

# Redesigning work: A blueprint for achieving shared prosperity

Canadians are ready for a more activist government that will help improve the quality of work life.

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Canadians are in a pessimistic mood – most people expect our society will become more divided, with lower living standards and slow economic growth. On a positive note, there is strong public support today for a long-term blueprint to restore a growing and optimistic middle class. Policy-makers should seize the opportunity to explore realistic solutions on several fronts.

In our new book [Redesigning Work: A Blueprint for Canada's Future Well-Being and Prosperity](#) (University of Toronto Press), we sketch what this blueprint must contain by drawing on extensive public opinion research and workforce surveys conducted by EKOS over the past several decades. For a start, the public wants a more activist government that can lead the way to shared economic prosperity – a marked shift away from the politics of trickle-down economics, minimal government and lower taxes. Nationally the timing for a bold prosperity blueprint is ideal, given that the Liberal government has the highest public trust of any government in 20 years.

EKOS polls suggest there is broad public support for initiatives such as raising the minimum wage and improving pensions. Equally important, policy-makers must explore opportunities to kick-start progress in a sphere that so far has received little attention in discussions of economic renewal: Canadians' daily work experiences.

## **Work redesign as a solution to arrested progress**

Changes in Canadians' jobs and workplaces are shaped by major economic and social trends. Globalization, new technologies, labour market restructuring, demographics and evolving management practices are relentlessly transforming work. At the same time, there is considerable potential to maximize the upside of these trends by making changes in how we work. Redesigning work to be more challenging, meaningful, skilled, collaborative, and flexible and economically rewarding will bring about improvements in organizational performance and workers' well-being. Work redesign can make a decent quality of life available to more citizens, as it rebalances working

relationships to achieve greater fairness and wider societal benefits. [As the OECD has argued](#), this must be a basic policy goal for all advanced industrial societies.

Our workforce surveys confirm that a worker's well-being depends on having a satisfying and motivating job. What's more, happy workers are more productive and, as organizations perform better, so does the economy. This link between well-being and prosperity provides a powerful incentive for employers and policy-makers to reverse the ebbing quality of work.

Middle-class decline and rising income inequality are two big economic trends visible to Canadians. Less visible yet also important for people's quality of life is how the psychological and social rewards of work are distributed. We need to ask: who has access to healthy and fulfilling jobs that support people to contribute, and further develop, their talents?

There's a fundamental paradox regarding these intrinsic work rewards in the post-recession job market. On one hand, since the 1990s many experts have assumed that the income and security of full-time employment sets the benchmark for a "good job." Yet today, full-time employees have higher levels of job stress and lower work engagement when compared with part-time, contingent or self-employed workers. Labour market analysts have labelled these "precarious" work situations "bad jobs," at least when compared with full-time employment. On the other hand, some workers seek out specific aspects of precarious work arrangements — in particular, the flexibility, autonomy and variety, even if it means less income and job security. A major challenge for policy-makers and employers today is to strike the right balance between these different job features.

### **Improving the quality of work life**

The quality of work life – which refers to satisfying, healthy and engaging work that is well integrated with one's personal life – has eroded during the past decade. Specifically, our surveys show that since the early 2000s Canadian workers have become less satisfied and engaged. Two out of every five workers are not satisfied when it comes to these quality-of-work-life indicators. The argument for reversing these trends is that highly satisfied workers are inspired to contribute their full capabilities. This is essential for stronger economic performance – a more engaged workforce should be at the centre of a national innovation strategy. Policy-makers should think of higher workforce engagement as a public good, widely benefiting individual workers, employers, society and the economy.

Governments are already taking steps to improve the quality of work life for less-advantaged groups. Improved monitoring and enforcement of employment standards legislation could cut down on abuses such as unpaid overtime. Further expanding occupational health and safety legislation to accept a wide range of psychological health risks as causes of stress-related injury or disability would push more employers to take action to get at the sources of stress. A national family-care strategy would be a welcome public policy solution for many workers with families.

### **Closing the job quality gap**

The "good jobs-bad jobs" distinction we noted earlier is too black and white to capture the varied and sometimes contradictory work experiences in today's labour market. The challenge now is making the most desirable features of contract and part-time work and self-employment more widely available, without requiring significant trade-offs in other aspects of job quality. This requires that

public policies and employers' human resources strategies promote more flexible work options, greater job autonomy and more extensive skill use.

There's no shortage of skills or knowledge in Canada, yet EKOS surveys document that these human resources are underutilized. As a result, Canada punches below its weight when it comes to using its human capital strengths. Furthermore, many knowledge workers experience a limited sense of meaning and accomplishment in their jobs. The link connecting economic performance and individual well-being is the more effective use of workers' capabilities every day in their job. Surely, this makes a compelling case for public and private investments in work-relevant training, learning and career development.

Organizations, sectors and regions need long-range workforce plans – which require the active collaboration of government and industry stakeholders to develop – if we are to ensure a future supply of workers with the right education and skills. Equally important is finding better ways to tap into the potential that workers already have to develop a more knowledge-intensive economy.

Work redesign can be guided by Canadian workers' vision of a great job. This vision rests on four pillars: positive working relationships, challenging tasks that make a contribution, a healthy and supportive work environment, and decent economic rewards. For most Canadians, the ideal job combines both economic and psychological rewards. However, between 25 and 50 percent of workers tell us that their current job lacks these features.

### **An activist role for government**

EKOS polls suggest that Canadians want governments to play a lead role in restoring prosperity. A majority of poll respondents support limits on CEOs' salaries, raising the minimum wage, a greater degree of fairness in taxation and compensation, help with caring for the young and the elderly, and improved pensions for Canadians who do not have employer pension plans. More immediately, governments could join with private sector partners and NGOs to raise public awareness and create a sense of urgency for action on workforce aging, the need for a workplace culture of learning and development, and strengthening the links between improved quality of work life and economic performance.

Governments also must continue to modernize employment standards and occupational-health-and-safety legislation. These frameworks were created for an earlier era, when full-time employment with one employer was the norm. Today they leave large numbers of precarious workers vulnerable. An example of how to rectify this is Ontario's 2014 *Stronger Workplaces for a Stronger Economy Act*, which holds employment agencies and their clients accountable for employment standards violations affecting temporary workers.

### **Imagining decent jobs in 2025**

An anaemic economic recovery, heightened concern about inequality and declining living standards, public support for a bold multisector initiative to spark economic growth – these all provide an impetus for concerted action to restore prosperity. History holds out many lessons for how breakthroughs have been made in the promotion of safer, healthier, fairer and more knowledge-based workplaces. Governments, employers, NGOs, unions and professional groups have all

contributed to these successes. If our reading of the public mood today is correct, then Canada may have the enabling conditions in place for another breakthrough in improving Canadians' working lives.

Despite overall declines in the quality of work life, EKOS surveys also suggest that a sizeable number of Canadians still enjoy their jobs, believe they are making a useful contribution and have a decent living standard. Just imagine that these job features have become the norm by 2025. That's what a more prosperous Canada looks like.

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