Making Government the Employer of Choice: A Recipe

February 5, 2001 – Canada's governments want to become "employers of choice". After more than a decade of public sector upheaval, a new phase of reform is underway.

Workforce renewal is the challenge.

But the context has changed. To attract and keep the best and the brightest, governments need new strategies to make the public sector workplace stand out in a much more competitive job market.

Graham Lowe, Director of CPRN's Work Network, is convinced the right response can serve two goals – a higher quality work experience for public employees, and more efficient and effective service to the public.

Lowe outlines his road map for renewal in ***Employer of Choice? Workplace Innovation in Government***, a CPRN synthesis report, published today. The report is the culmination of the Human Resources in Government Project, which examines the impact of downsizing and restructuring during the 1990s of the public service in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia and the federal government.

The key to Lowe's recipe is a "bundle" of human resource and work organization practices he calls workplace innovation:

- functional flexibility (job enrichment, job enlargement, multi-skilling/job rotation, self-directed work teams),
- flexible schedules,
- training,
- formal participation programs, and
- information sharing.

"In fact, we found that innovative workplace practices are progressing at an impressive pace in government as compared to the private sector," Lowe says. "Better than one in four of the work units we surveyed scored high on a majority of these practices. It's a great start, but there's a long way to go."

Governments can contribute to innovation, Lowe argues, if they;

- document the impact of organizational change,
- share information about flexible practices,
- decentralize authority for workplace change,
- remove barriers to innovation, and
- encourage union-management collaboration.

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“There is no single prescription that will work for every workplace,” Lowe says. “That’s why it’s important to decentralize responsibility to the unit manager and his or her workers, to tap their creative potential.”

Lowe also isolates a number of issues to be addressed if the public workplace is to become the preferred alternative; it must foster skill development and active learning; adopt recruitment and retention strategies for a more diverse workforce; compete with the private sector by making challenging and meaningful work a priority; and devise a more flexible and competitive compensation regime.

Judith Maxwell, President of CPRN, says the pressure on the public sector to act leaves it with no alternative but to become the employer of choice.

“The coming demographic crunch, the demand for high-skill knowledge workers, the need to mend labour/management relations hurt by unilateral cost-cutting in the 1990s, all point to the importance of a commitment to workplace change that puts employees, the development of their skills and a rewarding work experience first.”

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