



Work-Life Balance: What Balance? What Life?

The Issue

'Work-life balance' is arguably the hottest issue in Canadian workplaces today. Certainly, it's hard to pick up a newspaper without seeing an article on the difficulty of juggling a job and a personal life.

Feeling stressed and overworked is hardly a new experience for most of us. However, for Agriculture Union members, the imbalance between work and home lives has never been greater. We're still feeling the impact of the drastic cuts to the federal public service throughout the 1990s. While hiring has been going on in some areas, it is in response to public and political demand for new or enhanced services. Most of us are still faced with doing more with less.

One major barrier to action is the disconnect between the views of employees and the human resources staff of employers. For instance, a global online survey of attitudes to work-life balance was released in November 2007 by *Monster*, the leading Web-based employment recruiter in North America, Europe and Asia. It found that while 89 per cent of employees polled believe work/life balance programs – such as flextime and telework – are important, less than half of HR professionals consider work/life balance to be an important initiative for their companies.

Meanwhile, far from a time-saver, workplace technology had added to workloads. Much of this technology has been introduced into the workplace with little consideration as to how it is to be used most effectively. Nor have the employees who actually use the technology been afforded sufficient training or upgrading opportunities. And, with the federal government services increasingly migrating to the Web and call centres, a public expectation is being created that these services will be available 24/7.

Meanwhile, on the home front, life brings its own set of complications. All of us feel the incredible social and economic demands of our fast-paced consumer society. Households with two incomes – fueled by economic necessity as well as by gender equality – face more hectic schedules and fewer available hours for family time. Children have access to a much wider variety of activities outside school, with all the extra parental involvement this entails. The bulk of our members, part of the baby boomer generation, now face a new challenge: care of aged parents and other close relatives.

All this has combined to create a ‘perfect storm’ of stress and anxiety. Agriculture Union members can ill-afford the extra pressures of the workplace, particularly when they are avoidable.

A Win-Win Situation

Numerous studies have arrived at a similar conclusion. Rebalancing work-life demands confers numerous benefits to both employer and workers. These include:

- A greater ability to attract, retain and motivate employees.
- Reduced absenteeism.
- Heightening employees’ energy, creativity and ability to handle stress.
- Increased job satisfaction.

In addition, the employer is contributing to its social responsibility by enabling employees to better respond to their responsibilities outside of work.

The Employer’s Responsibility

A similar divergence of opinion almost assuredly exists within the federal public service. Yet, the employer bears the major responsibility for easing the work-life imbalance in Agriculture Union workplaces.

Federal labour relations laws give management virtually free rein in matters impacting workload: unilateral responsibility for staffing; control over allocation of work and overtime; decision-making over flexible work arrangements. And ambitious managers – at every level – refuse to push back against unrealistic demands from their superiors or political masters.

The employer is very much aware of the growing work-life imbalance within Agriculture Union workplaces. Management’s much-vaunted Public Service Surveys have consistently rated workload as the number one issue among federal government

employees. The problem has been discussed at the highest reaches of management, such as regular meetings of Deputy Heads and Heads of Agencies.

These senior mandarins are on the record as having offered “strong support” for action on the work-life imbalance issue. Unfortunately, as usually happens, brave words have failed to lead to serious action. The federal public service culture of rapidly-changing priorities, tight deadlines and ‘voluntary’ overtime is deeply engrained. Those with the nerve to challenge this reality are quickly labeled as complainers and poor team players.

Where management does take action, it is usually misguided (however well-intentioned). Providing access to time-management seminars is no substitute for directly attacking work-life rebalancing. Such actions only treat the symptoms of an ultimately dysfunctional workload situation, and place the blame on the individual worker and the onus on that individual to cope better.

No Choice but to Adapt

As grim as all this sounds, there is some realistic hope that things will change for the better over time. The reasons for this have nothing to do with the federal public service and everything to do with larger social trends.

The Canadian workforce is on the verge of a massive transformation. And this includes the federal public service.

Over the next decade, tens upon tens of thousands of federal public service workers – most of the baby boomer generation – will be retiring. Finding and recruiting replacements for these experienced, long-service employees is the largest human resources challenge facing senior management. As a result of successive Liberal and Conservative governments, and their attacks on government services and the workers who provide them, they have succeeded in portraying the federal public service as a less-than-desirable career choice.

There will be intense competition for the attention and engagement of today’s young people. Their career options are much wider. They are less wedded to a ‘job for life’, and more committed to life-long learning. They place a much higher premium on time outside the workplace for personal interests and activities. They are less willing to submit to the hierarchical, rigid, top-down culture of the federal public service. So, faced with this reality, even the most hide-bound senior- or middle-manager will have to address the issues of work-life balance. Unfortunately, these social trends do little to deal with the work-life imbalance in the here-and-now.

And that means that managers have to lead, and politicians have to act. When it comes to work-life balance, inaction is simply not an option.

Pressing for Change...Now

So, what can be done today to address this issue?

The bargaining table first comes to mind as the logical place for the Agriculture Union and our bargaining agent, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, to address our concerns with work-life balance. However, as noted above, any union representing federal public service workers must operate under an extremely restrictive set of labour relations laws not faced by our counterparts in the private sector.

So, while some progress can be made on the negotiations front, our efforts must also be directed inwards towards Agriculture Union members. The union must encourage our members to use the existing protections in their collective agreement to fight the culture of overwork.

Internally, there are a number of concrete steps that can be taken to pressure the employer for needed change:

- Placing work-life balance issues on the agendas of Union-Management Consultation at the local, regional and national levels.

- The Agriculture Union will fight to ensure that issues of work-life balance are linked to as many contract demands as possible, through collective bargaining.

- Pushing for more flexible work arrangements – such as flex time, reduced work hours, job sharing and telework – that are more widely available.

- Promotion of a ban on ‘voluntary overtime’. While accepting that this is a powerful economic inducement for our members to work longer hours, we must reinforce the direct link between overtime and work-life imbalance.

- Work-life balance issues should figure prominently in Agriculture Union Regional Seminars.

- The Agriculture Union should encourage the PSAC to integrate work-life balance issues into as many education courses as possible.

- The Agriculture Union and the PSAC should lobby employers and political parties for greater availability of workplace childcare facilities.

Conclusion

Agriculture Union members are dedicated professionals. We are proud to serve the needs of the public. We want to carry out our responsibilities in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Unfortunately, for both us and the public, persistent excessive workloads are undermining our best efforts.

At the end of the day, the only practical solution to work-life imbalance is to restore the balance. It is imperative to provide a work environment that supports employees and increases their capacity to meet the demands that are being made of them in all aspects of their lives. It is no longer enough to 'talk the talk'. It is high time to 'walk the walk'.

Sources of Additional Information

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety

http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/worklife_balance.html

Canadian Health Network

<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/servlet/ContentServer?cid=1093450836180&pagename=CHN-RCS%2FCHNResource%2FFAQCHNResourceTemplate&lang=En&c=CHNResource>

Canadian Social Research Links

http://www.canadiansocialresearch.net/work_life_balance.htm

Treasury Board Policies on Flexible Work

<http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/search-recherche/query-recherche.aspx?results=1&searchType=1&Containing=AND&Query=work-life+balance&K2DocKey=&VIEWSTATEENCRYPTED=>

Work Network of the Canadian Policy Research Networks

http://www.jobquality.ca/balance_e/balance.stm

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