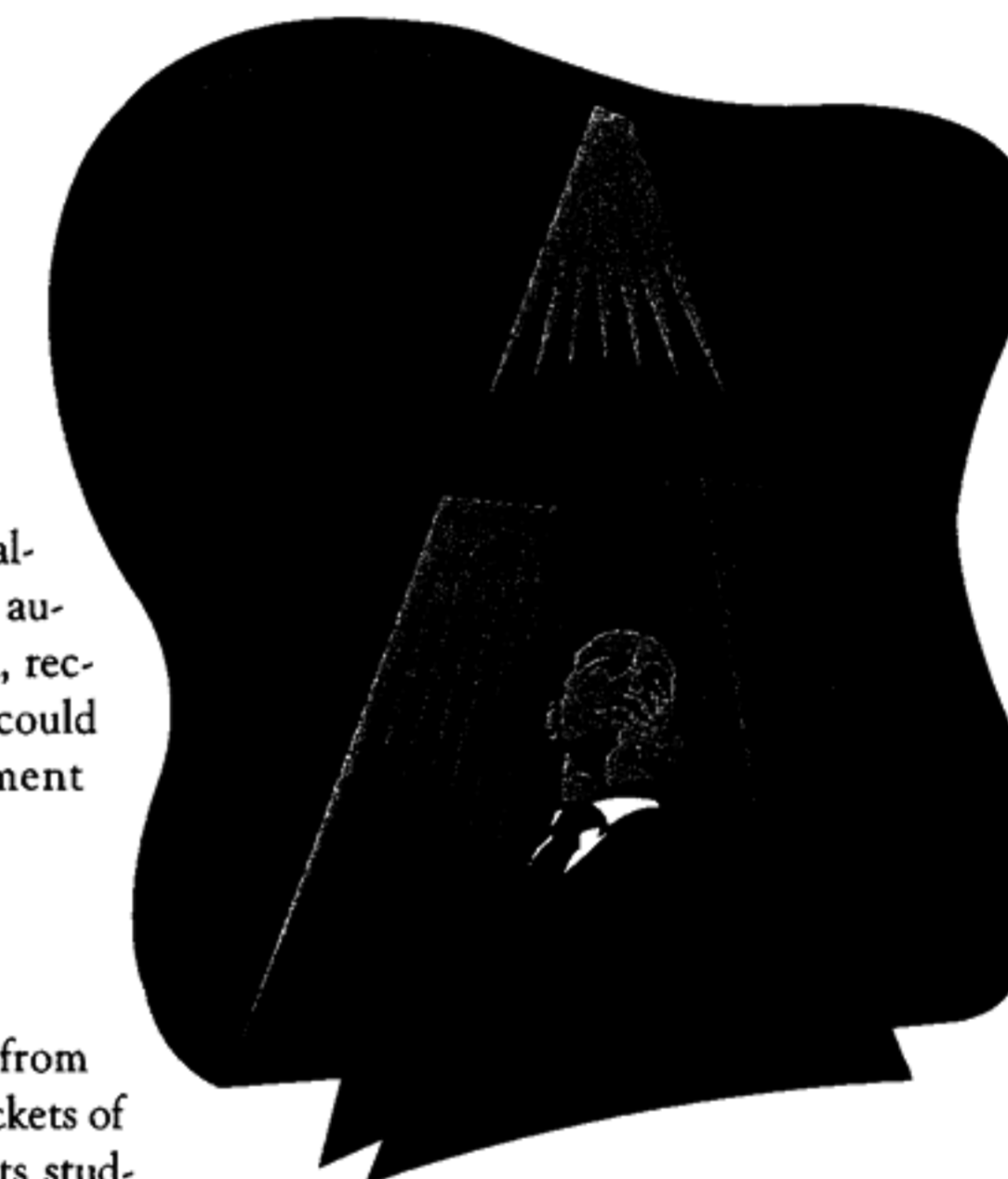
## The Emergent Flexible Workplace Model

One of the most positive findings from CPRN's research is the existence of pockets of innovation within the five governments studied. Just over one in four work units had moved from a traditional bureaucratic model of work organization toward a new more flexible model. Governments have a long way to go in this regard, but the potential gains in quality of work life and public service delivery are great.

These innovative workplaces were using "bundles" of practices in the following areas of human resource management and work organization:

- Functional flexibility (use of job enrichment, job enlargement, multi-skilling/job rotation, self-directed work teams);
- Flexible schedules;
- Training;
- Formal participation programs; and
- Information sharing.

(There is a sixth indicator of innovation – flexible compensation – but it rarely occurs in the public sector. This is an area where governments face difficult choices in the future, given competing pressures and constraints on



their pay level systems).

## Enabling Workplace Innovation

There is no universal formula for the emergent flexible model. But CPRN research suggests that the process of workplace innovation depends on these enabling conditions:

1. *Document the impact of organizational change.* Judging the effectiveness of new human resource strategies depends on developing measurable outcomes that are meaningful for individual employees, work units and the public. This includes developing tools to better measure outcomes. Surely this is part of the agenda for building knowledge-based organizations.

2. *Share information about flexible practices.* Documenting and communicating successful examples of workplace innovation will help front-line managers, in collaboration with staff and local union reps, to explore what options are available. This could form a useful inventory of effective workplace practices, showing

the processes by which locally appropriate choices about workplace change were made.

3. *Decentralize authority for workplace change.* The distinguishing feature of innovative work units is that their managers had more latitude to implement new approaches to job design and human resource management. The spread of such practices, then, depends on providing front-line managers with the authority needed to initiate flexible practices.

4. *Remove barriers to innovation.* Crucial too is an awareness of the barriers to workplace change so they can be overcome. This may require shifts in the culture of an organization. In this regard, workers and managers must create a shared commitment to putting people first, which means creating a high level of mutual trust.

5. *Encourage union-management collaboration.* More collaborative approaches to union-management relations and employee involvement will provide fertile ground for diffusion of innovative practices. Indeed, unions have positive contributions to make to the process of designing the future government workplace.

For governments, workplace renewal presents an opportunity to make substantive progress toward two complementary goals – a better quality of working life for the knowledge workers who will dominate public service work in the 21st century and a more efficient and effective public service.

That's how to become an "employer of choice." ■