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Work in the Nonprofit Sector: The Knowledge Gap

Ottawa – The profile, role, and expectations of the nonprofit sector have reached new heights in recent years, yet we know very little about the impact this development has had on the world of work in the sector. Does the sector have the human resources capacity to accommodate these new demands? What do they mean for the million-plus Canadians working in the sector? The purpose of this article is to raise the key questions that are emerging about work in the nonprofit sector, to highlight the gaps in current knowledge, and to identify steps for further research in this area.

Interest in the nonprofit sector has been increasing, in part, because of the recognition by governments and others of the role it can play in three important areas of society. One is the potential that it has to play an even greater role as a *builder of social capital* or social cohesion so as to foster a more vibrant democracy, economy, and society (Putnam, 1993; Maxwell, 1997). Another vision for the nonprofit sector is that it will play an expanded role in *job creation and the development of the labour force* (Rifkin, 1995). Several provinces have developed programs with these aims. Finally, there has been increasing attention to the role that the sector can play in *delivering public services*, as governments look to alternative forms of service delivery in an effort to increase cost efficiencies.

What remains unclear is the implications of these expanded roles for employment and human resources in the sector. Two major questions arise:

- First, does the nonprofit sector have the human resources capacity (e.g., the skills, expertise, human and financial resources, management practices, leadership, and training programs), that will be necessary to meet such increased responsibilities?
- Second, is the right policy framework (e.g., occupational, training and labour standards), in place to support attractive career opportunities and satisfying working lives for people employed in the nonprofit sector — both on a career basis and on short-term work contracts?

We begin by examining the kind of information needed if we are to be able to answer these questions, after which we will review the available information. In light of the knowledge gap revealed, we spend the final two sections indicating steps towards the advancement of research on work in the nonprofit sector. The first of two steps involves definition and classification work, which we believe is a necessary prerequisite to the second step, the generation of new data.

Contents

What we need to know about human resource issues in the nonprofit sector

A profile of human resources in the nonprofit sector

The nonprofit sector and human resources requirements

The integration of a paid and unpaid workforce

The nonprofit sector as a forum for job creation and labour force development

Mobility among the sectors

Work culture

Information that is currently available on human resources issues in the nonprofit sector

Where should we go from here?

1. Define and Classify the Nonprofit Sector for Labour Market Research Purposes

The nonprofit sector and its boundary with the public sector: hospitals and universities

Along the border with the private sector: co-operatives/credit unions

Unpaid activities: household or nonprofit?

Classification

2. Develop Nonprofit Sector Labour Market Data-Collection Capabilities

(a) Exploit existing databases at Statistics Canada

(b) Creating a new survey of the nonprofit sector

Who should be surveyed?

How could response be encouraged?

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