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Quality of Life
CHALLENGE

**LINKS BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AND
QUALITY OF LIFE IN BC'S CAPITAL REGION**

REPORT OF REGIONAL SURVEY

NOVEMBER 2005

IMAGINE ...

a sustainable quality of life for everyone in British Columbia's Capital Region.

Many of us take it for granted.
Some of us struggle to achieve it.
Each of us has a stake in it.

Quality of life is dynamically linked with the health of our community,
and the sustainability of the economy and the environment.

When people are informed about the quality of life in their community,
they can make better decisions to preserve and enhance it – for everyone.

INTRODUCTION

In May of 2005, the Community Council commissioned a region-wide telephone survey on different aspects of quality of life. Funding for this research came from the Vancouver Foundation and Services Canada, as well as in kind support from R.A. Malatest & Associates.

Some of the findings from the Regional Survey of Quality of Life were presented at the Quality of Life CHALLENGE Celebration and Dialogue, on November 23, 2005, highlighting the links between employment and quality of life.

One section of the survey asked about people's participation in paid work. The Community Council wanted to know what aspects of work impacted people's quality of life.

Many people living on low incomes are active in the paid workforce. Of the 36,000 people of working age living below the low income cut off in the Capital Regional District in 2000, more than half had worked at least part of the year. More than 4,000 had worked the whole year, full time, and they still weren't able to make ends meet.

These facts challenge stereotypes about who is living in poverty in our community, and also directs people to look at other solutions. The facts also prompt two key questions:

- What role can employers play in reducing poverty in the workforce?
- With what aspects of work are employees most satisfied and dissatisfied?

FINDINGS

This report outlines select findings of this survey and includes quotes from people working in low wage positions. These people shared their experiences during some complementary research conducted by the Community Council through a series of focus group sessions.

Aspects of work that affect quality of life

When asked what three most important aspects of their work added to their quality of life, people most frequently said:

- Relationships with people at work

- Rate of pay
- Flexibility around hours and work/life balance
- Interest and enjoyment in the job

When asked what three most important aspects of their work took away from their quality of life they most frequently said:

- Stress or workload
- Negative relationships with people at work
- Flexibility around hours and work/life balance
- Rate of pay

Relationships were most important to people earning less than \$20,000 a year. Almost three-quarters of people surveyed reported this aspect.

One person said:

I like working where I work. I like the people. It's a big company with lots of people. We form relationships over time at barbecues, staff parties, volleyball, etc. I have been working there 15 years.

Discrimination is a side of negative relationships people are often reluctant to talk about, even though employment rates for visible minorities, First Nations people, and people with disabilities exemplify discrimination. All employment rates are noticeably lower than those of able bodied white people with equal abilities and education.

One person said:

I can't wear a hijab at work. I have to tie it back like a bandana, which loses the point of wearing it. I find it hard to get a job when I go in to an interview wearing the hijab.

Satisfaction with aspects of work

People were asked about satisfaction with various aspects of work. Overall, the three areas which employees were least satisfied with were:

- Benefits such as health plan, bonuses, discounts (26% dissatisfied)
- Rate of pay (18% dissatisfied)
- Opportunities to learn & training (17% dissatisfied)

Regarding **other forms of compensation** such as benefits, health plans, bonuses, or employee discounts, the survey similarly found that people who have lower household incomes, and traditionally low wage service sector industries such as retail, accommodation and food services and personal services were noticeably less satisfied. Approximately one-third of respondents were satisfied compared to two-thirds in most other industries.

One person said:

Once I was sick with pneumonia and had no medical coverage from work. I had to work while I was ridiculously sick, but I still missed some shifts. My rent was late and I could have been evicted. I had no money for medical costs like prescriptions.

Findings around satisfaction with **rate of pay** predictably showed that people who have higher household incomes are more satisfied with their pay. Service sector workers, younger people and women, who all tend to be paid less, were all less satisfied with their rate of pay. Poverty rates show that these are often the demographic groups who are not able to earn enough to cover basic costs of living.

One employee said:

Employers won't pay based on costs of living, they pay based on what they can get someone for.

Satisfaction with opportunities to **learn and training** was:

- Highest in 18 to 25 year olds and in 55 to 65 year olds
- Lowest in health care and social assistance, construction and in retail sector
- Steadily increased satisfaction with training as household income increased

One person said:

The last job I had I was fired because I was not up to date on the newest technology. It was a small company and the employer couldn't afford to pay to train staff.

When the survey asked about **input into decisions** that affected their work, responses said

- Satisfaction with this increased noticeably with age
- Men were more satisfied than women
- People working in health care and social assistance, public administration, and in technical, scientific and professional services were least satisfied

One person said:

In my work I offer good ideas but they aren't going anywhere. Then the employer asks why sales are down. They aren't listening to employees.

When the survey asked about **flexibility around hours and work/life balance**, responses found that least satisfied groups included:

- Middle income earners (between \$20,000 to \$60,000)
- People working in public administration and education
- People between 25 to 34 years old

One person said:

When you work four hours on and four hours off getting daycare is very hard. Almost all daycare is geared for 9 to 5 work.

Finally, when the survey asked about **job stability**, it was found that

- 18 to 25 year olds were most satisfied with their job stability despite the fact that this is probably the age group with the least job stability. Satisfaction with job stability declines with age.
- Satisfaction is noticeably lower for people with lower household incomes. 32% people earning less than \$20,000 are satisfied compared to 73% people earning \$80,000 or more.

One person said:

I started as an auxiliary worker 15 years ago. I am still auxiliary so I am laid off from January to April and have to go on and off EI. Retail work is seasonal work.

CONCLUSION

Many employers in this community have adopted human resource practices which help to address many of the issues raised in this report. When unemployment rates are at a record low, employers are challenged to address retention rates and productivity. Employers may need to hire people who may have been unemployed for some time or have multiple barriers to employment. Employers may need to be supported as they learn how to retain and support such employees. This information will help

employers examine and adjust their employment practices so that their business and their employees' lives improve.

This study's findings point to areas where job satisfaction could be improved, such as rate of pay, stress, workload, negative relationships with people at work and work/life balance and thus the quality of life of working people. For more information on local solutions, see the Quality of Life CHALLENGE website for more information about what employers and other community members can do to improve quality of life in the workplace.