

Work-life conflict rampant, study says [CA] ^[1]

Author: Harding, Katherine

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EXCERPTS

In a collective and urgent cry for help, the overworked and stressed-out voice of the Canadian worker has been recorded in the third installment of a massive national work-life study.

"Canadians have reached the end of their rope," said Linda Duxbury, a business professor at Ottawa's Carleton University and co-author of "Voices of Canadians: Seeking Work-Life Balance", released yesterday.

"There is a lot of frustration out there, and it doesn't seem that anyone is listening to them."

The seven-report study was commissioned by the federal government to investigate the conflicting demands of Canadians' work and family lives.

Prof. Duxbury and Chris Higgins, a business professor at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., surveyed workers at 100 major organizations in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors.

This installment, which analyzed 10,000 handwritten comments included by respondents at the end of the survey, was meant to put a "human face" on the dismal statistics surrounding the rising issue of work-life conflict, Prof. Duxbury said.

"This document puts to rest the myth that Canadians can separate their work and family lives," she added. "Our work force has changed.

"It is time for Canadian employers and governments to recognize this fact and make the necessary changes so that Canadians can lead productive and meaningful lives at both work and home."

So far, government reaction to findings from the national work-life survey has been vague and cautious. "Balancing work, family and a personal life is important to the health, well-being and economic success of Canadians. . . ." federal Labour Minister Claudette Bradshaw said in a statement yesterday. "All of us -- employers, unions and government -- have a role to play in finding solutions to these challenges."

Most of the comments in the newest report -- 65 per cent - deal with the challenges employees face balancing their work and their lives. Within this group, 41 per cent of respondents said that challenges at work are the main culprit.

People complained about heavy workloads, non-supportive managers and organizational cultures that don't support balance.

Conversely, only 4 per cent wrote positive comments about how their organizations were trying to enhance work-life balance. Respondents in the private-sector sample and those working in management and professional positions were substantially more likely to make positive comments about their organizations.

Prof. Duxbury said a troubling finding of the report was the "untypically Canadian way that people are trying to cope" with their lack of work-life balance. "People don't want to have kids, some don't want to be promoted. . . . This is not good for organizations trying to retain skilled workers."

Wrote one employee: "I do not have any children right now and I'm in my 30s. I wonder, though, how I would manage a full-time job and children. . . . How do people do this?"

Respondents who blamed their organizations for work-life conflict also complained that their employers showed little or no interest in implementing broad policies to address this as a business issue.

"Employees do not leave an organization -- they leave bad management," the study bluntly stated about this trend.

Respondents said that even when organizations claimed to care about work-life balance, they rarely practiced what they preached.

Comments often reflected the life-stage respondents have reached: Young workers complained about the lack of job security and prevalence of contract positions; older workers talked about being overworked and underappreciated.

Only 10 per cent of the respondents used the comment section to suggest recommendations for change. They ranged from people wanting their organizations to set up day care and fitness facilities to wanting policymakers to review the benefits of having society debate the

need to go back to the traditional family structure.

And just 6 per cent of those wrote about how they had achieved balance, offering strategies such as using faith to help put life into perspective, being organized, having goals or simply finding a job you enjoy.

Some wrote that people just need to suck it up and get on with their lives. "Past generations dealt with family and work too. Is our society so changed that we can't deal with life any more? More people should just step back and analyze their lives before worrying about it," one person wrote.

Prof. Duxbury said that organizations that want to make it easier for employees to balance competing demands need to focus on the behaviour of their managers, the implementation of flexible work arrangements and establishing a supportive culture.

Governments, they say, should lead the way both with legislation and with advanced policies for their own employees.

The second installment of the study, which was released last fall, found that one in four Canadians works more than 50 hours a week, compared with one in 10 a decade ago. The typical respondent was averaging 42.5 hours a week on the job. Men, especially those in managerial jobs, are bearing the brunt of the mounting workload.

Prof. Duxbury said that each study helps to educate and encourage debate and positive change. The next two studies -- scheduled to be released this year -- will deal with the economic impact of absenteeism and health problems in relation to work-life conflict.

Prof. Duxbury said she's confident that the latest installment of the report will cause a stir because of their unusual approach of building it around respondents' quotes and not just hard data.

Recommendations

The work-life balance study offers strategies and approaches for employers and governments to reduce work-life conflict.

Employers should:

- Give managers at all levels the skills and tools they need to improve their "people management" practices (eg. training in communications, conflict resolution, time management and project planning, plus appropriate policies and resources); time to manage this part of their job; incentives, such as rewards focused on recognition of good people skills. Performance of the "people" part of the job should be part of all hiring and promotion decisions.
- Provide employees with more flexibility around when and where they work. There should also be mutual accountability.
- Introduce new performance measures that focus on objectives, results and output, instead of hours.
- Create more supportive work environments by: Developing and implementing appropriate policies; making sure employees know what programs are available and are encouraged to use them; measuring the use of the programs; and rewarding those sections of the organization that demonstrate best practices in these areas.
- Give employees the right to refuse overtime work and implement time-off arrangements in lieu of overtime pay.
- Provide a limited number of paid days off for child care, elder care or personal problems.
- Make it easier for employees to transfer from full-time to part-time work and vice versa, including pro-rated benefits for part-time work, guaranteed return to full-time status and maintaining seniority ranking and service.
- Examine workloads. If some employees are consistently spending long hours at work (50+ hours per week) employers need to determine why this is occurring and how workloads can be made more reasonable.

Governments should:

- Become best-practice employers in work-life balance by introducing appropriate policies and enacting forward-thinking legislation.
- Implement a national child-care program that addresses the needs of children of all ages.
- Develop and implement a national elder-care program.
- Ensure that labour legislation include specific language around long-term unpaid leave for the care of a parent.
- Make it financially easier for family members who wish to stay home to care for their children or elderly dependents. Options include tax credits or changes to the minimum wage.
- Ensure public policy reflects changes in longevity, divorce, remarriage and non-traditional family structures.

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