



Royal Bank Letter

Published by Royal Bank of Canada

Vol. 73 No. 2

March/April 1992

The Civilized Workplace

Faced with changes in the nature of the labour force, companies are having to accommodate workers' personal needs by introducing flexible work and family care programs. It could result in a real transformation in business philosophy...

When we in the current working generation tell our grandchildren about the way things were in our youth, we will doubtless face a credibility problem. The kiddies' eyes will widen in bemusement as we recall that in most families in our parents' day, only daddies went out to work, and mommies stayed home to look after the children at least until they were into their teens. In the interests of preserving the young ones' respect for their elders, it might be better not to broach the dubious assertion that most North American families at the time managed to live on a single income. That would be just about as bizarre as saying that women were rarely if ever found in certain occupations such as fire-fighting or truck-driving, and that very few of them were butchers, legislators, surgeons, or judges ... or corporate bosses, especially of men.

It will be difficult enough to convince tomorrow's children that these conditions actually did exist without trying to explain the reasons for them. Why were there no women in some jobs, Grandpa? "Well, there were just some things women didn't do." Was that because they weren't up to doing those jobs physically, mentally or emotionally? "Not really, it was just that they weren't expected to do them." And why didn't many women become big bosses — because they didn't want to? "No, because the *men* were supposed to be the bosses." Why was that? "Well ... Ah, let's talk about something else."

It would not be the first time in history that people have been at a loss to trace the logic of labour practices that were formerly taken for granted. It is difficult, for instance, to defend slavery on any grounds, but there were once many kindly, God-fearing planters in the Southern United States to whom the owning, buying and selling of human beings seemed part of the natural order of things.

There is little logical justification for male domination of the working world, yet it has always been a standard feature of the Protestant work ethic. "Woman should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children," no less an authority than Martin Luther wrote.

The original thinking behind the work ethic was that man's spiritual salvation lay largely in honest labour. It lent itself ideally to industrialization, in which work was no longer done at home but in factories requiring concentrated and steady toil.

The work ethic proved to be a highly flexible instrument for those who profited by it. For example, factory and mine owners who discovered that they could drive down the price of labour by employing women and children in conditions of neo-slavery simultaneously discovered that a woman's place was not necessarily in the home.

The ethic was twisted out of recognition by rapacious capitalists in the 19th century. To excuse their depredations, they hatched the theory of "social Darwinism," in which Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection was extended to human beings. In nature, they argued, the strong prey on the weak, and the weakest become extinct; so in business it was only natural that financially-stronger corporations and persons should prey on their weaker counterparts. The old-time plutocrats found a rich source of prey among their own employees.

But even though they tended to call the tune of popular opinion through incestuous relations with the press, there were limits to what they could get away with. Public outrage put an end to child labour on this continent in the early 1900s, and the worst abuses of female labour in industry were eliminated at around the same time. In general, women settled into the role of "homemakers" in the first half of this century.

Nevertheless, as Pierre Berton relates in his 1990 book *The Great Depression*, women were savagely exploited by outwardly respectable employers in Canada up until World War II.

Of course, male workers also were cruelly used in the 1930s, when any job at all was seen as a gift from heaven. The watchword of wage and benefits policy was "what the market will bear." Employees were told bluntly that they could accept the shabby working conditions offered or make way for the multitude of hungry candidates clamouring for their jobs.

A folk memory of the Great Depression tinted attitudes towards work in the postwar era. Even when

*He took the trip,
and returned to
find his assistant
bidding for his job*

plenty of positions were available, young men and women whose parents had been through the depression considered themselves lucky to be securely employed. Particularly at

the management and supervisory levels, people developed strong loyalties to their employers. With the Cold War against communism under way, capitalism went from being an economic arrangement to being a quasi-religious faith.

In the ideological atmosphere of the time, the Protestant work ethic burned with a purer intensity than ever. A person's worth was measured mainly by his or her capacity for hard work, or the appearance thereof. Effort beyond the norm was rewarded with promotion, accompanied by a rising income. And status and income became the leading criteria for personal success.

The Company Man emerged from the gleaming new office towers of North American cities. With him came the Company Wife, armed with her string of pearls and her gourmet cookbook in the campaign to further her husband's career. It was plainly understood in corporate and professional circles that the role of a married woman was to run the "support system" necessary for a successful married man's advancement. After a hard day's work, he could retire for a well-deserved rest in a well-regulated household adorned with well-adjusted children. She was expected to put up with the mess and trouble of raising them.

Many of these men were more married to their jobs than to their spouses. If the Company Man had to choose between attending a meeting out of town or visiting his sick daughter in the hospital, there was actually no choice at all: he would go to the meeting.

Great changes in attitude have taken place since the 1960s, when rebellious young people pushed western society into a sweeping reassessment of values.

Still, the notion that work must come before family is commonly accepted to this day. A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* told of a vice president who refused to postpone a long-delayed vacation with his wife in order to make a presentation to the company chairman. His assistant, he said, could do it just as well as he could. He took the trip, and returned to find his assistant basking in the chairman's admiration and bidding to unseat him in his job.

"We all know such stories, and of tensions between business obligation and family commitment," the authors wrote. "*The Wall Street Journal* and the Gallup Organization have reported that a substantial majority of executives surveyed believe success in business requires the making of 'personal and family sacrifices.'"

Up to now in many companies, the take-it-or-leave-it approach has remained the guiding principle of employee relations. Behind this is the idea that employment is strictly a commercial proposition in which a buyer and seller come together to make a hard-headed deal. Economists talk about the "labour market" and "surpluses and shortages" of skills as if human effort were the same as any other commodity.

The language chosen in a demographic commentary by two well-known Canadian economists reflects this view: "Slower labour force growth and aging will *force* major adjustments on both management and labour" (our italics). They go on to say that, in a dramatic reversal of current trends, Canada will soon face a labour shortage caused by a thinning-out of the population of working age. A nation long accustomed to living with the legacy of a baby boom is headed for quite different conditions as the sparse generation born in the 1960s and 1970s comes to dominate the labour force.

Demographers say that this paucity of people will soon bring about a shortage of skills, creating a seller's market for qualified workers. The current trend to early retirement will be reversed among well-qualified people; the demand for older workers will be at its highest in many years. Proportionately more women than ever will be in the labour force, in which female participation is expected to stand at well over 60 per cent by the end of the century. More handicapped persons will be employed, not especially out of corporate social responsibility, but out of corporate need.

Human resources management will increasingly dwell on matching corporate needs with personal needs as the competition to hire skilled, educated and experienced workers intensifies. Probably the greatest personal need will be for flexible working conditions that allow people to cope with family responsibilities.

As more women go to work, as they have babies later in their lives and the average age of the population climbs, familial concerns will become ever more prominent. More and more individuals will have to divide their time among working for pay, raising children, and caring for aged parents. It has been calculated that, with people living longer and thus becoming more susceptible to debilitating ailments, the average American woman soon will spend roughly the same proportion of her lifetime helping her parents as raising children — 17 to 18 years.

The changing nature of family life presents a growing challenge to North American business to adapt

A change from making life run in harmony with the steam engine

to social realities. The time when a working mother was a widowed, separated or divorced woman stuck in a low-level position has long passed. Now she may be married or not; and she

may be an executive or specialist whose ability and training make her highly valuable to the organization. She will not leave her job permanently when she starts having children, which may be in her thirties or even forties. She sees no reason why she should have to choose between having a family and having a career; she feels that she can be equally dedicated to both, as long as her job does not detract from her children's wellbeing.

A new type of male worker has also appeared. Often he is a one of a two-income couple who shares domestic duties with his wife or "significant other." He is likely to have a different set of values from men in the past, defining success in terms of all aspects of his life and looking upon his career as only part of the whole. As repeated surveys have shown, he may very well be under conflicting pressures between his work and having to care for children and/or dependent parents. But he is probably less willing to deal with these problems openly than his female counterparts.

As Fran Sussner Rodgers and Charles Rodgers point out in an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, "Numerous reports show that few men take advantage of the formal parental leave available to them in many companies. Yet a recent study shows that many men do indeed take time off from work at the birth of a child, but that they do so by piecing together other forms of leave — vacation, personal leave, sick leave — that they see as more acceptable." In many cases, regrettably enough, this reflects realistic thinking. One human resources executive told a researcher: "If a man requested leave for this purpose [child

care], his career would take a dive."

All the research into the subject suggests that changes in attitudes are called for not only in management, but among individual employees of both sexes. Management must free itself of the doctrine that unconventional work arrangements encourage slacking off, or are incompatible with a career. Men in dual-income situations must become more willing to take advantage of work-and-family programs and shoulder their share of household burdens. As New York career consultant Marilyn Machlowitz writes, "Corporate husbands can also make sure that their wives aren't doing double duty. It is very common for women who are former homemakers to take on a full-time job without letting up on domestic duties."

Managers may have trouble letting go of former employers' prerogatives such as dictating what hours people will work and at what location. The time-clock mentality is deeply ingrained in the business mentality. It took hold "when steam first began to pump and wheels go round at so many revolutions per minute," in the colourful words of Irish social commentator George W. Russell. "What are called business habits were invented to make the life of man run in harmony with the steam engine, and his movements rival the train in punctuality."

Many of the programs developed to allow people to care for their families without being penalized at work are based on the realization that traditional work schedules are not sacred. People may work part-time or odd hours to suit their circumstances. Two employees may share one job, allowing each enough time to meet familial obligations. People may work at home by electronic means, checking into the office when necessary. Or they may work a compressed work week, which gives them an extra day with their families.

In larger units of time, workers approaching retirement age may opt for phased or partial retirement. Maternity leave is being extended in some organizations to allow working mothers as much time as they feel they need to establish suitable child care arrangements. Companies now assist employees in various ways to provide child care and care for ailing parents. These and other measures form a category of "peace-of-mind benefits" that were unheard-of a few years ago.

At the same time, old corporate attitudes die hard, particularly the attitude that profit maximization is the be-all and end-all of business. Human resources practitioners still deem it necessary to "sell" companies on the idea of paying more attention to their employees' human needs by pointing to the bottom line.

Experts urge the adoption of flexible working ar-



rangements because they can be expected to reduce tardiness, absenteeism, and wasted time on non-business telephone calls. By helping to provide day care, they say, companies can combat the "three o'clock syndrome," named for the time of day when school gets out and production lags because workers

Treating workers as human beings, not as factors of production

are worried about their children being on their own. Assisting workers to cope with caring for elderly loved ones is promoted as a way of retaining a company's investment in training

high-performing employees. Without such aid, they might be obliged to quit.

In macro-economic terms, responsive human relations policies are also seen through the prism of practicality. "Our economy needs the most skilled and productive work force it can possibly find in order to remain competitive. That work force must reproduce itself and give adequate care to the children who are the work force of the future," the *Harvard Business Review* declares.

It is clear that the competitive fate of North American business will depend on how successfully it deals with the human element. As Paul A. Samuelson wrote in his standard textbook, *Economics*, "Human beings are a nation's most important form of social capital — a high-yielding form, moreover, in which we have invested too little in the past."

Along with this lack of investment, too little thought has been given to workers as complete human beings with vital interests outside of their places of employment. During the hey-day of the industrial revolution, Abraham Lincoln said that "a blind horse on a treadmill" made a perfect illustration of how employers would like the American worker to act. An echo of this attitude may be heard in the pronouncements of those widely-quoted sages who say that a corporation cannot be expected to have a social conscience. The sole responsibility of corporate management is to make as much money as possible within the basic rules of society, they maintain.

This theory ignores the change in social function which corporations have undergone in the last few decades. According to sociologist Daniel Bell in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, "To the extent that the traditional sources of social support (the small town, church and family) have crumbled in society,

new kinds of organizations, particularly the corporation, have taken their place; and these inevitably become the arenas in which the demands for security, justice, and esteem are made. To think of the business corporation, then, simply as an economic instrument is to fail totally to understand the meaning of the social changes of the last half century."

Bell introduced the concept of "membership" rather than "employeehip" in a company, which is expected to provide "a satisfying way of life for its members." Obviously the provision of a satisfying way of life must include taking a direct interest in its members' personal wellbeing.

In all the talk about the commercial benefits of adjusting operations to employees' needs, little attention

Reconciling the imperatives of work with those of domestic love

has been paid to the non-commercial side of the question. No one, it seems, has bothered to point out that treating workers as feeling human beings rather than as factors of production

is simply a matter of doing the right thing. In this, the social standards of business are merely catching up to the humanistic standards of other aspects of western society.

"Civilization consists in the multiplication and refinement of human wants," wrote the American scientist Robert A. Millikan. Not all of those wants are for material things. The most profound of them are in the realm of feelings. The new programs which enlightened businesses are developing to cope with the changes in the labour force directly address the deep feelings that exist within intimate family groups.

Writing of his hero, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalyst Theodore Reik observed: "He limited his goals in analytical treatment to bringing a patient to the point where he could work for a living, and learn to love.... Work and love. These are the basics." Organizations which adjust their conditions of work to accommodate the personal responsibilities of their employees are essentially reconciling the imperatives of work with the imperatives of domestic love.

In so doing, they are moving away from the tough-guy primitivism which for too long has been held up among North American management as an admirable quality. They are moving towards a more civilized society — one in which the "basics" of work and love need no longer tear people apart emotionally.

