



Work Well, Play Well, Live Well Statistics Canada's Workplace Wellness Strategy

When thinking about working conditions, the federal government may not pop into your head as a model of excellence. But life still holds some surprises. Like any organization, the federal government wants to attract and retain the brightest and best employees to function effectively. Once hired, employees in the public service struggle with the same issues as any other working person, juggling their work and personal lives.

Statistics Canada strives to produce a broad range of statistics that help Canadians better understand their country. It is highly respected worldwide. To fulfil its mandate, Statistics Canada's human resources goal is a stable workforce of high calibre employees in long-term careers. This goal is supported throughout the department's culture and through a comprehensive human resources strategy.

The 5,800 employees at Statistics Canada are luckier than many in either the public or private sector. For example, the department has a no-layoff policy, started in the 90s. Further, employees don't compete for specific jobs, but for specific levels of proficiency. Thus, employees can move between divisions with ease.

The department makes a sizeable investment in training for each employee. About 3% of its budget is invested in training, which translated to about \$5.5-million in 2003. New recruits receive about 20 training days per year. A training centre with 30 full-time trainers located on the premises is always busy with a wide variety of activities. Sange de Silva, Director General of Institutions and Social Statistics says, "We recruit people, we develop them, we make sure they have the capacity, the resources invested in them so they can go anywhere in the organization and be productive."

Employees also have access to a full complement of services and facilities that promote health, well-being and work-life balance. These services are guided by a 24-member Wellness Committee, and include onsite child care, an introductory work-life balance workshop, a rich fitness program, dozens of special interest clubs, numerous merit awards, employee appreciation days, career guidance, mentoring for all new recruits, and smoking cessation and health monitoring programs.

The employee wellness policies that have been developed pay off. The majority of senior managers have been with the department for twenty or more years, rising through the ranks, and the department's voluntary turnover rate (5%) is significantly lower than other government departments of comparable size (12.5%). A recent employee survey showed that 77% of employees say they are able to balance their personal, family and work needs, 82% feel supported with flex-

ible work arrangements, and 92% are satisfied with their current work arrangement. These are impressive numbers of satisfied employees.

This level of satisfaction can be attributed in large part to Statistics Canada's policy of open communication. For example, the department's formal Workplace Wellness Strategy came about through an innovative Employee Opinion Survey,¹ which was developed specifically to measure employee satisfaction on a range of issues. The survey identified a number of matters that required attention and work was begun to address them. Because the employee survey is repeated annually, the process of adjustment and improvement is ongoing, and employees see that their ideas and concerns are taken seriously and acted upon. Between surveys, there are several other mechanisms employees can use to formally voice ideas, grievances and concerns, but the majority of employees feel they can bring up issues more informally because they are secure that they will be listened to and treated fairly.

Complementing and supporting open communications, are a commitment to valuing people, investing in facilities, providing activities and enabling work-life balance. These interdependent factors make up Statistics Canada's Workplace Wellness Strategy.

As is the case in many organizations, employees who labour under a heavy workload are affected in a host of ways related to health and well-being, and feeling overworked is a big culprit in work-life imbalance. Statistics Canada estimates that their workload capacity was reached in 2001, and with no budget to hire more people and no sign of the workload decreasing, the issue clearly required new thinking.

De Silva explains: "For a lot of people, the problem of workload is a question of two variables. One is the amount of work; the other is the number of people available to do the work. The simple solution is to either reduce the work or hire more people to do it. That is definitely not as simple as it sounds. Our workload problem could be for various reasons. Maybe our people are not trained enough to do the job. Maybe we are not organized well enough to do the job. There could be all kinds of other variables."

Being surrounded by statistical expertise has its benefits. The first step taken was an additional survey to measure and analyze the extent of the workload management problem. This spurred several meetings with staff, managers and the wellness committee, and focus groups with staff. It became clear that there were a number of effective strategies already in place throughout the department, but, since the organization is large and disparate, these practices were not



generally known beyond each specific work area. The Committee decided to share these practices elsewhere, initiating a Workload Management Pilot Project.

Ten directors committed to trying out some of these best practices and to engaging their staff in finding their own solutions to workload imbalance. De Silva elaborates: "Basically, directors could do whatever they wanted but with some background – because the strategy has worked somewhere else or because employees had suggested it." After about six months of developing and trying out new strategies, the ten directors reported back.

"We found this works," says de Silva. "What works especially well is employees coming up with solutions. They didn't suggest hiring more people or reducing the workload. Instead they came up with ideas. Why don't we organize it this way, why don't we do some shift work. They came up with all kinds of ideas, hundreds of ideas." For example, one division changed from a more hierarchical management to a more matrix style of management – this is not as easy as it sounds in government.

From this pilot, the committee decided to implement the process throughout Statistics Canada, engaging all the directors and staff. This has been in progress for about a year and a half, and the results are now being assessed. There is anecdotal evidence that workload management is coming under control. As de Silva says, "When it comes to workload, there are no magic solutions. It is culture driven, it is temporal, it is organization specific, and specific even to the division."

One aspect of workload balance that is still sometimes problematic is the tendency for some middle managers to take on very high workloads. This group of employees is ambitious to get ahead in the organization. "They never say 'no' to anything," says de Silva. But it is their staff that bears the brunt of them saying "yes." At the same time, new recruits aren't always given enough to do and want to do more. "This is work in progress," he adds.

In 2003, to its credit, Statistics Canada received a Healthy Workplace Award from the National Quality Institute. Its commitment to providing a positive work environment and a workplace that supports employee well-being is characterized by the slogan included on the well-used Intranet pages dedicated to workplace wellness – *work well, play well, live well*.

¹. The Statistics Canada employee survey is so highly regarded that it has been adapted and implemented in all other government departments as the Public Service Employee Survey.

About the author

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