



Public Service Commission
of Canada

Commission de la fonction publique
du Canada

Comparison of Canadian and American Federal Public Service Employee Survey Finding

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January 2001

Canada 

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organization-wide surveys of employees are rapidly becoming a popular instrument for organizational planning and management. Interpretation of such survey results, however, can often be constrained by the lack of an external reference point to compare results to. Is a 65% agreement rate for a particular survey item "good" or "bad"? The more unique the organization, the less likely such a reference point is to be found in the research literature, leaving managers little further ahead.

This report attempts to provide such an external reference point for the 1999 Canadian *Public Service Employee Survey (PSES-1999)*. Forty items out of the original 92 from the **PSES-1999** were compared against items addressing highly similar concepts or areas from two recent public-service-wide employee surveys from the United States. The comparison is made at the Public Service-wide level, without regard to inter-departmental differences, using aggregated results from each survey sample. Although the three surveys involved somewhat different purposes and samples, a number of useful comparisons could be made between important **PSES-1999** questions, and questions on one or both of the American surveys. Comparisons indicated that:

- the Canadian Federal Public Service results generally either do not differ from, or are slightly more positive than, the American Federal Public Service in many key areas addressed by our respective surveys;
- a number of important questions on **PSES-1999** would provide more useful information to senior management if their phrasing were changed for the next use of the survey in 2002;
- a number of **PSES-1999** survey items that provided more disappointing results may be a byproduct of the nature of the questions asked, and/or a product of the nature of public service work, rather than an indication of the Canadian Federal Public Service as a specific employer.

A number of interesting issues emerge concerning the crucial role of wording in organizational surveys. Beyond any methodological issues highlighted by this comparison, placing the two public services side by side suggests that some types of survey findings may reflect factors and human resource management issues *common* to federal public services as employers, rather than issues *unique* to a given public service.

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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Survey

The 1999 Canadian *Public Service Employee Survey* (**PSES-1999**) has provided a wealth of practical information to departments and central agencies about the Canadian federal public service. To date, most analyses have been confined to cross-tabulations of responses within and across departments/agencies, with percent agreement rates used to assess the health of the organization.

While an invaluable resource, several obstacles to meaningful interpretation of this data still remain:

- In the absence of any longitudinal data with the same instrument, it is difficult to identify such scores as intrinsically promising or discouraging. As a first administration of the survey, however, this may be understood as necessary “growing pains” rather than a methodological shortcoming.
- There is little comparable data from the public sector. Most published data and instruments generally come from the private sector. The absence of external criteria for assessing whether a percent agreement score is noteworthy, or whether differences between scores, over time or between work units, are meaningful, impedes the use of survey-derived information for identifying high performing or underperforming individuals or organizational units.

In short, there is little in the way of a yardstick to compare survey results to at the present time. Recently, several central agencies within the American federal public service have carried out a number of organization-wide employee surveys, whose content and method have overlapped with **PSES-1999** to an extent that permitted comparison between the two public services. In addition to providing another perspective on the relative health of the Canadian Federal Public Service, this document summarizes the relevant points of comparison, and the methodological issues highlighted by their comparison. A number of recommendations for subsequent survey design and use follow.

The American Surveys

Since 1983, the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has been designing and conducting regular comprehensive surveys aimed at assessing the health of the merit system in the U.S. Federal Public Service. Surveys are conducted every 3-4 years, with the last three surveys conducted in 1992, 1996, and 2000. The current survey instrument also addresses a number of other areas pertinent to HR planning, such as intentions to leave and motives for departure. The data reported here are those from the 2000 *Merit Principles Survey* (**MPS-2000**), aggregated across agencies. Further information about this survey can be obtained at: <http://www.mspb.gov/studies/survey2000.html>

Starting in 1998, the Vice-President Albert Gore’s *National Partnership for Re-Inventing Government* has conducted three public-service-wide employee surveys of a somewhat briefer form than **MPS-2000** (the most recent one completed Sept. 29, 2000). The focus of the surveys was to assess the extent to which the initiative to reinvent the public service (including a more customer-focussed orientation and streamlining of internal procedures) have had an impact on departments, in

addition to assessing employee job satisfaction. Beyond the National Partnership for Re-Inventing Government, the team which developed the survey material was drawn from the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), the Office of Personal Management (OPM), and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The data reported here are from the 1999 data gathering (**NPR-1999**). Further information about the survey can be obtained at: <http://www.employeesurvey.gov>

All three surveys (**PSES-1999, NPR-1999, MPS-2000**) tended to use single items to address different constructs, as opposed to the multi-item scales more typical of academic research. All were administered in paper form at all levels of the organization, across all departments and agencies. Although both American surveys have been administered at other times, only the 1999 administration of the NPR survey and 2000 administration of the MPS survey were used for comparison, because of their closeness in time to **PSES-1999**.

Comparing the surveys

The three surveys were examined for common items by two psychologists: Dr. Mark Hammer from the Public Service Commission of Canada, and Dr. Paul van Rijn from the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board in Washington. Each person compared the surveys in isolation, and items that had been nominated by both raters were included as part of the cross-survey comparison.

In all, directly comparable items were found in **NPR-1999** and **MPS-2000** for **38** of the opinion/work-descriptive items in **PSES-1999**. For **9** of these items, it was possible to compare findings across all three surveys. Because of their phrasing, some questions in one survey could be compared against more than one question in another survey. Although a number of **MPS-2000** items addressed harassment and discrimination, differences in form and focus precluded direct comparison to related items in **PSES-1999**.

For purposes of comparison, per cent agreement scores (percentage of valid responses in a given response direction) were used. Direct comparison of published results was not considered valid since the American surveys used a middle point on their response scales and **PSES-1999** did not. To facilitate comparison, the **NPR-1999** and **MPS-2000** per cent agreement scores were recalculated excluding those who had used the middle no-opinion option.

In general, a number of qualifying factors (see section **Methodological Issues** for further details) need to be kept in mind when comparing results of the various surveys, including:

- the margin of error of the results for that survey (true distance between percent agreement scores may be larger *or* smaller than reported here, given the approximate +/-2% confidence interval of the American surveys; see **Methodological Issues**, p. 15);
- use of a different response scale with possibly different response descriptors (e.g., *satisfied* and *very satisfied* vs *agree* and *strongly agree*);
- use of adjusted, rather than actual, proportion agree results;
- possible differences in proportion expressing extreme scores (10% *strongly agree* and 50% *agree* is treated as equivalent to 50% *strongly agree* and 10% *agree* by all 3 surveys);
- relative contribution of different departments/agencies;
- a slightly more select sample (by virtue of return rate) from the American surveys.

COMPARISON OF FINDINGS

The findings presented here are organized along ad hoc themes suggested by the set of survey items which could be included for comparison from the various surveys. They should not be considered as organized by any statistical rationale or theoretical framework. A number of themes are similar to those used in earlier analyses of the survey results.

- Feelings about work and career
- Training and development
- Merit in staffing
- Work climate and working conditions
- Performance management & supervisor relations
- Client service
- The overall organization
- Harassment and discrimination

For purposes of easy reference, the questions themselves, and associated per cent score are presented. Per cent scores adjacent to the English **PSES-1999** question are for the public service as a whole. Scores adjacent to the French phrasing are for those indicating French as a first language (see **Methodological Issues** section concerning this). For comparable items, the **PSES-1999** item is always presented first, and the comparable American item below in a different typeface. The specific American survey is indicated in parentheses.

Feelings about work and career

Like Canadians, federal employees in the U.S. responded to several fairly similar questions concerning how generally positive they feel towards their work, their career, and their employer.

- | |
|--|
| 1. I believe that the work I do is important. 96%
J'estime que mon travail est important. 97% |
| 10) The work I do is meaningful to me. 89% (MPS-2000) |

Canadian employees voiced a strong belief that their work was important. American employees voiced similar agreement, though not quite as strongly. People can carry out work which they believe fulfills an important function, even though the function may not be personally meaningful. Given the margin of error, however, scores are fairly similar.

8. Overall, I like my job. **88%**
Dans l'ensemble, j'aime mon travail. 91%
96. I am satisfied with my career in the Public Service. **69%**
Je suis satisfait(e) de ma carrière dans la fonction publique. 74%
- 28) Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job? **69% (NPR-1999)**
- 27) Overall, I am satisfied with my job. **78% (MPS-2000)**

Canadian employees appear to like their jobs a bit more than American employees. What is distinctive about the American items, though, is their use of the term “satisfied”. Research indicates that “satisfaction” judgments tend to incorporate estimates of future improvement or decline, in addition to recall of prior changes, and other possible more desirable scenarios. As a result, satisfaction ratings may often be less positive than ratings of liking. Correspondingly, Canadian employees expressed lower *satisfaction* with their career, than *liking* of their jobs.

95. My department / agency is a good place to work. **75%**
Le milieu de travail de mon ministère / organisme est agréable. 73%
- 9) I would recommend the Government as a good place to work. **68% (MPS-2000)**

Both public services are relatively positive about their employer. Given the margin of error, the scores are not that dissimilar. The use of a broader term in the **MPS-2000** question (“government”) may have resulted in a bit more reticence by American respondents than the more specific context (“department / agency”) used in the Canadian item.

Training and development

Both Canadian and American surveys inquired about several facets of career development and job-related training. Results here are generally fairly similar across the two public services.

70. I get the training I need to do my job. **72%**
Je reçois la formation dont j'ai besoin pour faire mon travail. 75%
77. I am able to get on-the-job coaching to help me improve the way I do my work. **53%**
Je peux obtenir la formation en cours d'emploi nécessaire pour améliorer ma façon de travailler. 62%
- 15) I receive the training I need to perform my job. **67% (MPS- 2000)**
- 13) Employees receive the training they need to perform their jobs (for example, on-the-job training, conferences, workshops). **64% (NPR-1999)**

Canadian public servants are not substantially more likely than American ones to report receiving training that is directly related to their current job. When a distinction is made between what might be seen as preparatory training (Q70), and ongoing training (Q77), agreement in the Canadian sample falls off.

36. *My immediate supervisor helps me determine my learning needs.* **49%**
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) m'aide à cerner mes besoins en formation. **55%**
74. *My immediate supervisor does a good job of helping me develop my career.* **45%**
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) m'aide beaucoup à me perfectionner sur le plan professionnel. **50%**
- 34) My immediate supervisor encourages my career development. **53% (MPS-2000)**

Although Francophone employees tend to voice slightly more positive views about supervisory support for career development than their non-Francophone counterparts in Canada, much like their American counterparts, neither linguistic group indicates strong ongoing supervisory support for their career development. In a preliminary analysis of the Canadian sample, the perception of supervisory support for career progress was a powerful predictor of career satisfaction (Q96). Such perceived support was also less likely to be reported by employees in those departments reporting greater supervisory turnover.

The American question may well evoke a slightly more positive response than the Canadian one by virtue of its use of the less active term “encourages”, rather than “helps”. Such a term can be interpreted by the respondent to reflect support even when the career development action is undertaken without the assistance or intervention of the supervisor.

Merit in staffing

Several questions across the surveys touched on issues of merit in staffing and the perceived fairness of staffing.

41. *In my work unit, I believe we hire people who can do the job.* **72%**
Dans mon unité de travail, j'estime qu'on embauche des personnes capables de faire le travail. **77%**
- 55a) My immediate supervisor selects the best-qualified available people for the jobs to be filled. **56% (MPS-2000)**
42. *In my work unit, the process of selecting a person for a position is done fairly.* **60%**
Dans mon unité de travail, la sélection des titulaires des postes est équitable. **65%**
- 55d) My immediate supervisor uses fair and open competition for promotions. **57% (MPS-2000)**

Although merit appears to play a stronger role in Canadian PS appointments than American ones (Q41 vs Q55a), several differences in the questions should be noted. Where the Canadian question inquires about individuals who meet the minimum requirements of competence, the American question asks about optimal competence. Further, where the Canadian question inquires about the staffing of the position per se, regardless of who played a role in that staffing action, the American question specifies the immediate supervisor’s role in particular. Both of these differences might be expected to make Canadian responses somewhat less conservative than American ones.

78. *I believe I have a fair chance of getting a promotion, given my skills and experience.* **43%**
J'estime avoir des chances équitables d'obtenir de l'avancement compte tenu de mes compétences et de mon expérience. **49%**

62a) In the past 2 years, to what extent do you feel you have been treated fairly regarding promotions? **78% (MPS-2000)**

With respect to promotions, there is a wide gap between Canadian and American scores. Again, differences in the nature of the question need to be considered in interpreting the scores. Where the Canadian question is *prospective* (addressing future possible promotions), the American question is *retrospective* (addressing only competitions applied for). Where the American question addresses only the procedural fairness of staffing actions in which the respondent has been involved, the Canadian question confounds this with the likelihood of ever being promoted. Finally, where the American question restricts the time period being referred to, the Canadian question refers to the future in general. All of these differences are likely to make Canadian responses somewhat more conservative than American ones, since they deal with the unknown rather than the known. In short, **PSES-1999** responses to Q78 may be less alarming than first thought.

Work climate and working conditions

A variety of questions in all three surveys addressed the climate of the workplace, including the flow of information, level of democracy and autonomy, and interpersonal relations. Several other common questions examined aspects of working conditions.

45. *I am proud of the work carried out in my work unit.* **86%**
Je suis fier(fière) du travail qui est fait dans mon unité de travail. **87%**

32) How would you rate the overall quality of work being done in your work group? **90% (NPR-1999)**

Employees in both public services generally expressed confidence in the quality of work undertaken by their work unit.

39. *In my work unit, my colleagues treat me with respect. 94%*
Dans mon unité de travail, mes collègues me traitent avec respect. 95%
38. *My immediate supervisor treats me with respect. 87%*
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) me traite avec respect. 89%
- 12) I am treated with respect in my work unit. **82% (MPS-2000)**
53. *In my work unit, every individual, regardless of his or her race, colour, gender, or disability would be / is accepted as an equal member of the team. 87%*
Dans mon unité de travail, chacun(e) est / serait accepté(e) comme membre à part entière de l'équipe, sans égard à sa race, sa couleur, son sexe ou son incapacité. 87%
- 14) Differences among individuals (for example, gender, race, national origin, religion, age, cultural background, disability) are respected and valued. **74% (NPR-1999)**

Relations among colleagues appear to be somewhat more positive among Canadian public servants. The phrasing of the Canadian questions may have conceivably biased employees to respond somewhat more favourably, however. Where Q39 inquires specifically about treatment by colleagues, the American equivalent is more nonspecific, and may be interpreted as including relations with the immediate supervisor. Where Q53 inquires about “acceptance”, the American equivalent inquires about differences being “respected and valued”, a somewhat stronger opinion. Not surprisingly, some 22% of (American) respondents selected the middle option (no opinion) for this particular item.

3. *It is easy to get the information I need to do my work. 75%*
Il est facile d'obtenir les renseignements nécessaires pour faire mon travail. 77%
50. *In my work unit, we are good at sharing information with each other. 74%*
Dans mon unité de travail, nous arriverons bien à partager l'information entre nous. 72%
- 1) Information is shared freely in my work unit. **68% (MPS-2000)**
44. *In my unit, we work as a team. 72%*
Dans mon unité de travail, nous travaillons en équipe. 71%
- 5) A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my work unit. **67% (MPS-2000)**
- 6) The spirit of teamwork and cooperation exists in my immediate work unit. **69% (NPR-1999)**

Both public services indicate that a cooperative and open atmosphere tends to prevail in their work units, with Canadian public servants voicing a slightly (though not likely a significantly) more positive opinion.

2. *I have the necessary materials and equipment to do my job.* **85%**
Je dispose du matériel et de l'équipement nécessaires pour faire mon travail. **86%**
- 2) I have the resources to do my job well. **70% (MPS-2000)**
16. *I consider my workload reasonable.* **50%**
J'estime que ma charge de travail est raisonnable. **51%**
- 4) My work unit has a sufficient number of employees to do its job. **43% (MPS-2000)**
5. *I am allowed the flexibility to balance my personal, family, and work needs.* **84%**
J'ai la souplesse nécessaire pour concilier mes obligations personnelles, familiales et professionnelles. **85%**
- 15) Supervisors/team leaders understand and support employee's family/personal life responsibilities. **65% (MPS-2000)**

In terms of working conditions, Canadian federal employees appear to fare better than their American counterparts. They report being better resourced and report better work-life balance, in addition to having a slightly more manageable (though still high) workload. The gap may well actually be smaller than shown here, given the relative phrasing of the American and Canadian questions. Where **PSES-1999** (Q2) inquires about doing one's job, the comparable question from **MPS-2000** (Q2) inquires about doing one's job "well", such that employees are adopting different performance standards for each question. Similarly, where Q5 in **PSES-1999** asks about being "allowed the flexibility" (which may come from collective agreements, or legal protection, rather than explicit support from supervisors), Q15 on **MPS-2000** asks about explicit support from supervisors.

21. *I am encouraged to be innovative or take initiative in my work.* **49%**
On m'encourage à innover ou à prendre des initiatives dans mon travail. **46%**
- 11) Creativity and innovation are rewarded. **39% (NPR-1999)**
54. *My work unit periodically takes time out to rethink the way it does business.* **64%**
Dans mon unité de travail, on revoit de temps à autre la façon de procéder. **73%**
- 16) My organization has made reinvention a priority (for example, working smarter and more efficiently). **35% (NPR-1999)**

Neither public service indicates strong support for individual initiative or innovation. At the group or work-unit level, the picture is somewhat better in Canada, and ambiguous in the American case. Both **NPR-1999** questions here (Q11 and Q16) tend to be posed in a stronger way than their Canadian equivalents, potentially resulting in a more restrained response. "Reward" may be seen as meaning a more robust response from management than mere "encouragement". Similarly, "taking time out" is not quite as strong as making something "a priority". More troubling is the discrepancy between English and French responses to **PSES-1999** Q54. Anglophone employees voiced 59% agreement with Q54, compared to the much higher 73% agreement rate from Francophones. This would suggest a different nuance to the question in each language; most likely the distinction between "doing business" and "façon a procéder".

23. *I have a say in decisions and actions that impact on my work.* 43%
J'ai un mot à dire quant aux décisions et aux mesures qui influent sur mon travail. 42%
- 3) At the place I work, my opinions seem to count. **66% (MPS-2000)**
- 5) At the place I work, my opinions seem to count. **59% (NPR-1999)**
- 29) How satisfied are you with your involvement in decisions that affect your work? **54%**
(NPR-1999)
25. *My immediate supervisor allows me to determine how I do my work.* **88%**
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) me permet de décider comment faire mon travail. **87%**
57. *In my work unit, we have a say in how the work gets distributed.* **42%**
Dans mon unité de travail, nous avons notre mot à dire sur la répartition des tâches. **43%**
- 6) I have been given more flexibility in how I accomplish my work. **65% (MPS-2000)**
- 18) In the past 2 years, I have been given more flexibility in how I accomplish my work. **57%**
(NPR-1999)

The level of employee democracy in the work unit appears to be higher in the American public service, however Canadian employees appear to have somewhat more autonomy within their jobs. It is unclear to what extent American employees are responding to a softer claim. Having one's opinions "count" (Q3, Q5), as opposed to "having a say" (Q23), may imply consultation rather than the power to determine.

Performance management & supervisor relations

Five items addressing the relationship between employee and supervisor, with respect to the employees performance, were identified as having corresponding items in the American surveys. Canadian public servants generally fared as well as, or better than, their American counterparts on these items.

24. *I know what my immediate supervisor expects of me in my job.* **85%**
Je sais ce que mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) attend de mon travail. **86%**
31. *My immediate supervisor and I discuss the results I am expected to achieve.* **62%**
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) discute avec moi des résultats que je suis censé(e) atteindre. **65%**
33. *My immediate supervisor assesses my work against identified goals and objectives.* **59%**
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) évalue mon travail en fonction des buts et des objectifs établis. **67%**
- 11) I know what is expected of me on the job. **90% (MPS-2000)**
- 24) The standards used to evaluate my performance are fair. **65% (MPS-2000)**
- 25) Are you clear about how "good performance" is defined in your organization? **37% (NPR-1999)**

Both Canadian and American federal employees are fairly clear about what is expected of them on the job, though somewhat less clear about, and less accepting of, the standards used for evaluating

their performance. The outlier among these results is Q25 from **NPR-1999**. It is conceivable that this question is too broad in its coverage (it potentially extends to work units or levels unfamiliar to the respondent), yielding more reticence in respondents. Examination of the raw data indicates that some 30% of the sample had no opinion to offer in response to this question.

26. *I receive useful feedback from my immediate supervisor on my job performance.* **61%**
Je reçois des commentaires utiles de mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) sur mon rendement au travail. **65%**

31) My supervisor keeps me informed about how well I am doing. **59% (MPS-2000)**

28. *I get adequate recognition from my immediate supervisor when I do a good job.* **66%**
Mon(ma) supérieur(e) immédiat(e) reconnaît de façon appropriée la qualité de mon travail. **73%**

20) I am satisfied with the recognition I receive for my work. **46% (MPS-2000)**

30) How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for doing a good job? **50% (NPR-1999)**

In general, Canadian and American employees receive comparable feedback from supervisors about their typical job performance. Canadian employees appear more likely to report that the feedback received from supervisors about their peak performance is appropriate. A distinction to note between **PSES-1999** Q28 and **MPS-2000** Q20 is that between recognition for “good” work, as opposed to work in general. Supervisors may be less acknowledging of day-to-day efforts than employees would like, while still being seen as responsive to noteworthy efforts. This hinted at in the difference between **NPR-1999** Q30 and **MPS-2000** Q20, but the gap between **PSES-1999** Q28 and **NPR-1999** Q30 still reflects a considerable difference between the two public services.

Client service

Two items from **PSES-1999** and **NPR-1999** addressed the client service aspect of the public service.

86. *My work unit has client service standards.* **75%**
Mon unité de travail a des normes de services à la clientèle. **76%**

1) There are service goals aimed at meeting customer expectations. **84% (NPR-1999)**

88. *I ask my clients about their needs and expectations.* **68%**
Je demande à mes clients quels sont leurs besoins et leurs attentes. **70%**

2) There are well-defined systems for linking customers' feedback / complaints to employees who can act on the information. **59% (NPR-1999)**

The data suggest differences between the public services in client-service standards, however this may be a product of question phrasing. Although NPR Question 1, and all similar questions, were prefaced with the introductory phrase “In my organization...”, it does not necessarily refer to the employee’s own work unit. The Canadian equivalent (Q86) refers to the employee’s own work unit, which may have little relationship with clients or only an intermittent one, hence a more restrained response to the item. Where the American question inquires about formal systems for responding to

client feedback, the Canadian question inquires about informal channels, and receives a more positive reply from respondents.

The overall organization

A number of overlapping questions can be seen as clustering around employees' perceptions and understanding of the organization as a whole, their place and the place of their work unit within it, and the role of management

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| <p>47. <i>I know how my work contributes to my work unit's objectives.</i> 88%
<i>Je sais de quelle façon mon travail contribue aux objectifs de mon unité de travail.</i> 89%</p> <p>48. <i>I understand my work unit's role in the department/agency.</i> 91%
<i>Je comprends le rôle de mon unité de travail au sein du ministère / de l'organisme.</i> 92%</p> <p>49. <i>My work unit's goals are consistent with my department / agency's goals.</i> 82%
<i>Les objectifs de mon unité de travail sont compatibles avec ceux de mon ministère / organisme.</i> 85%</p> <p>45a) To what extent do you feel that the work you perform contributes to the accomplishment of your agency's mission? 92% (MPS-2000)</p> <p>45b) To what extent do you feel that the work performed by your work unit contributes to the accomplishment of your agency's mission? 94% (MPS-2000)</p> |
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Both American and Canadian employees have a fairly strong sense of how they contribute to their work unit, and how their work unit fits into the department/agency, as a whole.

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|--|
| <p>93. <i>I can clearly explain to others the direction (for example, the vision, values or mission) of my department / agency.</i> 64%
<i>Je peux clairement expliquer aux autres l'orientation (la vision, les valeurs, la mission, etc.) de mon ministère / organisme.</i> 68%</p> <p>3) Managers communicate the organization's mission, vision, and values. 61% (NPR-1999)</p> |
|--|

Where Canadian public servants are aware of the goals, mission and values of their department/agency, though, they express less confidence in being personally able to convey them. In the case of American employees, awareness of the relationship between work unit and agency direction also appears to be more a product of tacit or implicit assumptions than explicit communication from management. Not surprising, really. Most people find it easier to understand something than to explain or articulate it.

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| <p>90. <i>I believe that senior management will try to resolve concerns raised in this survey.</i> 37%
<i>Je crois que la haute direction va s'efforcer de résoudre les problèmes soulevés dans le présent sondage.</i> 43%</p> <p>21) Management and the union(s) work cooperatively on mutual problems. 45% (NPR-1999)</p> |
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Neither public service expressed strong confidence in management to address problems. Only 34% of American employees actually responded positively to Q21. The result shown above is adjusted for the 25% of respondents who expressed neither positive or negative opinion for that particular question.

Harassment and discrimination

Both public services have examined issues related to perceived harassment and discrimination against employees. Unfortunately, the approach taken to examine these issues by the Canadian and American surveys was radically different, impeding any direct comparison here. It is worth examining differences in the approach taken, however, and the relative merits of each, for the purposes of any future tailoring of the PSES, since both issues are important and sensitive.

Defining harassment and discrimination: PSES-1999 used two simple Yes/No questions to explicitly detect the presence of harassment and/or discrimination. The questions themselves did not define what form of harassment/discrimination, the severity, the context, or agent. It was possible to examine discrimination more specifically via demographic breakdowns of items felt to be sensitive to detecting discrimination (e.g., demographic differences in perceptions of chances for promotion, perceptions of being fairly classified, etc.), however no questions beyond Q60 (“*I have experienced harassment in my work unit*”) provided an opportunity to either define or examine harassment.

In contrast, **MPS-2000** explicitly examined specific forms and contexts of discrimination via a number of items. Employees were asked...

(Simplified)

63. **In your organization**, to what extent do you believe that employees from each of the following groups are subjects to **flagrant and obviously discriminatory practices** which hinder their career development? (*African Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Whites*)
64. In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been denied a job, promotion or other job benefit because of unlawful discrimination based upon:
(*race/national origin, sex, age, handicapping condition, religion, marital status, political affiliation*)

American public servants were also asked about specific contexts and types of harassment.

(Simplified)

65. In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been pressured by an agency official (**MPS-2000**):
...to engage in partisan political activity?
...to retaliate against or take action in favor of another Federal Employee or applicant for political reasons?
67. In the past 2 years, do you feel you have been retaliated against or threatened with retaliation for (**MPS-2000**):
- making disclosures about fraud, waste, safety issues, etc.
 - exercising right to appeal/grieve/complain
 - testifying re: whistleblowing or appeals
 - refusing unlawful orders
 - reporting harassment

Although the Canadian questions make for a more streamlined survey instrument and leave more room for questions addressing other issues, the lack of specificity makes it difficult to identify areas for intervention and targeted policy. Conversely, the **PSES-1999** questions were also sensitive to

discrimination and harassment of many types beyond those explicitly addressed in **MPS-2000**, such as harassment by clients.

Language issues: Differences in the translated version of the Canadian question also illustrate the need to identify level of impact when posing such questions. When responding to “*I have experienced discrimination in my work unit*”, 20% of English-speaking employees indicated that they had “experienced” it. When responding to “*J’ai été victime de discrimination dans mon unité de travail*” only 13% of French-speaking employees responded affirmatively. While ostensibly addressing the same idea, the two versions differ in the level of implied impact to the employee. The same language distinction was also in evidence for Q60, where 23% of English-speaking employees responded affirmatively to “*I have experienced harassment in my work unit*”, in contrast to only 14% of French-speaking employees responding to “*J’ai été victime de harcèlement dans mon unité de travail*”. It should be noted that these results may not be entirely accurate, since there was coding for first language spoken by the respondent, but not the language of the survey form being returned, and the proportion of individuals who may have completed a survey form in their second language is unknown.

American results: To date, there has been only limited information from **MPS-2000** published regarding data on harassment and discrimination. Unofficial data gathered by P. van Rijn indicates that some 12% of **MPS-2000** respondents believed they had been denied a job or promotion because of their race or national origin, and 11% believed they had been denied a job or promotion because of their sex. Responses to retaliation-related harassment questions indicated an occurrence of between 1% (for reporting sexual harassment) and 9% (for exercising an appeal right), with other types of retaliation in the 2-7% range. Because the survey items themselves allow employees to indicate multiple types of harassment or discrimination, and the data have been aggregated by category of action, it is unclear what proportion of employees had been discriminated against or harassed in *any* form - the statistic which would be most directly comparable to **PSES-1999** Q59 and Q60. This data may be obtainable in the future.

That being said, the specificity of the American questions (which would exclude some forms of harassment and discrimination being reported by Canadian employees, thus yielding lower reported rates than the Canadian questions), coupled with existing data obtained from those questions, suggests that reported rates of harassment and discrimination in the Canadian public service are not likely that discrepant from the American federal public service.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Notwithstanding the possibility of very real differences in the perceptions and organizational climate of Canadian and American public servants, there are a number of methodological factors highlighted by this inter-survey comparison, that must be considered in interpreting any apparent differences, or lack of differences, in their results.

How were the surveys different?

Census vs Sample approach: The Canadian approach pursued a census method, in which the survey form was distributed to all public servants, with roughly 104,500 of the more than 185,000 employees responding. The American method used a stratified random sample, whose size was selected so as to yield a confidence interval of $\pm 2\%$ for the public service overall (i.e., only a 5% chance that the results for the entire public service would be more than 2 percentage points higher or lower than what was observed from the sample), and a confidence interval of roughly $\pm 5\%$ for individual agencies. For the American samples, this resulted in 750 forms being distributed to each major agency, and 750 forms being distributed across a group of smaller agencies, yielding final sample sizes of approximately 14,200 for **NPR-1999** and 17,500 for **MPS-2000**. (Some of the surveys were not deliverable because the person had died, left the agency, left no forwarding address, etc.)

Distribution: The Canadian survey was distributed internally and returned by mail. The American surveys were distributed approximately half by internal distribution and half by mail to the respondent's home, with return entirely by mail.

Return rates and representativeness: Return rates have averaged roughly 40% of forms distributed, over two administrations of the NPR survey (**NPR-1998/1999**) and the MSPB survey (**MPS-1996/2000**), yielding a sample size of roughly 1% of the entire American Federal Public Service (including civilian Defence personnel, but excluding the Post Office). **PSES-1999** yielded a return rate of approximately 55% of the entire FPS. In both public services, return rates for employees in operational occupational groups were approximately half of that for other occupational groups (26% return rate for Canada, approximately 20% for the U.S.).

Because the sample size was held constant across agencies, agency results for both **NPR-1999** and **MPS-2000** were weighted by agency size, when aggregated. This contrasts with **PSES-1999**, where a census approach avoided the need for post-hoc weighting of departmental results. In all three surveys, larger agencies/departments contribute more to aggregate results, however relative accuracy of that contribution varies somewhat more in the American surveys.

Question format: For opinion-type questions on **PSES-1999** respondents had to provide an opinion of some sort since no mid-point was provided (although “*don't know*”, and “*not applicable*”, options were provided, where appropriate). Both **NPR-1999** and **MPS-2000** employed a middle-choice option (generally “*neither disagree nor agree*”). This tends to draw a modest number of responses, and reduces the overall proportion of responses indicating a clear opinion. Where **MPS-2000** provided respondents an opportunity to indicate that the question did not pertain to them in some manner, **NPR-1999** did not employ this option.

Respondent-specific questions: With the exception of a single question pertaining to language of service (if serving the public), all **PSES-1999** questions were directed at all employees. All questions in **NPR-1999** were likewise directed at all employees. **MPS-2000** contained question sequences and sections unique to individuals who:

- were supervisors,
- had staffed certain types of positions in the previous 2 years,
- had contended with poor performers within their work unit,
- did (or did not) intend to retire or seek another job within the coming year,

Length: **NPR-1999** is the briefest of the three surveys, containing 32 individual opinion questions, 11 demographic questions, and one open-ended comments item. The entire survey covers 3 pages of optically scannable forms.

MPS-2000 is the longest of the three surveys, in terms of printed length. It varies in time to complete, depending on which sections pertain to the respondent. The briefest version for respondents (not retiring, no supervisory responsibilities) requires provision of 174 responses in the attitudinal section, and 11 additional responses in the demographic section. The longest possible version (a retiring or departing supervisor who had filled an entry-level professional or administrative position, and had also dealt with a poor performer in their unit) adds 80 more items/sub-items to be responded to, over and above those already noted. **MPS-2000** also contains an open-ended comments item. The entire survey is 16 pages in length, including the cover letter.

In comparison, **PSES-1999** requests responses to 112 items/sub-items, of which 22 can be considered demographic items or those assisting group-wise analysis, and the remainder are opinion or work-descriptive. The entire survey form is 12 pages, including a cover letter.

Specificity

The degree of specificity of some **PSES-1999** questions appears to play a role in the responses given to them. Responses can, at times, appear to be more negative because the target or topic of the rating is not clearly identified. At other times, lack of specification may encourage *more* agreement with a negative statement by inviting many interpretations of the item. Specificity (or lack of it), can be seen in several different ways, some more explicit than others:

Time constraints: Some American results may appear more positive than our own because they address a smaller time frame for unpleasant events to occur in. Conversely, several of our questions lack any time frame, increasing the likelihood of negative events to have occurred and higher reporting rates (e.g., discrimination, Q59). Related comments follow below concerning time-orientation of questions.

Situational specificity: Several American questions, most prominently those concerning harassment and discrimination in **MSPB-2000**, identify specific situations and bases for the offending acts. For example, in addressing harassment, the survey inquires about retaliatory acts for specific types of employee actions. This has several implications.

- By not specifying situations, responses to the Canadian questions reflect an aggregate of a variety of situations, many of which may be only incidentally work-related.
- Where the situations remain unspecified, it becomes difficult to identify areas for intervention at any organizational level.
- Although it is still possible to indirectly identify contexts that more closely specify the source of some negative scores (e.g., harassment scores tended to be higher for those serving the public), this involves more work, and is somewhat more difficult to communicate to management.

Specificity of agents/targets: Canadian and American findings sometimes differ for common items where the one survey specifies who the question is about, and the other remains nonspecific. **PSES-1999** questions on harassment and discrimination (Q59 & Q60) are good cases in point. Where the English phrasing of the question did not specify a target of discrimination or harassment (“I have experienced...”), the French phrasing specified (“J’ai été victime...”) the respondent as the sole target. Correspondingly, harassment and discrimination were upwards of 50% more likely to be noted by Anglophones than by Francophones.

Similarly, where questions concerning harassment on the American surveys examined retaliation from authority figures in specific situations, and questions concerning discrimination addressed specific bases for discrimination (age, sex, race, etc.), our own question did not specify agent or basis, resulting in a responses that confounded many sources and types of both actions. Over and above the potential inflation of the incidence of harassment and discrimination, the lack of specificity in our own line of questioning makes it difficult to identify, and prioritize, areas for intervention. For harassment and discrimination in particular, a form of question more in the direction of the MSPB survey would yield more useful information.

Conversely, posing the question at a broader level, is often associated with less favourable outcomes when responding to positive statements, conceivably by encouraging a more cautious response. For example, **PSES-1999** question #54 (“My work unit periodically takes time out to rethink the way it does business”) received a more positive response across the Canadian FPS (64% agree) than the comparable question asked in **NPR-1999** (Q16 - “My organization has made reinvention a priority...”) where only 35% agree. The questions differ in the level at which the respondent is asked to estimate organizational attitude.

Time orientation

Several questions on the Canadian and American surveys address the same topic, but adopt different time orientations in the way the question is framed, leading to different response patterns. For example, where the **PSES-1999** question concerning fairness of promotional staffing actions is posed in a prospective manner (Q78: “I believe I have a fair chance of **getting** a promotion, given my skills and experience”; emphasis added), the American question is retrospective in orientation (Q62a: “In the past 2 years, to what extent do you feel you **have been** treated fairly regarding promotions?”; emphasis added). Not surprisingly, the American question evoked more positive responses (78% agreement vs 43% agreement) by referring to competitions actually applied for, within a defined period as opposed to estimates about the future.

Similarly, questions where respondents were asked about their level of “satisfaction” generally tended to evoke more negative responses. Some theoretical interpretations would suggest that this is partly because expectations about the future, and other possible outcomes, have a stronger bearing on one’s satisfaction with something, than with the extent to which it is “liked” at the moment. This is illustrated by the contrast between how much Canadian FPS employees are “satisfied” with their career (Q95 - 69%) versus how much they “like” their job (Q8: 88%). When asked how satisfied they were with their job, American federal employees voiced between 69% (NPR-1999) and 78% (MSPB-2000) agreement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The comparison of the content of the three survey instruments, and the variation in observed results associated with question form and phrasing, suggest a number of possible modifications for consideration for the next planned use of the PSES in 2002.

Merit and promotions

As noted, Q78 in **PSES-1999** tends to confound the perception of merit in promotions, with the probability of future career progress over an unspecified time frame. More information could be derived from the survey if this question was split into two separate survey items addressing each notion separately. There is useful information to be obtained by inquiring about employees' expectations of career movement, especially with respect to equity issues or groups where retention is of concern. Selecting a specific time frame for such a question (e.g., expectations for the next 5 years), is also likely to provide more interpretable data and provide more guidance about what employees consider to be acceptable rates of career progress (most effectively understood by examining correlations between expected career progress and expressed career satisfaction).

For assessing the merit-basis of promotions, the question used in **MPS-2000** appears to provide a suitable model by referring specifically to competitions for which the employee has applied. The **MPS-2000** question confines this question to the previous 2 years, but it could be adapted to any prior time frame that is appropriate. Depending on other factors, this question could address competitions applied to in the FPS overall, only within the current department/agency, or both.

Discrimination and harassment

The current **PSES-1999** questions pose some difficulties for interpreting results by virtue of discrepancies between French and English wordings of the questions, and by virtue of their nonspecificity. Although the type of questions used to address these areas in **MPS-2000** provide clearer information, they also extend the length of the survey substantially, and may not necessarily address those areas of highest priority within the Canadian federal Public Service. It may still be useful to consider splitting Q59 and Q60 in the existing **PSES-1999** instrument into several questions; perhaps addressing forms or degrees of harassment and discrimination that would require the most attention, or be most amenable to organizational interventions. At the very least, specification of the respondent as the target of discrimination or harassment, specification of a time frame, and specification of a source of discrimination and/or harassment, would likely provide data that could better inform management.

Position-specific questions

MPS-2000 provides a large number of items directed exclusively at supervisors. Much information about management can be gleaned from **PSES-1999** by an occupational group-wise analysis of the data, however all questions assume the individuals responding are involved in the same activities. It may be useful to consider several additional questions more tailored to the activities of supervisors and managers. For example, questions addressing the impact of resources, or policy shifts, may be better formed and more unambiguously responded to when directed at supervisors and/or managers specifically.

Increasing response by operational personnel

In both public services, response rates for those in operational groups was low. This suggests that differential response rate for these groups for **PSES-1999** reflected something more generic about the tendency to respond to surveys in this group, rather than any concurrent events (such as labour - management disputes) that might have affected response rates. It may be fruitful to obtain some preliminary information from these groups about obstacles to fuller participation, prior to the next data gathering in 2002. Alternatively, it may be useful to include questions in the next data gathering directed at individuals who did not participate in the 1999 survey.

Coding for language of survey form

In several instances, the phrasing of French and English versions of the PSES appeared to evoke different response patterns from employees. Comparison across Canadian and American items suggests a number of factors that may account for such differences. Although a number of language-related pieces of information were obtained from employees during the 1999 data gathering, language of the survey form submitted was not coded for. As a result, it is not possible to accurately analyse translation influences on responding, or accurately adjust departmental or other agreement scores using proportion of French and English survey responses. First language spoken may provide a very useful proxy for language of form, but does not accurately identify fluently bilingual employees who may be completing survey forms in their second official language.

Measuring perceived progress

Although the aggregated results from the **NPR-1999** dataset are not substantially different from the 1998 dataset using the same instrument, post hoc analysis of the 1999 data indicated large differences for many items when agencies were separated into those that made “reinvention” a priority, and those that didn’t. A potentially useful addition to the next use of the PSES might be one or more items addressing the perception of departmental and/or managerial action in response to, or simply since, the 1999 survey (e.g., *My department has taken effective actions in response to many of the issues identified by the 1999 employee survey* - Strongly Agree → Strongly Disagree). For purposes of analysis, it may also be useful to include an item which would identify those who had participated in the 1999 survey.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The data presented here are aggregated across each federal public service. Although there are some remarkable similarities observed across the two public services, the analysis is somewhat superficial, and neglects the often considerable variation observed between, and within, departments and agencies. Consequently, although some of the survey items examined here may at first appear to contribute little distinctive information about the Canadian Public Service as a whole, they may still contribute much information which identifies levers for organizational improvement for individual components of, and communities within, the public service.

One of the themes that emerges from this analysis, such as it is, is that one should be wary of drawing inferences about the Canadian federal Public Service as a *particular* employer, as opposed to the Canadian federal public service as a *type* of employer (a category which the American federal public service also belongs to). Issues such as the relatively modest understanding of the direction of the department or agency (Q93 - **PSES-1999**) may be more a reflection of the sheer difficulty of translating government policy into more concrete visions within large departments spread across the country, than a reflection of senior management.

What is also quite apparent from the comparison of item phrasings across the three surveys is that survey committees must be that much more sensitive to question phrasing when issues of interest are addressed by single items rather than by multi-item scales. A number of general principles appear to emerge from this particular survey comparison that might assist in the design, or interpretation, of items in future administrations of the employee survey.

Finally, while apparent similarities and differences between responses to comparable items may emerge when looking at absolute numbers (e.g., per cent agreement or other finite scores), this is separate from the systematic and predictive relationship that survey items may have with each other. For example, differences between the two public services may appear with respect to job/career satisfaction and indices of support for career development, but the two public services may well show identical predictive relationships between these two variables. Conversely, agreement rates on two or more items may be identical for the two public services, but the items may be interrelated in an entirely different manner, depending on the country or department/agency. In short, absolute levels of responding tell less than the whole story. Closer examination of the potential predictive relationships between issues addressed in the surveys should be pursued.

The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the extensive contribution of Dr. Paul van Rijn of the Merit Systems Protection Board in Washington, DC, in the development of this project.