New Data Show Increasing Conflict Between Work and Rest of Life

October 23, 2001 – Work/life conflict has increased markedly among Canadian workers over the past ten years.

That conflict shows up as,

- *increased workload and hours of work* – the average employee surveyed spent 42 hours a week in paid employment in 1991, 45 hours in 2001
- *more stress* – high stress on the job is twice as prevalent today as ten years ago
- *declining physical and mental health* – more visits to the doctor, more cases of depression
- *increased absenteeism* – employees experiencing high work/life conflict have absenteeism rates three times those of employees with low work/life conflict
- *lower job satisfaction* – 62% were highly satisfied with their jobs in 1991, compared to only 45% in 2001
- *lower commitment to employers* – 66% highly committed to their organization in 1991, only 50% in 2001

These are findings of a new CPRN study by Linda Duxbury of Carleton University's School of Business and Chris Higgins of the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario. ***Work-Life Balance in the New Millennium: Where Are We? Where Do We Need to Go?*** is based on data from two major national surveys, one in 1990-92 and the other in 2000-01. Health Canada funded both surveys and will publish full details of the most recent later this year.

The study shows a growing proportion of the workforce is having difficulty balancing the competing roles of employee, parent, spouse and eldercare giver.

Why should we care?

"Our data demonstrate that the inability to balance work and family life is everyone's problem," says Duxbury. "It hurts the employer, the employee, the employee's colleagues, the employee's family and Canadian society as a whole."

Reduced productivity, absenteeism, turnover, lower commitment and lower morale all affect the employer's bottom line. As for the employee, work/life conflict can lead to marital strife, reduced family and life satisfaction and a host of physical and mental problems.

…/2

The economic costs are significant. For example, the authors estimate absenteeism resulting from work/life conflict costs Canadian firms almost $3 billion a year. Such conflict also results in extra visits to the doctor, adding $425 million annually to the cost of health care, not to mention more hospital stays, more medical tests, more demands on other practitioners and more prescription drugs.

There are signs that demographic change, a more competitive labour market and the changing expectations of workers themselves are motivating some employers to take work/life balance seriously. But not enough.

“While the number of employers who talk about work/life balance has increased, concrete changes have been slow to materialize,” says Duxbury. “And employers are the key to change.”

The paper recommends that employers,

- be more flexible on work hours and work location,
- increase employees’ sense of control over their work,
- increase the number of supportive managers, and
- focus on creating more family-friendly work environments.

Among their recommendations to government, the authors argue for legislation protecting an employee’s right to refuse overtime, take time off in lieu of overtime pay and entitling employees to up to five days paid personal leave per year. They also suggest that the federal government become a model employer in this area, take the lead in establishing national childcare and eldercare programs in conjunction with the provinces, and strive to find ways to “make work pay”.

You can access or download a copy of the document by clicking here.

e-network e-network work e-network e-net