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The Changing Face of the Public Service

Ottawa – After a decade of downsizing, Canadian public servants are doing different work with different skills. The federal and provincial public services have become more specialized, older and employ more women, according to a new study by the Canadian Policy Research Networks.

An Era of Change: Government Employment Trends in the 1980s and 1990s, by Joseph Peters, is the first in a series of reports from the Human Resources in Government Project. It represents the first detailed, comparative picture of the size, function and nature of federal and provincial public services. “This study brings together a variety of Statistics Canada sources, as well as administrative data from five governments - the federal government, Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Ontario,” says researcher Joseph Peters. “By combining these sources, we get a unique multifaceted look at public sector employments trends. We are able to compare details like employment equity and occupational structure. We see that all governments have changed, and that there has been consistency in the trends to more information workers, professionals and administrators, and fewer staff in clerical occupations.”

The study shows that the size of the public service reached its peak in 1991. As a percentage of the labour force, it reached its peak in 1983, when 51 out of every 1,000 working Canadians were employed by the federal or provincial governments. By 1997, that number had shrunk to 36 out of every 1,000 working Canadians. The 1996 Census was the first in this century to show a decline in public service employment. With downsizing and hiring freezes, the provincial government workforce shrank, by 22.5% and the federal workforce by 14.6%. This represents a decline of 62,000 and 43,800 positions respectively.

Reductions in clerical occupations account for 94% of federal government downsizing and 32% provincially. This translates into 41,600 jobs federally and 13,300 at the provincial level. While the clerical workforce was shrinking, the number of managerial and administrative positions - such as auditors, human resources professionals and accountants - has been increasing. Management and administrative occupations now make up more than 33% of the federal and provincial workforces.

The public service workforce has achieved almost equal representation of men and women, a development that could be attributed to two factors: The hiring policies of the 1980s were aimed at addressing the gender imbalance, and the majority of the older workers leaving the employ of the government has been male. Since 1976, participation by women in the federal public service has increased to 47% from only 35%. At the provincial level, women now outnumber men, at 51% of the workforce, compared to 39% in 1976. The kind of work women do also has been changing. In the federal public service, representation by women at the executive level has more than doubled, from 9.6% in 1987 to 23.3% a decade later.

Federally, union membership has increased from roughly 82% in 1987, to approximately 87% today. This reflects the fact that, though they represent only 18.6% of the federal workforce, non-union members accounted for 44.5% of workforce reductions between 1991 and 1997. Provincially, cutbacks have had little or no effect on the percentage of the workforce that is unionized, with the lowest union representation among the four provinces surveyed being Nova Scotia at 61.4%, and the highest 91.9% in Manitoba.

When the definition of public service is broadened beyond the narrow administrative core of government, the most striking reductions show up in the delivery of some key services. When the definition of provincial government is expanded to include health, education and social services, health represents 73.4% of the workforce reductions between 1991 and 1996, or 53,027 jobs. Broadening the definition of federal government to include the military, 68.5% of the cutbacks - 40,714 positions - are in protection of people and property, which also include policing, firefighting, and occupations related to corrections, rehabilitation and law courts.

Hiring freezes have drastically reduced the number of young people entering the public service. The median age of the provincial and federal public service is approximately four years higher than that of the Canadian workforce as a whole. Employees under the age of 25 account for less than 2% of the workforce in four of the five jurisdictions studied. At the same time, downsizing has led to the departure of many workers aged 55 and up. With the lower and higher ends of the age demographic lopped off, there is a concentration of employees in the 45-54 age group, which now makes up 30% of government workforces.

“As governments come out of a period of downsizing and face an impending wave of retirements, they are faced with significant challenges in the areas of renewal, rejuvenation and recruitment,” says Canadian Policy Research Networks President Judith Maxwell. “This means they will need to redefine their human resources policies. The new applied knowledge generated by this project will inform discussions about renewal.”

Future publications of the Human Resources in Government initiative will focus on labour-management relations, compensation, workplace changes and renewal scenarios.

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