Work-Life Balance In Canada: Making the Case for Change

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Introduction

As we enter the new millennium, Canadian governments, Canadian employers, Canadian employees and Canadian families face a common challenge - how to make it easier for Canadians to balance their work roles and their desire to have a meaningful life outside of work. A large number of studies over the last decade have revealed that many Canadians have difficulty in balancing work and family (Akyeampong, 1997; McBride-King, 1990; Lero et al., 1993; Duxbury et al., 1991; Higgins et al., 1992; Duxbury and Higgins, 1998, Johnson et al., 1997). Furthermore, recent work by the authors (Duxbury and Higgins, 2001) indicates that the percent of Canadians who suffer from high levels of work-life conflict has increased dramatically over the course of the past decade.

Why has work-life balance become more of a challenge? A number of trends (i.e. profound changes in Canada's economic situation, in the structure and functioning of Canadian families and in the role of governments) came together in the 1990s and appear to have overwhelmed employees' ability to cope. Fourteen years ago the Hudson Institute caught the attention of the business world with its publication of *Workforce 2000* (Johnston & Packer, 1987), a compelling description of anticipated changes in the work world and in the demographic profile of workers. It is now 2001 and many of the changes predicted in *Workforce 2000* have indeed materialized. As predicted, the workforce of the new millennium is quite different from the one organizations are used to managing (i.e. the male dominated workforce of the past). The new workforce is older, more ethnically diverse, and has a larger proportion of working women, working mothers, dual-income families, employees with responsibilities for the care of aging parents, fathers with dependent care responsibilities, and sandwich employees (i.e. those with both childcare and eldercare responsibilities). With the advent of the dual-income family, employees of both sexes are now coping with caregiving and household responsibilities that were once managed by a stay-at-home spouse. Such employees are not well served by traditional "one-size fits all" human resource policies which can impose rigid time and place constraints on employees or reward long work hours at the expense of personal time. Similarly, organizational cultures which focus on hours rather than output and dictate that work takes priority over family and life make it difficult for many of todays employees to achieve a balance.

The evidence suggests that both governments and employers have been slow to respond to these changing social and economic pressures on Canadian employees and their families (Scott, 2000). In the absence of supportive government policies and organizational practices families have struggled to accommodate job demands, often at the expense of their family role obligations and their own well being. The result has been an increase in work-life conflict and stress (Scott, 2000).

The fact that many organizations and governments tend to have a limited, somewhat biased, view of the topic of work-life balance (many still subscribe to what Kanter (1979) has been