

Workers' priorities changing after Sept. 11 [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Ronald Babin used to see himself as a road warrior. A technology consultant in Toronto, he averaged about four days out of five on the road.

Then came Sept. 11. Mr. Babin was at a meeting in Washington.

"It took me about two weeks to realize, geez, if that plane had gone a little further, I might not be talking to you now."

Since then, Mr. Babin, who works for Accenture, has tried to ditch his constant traveller image, although he still spends about half his time on the road.

But like others in his office, he is holding a lot more conference calls and video conferences and he's trying to make it home to catch a few more music practices.

"It's not huge events, it's the series of little events that are important to share as a family," he explained above the sound of drums in the background one recent evening.

Since September, Mr. Babin said he feels there has been a lot of understanding among co-workers for views like that.

Several experts who study the area of work and family say they are witnessing the same thing. It is, they say, as if the horrific events in Washington, New York and Pennsylvania have left many workers willing to say enough is enough.

"One impact of the September tragedy is that it has gotten people thinking about their families . . . about what's important to them," said Donna Lero, a professor of child and family studies at the University of Guelph. "You start to think about how much of your life you want to have driven by work and by work demands."

Recently, Ms. Lero and Karen Johnson, who works for the Women's Bureau at Human Resources and Development Canada, released a report that pulls together a wide body of national research to document just how difficult the struggle has become for Canadians to balance their work and personal obligations.

(The report -- *Work-Life Compendium 2001*, 150 Canadian Statistics on Work, Family & Well-Being -- is available at <http://www.uoguelph.ca/cfww> ^[2]. Click on "What's New" on the home page.)

"You need to take a step back and realize how much has been going on, particularly in the last 10 years. Change is coming from many different places, but we are experiencing it all at once," said Ms. Lero, who is also co-director of the University of Guelph's Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being.

During the past decade, Ms. Lero said the growing tension between work and home has taken its toll, with research showing higher levels of stress among workers, more absences caused by work-life conflicts, as well as reduced productivity and lower morale.

That alone, many say, should have been enough to cause employers to act and support their staff in meeting all their responsibilities -- at home as well as on the job.

These days, firms may not feel they have a choice, said Nora Spinks, a Toronto-based consultant.

"We are getting a lot of calls. Companies are no longer asking why should we do this, they are asking how," said Ms. Spinks, whose firm Work-Life Harmony Enterprises helps organizations bring more balance to their employees' lives.

"What we are experiencing post-Sept. 11 is masses of the work force going through a realignment of their priorities," Ms. Spinks said.

Linda Duxbury, a professor at Carleton University and one of the country's leading researchers on work-life issues, says it's about time.

Ms. Duxbury will soon release a study on workers' struggles to meet the needs of their personal lives and jobs, and she said it will contain "some pretty scary stuff."

"Organizations have been demanding more and employees have been giving more," she said.

Ms. Duxbury believes the attacks were a turning point for many, such as Mr. Babin at Accenture.

"It's going to change things," she predicted. "What is the first thing people did? Did they start working harder? I went home early and picked up my daughter. I think that was a common response."

Ms. Lero said this new questioning comes as the workplace is facing change from many sources.

The Lero-Johnson report provides a snapshot of many of those changes and is a follow-up to a similar work done in 1994.

It highlights, for example, demographic shifts such as an aging population and the increase in single-parent families that have added to workplace stress. At the same time, Ms. Lero said, changes in the economy have increased competitive pressures at companies, technology has altered how and where work gets done and there has been a rise in the use of non-standard work arrangements.

"Increasingly, this is an area that we have to address through both public policies and workplace practices," she said. "Leaving it to individuals to just sink or swim is very costly and doesn't work."

Even before Sept. 11, some experts point out, maintaining a balance between work and life was a top priority for many employees.

Claudine Kapel, a human resources consultant at Towers Perrin in Toronto, said in a poll this spring of 6,000 workers, 800 of them in Canada, work-life balance was singled out as the No. 1 reason for sticking with a job.

It is a message that employers need to hear, experts say -- especially now. Although many firms are cutting staff, Ms. Lero said they should not be cutting employee support programs.

"Sometimes when companies are cutting, they will think this work-life stuff is a frill," she said. "When there is stress and turbulence in the work force, it is not the time to cut back on the things that make a difference in terms of people feeling supported in their work."

- reprinted from The Globe and Mail.

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