

1995

employment trends

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Introduction

Trends in Non-Standard Employment

The current employment status of the respondents breaks down as follows:

34% permanent full-time

23% permanent part-time

11% temporary full-time

15% temporary part-time

9% self-employed and casual labour

8% unemployed

Non-Standard Employment Personal Impacts and Employment Impacts:

long-term planning

high cost of living

low self-esteem

raising children

pressure to perform

lack of security

survival of the fittest?

Choice in Employment Status

Why do people work in NSE positions?

What factors influence this choice?

What are the major issues involved?

What are the preferred alternatives?

Women and Work in Today's Economy

current trends

women at home

women at work

future trends

In a study conducted over the early months of 1993, the Edmonton Social Planning Council interviewed 174 people about their employment status and how they perceive current employment trends. The focus of the study was on people who are or have been involved in non-standard employment (NSE), that is part-time, temporary or contract work.

In a recent study on trends in non-standard employment by the Edmonton Social Planning Council, a number of questions were raised about the issue of choice in employment. How many people choose temporary or part-time work? What situations influence these choices? How much choice is available in today's employment market? Do employment related policies have an impact on the choices people make? The following fact sheets suggest some answers to these questions.

The 127 respondents had all been employed in at least one non-standard position since completing their full-time education. From this group, a number of individuals agreed to participate in one of the nine focus groups set up to discuss the issues in greater detail.

While the initial contacts were made from a random selection of telephone numbers, the criteria and self-selection resulted in a study sample of which 68% were women and 32% men. Partly in consequence, many of the issues raised by the respondents specifically related to the concerns of women in the workplace. The following summary is based primarily on their overall responses. ♡

Employment Trends

The survey respondents overall noted a trend away from full-time full-year employment and discussed what that trend means for them. Only 34% of the respondents were employed in permanent full-time positions while 37% were working under conditions not of their choosing (i.e., contract, temporary or part-time), mostly because full-time permanent positions were not available. Most of the others who participated in the study preferred working in non-standard positions.

Finding Non-Standard Employment

The most frequently cited source of information about non-standard positions was word of mouth; 38% of the jobs were found that way. Twenty per cent were found through job searches and 14% were found through newspaper ads. Other jobs were found through a variety of sources, including internal postings, employment agencies and unions. None of the people we spoke with found positions through the Canada Employment Centre.

Few people mentioned unions in relation to finding non-standard employment. While 25% of the respondents worked in unionized settings, only 19% belonged to the union and only one individual found a non-standard position through the union.

Benefits of Non-Standard Employment

The benefit of NSE most frequently cited by respondents was flexibility. A number of people commented on the ability to set their own hours. For part-time workers, the benefits related mostly to having time to spend with children or to participate in other activities. Eleven per cent of the respondents identified "income" as the benefit they received from non-standard employment, either as "better than nothing or welfare" or as a supplement to other earnings. People who work in temporary positions commented on variety in employment and opportunities to develop new skills or to test their interests. A few people stated that NSE is less stressful than full-time, permanent employment or that they were able to enjoy their jobs more with non-standard hours. Twenty-three per cent of the study sample were unable to identify any benefits of non-standard employment.

Problems Associated with Non-Standard Employment

The response to this question was much stronger than to the previous one. Over 50% of the respondents commented on the lack of benefits

for non-standard workers and almost as many expressed concerns about the lack of stability or job security.

The third major issue was that NSE frequently does not provide enough income to meet expenses. Other responses included no choice of hours; no future; lack of respect; and stress over finding new jobs. Only eight percent of the respondents cited no problems in working NSE.

Treatment of Non-Standard Workers

Most of the survey respondents believed that non-standard workers are treated differently by employers than those who work full-time, full-year. While a few felt that part-time, temporary or contract workers are treated better than others, the majority believe that, at least in some matters, non-standard employees are treated worse. The issue of most concern is the lack of pensions or any other benefits.

Attraction of Non-Standard Positions

Respondents were asked to identify features of employment that would encourage them to accept a part-time, contract or temporary position. The number one response was "rate of pay of the job." The second major attraction was on the job training or upgrading, followed closely by opportunities for promotion. Medical and sick leave, vacation and pension benefits were also rated highly by the study participants.

When asked if these features were included in their most recent non-standard position, the response was much lower. Forty-six per cent of the respondents indicated there had been job training or upgrading opportunities and 20 to 40 per cent received vacation, medical or pension benefits. Twenty-one per cent said there were opportunities for promotion or career advancement in the positions they held. ♣

This research was conducted with the support of a National Welfare Grant. This is one of a series of articles under the title Contract and Temporary Work: Impact on employees, social policy and programs in Canada.

Personal Impacts

Long-Term Planning

Most of the focus group participants commented on the difficulties faced by non-standard employees trying to plan for the future. Few were prepared to make any long-term commitments. Among the younger group members, questions were raised about whether they would ever be able to afford to have children or to go back to school.

One woman spoke of an RRSP that her parents had started for her a number of years ago and that she has continued to develop. She stated that her financial situation now leads her to feel that she might be better off by cashing it in to pay her bills, but on the other hand she is aware that it's the only form of security she has for the future.

A few people commented specifically on the cost of housing and the risks associated with buying property in an uncertain economy.

High Cost of Living

Numerous comments were made about incomes not keeping pace with expenses. Whether a person was part of a family unit, a single person on their own or one of a group sharing costs, there was a general sense that most of the focus group members did not consider themselves to be well off.

In households where there was more than one income, there was usually one person working full-time full-year. It was considered important by the participants for this person to have a decent benefit package that provides family coverage, because this rarely came with non-standard positions.

There were also a number of comments made about the fact that incomes are not going up at the same rate as costs. One woman said that her husband was earning the same hourly wage now that he received 12 years ago because production costs had climbed so high.

Low Self-Esteem

A number of participants who felt they had little opportunity to find full-time permanent positions spoke of the impact their employment status had on their emotional state. This generally fell into two categories. People from two earner households in which the other person was the primary bread winner commented on their feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy. For others, the main issue was expectations placed upon them (by themselves or their spouses) to be looking for a better job or doing more with their time.

The second group who commented on self-esteem issues were people whose feelings of personal value were directly linked to their employment status.

Raising Children

A number of people have conflicting feelings over whether their children will benefit more from having a second income in the

household or a parent at home with them full-time. There was a sense among the respondents that much of the violence and youth crime we are seeing these days is partly a result of the difficult choices families are being forced to make.

People expressed concern about the negative feelings their children pick up because of the tight financial times. When parents fear getting laid off or worry about how they will pay the bills, the children react.

A major worry for many parents is what kind of future their children might face. At the same time, there is concern that the family income may not be enough to support the children as they get older.

Employment Impacts

Pressure to Perform

A number of people commented on a change in the attitude of employers who know that there are hundreds of applicants looking for work. There is much competition within the workplace and the people who do well are the ones who are putting in extra effort, such as attending night school or participating in projects outside the regular work schedule.

Respondents in health care and related occupations appeared to be feeling some of the impacts of employment trends quite harshly. Many have been laid off while others have been forced into part-time positions.

Lack of Security

Even among those respondents who had been with one employer for many years, there was a feeling that jobs are not secure. Full-time jobs have been changed to contract and some people have been forced to reapply for their positions.

In many cases, benefits are directly connected to the length of employment or the number of hours worked, so employees lose both the pay they need to live on and their security for the future.

Survival of the fittest?

People felt very strongly that the economy is likely to get worse before it gets better, that government was unable or unwilling to deal with employment issues, and that it was up to each individual to do the best they could to survive. ♣

Why do people work in non-standard positions?

When asked why they were working in a non-standard position, the most common responses among our study sample fell into three categories: those who like the variety, flexibility and challenge provided by working in a series of jobs; those who prefer to devote more time to family and other activities; and those who have been unable to find full-time full-year positions.

What factors influence the choice to take a non-standard position?

People choose to take non-standard positions for a number of reasons. Many mentioned issues of control, including controlling the hours they work, control over the types of work they are willing to take and control in terms of knowing where they stand. There is a sense of "being your own boss" in taking contract work, even when there is someone else with overall responsibility.

For the parents we spoke with, the major influence in choice of employment was the opportunity to work hours that fit their children's needs. Many women seek part-time work while their children are at school but prefer to be at home when school is out.

Many respondents mentioned having to choose between spending time with their children or having money for "extras". Most of the family members we spoke with said that it would be difficult to live entirely on one income but they would rather make do with less so their children can get the attention they need.

There was talk about the impact of past choices on current opportunities, and a greater concern about what impact today's choices will have on the future. A number of women related stories of how they were at a disadvantage in the workforce because they had taken time off to be at home with their children. As a result, their skills were out of date or job market demands had changed.

People spoke of the limitations associated with choosing non-standard employment. Self-employment was one option that appealed to many, but the start-up costs make it a difficult route to follow. Job-sharing was another idea favoured by a number of our respondents, but few employers encourage this alternative and some won't allow it at all.

Overall, there was a sense that "choice" was not an appropriate term in relation to employment.

What are the major issues for people in non-standard positions?

For many people there was a feeling of helplessness associated with the current job market. They do not feel that many choices are available. The power rests in the hands of employers who know there are far more people looking for work than there are jobs.

Lack of job security was raised by almost all the people we spoke with, regardless of their present employment status. The impacts of the current employment trends are felt by most families and most workers. Those who are employed full-time stated that employer's expectations are rising as workers are forced to fill in the void created by cut-backs. For those working in part-time or temporary positions there is a constant fear of being laid off.

What alternatives would people like to have available?

Employers should allow workers to choose a shorter work week. Many people would prefer to work 30 to 35 hours per week instead of 35 to 40.

Concern was expressed over the skills being lost as more people are being encouraged to take early retirement or simply laid off. People suggested that there should be more focus on older workers helping to train those who are just entering the workforce.

A number of women felt that things could be improved by giving greater recognition to homemakers and volunteer work. Policies, such as homemaker's pensions, would make these choices more viable.

People would like to have more support in small business development. A number commented on problems associated with trying to make it on their own. Specifically, they need help with start-up costs and consultation to help them succeed. People felt they had good ideas that should be profitable but no way to put them into action.

It was suggested that a problem in our society is that people do not know how to use their leisure time, resulting on too much focus on employment related activities. People would like to see more emphasis on being creative, on how to improve quality of life without increased resources, and on ways to adapt to a new structure. ♣

Current Trends

The changing structure of the workforce in the past decade has had particular significance for women. Sixty-nine per cent of Albertans working part-time are women as are 53% of those who worked 26 or fewer weeks in a year.

Further analysis shows that the reasons women worked part-time fell into four categories: personal or family responsibilities, school, full-time work not available and full-time not wanted.

Women at Home

Among the married women in the focus groups who had children, most spoke at length about the problems trying to find a balance between family and work. They all felt there was a need for two incomes, although a few said theirs was secondary and was used to provide the "extras" they could not afford on their husbands' incomes alone. Others said they would prefer to be working fewer hours or not at all but felt this was not possible given their current financial resources.

The two issues most frequently raised in the focus groups were the attitudes of partners who had full-time paid employment and the sense of isolation that can develop in people outside the paid workforce. For many women there is a feeling of powerlessness while others mentioned low self-esteem associated with their husbands' control over money.

Women said their husbands expect them to do most of the work at home, whether or not they are in the paid labour force. A small number said the work at home was shared, but the majority stated that the work would just pile up until they had time to do it.

A number of other issues were raised by these women. Many were concerned about today's generation of children who are frequently left with little supervision. Another woman said she would not consider taking full-time work outside their home because she doesn't trust a day care to provide the level of care her children need.

Women at Work

A variety of comments were made about the difficulties women have in the workforce, some relating to their family responsibilities and some a result of past and present discrimination. For others, the current workforce trends and lack of employment opportunities were the main issues.

Many women spoke of problems which resulted from taking time out of the workforce to be at home with young children. On the other hand, some women said they are afraid to have children now because

they can't afford to be removed from the workforce.

Much resentment was expressed about the position women are placed in when they choose to have a family. Concerns were raised about the problems getting stabilized in the workforce, or trying to get started after a number of years at home. Particular problems arise for older women who have been at home for a long time.

Attitudes toward women in the workforce were also addressed. People mentioned difficulties dealing with the "old boys network" and other forms of discrimination against women. Many women feel that there is little more than lip service paid to the concept of equality in the workforce.

On a similar vein, people spoke of the increasing mechanization within offices taking the place of jobs which were previously handled mostly by women. Examples included electronic mail, voice mail and computerized record keeping. Women also mentioned difficulties they faced trying to get a response to their concerns.

Future Trends

The concept of job sharing was one that women often mentioned. A few had tried it or were considering it for themselves while others had only heard about it and were not sure how it would work in practice.

The growth of women in the small business sector is also seen as a positive influence. Examples were given of women with the Body Shop and Mary Kay Cosmetics to show that being supportive of others can lead to success.

People spoke of the need to focus on cooperation rather than competition. Some felt that this would come about as more women open small businesses. This concept was expanded by one group which suggested that society would benefit by recognizing the inter-connectedness of work, family and community.

The other change that many women would like to see is formal recognition of the work done by women in the home. They would like to see this on two levels: first, through changes in policies, including pension and tax legislation; and second, by recognizing the skills required to maintain a home, such as budgeting, time management, and child care, as valid components of a resume. ♣