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ELDERCARE AND THE WORKPLACE: THE ROLE OF BUSINESS, LABOUR AND GOVERNMENT

Report on the Roundtable held in Ottawa,
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ELDERCARE AND THE WORKPLACE: THE ROLE OF BUSINESS, LABOUR AND GOVERNMENT

(Roundtable, Ottawa, 21 June 1994)

INTRODUCTION

On 21 June 1994, approximately 25 individuals, drawn primarily from business, government and labour, attended a one-day roundtable in Ottawa on Eldercare and the Workplace. This roundtable, organized by The Conference Board of Canada and the Women's Bureau, Human Resources Development Canada, continues work initiated by the two organizations in the late 1980s. The overall goal was to facilitate ideas and action on eldercare issues within a framework of family, community, business, labour and government.

Present were representatives from several departments and agencies of the Government of Canada, major private companies and private and public sector trade unions.

WHAT IS ELDERCARE?

"Eldercare" has been defined by the Canadian Work and Family Services as "the provision, purchase or securing of care and/or assistance for individuals over the age of 55 by a family member, friend or community agency."

Eldercare has taken on increased significance with the rapid aging of Canada's population, particularly the major increase in those aged 75 years and over. Eighty percent of this care is provided by family members. Women are disproportionately represented in the caregiver group at a time when they are increasing their participation in the paid labour force. Workers across Canada struggle to meet both the needs of respective employers and those of family members including, increasingly, aging relatives as well as dependent children. To meet these diverse needs successfully, employees may require assistance.

STRUCTURE OF THE ROUNDTABLE

The keynote speaker was Lisa Barham, from the University of Guelph's Canadian Aging Research Network (CARNET), launched in 1990 under the Government of Canada's

Network of Centres of Excellence Program. Ms. Barham presented findings from recent research carried out by the Work and Eldercare Research Group.

Following her presentation, discussion was organized into two sections. First, in a plenary session, participants were asked to define their view of eldercare and to outline their perspectives on the key issues. Second, in smaller groups, participants considered eldercare issues facing employees and employers and complex issues requiring a wide range of solutions. Previously prepared questions were useful in directing the discussion.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM CARNET RESEARCH FINDINGS

A. Differences between Eldercare and Childcare

Numerous differences between eldercare and childcare were mentioned; some were seen as realities, others as beliefs. As realities, it was suggested that most of the elderly have the ability to select their care while children generally do not. Also, several family members, such as siblings, may be involved in deciding on care for the elderly. Care of the elderly is more likely to require addressing complicated medical problems and less likely to have substitute care available.

The beliefs underlying elder care are different from those underlying childcare: people think that the elderly should be involved in any decision on their lives; that there are limits to the amount of personal involvement expected from carers; that institutional options (such as nursing homes) are acceptable; that the level of dependency is less; and that carers are less willing to accept the job costs resulting from their caring role.

B. Pattern of Job and Personal Costs for Employed Canadians

In a national survey in 1992, individuals were asked if they had provided any of 18 kinds of assistance to a relative aged 65 or over in the past six months. Such assistance ranged from **general eldercare** (occasional assistance with shopping and household maintenance) to **personal eldercare** (daily involvement in dressing and bathing). Almost half of the sample of 5,121 respondents reported having been involved in eldercare, usually of parents.

In relation to personal variables, compared with those responsible for no caregiving or for **general eldercare**, those involved in **personal eldercare** reported higher levels of stress; less satisfaction with their jobs with respect to autonomy, skill use and opportunity for personal development; and higher levels of work-family conflict. In relation to job variables, employees providing **personal eldercare** reported more absenteeism and more difficulty in attending business meetings, taking on extra projects, seeking or accepting promotions, working desired shifts and going on business trips.

C. Workplace Support

Some organizations have introduced flexible work arrangements and assistance programs in an effort to attract and retain a productive workforce. These strategies include extended leave, short term leave, personal days, time off in lieu of overtime pay,

short work week, part time work, flexible hours, job sharing, work at home, eldercare information and employee assistance programs.

Those respondents involved with eldercare reported high use of personal days, employee assistance programs, and part-time employment, an indication of their need for such options. Despite the large percentage of respondents (46%) involved in eldercare, eldercare information was available to only 8%. Overall, those respondents with access to flexible work arrangements and assistance reported lower stress, higher levels of job satisfaction, and less work-family conflict.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM PARTICIPANTS' DISCUSSIONS

A. Business Perspective

Some representatives from business argued that the current economic constraints mean that employer-initiated eldercare cannot be an issue. Programs of early retirement are more of a focus than flexible work arrangements. It was noted that single people often perceive that they receive less from the employer than do those with family responsibilities. There is a concern that organizations are opening themselves to unrealistic expectations from their employees and the community. On the other hand, the idea of employer collaboration with community services to build a base for employee support was discussed, as was mandatory management training to sensitize managers to employee needs. Managers who approached work and family issues from an equity perspective were reported to be more supportive than those approaching them from a human resources or benefits perspective.

B. Union Perspective

Most union participants agreed that the current economic debate has pushed family and workplace issues off the agenda. Most contended, however, that for unionized workplaces, eldercare support should be negotiated as benefits within a collective agreement. They noted that significant barriers exist for certain groups, such as non-unionized employees, contract workers, and immigrant workers. They felt that eldercare and childcare should not be viewed solely as women's issues and that they should both be considered as essential to a supportive and productive workplace.

C. Government Perspective

The federal and provincial governments, faced with large deficits, are seeking new ways to control spending. Cost-containment can lead to alternative ways of organizing and managing resources needed by the elderly or to reduced health care, housing and community services for this group of Canadians. Many participants argued that governments have a role to play in eldercare and that there is room for taxation-based state provision of services, though they also thought duplication of existing employer-initiated programs should be avoided. Some participants observed that formal legislation in areas affecting the family could be problematic for governments.

D. Research Perspective

The need for data collection and evaluation of existing workplace and community options was emphasized repeatedly. Economic analysis, particularly of information on costs and benefits, could be used to convince all parties that support for work and family is important. Evaluation of available assistance, whether provided spontaneously by individual employers or through collective bargaining agreements, could be used to determine effective approaches and those that need adjustment. Programs in other countries could also be assessed.

CONCLUSION

Participants agreed that, as an issue already affecting a significant percentage of Canadian workers and promising to affect even more in future decades, eldercare cannot be left to individual solutions; it is a complex issue requiring participation by all sectors. Business, labour and government participants indicated that they are focusing on this issue, with several options being tried and others under consideration. In the meantime, individual employees are also seeking their own solutions.