



## Family Life and Work Life: An Uneasy Balance

**F**amilies are changing and so are the organizations for which they work. Families need and want the work that employers provide and employers need the workers to produce goods and services for sale and distribution. It is a two-way street.

“Family Life and Work Life: An Uneasy Balance” highlights the dynamic relationship between these two entities and examines whether or not Canadians are achieving an acceptable balance between family life and work life. The result seems to be an uneasy balance.

- While many families are satisfied with their family life and work life arrangements, a growing number are clearly not. This dissatisfaction often negatively impacts families and their employers. A looming labour shortage will likely worsen the situation.
- Persons who live in family households comprise 84% of the total supply of Canadian labour. The last decade has seen rising labour participation by all family members, with the largest increase among female lone-parent families and wives with young children. Flat hourly earnings are leading more family members into the paid workforce.
- Family members are spending more time on work and work-

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- related activities. Commuting times are increasing and modern technology has blurred the lines between work and family.
- It is undeniable, more work time clearly means less family time. The average time spent with family on a typical work day has shrunk by about three-quarters of an hour, from 250 minutes per day in 1986 to 206 minutes in 2005 — a drop of 18%.
  - Women still do most of the juggling in bringing about a balance between family time and work time. Women are much more likely to work part-time, simply drop out of the paid workforce or work two jobs to accommodate family needs.
  - The job market is strong but is slowly shifting towards more temporary employment and increasing overtime, both with or without pay. Organizations are continually re-engineering, rotating workers, integrating functional groups, downsizing and reorganizing the workplace.
  - The ongoing stress and change is leading to more dissatisfaction, more time off for illness and family reasons, more workers who are thinking of leaving their current employers and lower ratings for their employers.

### **There is more that can be done to improve the uneasy balance**

Families and employers are encouraged to continue working together to strengthen their partnership with a view of building and/or maintaining healthy work life and family life relationships. Governments at all levels are similarly encouraged to take a leadership role in establishing the context and opportunities for continuing dialogue, discussion and policy development in this critically important area.

### **Who is doing what and what else can be done?**

#### *1. What are families doing to improve the balance?...*

##### *Plenty*

Is a good balance between family life and work life even possible? A recent survey<sup>1</sup> found that “only 27% of respondents are convinced that work-life balance is attainable in our society and only 17% strongly believe our society supports its workers having good work-life balance.”

One thing which seems clear is that workers are now placing

more importance on their families than in the past. The survey noted above found that 54% of Canadians placed a high value on family versus only 10% who place a high value on work. Another study found that the percentage of working Canadians who give priority to family rather than work has doubled over the last decade.<sup>2</sup>

For a large and diverse group, the balance seems to be an uneasy and uncomfortable one.

The degree of uneasiness ranges anywhere from the 20% who are clearly dissatisfied with the balance, to perhaps as high as two-thirds who believe that the workplace is not meeting their family life and work life expectations.

Families are making significant adjustments.

For most families, work is necessary to obtain the financial resources needed to support themselves and their dependents. As such, more family members are joining the paid workforce to help achieve these ends.

More families are adjusting by having no children, having fewer children or delaying children until their education, their family finances and their careers are in better shape.

Families are adjusting their work schedules, such as working part-time or dropping out of the labour force for long periods of time. This is especially so among women with young children. Even so, labour force participation rates are climbing for this group as well.

Some families are adjusting by not spending as much time together, especially with their children.

The stresses and increased absences from work are viewed as a negative offset to the benefits of paid work.

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## **What else can families do? ... Get informed and push for more**

More families need to re-evaluate how they share the paid and unpaid work loads of the household. The original deal may not fit as well as it once did.

Families need to make themselves aware of the family programs that are available at their place of work or through government programs. Families should use those that are available ... while pushing for even more of these programs.

### *2. What are organizations doing to improve the balance? ...Not enough*

In a context of growing international competition, private-sector employers must continuously increase efficiency to sustain and enhance shareholder value. In the short-term, these goals are in direct conflict with improving the family life and work life balance. In the medium and longer-term, addressing these issues may be a pre-requisite to hiring, motivating and keeping employees. Dissatisfied employees leave and/or suffer from more physical or mental health problems.

There has been little research in Canada and elsewhere of organizational responses to the uneasy balance. In part, this is so because it is difficult to separate specific family life and work life issues from the concerns that affect all employees. Many organizations are not doing enough to create family-friendly work places.

In 2001, only 40% of organizations had personal support, family service, or counseling programs, only 9% had child care services<sup>3</sup> (on-site, external assistance or informal arrangements) and even fewer (5%) had eldercare services. In 2001, about 70% of all employees had at least one non-wage benefit (30% had no benefits at all) ranging from a high of 93% for organizations with 500 or more employees to a low of only 7% for those working in organizations with fewer than 20 employees.<sup>4</sup>

Small businesses may be doing something but on an informal basis. A CFIB (Canadian Federation of Independent Business)<sup>5</sup> survey suggested that 92% of senior managers in small and medium-sized enterprises had a flexible work time policy ... however, three quarters of these were informal.

According to a major study “the majority of Canada’s largest employers cannot be considered to be best practice employers.”<sup>6</sup> Another major report suggested that “most employers have not voluntarily embraced work-life balance policies.”<sup>7</sup>

While many organizations accept the reality that “one-size does not fit all” they find it difficult to provide more targeted programs or want to keep control of hours and schedules.

## What else can organizations do? ... Much more

There is a “business case” to be made. There are real costs of not doing enough and there are real benefits to doing what is right for employees and their families. Estimates suggest that the direct costs of absenteeism range from \$3 to \$5 billion a year.<sup>8</sup> Indirect organizational costs (lower productivity, recruitment, training, low morale) certainly push the total much higher.

Organizations should incorporate the concept of both family life and work life support into their strategic and operational planning processes. This should include awareness sessions, setting targets, measurements, roles and accountability.

### *3. What are governments doing to improve the balance? ... Leading*

Governments are key players in setting the principles and standards that protect workers and families from unacceptable practices by their employers. Many of these standards refer to the control of time and who has the power to control this limited resource ... the employer, the employee or both. Governments typically set the minimum standards. In a market economy, setting the minimum standards is politically and technically challenging.

Ensuring that there is compliance with these minimum standards is an even greater challenge. These difficulties are compounded by differing standards across Canada.

According to the ILO (International Labour Organization), Governments should be guided by five principles in developing a “decent work time” agenda: (1) that it should be safe and healthy; (2) that it should be family-friendly; (3) that it promotes gender equality; (4) that it advance productivity; (5) and that it facilitate worker choice and influence.<sup>9</sup>

In Canada, governments set standards for several key concerns:<sup>10</sup>

**Hours of work** – Sets maximum hours of work per day, per week or per period, overtime compensation, rest periods and many exemptions for specific situations and industries. The various work rules and the numerous ways that they can be combined means that the work rules are very detailed and complex.

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**Paid time off work** – Sets minimum weeks of holidays or payments for holidays not taken and statutory holidays.

**Leaves** – Maternity, parental and adoption, compassionate care, sickness, family obligations responsibility, emergency, wedding or civil union, and bereavement leave. Regulations include eligibility requirements, entitlements and employment protections before and after leaves. Some leaves are paid and some are not.

**Occupational health and safety** – Worker rights with respect to being informed of hazards, worker rights to be able to participate in activities to prevent hazards and worker rights to legitimately refuse to perform dangerous work without dismissal or disciplinary action.

**Human rights and employment equity** – Prohibits discrimination on a variety of grounds including sex, marital status, family status and religious and ethnic origin.

### **What else can governments do? ... Increase family priorities**

- Governments must shift their priorities more towards protecting the rights and needs of families and family members, while still providing adequate flexibility for sound organizational effectiveness.
- Ensure that policy changes reflect the current situation of families rather than the one earner (usually male) model of many years ago. The provision of affordable day-care services for working and non-working families should be a top priority.
- Influence, motivate and lead organizations to develop programs to promote family-friendly workplaces.

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*This is the executive summary of the full report, available at <http://www.vifamily.ca>, prepared by Roger Sauv  (People Patterns Consulting) for the Vanier Institute of the Family.*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Desjardins Financial Security. "Survey shows workaholic label is losing its luster as Canadians seek more time with family." Press release April 24, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> Duxbury, Linda and Chris Higgins, *Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium — A Status Report*, Funded by Health Canada, October 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> Lowe, Graham, *Control over time and work-life balance: An empirical analysis*, prepared for the Federal Labour Standards Review Committee, November, 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada, *Workplace and Employee Survey Compendium 2001*, catalogue 71-585-XIE, October 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> André Lavoie, *Work-life balance and SMEs: Avoiding the "one-size-fits-all" trap*, CFIB, July 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Duxbury, Linda and Chris Higgins, *Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium — A Status Report*, Funded by Health Canada, October 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> Fudge, Judy, *Control over working time and work-life balance: A detailed analysis of the Canada Labour Code, Part III*, prepared for the Federal Labour Standards Review, February, 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> Duxbury, Linda and Chris Higgins, *Work-Life Conflict in Canada in the New Millennium — A Status Report*, Funded by Health Canada, October 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> Fudge, Judy, *Control over working time and work-life balance: A detailed analysis of the Canada Labour Code, Part III*, prepared for the Federal Labour Standards Review, February, 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> Based mostly on Stinson, Gay and Judith Martin, *Work-Life Balance: A report to Ministers responsible for Labour in Canada*, CAALL Ad Hoc Committee on Work-Life Balance, February 2002 AND Fudge, Judy, *Control over working time and work-life balance: A detailed analysis of the Canada Labour Code, Part III*, prepared for the Federal Labour Standards Review, February, 2006.