

The gender gap

Women's frustrations should ring alarm bells

DO you know what day it is today? March 8 is International Women's Day. "Yah, sooo..." you might say. Other rapid-fire comments I've heard include "What do we need that for?" or "Women are already getting all the jobs!" Well, let's stop right there and take a good objective view of things.

International Women's Day, part of Women's History month, has been celebrated in one form or another for more than 90 years and has a very rich history. Initially started as a women's rights and peace movement, the UN soon endorsed and sponsored it as a means to raise the issue of cruelty to women in Third World countries.

In the 1970s, particularly in the U.S. and Canada, the movement gradually began focusing more on barriers to the division of labour and women's success in the workplace. As one might expect, change didn't come easily. Soon these noble efforts were attributed to radical feminist politics and were thus dubbed the "women's liberation movement." Unfortunately this negative labelling created a confrontational "we versus them" approach rather than understanding the value of working together to create a better workplace and a better world.

But the women's movement has endured and can be proud of its input into many social change accomplishments. Today for instance, a young mother doesn't have to resign her job when she has her baby; she can take a combination of paid and unpaid maternity leave for up to one year. Fathers wanting a parenting role can take leave as well.

How many of our readers are using



**Working
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Barbara Bowes

flex time, part time or telecommuting as a way to keep connected with home, family and work? Just a very short time ago, this privilege was simply not available. What about pension contributions, marriage property rights, access to education, the ability to engage in any occupation of choice, equal pay for work of equal value and equal opportunity for all?

Unfortunately, people are quickly taking these benefits for granted and many probably don't realize most of these initiatives were spearheaded by women's groups. Today in many cases, women's groups are not as aggressive as they once were; instead women are becoming part of the mainstream political process.

So, where do we stand today? Is there disparity between women's and men's work experiences? Does the so-called "glass ceiling" still exist? How do female knowledge workers look at the new economy compared to their male counterparts?

According to a newly released Canadian report, traditional measures such as access to jobs and equitable wages suggest some progress has been made in closing the gender gap and there are indeed areas where the experiences of men and women are now coinciding.

However, women with higher educa-

tion and higher-end "knowledge" jobs appear to experience significantly more job quality deficits than their university-educated male counterparts. In fact, female survey participants stated they were experiencing considerable frustration in finding a job that met their expectations.

These employee frustration and quality of work issues should raise alarm bells in the heart of any business owner. Just look over your shoulder and count the number of baby boomers lining up for retirement. What are you doing about employee recruitment, retention, training and succession planning? Are you able to survive the skills gaps that'll be created in the very near future?

Here are some of the strategies you might use to ensure your company's skills foundation is maintained and nurtured.

Examine internal stereotyping: Look around you; do an audit. Is there a bias, conscious or unconscious in how you recruit and promote people, particularly women? Are you only hiring employees that look like you?

Reach out: Create a multicultural and diverse workforce by reaching out to different communities. Go beyond your usual professional network. Seek out people with a variety of opinions and viewpoints. Going forward, employee diversity will help to solidify your role in a global economy.

Initiate comprehensive training: Set up a system where professional development can occur through mentoring, coaching, developmental assignments and both technical and soft skills training. Make sure you have female candidates in the "pipeline" and be careful not to limit these individuals to traditionally female jobs.

Family-friendly policies: If you don't already have flex time, part time or job-sharing, check out these strategies as one way to attract and retain female workers. Remember, family friendly policies benefit everyone.

Ask Barbara

Got a problem at work with your boss or a fellow employee? Concerned some of your employees aren't pulling their weight? Free Press careers columnist Barbara Bowes is willing to help with some of the more straightforward problems that may arise in the workplace. On the last Saturday of every month, Barbara will answer some of the questions submitted by Free Press readers. E-mail questions to business@freepress.mb.ca (enter Ask Barbara in the subject line) or fax questions to 697-7412. Please provide name, address and phone number for confirmation purposes. Pseudonyms may be used for publication to protect author's identity.

Continued
Please See **GAP F5**

Gap

continued from Page F1

Gender neutral pay structure: Many companies would quickly say they already have a gender neutral pay structure. However, it's been found that 25 per cent of women receive lower pay, benefits and security than male counterparts.

Increase communication: One in seven female study participants indicated dissatisfaction with communication in the workplace. If you want employees to support your goals, then communicate your passion and develop ongoing commitment through frequent com-

munication.

Reduce hierarchy: High productivity workers, particularly those with a university education, want an opportunity to work independently. Hire your employees and then let them do their work.

Ensure high commitment: There is nothing worse than mouthing the words, but not living up to your commitment and 25 per cent of women feel that commitment and respect is currently falling far short of expectations.

If we look back over the years, we can easily see that we've come a long way in creating high productivity and family-friendly workplaces for women employees. While there's still work to be done, the greatest thing of all

is that there is a benefit to everyone.

Source: Men's and Women's Quality of Work in the New Canadian Economy, Karen Hughes, Graham Lowe and Grant Schellenberg, Canadian Policy Research Network, Feb. 21, 2003; Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital, Motion Magazine, Oct. 1996.

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