

Landry looks at slowdown for fast-lane family life



Graham Fraser

OTTAWA—In many offices, there are two deadlines at the end of the day.

There is the deadline for work, when the usually loquacious and relaxed become terse and intense. But there is an earlier one, more demanding, stressful and exacting. That is the time that parents of young children have to finish in order to get to the daycare centre, or to relieve the caregiver.

By the end of the afternoon, the air is crackling with the electric energy of parents frantically scrambling to finish, get out of the office, and arrive in time to

be simultaneously caregiver-grateful and child-cheerful — while juggling cell phones, papers and plastic dinosaurs.

A recent study by Linda Duxbury of Carleton University and Chris Higgins of the University of Western Ontario for the Canadian Policy Research Network makes it clear that the sense that this tension between work and family is increasing is not just anecdotal.

It really is tougher now than it was a decade ago. Almost 60 per cent of those surveyed by Duxbury and Higgins in 2001 felt they were suffering from “high overload” — as compared to less than 50 per cent in 1991.

It's not surprising: in 1991, laptops were still relatively crude and expensive, e-mail barely existed outside the scientific community, and cell phones were still bulky, inconvenient and rare.

The technologies that now

make it almost impossible to close the office door all existed — but their collective grip was not as tight as it is now.

In addition, as Duxbury and Higgins put it, there are “organizational norms that still reward long hours at the office rather than performance.”

This has extraordinary impact on everything from medication for stress-related ailments to burn-out, from job efficiency to productivity: a substantial cost to employers. And the overload comes from work, not family. The time employees spend in family activities has dropped from 16 hours a week to less than 11 hours a week.

Duxbury and Higgins found that work-life balance problems do not just apply to employed parents or working mothers.

“Rather, it would appear from our data that the trend to greater role overload, higher family to work interference, poorer men-

tal health, greater dissatisfaction with work and reduced loyalty to one's organization is characteristic of all Canadian employees, regardless of their gender or their parental status,” they wrote.

Bernard Landry has proposed one of the first political responses to this problem in Canada.

If he is re-elected as Premier of Quebec, he told a Parti Québécois meeting last weekend, he will introduce legislation to make it possible for parents of children under 12 to work a four-day week. And Quebec will increase the mandatory annual holiday from two weeks to three weeks over three years.

Landry's officials calculate that there are 600,000 families in Quebec, and that 100,000 might take advantage of the four-day week.

People would have to take a pay cut to do it, but employers would be required to maintain

benefits — estimated at a cost of \$100 million. But Quebec recently cut taxes on capital by \$1 billion — so employers would come out ahead of the game.

There are still wrinkles. It is hard to see how a Grade 4 teacher could teach only four days a week, and as one parent pointed out last week, the four-day week, like the \$5-a-day day-care system in Quebec, does nothing for families where one parent stays home. But the idea is intriguing.

Ironically, three days later, Quebec Treasury Board President Joseph Facal announced that he would be leaving elected politics, because he wants more time with his family.

It is easy to be cynical when departing politicians or executives say this. Facal has been odd man out in the PQ cabinet, widely criticized for calling for a rethinking of the “Quebec model” and the PQ commitment to

state intervention.

Had he not been slapped down a couple of times last year, had he believed the PQ would be re-elected, had he thought a referendum on sovereignty would be fought and could be won, who knows? He might have felt the sacrifice was worth it.

But it was impossible not to feel a twinge of sympathy when he described tip-toeing out of a dark house before his children, aged 4 and 20 months, were awake — and returning at the end of the week, after they were in bed.

Facal has been living the life that Duxbury and Higgins described: overload, work dissatisfaction, and reduced loyalty to his organization. He is not alone; increasingly, that's life in the working world. Landry, at least, is trying to do something about it.

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