

The quality of work: a people-centred agenda essay

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Rapid technological change and the globalization of economic activity is restructuring the North American economy, and with it the nature and future of work in Canada. There is now a clear, though barely-articulated question as to whether secure, full-time, adequately-waged employment will be available to much of the North American workforce, at least over the next 30-60 years, or whether “jobless growth”, under-employment and “contingent” employment will become the norm, as is increasingly the trend in other industrialized nations. Canada has shifted towards a knowledge-based economy, reflecting an upward trend across most industries with the explosive growth of the information and communications technology sector over the past decade. This transition has been a long and continuous process, crossing all provinces and the urban-rural sectors, with a general increase in the importance of skills, knowledge and human capital among many types of firms and establishments.

In fact, the proportion of knowledge workers increased steadily over the last three decades, reflecting a growth trend that began long before the high-tech boom of the 1990s (Beckstead, 2003). Many organizations struggle to build the leadership capacity that they need to thrive in the ever-changing global business environment. Canadians revealed a pervasive anxiety about such issues as joblessness, under- and over-employment, conflicts between work and family, workplace inequalities, retiring with dignity, and jobs for youth. At the same time, they indicated that they want more from their working lives – not only economic security and a decent standard of living, but opportunities for personal development and the fulfilment that comes with making a contribution to society. Canadians want personal rewards from

work other than just decent pay and economic stability (Lu, 1999). To address this concern, corporations must introduce quality improvement programs to critically assess the directions in which work seems to be headed, and determine how they can meet the aspirations that individual Canadians have for their work life. It is therefore necessary to give higher priority to improving the quality of work for it will have numerous benefits for individual workers since the characteristics of our jobs and work environments determines our quality of life. This viewpoint finally addresses the contradictions and inconsistencies in the management rhetoric usually presented through public debates.

Although Canadians received high marks from the United Nations for their high quality of life, questionable points as to the quality of work have still emerged throughout the decades. It is true that perceptions of job insecurity may have risen in the 1990s, but one can argue that this was not a permanent development but rather linked with high unemployment and downsizing and these fears have since abated with the fall in unemployment. Indeed, I believe that a case can be made that there is a strong long-term upward trend in job quality, although subject to short-to-medium term reversals because of negative cyclical developments. Factors behind this trend include the mechanization of the workplace, which reduced drudgery and industrial accidents, the employment shift from the goods sector to the service sector, and the concentration of net employment growth in professional and managerial occupations. In order to motivate their workers, employees must provide a pleasant environment that motivates its subordinates- considering their growth and welfare in every endeavor.

But what constitutes a high- quality workplace? Perhaps it would be a lot easier to describe a good place of work by using a poor agency as a starting point. When we ask the employees of such a site they answer by mentioning unclear responsibilities, no feedback, unfairness in wages, promotions and dismissals, no opportunity for personal development, poor physical environment, in brief a place characterized by uncertainty, hostility and fear. In contrast, a high quality workplace is one that meets employees' needs and delivers results for the employer (Lowe, 2000). It is one where people are treated with respect, have good communications, do interesting work that gives a sense of accomplishment, have supportive co-workers, have ample opportunity to develop their skills, and can balance work and life. The knowledge-driven economy has brought with it a major transformation—jobs involving the most complex type of interactions make up the fastest-growing segment in many industries (Bennett, 1990). As a result, formal learning once or twice a year doesn't provide the experience or knowledge that workers require. There needs to be a significant shift of budgets and resources from formal learning settings to informal situations where the majority of learning actually takes place.

This interactive presentation will examine current trends and include case studies from the public and private sectors about how smart organizations are using communities of practice. All instances of successful development are ultimately the collective result of individual decisions by entrepreneurs to invest in risky new ventures and try out new things. In labour circles, there has been growing awareness of the problems posed by a globalizing economy working in concert with technological innovation in the workplace. I

then turn to the more difficult question of how one thinks about appropriate strategies for administrative building. Making the quality of work a higher priority requires a fundamental shift in management thinking. Employees need to be treated as assets rather than costs and managers need a long-term vision of how people development will pay off. To work methodically in improving workplace quality all links must hold, in the long chain from management policy, through the administration system, programs and processes, all the way out to the individual employee. This kind of quality assurance of management requires a complete and consistent structure, and it must be possible to measure present status and improvements.

What are required, though, are a dedicated top management and great patience and persistence in the implementation phase. A substantial and permanent improvement of workplace quality is a long project, but quite possible to achieve, without exceptional extra cost. The end result is an executive management that is satisfied with the performance, quality and capacity for change of their organization. Employees experience a workplace characterized by security, fairness, participation, cooperation and opportunities to grow. Managers have the challenging tasks they seek and feel the right balance of independence and support.

To achieve this goal, workers must use a collaborative approach to solving workplace problems. This framework must be based on the fundamental principle that joint efforts by employees, their unions and management will improve the quality of services delivered. Consultation, co-development and collective bargaining are all appropriate mechanisms for the creation of “win

– win” solutions to workplace concerns. To help bring about this basic change from an adversarial to a more joint problem solving approach requires the rebuilding of trust and a willingness on both sides to explore different approaches – in short what is often referred to as “ a cultural change”.

Such change, while difficult, is nevertheless possible. It can be encouraged by revising and modernizing the system and by providing for a single redress system for individual workplace complaints throughout the system and by establishing a new agency to assist the parties in finding mutually acceptable solutions in collective bargaining. A good, stable and productive labour management regime should be the foundation to good human resources management in a unionized environment. The employees in Canada’s public service and broader public sector are almost completely represented by certified bargaining agents, a situation that we do not expect to change. Finding a way to build effective working relationships between unions and management thus becomes a key public policy issue.