

IV. EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF FREE TRADE

A. Expectations Regarding Jobs

Views regarding the effect of free trade on employment have been referred to above and have been reported as well in previous nation-wide surveys, including The Decima Quarterly Report. Essentially, previous research shows a roughly equal division between those expecting more, about the same, or less jobs. This was reflected in the group discussions as well, along with a recognition among many, that the short-term impact may be negative but would likely "balance out" over the long run. There were some concerns expressed, however, about the nature of the jobs available for Canadians under this new "equilibrium."

That is, what emerged in the focus group discussions, which was "new" or added to the understanding of Canadians' perceptions of the effect of free trade on employment, is a distinction between the quantity and quality of jobs. Several participants emphasized that they thought free trade could lead to major changes in the quality of jobs. Some people expressed concern that while the level of jobs may level off, there may be relatively more lower paying and less skilled jobs for Canadians (in the service sector for instance) and less higher paying and higher skilled ones available. Typical of this view was a statement by one Brantford group participant that "People will have to make a lot of sacrifices regarding the type of work they do and the kind of wages they receive."

This issue has not emerged in previous quantitative research as one which has any appreciable salience among the public and is more of an "opponents' issue" in any event. Therefore, were the issue to emerge in public debate either leading up to or following the signing of a draft agreement, it is likely one which should be dealt with strategically in a responsive and reactive fashion.

Another issue that arose in this segment of the discussion pertained to efficiency and competitiveness. As part of the adjustments in the Canadian labour market leading to the equilibrium over the long run referred to above, some participants felt that free trade will "give Canada the kick in the pants it needs." That is, the sluggishness, inefficiency and even laziness of the Canadian workforce perceived by some was seen as likely to be shaken up by free trade, forcing Canadians to become more efficient and work harder, thereby making us more competitive.