
Backgrounder:

Changing Employment Relationships: Implications for Workers, Employers and Public Policy

A new research project by Canadian Policy Research Networks

Two decades of breathtaking economic change in Canada have transformed labour markets and workplaces. Researchers have documented many of these new work and labour market trends: rising non-standard work, the widening gap between ‘good jobs’ and ‘bad jobs’, the reform of income support programs, the information technology revolution, and economic globalization. Yet, we still know little about the impact of economic change on *the employment relationships* that underlie these work structures.

The structural change that has occurred in working arrangements over the 1990s has major implications for employment relationships. The objective of this project is to ‘map’ the labour market from the perspective of employment relationships, using the following dimensions: trust, commitment and loyalty, fairness and respect, obligations and responsibilities, control and decision making, independence / dependence, economic and psychological security, cooperation, integration, participation, communication, and legal attachment and rights.

Consistent with CPRN’s commitment to furthering constructive public policy debates, this project will help workers, employers, governments, unions and other labour market stakeholders respond to the challenges posed by changing employment relationships. Employers’ concerns about changing employment relationships include the challenges these pose for skill development, recruitment and retention, loyalty and commitment, staffing flexibility and organizational effectiveness. Unions are grappling with how to adapt collective bargaining and organizing strategies to new employment relationships embodied in outsourcing, temporary and contract work, and teleworking. Workers and their families are concerned about economic security and job quality. In policy terms, the provision of public goods such as income support and education and training is based on assumptions about the kind of employment relations that characterize an individual’s work life.

Four research and policy questions guide the project:

1. Do different dimensions of employment relationships form identifiable clusters and which labour market, workplace, and socio-demographic characteristics define each cluster?
2. Do current employment relationships meet the expectations and needs of workers, contributing to the overall quality of work life?
3. Do employment relationships influence productivity-related behaviour and attitudes (e.g., work effort, absenteeism, training, skill use, participation in decision making, loyalty)?
4. What are the major public policy implications of this mapping of employment relationships?

The project has seven components:

1. A *Roundtable* in February 1999 brought together 25-30 leading researchers, policy experts and representatives from a range of stakeholder groups to frame a comprehensive set of policy issues to inform the project's research. Two smaller Roundtables were also held in Edmonton and Toronto.
2. A Discussion Paper, *Re-Thinking Employment Relationships* (October 1999) explores the significance of employment relationships sets out the analytic tools needed to understand them.
3. A Study, *Gender and Self-employment in Canada: Assessing Trends and Policy Implications* by Karen Hughes (October 1999), provides an in-depth examination of trends in self-employment.
4. Two integrated *empirical studies* (a national survey and a series of focus groups) are designed to investigate the experiences, attitudes and responses of workers regarding their employment relationships.
5. A *Roundtable*, co-sponsored by the Institute for Work and Health, is planned for spring 2000 to solicit input from project stakeholders on the implications of the findings for workers, employers, and public policy.
6. A short *Synthesis Report* (spring, 2000) will summarize the findings of the survey, focus groups and Roundtable input, outlining implications for workers, employers, and public policy.
7. A brief *Highlights* report will facilitate communications and dissemination of results through the media, Internet, and CPRN networks.

The project team comprises Graham Lowe, Project Director, who is Director of the Work Network at CPRN and Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta; Judith Maxwell, President of CPRN; Kathryn McMullen, Network Leader with CPRN's Work Network; Katie Davidman, Project Manager for CER and Researcher with the Work Network; and Grant Schellenberg, DataQuest.

Sponsors of the project include Canfor, Noranda, Syncrude, Human Resources Development Canada, Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Canadian Labour Congress, Treasury Board Secretariat, Parks Canada and The Law Commission of Canada. Partners to date in this research program are the Institute for Work & Health, Dataquest, the Ontario Federation of Labour and Ekos Research Associates.