
Overview of the Literature on Working Time and the Distribution of Work

Background Document for Lessons Learned
on the Innovative Workplace

Prepared by the
Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre
For Evaluation and Data Development Branch
Strategic Policy
Human Resources Development Canada
May, 1997

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the primary reasons for examining different work arrangements, especially work time arrangements, is the extent to which jobs at the workplace level can be protected through avoidance of layoffs or, in some cases, new hirings can result. Discussions about the prospect of an economy with less potential to create jobs (the “jobless economy”) have prompted groups interested in the consequences of higher unemployment to see changes in work time as a means of helping employment.

The proportion of people working the traditional work week of between 35 to 40 hours has declined from 65 percent in 1976 to 54 percent in 1995. Over the same period, the share of both workers working more than 40 hours per week and less than 35 hours increased. The bifurcation in the distribution of hours of work has raised the concern that work is more unevenly distributed and that new work time arrangements could be achieved to address this.

Innovations in working time appear in several different forms, including reductions in overtime; reductions in daily, weekly or annual hours; as well as more flexibility in the scheduling of standard hours. Changes in working time over the life cycle are also part of this literature and include leave for child care or eldercare; sabbaticals; education or training leave; and early or phased-in retirement. The breadth of the subject and the extent of change in the industrialized world, has generated an extensive literature on working time issues, much of which focuses on identifying the social and economic implications of the observed trends. The literature often refers to examples of workplaces in which changes are occurring but there are very few studies that actually document these changes in a consistent fashion. This is particularly true for Canada where discussion of impacts of working time changes is largely anecdotal.

The question remains however whether further reductions in the length of the work week that are negotiated through collective bargaining will achieve employment gains. If such gains are not readily apparent, then problems arise in encouraging workers to engage in work time reductions for work sharing simply because those who bear the largest costs are the ones least likely to gain. The big gainers would be the unemployed but the costs of achieving work time reductions would be borne by the currently employed.

The first part of this paper provides a brief overview of the relevant literature; the second part provides a selective bibliography on changes in working time and the distribution of work.

1.1 General

Working time and distribution of work issues are addressed in the literature across a number of different fields – human resource and organizational management, industrial relations, economics, political science, sociology and leisure studies.

The literature also has several strands reflecting the different perspectives of the various authors.

For example, a number of authors have speculated on changes in working time in the context of a shift from industrial to a post-industrial knowledge-based economy. Most notable among these recent authors is Charles Handy of the United Kingdom whose seminal work on these issues has influenced the popular writing of American authors like William Bridges (Jobshift) and Jeremy Rifkin (The End of Work). The impact of technology and globalization on the nature of work figures prominently in the workings of Franklin, Beck, Menzies, Aronowitz and DiFazio, all of whom predict significant gains in productivity. These gains have the potential to result in shorter work time. However one feature of the current structural adjustment is the widespread use of downsizing to increase competitiveness and the increased reliance on part-time, temporary and contract workers who are not adequately covered by the current social safety net. Several authors, observing a growing polarization in working time ("too much work for some, and not enough for others") address issues of equity, particularly as they relate to women and youth who are over represented in non-standard and contingent work. In essence this literature raises major concerns about how work and income will be distributed and how revenue will be generated in the emerging knowledge society.

Another important thread running through the literature is the concern about what Juliet Schor refers to as the "work-and-spend cycle" and its relationship - via consumer led demands on resources - to environmental protection and sustainable development. In a similar vein, other authors raise fundamental questions about the deterioration in the quality of life, as more of both men and women's prime years are consumed by paid work, leaving time for little else. Most of these authors advocate a commitment to shorter working time to facilitate a better balance between work and family responsibilities and improve the level of social cohesion in communities.

The literature includes a number of studies which document, at the economy level, changes in working time both historically and across different countries. These studies indicate that historical reductions in working time have leveled out at about 40 hours per week and the trend appears to be reversing as long hours are on the increase. Among the western industrialized countries, Japan leads

the way in the number of hours worked annually followed by the United States and Canada. Workers in European countries, (with the exception of the UK) generally have the shortest working time.

Working time issues have usually had a higher profile during periods of economic down-turns; but sustained levels of high unemployment, together with broader social concerns about work and family balance have meant that these issues continue to receive attention from social and economic analysts despite the recent period of economic growth.

1.2 Reductions in Working Time and Job Creation

Current concerns among unions around working time reductions are attempts to redistribute work in response to increasing concerns about unemployment and income levels.

Most of the recent experience with initiatives to create or preserve jobs through working time reductions has been in the European community, notably in France, Germany, Netherlands , and the Nordic countries. Work-sharing experiments have taken many forms and often involve the state directly in income support and/ or subsidies to businesses.

It is generally conceded that reductions in working time could theoretically preserve if not create employment. Furthermore it is expected that the larger the reduction in working time, the greater their potential impact on unemployment. However, studies of specific programs, particularly in Europe have indicated mixed results. There are many issues of contention which include:

- assessment of the impact of reductions in working time on job creation;
- estimation of productivity gains;
- the ability to find suitably qualified workers to substitute for those who have reduced their working time;
- increased costs to employers with respect to ongoing operations and the fixed costs associated with hiring;
- implications for the state in terms of both revenue and expenditures.

More generally, government work-sharing initiatives have been criticized by some as interfering with labour market adjustment and “postponing the inevitable”.

In North America, the governments of Canada, Ontario, and Quebec have all launched major policy reviews within the past five years to consider the potential

of changes in working time to generate or preserve jobs, improve work and family balance, and support the development of a productive and competitive workforce. These policy reviews have produced a wide range of recommendations including capping paid overtime, reducing the standard work week, increasing the duration of maternity, paternity and parental leaves, providing time off for family reasons, providing a legislated entitlement to education leave and encouraging phased-in retirement.

Work-sharing or short time compensation schemes have been less extensive in North America than in Europe. In Canada, there have been a number of mandated working time reductions in the context of recent down-sizing in the public sector (in Ontario, Manitoba and New Brunswick) but they have not been documented in the literature. The Canadian Unemployment Insurance Worksharing Program, which has been operating since 1982, was the subject of a major evaluation in 1993. The evaluation findings suggest that the program met its objectives with respect to preserving jobs during periods of short term adjustment. However, the federal program, like a similar Quebec Government program, has not been heavily utilized.

Early retirement schemes have been used in some European countries as a way of creating employment for younger workers. These efforts have proven to be both costly and largely ineffective in terms of job creation. Partial retirement schemes have also been tried with generally disappointing results. Delsen reports for example that only Sweden has what could be considered a successful program.

Legislation, income support programs, tax measures, collective bargaining, government as employer, and increased public awareness have all been identified as potential levers for change. A review of the literature reveals no consensus with respect to the effectiveness of large scale efforts by government to create jobs through working time reductions. The broad consensus is that voluntary reductions in working time, by agreement between the parties involved, offer the most viable approach to redistributing work and have generally been judged to be more successful. This means that any significant changes in working time will be determined in large part by what happens in the workplace.

1.3 Flexible Work Arrangements

There is a general recognition throughout the literature that workers are facing greater time stress particularly as a result of having to juggle work and family responsibilities. At the same time, companies are finding they are operating in a changed business environment as a result of increasing international competition

and rapid technological change. Discussions of flexible work arrangements therefore occur frequently in the human resource management literature in the context of workers' need for a better balance between work and family responsibilities. The discussions also reflect the broader context of efforts to improve productivity and competitiveness. The increased use of technology in the workplace, have given the potential to extend the hours of operation (to meet customer demand or to maximize the use of expensive capital equipment) and to provide services in entirely different ways that may not rely on a traditional work week. These trends have put pressure on employers to adopt more flexibility in scheduling hours of work. Typically, flexible work arrangements include flexible hours; compressed work weeks; part-time work; job sharing; time off for family reasons; various leaves for the care of dependents and education and training; working from home (telework) and phased-in retirement.

The work and family issue has received a lot of attention in the literature growing out of a general concern with the larger number of women in the labour force compared to 30 years ago and a similar rise in the number of dual earner families. Work and family programs, which are widespread among large employers in both the public and private sectors, may consist of the provision of child care facilities, dependent care counselling services, maternity and parental leave, time off for family reasons as well as flexible work arrangements. The Work/Family Institute describes three levels in the development of work and family initiatives. The first level involves introducing a set of specific programs; the second level involves integrating the programs into a broader range of human resource management policies and the third level involves changing corporate culture so that concern for families permeates all elements of the organization. Most work and family initiatives are at the first or second level.

Flexible work arrangements have generally been judged to be the most valuable elements of work and family initiatives. Although work and family policies are quite common, utilization of the options available continues to be a problem. Most of the literature points to job insecurity, stagnating income, and organizational culture as the main barriers to greater uptake.

Telework has also been covered extensively in the literature. As a phenomenon, home based work exhibits a wide range of possibilities from teachers and office workers with good paying jobs and benefits to textile and temporary workers with little else but contingent job security. Generalizations about working from home are therefore difficult to make. The literature identifies a number of issues which tend to reflect the diversity of experiences. Some workers may feel isolated from the type of group and social interactions that can be beneficial to work performance. A number of unions studies have shown that hours of work would be longer for home-based workers.

The age of retirement has been decreasing especially as downsizing programs have relied heavily on early retirement incentives. Partial retirement schemes have been tried with mixed results. The Canadian Council on Social

Development indicated that the rate of part-time participation among men and women aged 55 to 64 had increased mainly as a result of voluntary reduction in working hours. However, there were some negative aspects particularly around pension issues.

Despite the emphasis on life-long learning which has been identified as a key element of human resource development strategy in the new economy, the literature on the availability, use and impact of education, training and sabbatical leaves appears to be very limited.

2.0 CONCLUSION

Changes in the labour market and conditions are leading to new practices in the workplace around work time reductions and work arrangements. The literature reflects a growing concern around the need to find a means to redistribute work and help create or preserve employment opportunities. Similarly, findings ways to reduce the time pressures on individual workers is a dominant concern. Work time reduction has been proposed as one solution.

The debate around working time is part of a larger discussion over the future of work. Part of this debate centres on whether there will be a general surplus of workers in the economy in comparison to the number of jobs available. Work arrangements represent one area where individuals, unions, business and government can perhaps affect the distribution of work in response to changing labour markets and business environments.

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