

Men's and Women's Quality of Work in the New Canadian Economy

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Despite much debate and commentary on the emerging knowledge economy in Canada and other industrialized countries, there has been little in-depth analysis of how gender issues are playing out in the process of economic and workplace change. Women's experiences on the job are usually examined using a limited range of measures, and scant attention has been paid to the expectations that women and men bring to the workplace. The purpose of this report is to provide new evidence on what women and men want in a job, and how they are experiencing the transition to a knowledge-based economy.

On many measures, there is evidence of growing convergence in the labour market characteristics of Canadian women and men. Whether we consider labour force participation rates, earnings, access to knowledge occupations, or union representation, women and men's working experiences seem to be becoming more alike. But there are important exceptions to this, most notably the persistent segregation of women and men into different occupations and the much higher rates of part-time work for women. Overall, convergence is most evident amongst highly educated workers – especially those with university degrees.

However such convergence is only half the story. Our research shows that, in many respects, women and men have different expectations and assessments of their jobs, and that these differences are most apparent among women and men with higher levels of education. These findings add an important element to the discussion of how the working lives of women and men are being transformed in the knowledge economy.

Before considering these gender differences in job expectations and assessments, it is important to highlight one aspect of work that is highly valued by both women and men, regardless of education – the desire for interesting work.

Most women and men express a desire for interesting work and a sense of accomplishment. People want to feel engaged in what they are doing. This is evidenced by the fact that about 70 to 75 percent of women and men across education levels rank interesting work as a very important job characteristic. However, one in seven employees (14 percent) says that their job is less interesting and engaging than they would like, with employees with high school or less more likely to report this type of 'job quality deficit' than employees with a university degree. This 'job quality deficit' has significant consequences for employers. For example, fully one-half of workers with such a deficit looked for a job with another employer in the previous year. Workplace strategies, such as job rotation or task diversity, are one way to address the negative aspects of repetitive or monotonous work.

Other expectations of job quality vary more widely across levels of educational attainment, and it is useful to segment the labour force into two groups – individuals with post-secondary education and those without.

Expectations and Job Characteristics of People without Post-secondary Education

Women and men with high school or less place a greater priority on job security, pay and benefits than individuals with higher levels of educational attainment (especially university degrees). For example, men with high school or less are almost twice as likely as men with university degrees to rate job security as a ‘very important’ job characteristic. Clearly, they are uncertain about their prospects for re-employment in the wake of a job loss, and are sensitive to issues of pay and benefits given the relatively small pool of good jobs available to them. For many employees with high school or less, their job falls short of their expectations on pay, benefits and security. Indeed, one-third of men and almost 40 percent of women have a ‘job quality deficit’ in this area.

For employers who rely on a low-wage, high turnover employment strategy, such dissatisfaction is unlikely to be a concern. But for those who rely on high school graduates for at least a portion of their core workforce, pay, benefits and security are important considerations in recruitment and retention strategies. These bread and butter issues are also closely associated with the willingness of employees to join a union.

Employees with high school or less – especially women – also place a high value on communication and collegial relations in the workplace. For example, 82 percent of female employees and 71 percent of males with high school or less say that good communication in the workplace is ‘very important’ to them. However, for about 15 percent of women and men, the quality of communication in their workplace falls short of their expectations. Again, this has important implications for employers, as the vast majority of employees with a job quality deficit in this area report that morale in their workplace is low. One obvious implication is that employers struggling to improve morale in the workplace would be well advised to improve channels of communication.

Employees with high school or less also experience ‘job quality deficits’ in other key areas. For example, about 35 to 40 percent of these employees report that their jobs provide less flexibility to balance work and family than they would prefer, and just over 25 percent report that the level of trust and commitment they experience in the workplace is less than they would prefer. Among men and women with high school or less, gender differences on these measures are negligible. For employers, these job quality deficits have significant consequences, as they are positively correlated with intentions of job turnover, willingness to join a union, low morale and absenteeism.

Expectations and Job Characteristics of People with Post-secondary Education

While the labour market characteristics of female and male university graduates are converging on many measures, our evidence shows that job expectations and assessments differ most within this educational category. In short, the new economy looks very different to female and male knowledge workers.

Among university graduates, female employees are far more likely than their male counterparts to place a high value on respect, commitment, communications and workplace relations. The shares of female graduates ranking these job characteristics as ‘very important’ are about 18 percentage points higher than male graduates. The importance that women attach to commitment and workplace relations suggests a desire for stable employment relationships, which calls into question the notion of employees as foot-loose ‘free agents’. In contrast, university educated men seem to place far less value on these softer aspects of work life, and may be the one group that fits the ‘free agent’ image of a knowledge worker.

While university-educated women have high expectations regarding people-supportive workplace practices, these expectations are not being met. For example, one-third of female graduates have a job quality deficit in the area of work-family balance and flexibility, one-quarter have a job quality deficits in both commitment and respect, and pay, benefits and security, while one-in-seven have a job quality deficit in the area of communication. These deficit rates are higher than those reported by men, indicating that female knowledge workers are more likely to experience frustration in finding employment that meets their expectations.

Impacts of Information Technologies

Information technologies are an important element in the transformation of Canadian workplaces. Over one-half of employed Canadians are now moderate or high intensity users of computers in the workplace. These people work in a fairly wide range of occupational and educational categories – about one-third of high intensity computer users are located in professional occupations, while one-fifth are in clerical jobs. Women account for 42 percent of high-intensity computer users and 51 percent of moderate intensity users. About half of high intensity computer users have a university degree, and one quarter have high school or less. High intensity use of computers in the workplace brings with it both positive and negative outcomes, with women expressing most concerns about the negatives.

On the positive side, high technology use is associated with interesting work. It appears to enhance the interest and challenge of work for both women and men, and to be associated with greater utilization of employees’ skills on the job. Intensive use of technology is generally viewed as having a neutral or positive effect on job security for men but less so for women.

On the negative side, high intensity computer use is linked to longer work hours, more intensified job demands, and spillover of work into the home. Bearing in mind that many Canadians already experience high levels of work-family conflict and the associated organizational and economic costs, it would seem prudent for employers to ensure that new technologies are not adding to such problems. The challenge is to use technology to reduce workloads and increase flexibility and choice in their work lives.

Overall, our analysis shows striking changes in the labour market role of educated women, but little change in the role of women with high school or less. A more technology-driven, knowledge-based economy brings new opportunities for women in managerial and professional occupations, but we see the same concentrations of women with high school or less in the

traditional sales, service, and clerical occupations. Thus, the growth of knowledge work and the information technology revolution have been levelers for some, but not for all.

But this is only half the story. Work experiences in knowledge sectors of the economy look very different to women than to men. Most notably, men are more likely than women to be intensive IT users, and men also come out ahead when it comes to positive benefits of IT on job security. Thus, the new economy appears so far to be a gendered economy. Women are not excluded, but their experiences are less positive than for men.

What is important for employers to consider in the years ahead, as skill shortages emerge, is that the key to retention and recruitment often lies in the quality of the work experience. In this context, differences in the expectations and values of women and men are an important consideration.

Overall, job quality has a direct and significant impact on job turnover, morale, and willingness to join a unit. Understanding and responding to the expectations of employees will therefore make a real difference to the bottom line in the 21st century labour market.