

Nearly half of Canadian working women would rather quit than return to the office full-time, survey finds ^[1]

Women have shouldered additional responsibilities throughout the pandemic, with many forced to move to part-time work or leave the workforce entirely, The Prosperity Project found.

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EXCERPTS

As businesses across the country issue back-to-office notices to employees, nearly half of Canadian working women say they may quit their jobs if working from home at least part of the time is not an option, a report from The Prosperity Project found.

The project, founded to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian women, surveyed 800 women across the country. It found that nearly half of those who responded transitioned to working from home during the pandemic. Of those, more than nine out of 10 said they would prefer that most or at least part of their work to be done remotely moving forward.

About 45 per cent, or approximately 360 respondents, said they would go so far as to quit if forced to work from the office full-time, while nearly two-thirds indicated they would turn down a promotion to keep working from home.

“This is very alarming data,” said Andrea Spender, CEO of The Prosperity Project, a registered charity launched in May 2020 that aims to link women and prosperity, and underscore the economic importance of gender equality.

While more than seven in 10 of those surveyed said employers were more accommodating during the pandemic, a similar proportion anticipates bosses will put the priority on in-person office work going forward. Nearly six in 10 surveyed feel they will soon have to choose between their family and their career.

“Women don’t want to choose between work and family. But this poll is showing that they may have to if at least some of this flexibility does not continue,” said Spender.

While progressive organizations are offering flexible work options, others are not, opting instead to “pull the switch” and turn things back to how they were before the pandemic, said Catherine Connelly, a Canada Research Chair and human resources and management professor at McMaster University’s DeGroote School of Business.

“That’s very unrealistic,” she said. “These flexible or hybrid work arrangements have become common enough that it’s almost a routine thing for employees to expect these days.”

Connelly believes organizations that do not offer flexible work arrangements will see employees quit and move to other jobs that offer those accommodations.

“We’ve already seen a fairly significant cultural shift in terms of what employees will accept,” she said, noting that with low unemployment rates, it’s an employee’s market. “They know that if they would like a certain arrangement, and their employer is not ready to provide that, then they can find somebody else who will.”

The survey also found the number of women working full-time has decreased noticeably, down from 70 per cent before the pandemic to 62 per cent in May 2022.

“I’m extremely concerned. We’re backsliding,” said Spender, noting the progress made before the pandemic with regards to women’s labour force participation was slow and incremental. “We’ve lost a lot of it during the pandemic.”

Many women shifted to part-time work or left the workforce entirely during the pandemic because of additional child care and elder care responsibilities, said Connelly.

And 46 per cent of the women surveyed reported that during the pandemic they have taken on more responsibilities at home.

“It’s usually the women (who step back from work), because they tend to be paid less than men in general,” said Connelly.

Andrea Gunraj, vice-president of public engagement at the Canadian Women’s Foundation, said workplace flexibility and targeted

supports for women and gender-diverse people have long been identified as tools to help build gender equity and reduce pay gaps.

She believes flexible workplace policies must cover the most vulnerable employees, noting many women work in front-line and care services, “workplaces that tend to be precarious, underpaid, and under-protected,” Gunraj said.

“They’re least likely to get support to balance work and home responsibilities, nor do they have as many hybrid work choices,” she said. “Putting them first makes things better for everyone.”

Unless new workplace policies are implemented, Spender fears the continual decline in labour force participation among women will hurt Canada’s economy.

“We need women’s full contribution and participation for Canada to prosper economically,” she said. “Employers must build a new model of work that is more inclusive” and an environment that offers flexibility for women, “with continued equal opportunity for promotion and advancement.”

Region: Canada ^[3]

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