

Employees' basic value proposition: Strong HR strategies must address work values

Gender more important than age when assessing employee preferences

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oday's skill needs and tomorrow's baby-boomer retirements are motivating employers to act strategically about recruitment and retention. Too often, however, the goal of a resilient and committed workforce is expressed in vague terms, like becoming an "employer of choice."

This lofty goal must be broken down into concrete actions. One of the first steps is mapping out what a great place to work looks and feels like from inside the organization. From an employee's perspective, the basic value proposition is a job and a work environment that meets expectations.

Employers who can deliver on this will find it much easier to recruit and retain staff than those who do not.

Research conducted through the Canadian Policy Research Networks' Job Quality Web site (www.jobquality.ca) highlights some of the gaps between what employees want in a job and what they have. Three practical insights emerge.

First, it's the soft stuff — the relations and psychic rewards of

work — that matters most to Canadians. Second, contrary to popular notions that young workers look for a different deal than older workers, the biggest value differences are based on gender. Third, a sizeable number of workers experience "job quality deficits" — a large gap between what they want and have in a job. These deficits have direct implications for organizational performance and meeting HR goals.

What's important in a job

In February and March 2000, 2,500 working Canadians were asked to rate the importance of 15 job characteristics if they were looking for a new job. Employees overwhelming ranked personal and social aspects of work ahead of economic aspects (see chart).

The five most sought after job characteristics, considered "very important" (on a five-category response scale that went from "very important" to "not at all important") by almost 70 per cent or more of survey respondents, were respect, interesting work, a sense of accomplishment, good co-worker communications, and work-family balance.

Pay, benefits and security — the economics of a job — were somewhat less important. Despite the fact that flexible schedules are part of family-friendly workplace policies, only about one-third of employees consider this job feature very important. It seems that there is more to balancing work and family than having a flexible schedule, at least in the minds of many employees.

Younger and older employees have similar values

The data yielded the unexpected finding that, contrary to what many think, younger workers' job values are quite similar to those of their older colleagues.

Many surveys that focus on the under 30, "Nexus Generation" suggest younger workers today are on a unique quest for challenging, meaningful and collaborative work. While the research confirmed these are highly valued job features for workers under age 30, the same was true of their parents' generation.

It is worth remembering that surveys of workers' values in the early 1970s found the same values were widespread back then. This too was an era of turmoil,

as the baby boomers who had come of age in the rebellious 1960s flooded into the job market, and many commentators feared the Woodstock generation would wreak havoc inside organizations — an unfounded fear, as it turned out.

Employers face greater challenges gaining the commitment of younger employees, but that has always been the case. The largest differences between Nexus employees and their parents have to do with career advancement opportunities, which, not surprisingly, are more highly valued at the start of a person's working life. And older workers have somewhat higher expectations in terms of a sense of accomplishment and freedom to make decisions.

Personally rewarding work has long been a core value. Indeed, there is more continuity in work values over time and across generation than many think. Employers who target the needs of young recruits are missing an opportunity to address the quality of work needs of all their staff.

Men and women have different expectations

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Job quality often lacking

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In contrast to generational variations, there are striking differences in work values between men and women. In the study, men and women placed significantly different emphasis on 11 of the 15 values.

Women placed greater importance on workplace issues such as respect, communication, recognition, work-family balance and co-worker relations. On two strategic human resource management concerns — skill development and commitment — women expect more than men do.

In light of these findings, employers need to carefully consider how HR policies and practices could have different implications for female and male employees.

While soft issues clearly are

important for all workers, women have raised the bar when it comes to a people-supportive workplace climate. If respect, recognition and communication are lacking in an organization, female staff may be the first to become disengaged. At the same time, initiatives designed to foster a positive climate among employees will resonate especially among females. Males may be harder to sell on the need for such initiatives.

Job quality deficits

All employees bring their own values into the workplace. These expectations are the filter through which they evaluate what their jobs provide. A job and a workplace that meets an employee's expectations is, by definition, a good place to work. This is a ma-

job step towards creating an engaged and productive workforce.

So how well are Canadian employers doing in this regard?

To answer this question, survey data was used to calculate job quality deficits: the measure of the gap between what an employee wants and has in a job. After asking survey respondents the importance they placed on the 15 job characteristics (in Figure 1), they were asked to assess whether these described their current job. Simple math provides the "deficit" score.

For a sizeable minority of workers, their jobs fail to deliver the quality sought. One-third of employees has considerably less flexibility in work schedules and less opportunity to balance work and personal lives than they would prefer. Similarly, about one-third of employees have a job quality deficit in opportunities for advancement, wages, benefits or job security. About one-quarter have less commitment and trust than they would prefer.

The costs of large job quality deficits

As a benchmark, it is useful to consider that one in four employees have large deficits on five or more job characteristics. These are low quality jobs, and it shows in the low job satisfaction reported by these workers. At the other end of the job quality continuum, one in five have jobs that meet their expectations, or come close, on all dimensions. These are good jobs with satisfied employees.

Beyond job satisfaction, there are other costs to not meeting employees' work aspirations. One quarter of the workforce has large deficits on five or more job characteristics. This group is far more likely to report low morale.

Thus, job quality is not just an individual issue, but a workplace issue as well. Chances are, if one worker experiences a big gap in job quality, so do her co-workers. Morale affects productivity so this gap can be costly.

Canadian workers have their own basic value proposition. They will meet an employer's performance expectations if their job rewards and work environment meet their work values.

As employers strive to adjust HR strategies to a more intensely competitive and volatile labour market, it is vitally important to consider how employees define a great place to work. Those employers able to close the gap between employees' job expectations and their daily experiences at work will take a giant step toward creating a workplace of choice.

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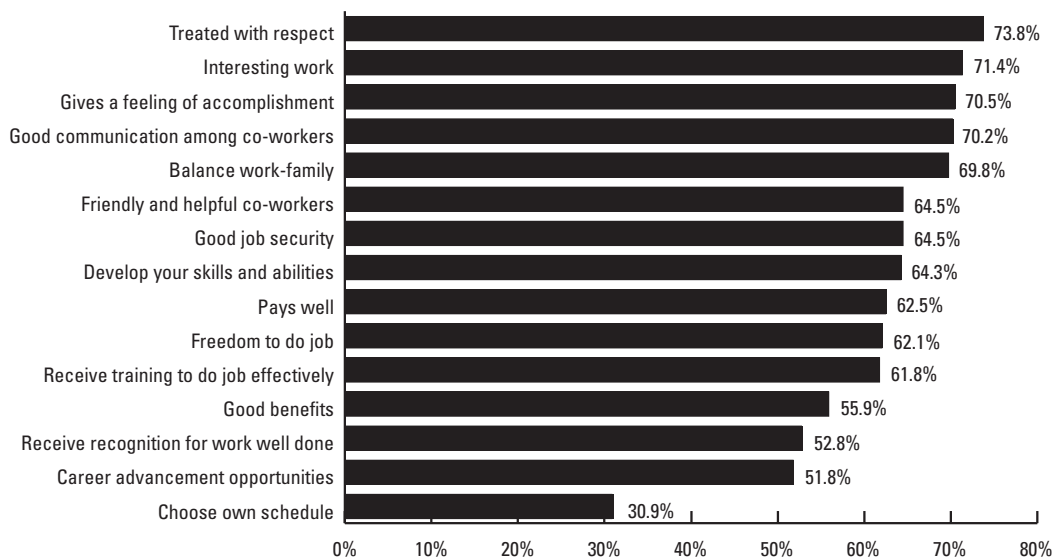
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What employees want in a job

Per cent who consider job feature "very important"



Source: CPRN-Ekos Changing Employment Relationships Survey 2000