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Terms of Employment

The state of 'employeeeship' lately has taken on new dimensions. And Canadians have been slow to adapt to changes in life on the job. Employees today are being asked to fill a very tall order. But responding to the challenge will tend to make them into better all-round human beings ...

In this age of individualism, being an employee has suffered a down-grading in public estimation. Some companies now describe their employees by euphemisms such as "associates," as though there were something demeaning about working for anyone but oneself. Television and slick magazines spread the impression that entrepreneurship is the golden road to success and glamour. Wage-earning parents scrimp and save so that their children and grandchildren may become independent professionals.

Through all this, however, the fact remains that the great majority of the people who work in developed countries today are directly employed by businesses, governments, or other organizations. Employees form the backbone of a modern economy, and they should be proud of the indispensable role they play in supporting our society.

In any case, "self-employed" people do not really work for themselves: they work on behalf of their customers, clients, and/or investors. Entrepreneurs or professionals who are seriously interested in building a reputation for quality would be well-advised to think of themselves literally as employees of the people they serve.

Still, considering that "employeeeship" is so pervasive and so central to our way of life, it is remarkable how little attention is paid to it. A lot of thought goes into what makes a good employee in specific occupations, but not into what makes a good employee in general. Business schools concentrate on teaching people how to be bosses, not rank-and-file workers. Company training programs offer more courses for supervisors than for the supervised.

From an historical point of view, the omission is understandable. Two or three generations ago, people knew automatically what was expected of them as employees. Ideally, they would be honest, clean, tidy,

punctual, diligent, cheerful, and obedient. To be sure, these qualities would be assets to any employer at any time; but they were the *only* qualities employers looked for back then.

They did not, for example, look for initiative; if anything, initiative was discouraged. Bosses did not want people who would do things on their own; they wanted people who would do what they were told.

In fact, when it came to filling most jobs, they were none too keen on people who were conspicuously intelligent or well-educated. Someone who was too smart, who knew too much, might turn out to be a troublemaker, questioning orders and attempting to upset the established way of doing things.

Employees who "knew their place" were perfectly suited to the old-fashioned system in which a managerial elite did all the thinking for an organization. In any reasonably large operation, a small group of decision-makers did the planning, dealt with problems, and generally directed an amorphous body of "personnel."

Orders were passed down through a pecking-order of bosses. On the lower levels instructions were usually given verbally, so that there was no need for ground-floor workers to read on the job.

In this and other ways, the typical organization was designed to simplify operations on the lower levels. Work was broken down into disparate tasks which individual workers could perform automatically by sticking to an invariable routine.

At a time when not much thinking was required of blue-collar workers, their education was not much of a factor. Thus it was common practice to leave school and start earning money as soon as the law allowed.

This was especially so in Canada, where the resource-based industries which dominated the economy also offered a simple, tightly-supervised working

environment. You did not need a high school diploma to cut down trees or dig ore out of a mine.

In the circumstances, school and work were viewed as two distinctly different entities. You went to school, and whenever you finished, you went to "work" — real work, not that stuff you did in a classroom. When you did get a job, you usually learned how to do it through experience and coaching by fellow employees.

Skills acquired in this way could easily sustain a person through a working lifetime. For example, someone who learned to operate a hydraulic metal press in 1920 would probably be operating essentially the same machine in 1965.

Times have changed: For one thing, the relative importance of the resource industries in Canada's economy has diminished. But even in the resource

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industries, workers are now called upon to operate sophisticated computerized equipment in mines and mills.

In practically every other field, employees nowadays must be capa-

ble of learning new and often radically different ways of doing things. As a result, the idea of what makes a good employee has been turned inside-out.

Whereas employers once frowned upon employees who thought for themselves, the ability to reason is now a prerequisite for lasting employment. In the words of the Conference Board of Canada's Corporate Council on Education, Canada needs workers who can "think critically and act logically to evaluate situations, solve problems and make decisions," and who have "the ability to identify and suggest new ideas to get the job done — creatively."

These abilities count for nothing if they are not supported by an adequate education. Anyone who expects to get and keep a good job today must be able to undertake retraining, meaning that he or she must be able to read, write, and calculate proficiently. Such is the pace of change that the average young Canadian in the labour force today will probably face the need for substantial retraining several times in his or her career.

Not only can people expect to be retrained in their own jobs, but they may be obliged to learn others. As a paper prepared for The American Society for Training and Development puts it, "Competitive pressures compel employers to shift employees between jobs and responsibilities, putting a premium on the ability to absorb, process, and apply new information quickly and effectively."

Because of reorganizations designed to improve

productivity, many tasks formerly assigned to managers and supervisors are now carried out by line employees. In the new "bossless" work teams, each member is expected to participate in arriving at informed and well-thought-out decisions. In some manufacturing plants, work teams now make production plans, order materials, deal with internal suppliers, maintain quality control, participate in equipment purchases, and meet with customers to discuss their needs.

The distinction between blue-collar and white-collar jobs has faded. Ordinary employees must accept a degree of responsibility which few could have imagined in the days when a worker was a worker and a boss was a boss.

Now, any member of a work team or quality circle may be involved in setting goals and priorities, and managing time, money, and materials. And anyone is likely to be called upon occasionally to act as a leader as leadership shifts among those in the group qualified to take charge in particular situations. Individual employees must be capable of identifying the best time to lead and the best time to follow in pursuit of the best results.

Such redistributions of authority bring into play a whole set of characteristics which workers were inclined to keep to themselves under the old system. When people take on extra responsibility, their personal attitudes and their working lives can no longer be viewed separately.

When workers are put in the position of making decisions together, they must be willing to see the other person's point of view in order to achieve workable compromises. In Canada's diverse society, they must respect divergent views as they are called upon to co-operate with members of other ethnic groups and sexes. They must understand that cultural differences result in different approaches and ways of doing things: Different — not wrong.

*The safest way is
to equip oneself to
"continue to learn
through life"*

The diversity of the population of the new workplace is one of many reasons why the ability to communicate has become imperative to acting as an effective employee. Where people do not have the same mother tongue, there is an added need to ensure that what is being said with reference to work is absolutely clear.

Workers in various situations spend much of their day communicating verbally, and companies consistently report heavy avoidable costs due to misunderstandings. So employees should make conscious efforts to express themselves carefully and

listen effectively. The latter entails not only listening intently, but asking the appropriate questions whenever a misinterpretation might occur.

Of course, written communications are vital too. As more computerized equipment comes into service, there is more and more interaction between worker and machine in written language. A recent study in industrial plants in the United States found that workers spend an ever-increasing portion of their time reading forms, charts, graphs, manuals, computer terminal prompts and the like.

People in positions where no one was ever expected to communicate on paper before are now being asked to write memos, notes, instructions, and presentations. This requires a sufficient command of the language to enable them to sum up information and concepts concisely, and in a way that is sure to be understood.

The ability to read and write must be accompanied by the third fundamental educational skill, the ability to count and calculate. Line workers who have taken over tasks formerly done by junior managers may have to do some figuring to follow specifications and keep track of production and inventories.

A knowledge of higher mathematics may be required to operate computerized equipment and cope with advanced production methods. Representing some of the country's largest employers, the Conference Board's Corporate Council for Education summed up the situation by saying that Canada needs workers who can "understand and solve problems involving mathematics and use the results."

In all, what is being demanded of Canadian workers now or in the near future is rather daunting. The best response to the challenge is to reinforce one's capacity to "continue to learn for life," as the

Steering students back towards the skills the economy needs

Corporate Council says. In many instances, people may have to refresh their knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic — or actually learn them for the first time, either in employer-

sponsored courses or on their own initiative.

While a great deal has been said about the unpreparedness of Canada's *future* labour force for the competitive challenges ahead, the burden of change is actually falling most heavily on the present generation of employees. As a recent federal government discussion paper pointed out, "Two-thirds of those who will be in the labour force in the year 2005 are already in the work force today." According to the same document, "Over half of the new jobs in this decade will require more than 12 years of

education and training; yet some 60 per cent of today's work force possess no more than a high school education." On paper, at least, this means that the majority of workers in Canada today are not educationally qualified to do the jobs that are coming along.

Clearly the nation as a whole has a great deal of catching-up to do to prepare its people to work competitively in a technology-driven global economy. As a case in point, the 1991 federal Speech From the Throne noted that "Canadian industry spends less than half as much on training as American industry does, a fifth as much as the Japanese and an eighth as much as the Germans." Surveys show that only 31 per cent of Canadian companies provide formal training for their employees.

Obviously, the realization of what it takes for a trading nation such as Canada to meet international competition has been slow to sink in among the general run of Canadian employers. And their apathy has been matched by a casual attitude towards education among present and future employees.

In a throwback to our frontier tradition, people in this country still seem to believe that they can have good jobs without going to the trouble of acquiring the basic tools of learning. Students (and their parents) apparently cannot see the connection between what they learn at school and what they will be expected to do in the labour force.

Reconciling good employeeship with good citizenship and a good life

For instance, a relatively tiny proportion of Canadian students study higher mathematics in high school in comparison with their counter-

parts in competing countries. But then, a truly shocking number of Canadians never finish high school at all — almost 30 per cent, compared with less than 5 per cent in Japan.

Canada produces roughly as many secondary school drop-outs as it does university graduates. This helps to account for the chilling estimate that at least one in every four Canadians is functionally illiterate and/or innumerate.

Although a fair number of such people initially find work when they prematurely leave school, in the long term they are likely to be doomed to a life of intermittent unemployment. If they do have jobs, they are jobs with poor pay, few benefits, and no hope of getting ahead.

One rationalization for dropping out is that doesn't matter whether you do or not, because all sorts of educated people are also jobless. When this proposition was broached in a recent radio panel



discussion, an economist on the panel commented: "Well, we can't guarantee you a good job or any job at all if you get an education. But we pretty well *can* guarantee you a bad job or no job at all if you don't."

The picture is not entirely bleak, however. After they have learned just how tough it is on the job market without an education, a considerable number of drop-outs resume studying in later life. The "drop-back-in" phenomenon helps to explain the extraordinary number of Canadians who are engaged in self-directed learning. More than 4.8 million adults are voluntarily enrolled in continuing education and training courses, most of them in attempts to improve career prospects or work skills.

According to the Economic Council of Canada, the reason apprentices in Canada are so much older than elsewhere — an average of 27 years of age — is that they "turn to the apprenticeship system only after they realize that they have few skills to offer." In its final report before it was disbanded by the federal government last year, the council noted that "many students and new entrants to the labour market are simply unaware of what the skilled trades do and what apprenticeship training provides."

There are some 173,000 apprentices or similar trainees in Canada, but the council found that the apprenticeship system is overly concentrated in traditional trades, and fails to cover much new electronics-based technology. It suggested an overhaul of the system in conjunction with other programs, notably the Co-operative Education movement which has gained a strong foothold in Canada in recent years.

Co-op education may provide at least a partial answer to the recurring complaint that Canadian workers have little idea of what skills they should be bringing to the labour force. Supported by businesses, labour unions, governments, educational organizations and community groups, co-op programs provide students with part-time jobs so that they can learn about prospective future occupations while still in school.

More than 130,000 Canadian students at the secondary, college and university levels are now enrolled in co-op programs. Both the number of participants and of organizations which sponsor their efforts by giving them temporary employment have lately been on the rise.

The Economic Council called for a concerted expansion of co-op schemes, especially in the skilled trades in which there are relatively few participants. It said that their "apprentice-like alternation of work experience and education" might provide the basis for Canada to develop a variant of the apprenticeship system which has proved such a powerful force

behind Germany's prowess in world trade.

The council urged the formation of "clear and direct links" between Co-operative Education and the regular apprenticeship system. This should be accompanied by a higher priority for vocational schooling and the revival and expansion of apprenticeships based on secondary schools.

In general, the Economic Council found a serious lack of communication between the educational system and employers. "Canada must move towards a closer integration of school, work, and training. The wholehearted commitment and active participation of employers in all sectors — public and private, goods-producing and service-producing — are absolutely essential to the success of such an approach," it declared.

The Conference Board's Corporate Council on Education agrees that higher employability skills must be developed among young Canadians leaving school, but its members are quick to add that they are not blaming the educational system. In the face of a decline in growth of national productivity, complacency has reigned among all concerned, including governments which merely gave lip-service to a higher-standard labour force, businesses of all sizes which have neglected on-the-job training, and a secondary school system which is biased towards academic subjects at the expense of technical and vocational skills.

Naturally enough, there has been some debate over what kind of people the educational system should be designed to produce as employers have pointed out the economic and social perils of having a deficient national work force. Some educators have protested that, in our kind of society, their job is not to produce grist for the mills of industry, but to help develop independent-minded citizens and well-rounded human beings.

But there really is no ground for dispute. With the increasing humanization of the work place in recent years, independence of mind and good citizenship have become basic qualifications for any employee. In its recently-published list of "employability skills," the Corporate Council on Education says that Canadian employers need people who can demonstrate "honesty, integrity and personal ethics; a positive attitude toward learning, growth and personal health; initiative, energy and persistence to get the job done; and the ability to set goals and priorities in work and personal life." Whether working or not, who would not want to possess such a sterling set of personal qualities? When you get right down to it, the characteristics that make a good employee and a good all-round human being these days are exactly the same.

