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Job Quality and Competitiveness: How Canada Stacks Up

Ottawa – A pioneering comparison of Canadian workplaces with those in 16 other industrialized countries finds the country compares well with its main trading partner, the United States, but lags behind some European countries in key respects.

How Canada Stacks Up: The Quality of Work – An International Perspective, by Richard Brisbois, published today by CPRN's Work Network, compares workplaces in Canada, the U.S. and the member nations of the European Union, in terms of four dimensions of job quality: work/life balance; health and well-being; skills development; and career and employment security. An additional indicator on overall satisfaction with working conditions is presented separately.

Previous CPRN research has shown that job quality is an important contributor to a number of important outcomes, from lower absenteeism and higher morale to improved productivity.

“It's clear that raising the quality of workplaces can be a vital ingredient in a country's competitiveness strategy,” says Ron Saunders, Director of the Work Network. “In an age when both capital and skilled workers are highly mobile, we ignore this aspect of competitiveness at our peril.”

So how does Canada compare? Canada does better than average on most of the indicators of job quality based on the data available, with one notable exception – Canadian (and American) workers feel distinctly less safe in their workplaces.

Some of the key observations from the cross-country comparisons:

- On work/life balance – Canadians work longer than average hours, but work average amounts of overtime and are happier than average with the fit between work and family life (almost 45% report a good fit, versus the 17 country average of almost 38%).
- On health and well-being – Canadian workers ranked fourth in terms of concern for health and safety on the job (almost 32% express concern, compared to an average of 28% across all 17 countries), and first in reporting working at high speed “all the time”.
- On skills development – Canadian workers report the fourth highest computer use at work (almost 61%, versus the 17 country average of 52%), are second most likely to feel overqualified for their jobs and fourth most likely to receive employer-sponsored training.

- On career and employment security – while the incidence of temporary employment in Canada is close to the mean of the 17 countries, Canada has the third highest rate of involuntary part-time employment.
- On job satisfaction – Canadian workers express an above average level of satisfaction with their working conditions (40% versus the 17 country average of 33%).

“Some of the reasons for these differences are cultural, some institutional and some due to regulation, but others likely reflect differences in priority given to job quality issues by both governments and employers,” says Brisbois. “We need more research on specific indicators and, indeed many more comparable indicators, before we can reach definitive conclusions.”

Much more comprehensive data have been collected and analyzed for European countries for a number of years, and the paper calls on the Canadian government to collect and publish a similar range of data.

“Without additional data, we are not in a position to assess our relative standing on job quality, nor measure the success of initiatives to improve the quality of the Canadian workplace,” Brisbois says.

Nevertheless, the paper flags some areas of concern for Canada in a competitive global marketplace. The poor standing of Canada in terms of health and well-being relative to many European countries is one. The fact that Canadian workers express a lower level of satisfaction with their jobs than do their American counterparts is another.

“These differences amount to warning signals in an ever more competitive world,” says Saunders. “They also reflect quality of life concerns. Job quality is not simply an economic goal, but an important determinant of well-being.”

Note: Data from this study are also available at CPRN’s special Web site on national job quality: www.jobquality.ca, a leading source of information on the state of Canada’s workplaces.

- 30 -

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Richard Brisbois, Researcher, Tel: (613) 567-7485 – E-mail: rbrisbois@cprn.org

Ron Saunders, Director, The Work Network, Tel: (416) 932-0318 – E-mail: rsaunders@cprn.org

Peter Puxley, Director, Public Affairs, Tel: (613) 567-6665 – E-mail: ppuxley@cprn.org

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