

# **The Case of the Product Safety Program of Western Region**

**Potential Impacts of Compressed Work Week  
On Access to Services  
In a Small Government Operation in Canada:**

**Ivy Chan**

## **The Case of the Product Safety Program of Western Region**

### **Potential Impacts of Compressed Work Week**

#### **On Access to Services In a Small Government Operation in Canada:**

**Ivy Chan**

#### **Background**

The compressed work week (CWW) is often seen as an innovative solution to balancing work and personal life. The Variable Work Week policy of the Government of Canada's Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) is a form of flexible hours of work. Its stated objective is to allow the compression or extension of the work week to the mutual benefit of the employer and employees, while maintaining the department's ability to operate effectively. According to the TBS policy, management may authorize employees to complete their weekly hours of work in a period other than five standard working days averaged over a specified period, when satisfied that operational requirements are met and provided that no increase in costs (including overtime) is incurred. Implementation of variable work week must also be done in accordance with the provisions of the relevant collective agreement or the applicable terms and conditions of employment and conform to the TBS policies on flexible and maximum hours of work.

With the recent addition of new staff in the Product Safety Program of Western Region of the Health Protection Branch of Health Canada, there is renewed interest in equitable access to CWW. The purpose of this document is to review the situation and to determine whether CWW is suitable for continued and/or expanded application in the program. This is particularly timely because recent changes in the organization (the transfer of the food inspection program to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the creation of the Environmental Health Programs Division) have meant changes not only in the organizational structure but also in the responsibilities of some of the staff in this region.

In 1999, the Product Safety Program of Western Region had four officers and an assistant in the Burnaby office, a program manager, an officer and an assistant in Edmonton and two officers and an assistant in Calgary. All staff has access to flexible hours of work in that starting time is decided with the manager, as long as the core hours are observed.

In addition, three members on staff are on nine-day fortnight CWW; the program manager in Edmonton who received approval some 15 years ago when he was one of five District Managers in the Region in the Food Inspection Program and two program officers in Alberta authorized while working in single-officer offices prior to the creation of the Environmental Health Programs Division. In other words, the three existing staff members who are on CWW are all located in Alberta and received approval for CWW when the organizational structure differed to varying degrees.

According to the employees involved, authorization seems to have been granted upon request. There is no indication that there has been an evaluation as to its impact on program effectiveness. This is not surprising since most programs do not have well-developed outcome measures and in fact are still struggling to do them. It should be noted that, over the years, both

officers and support staff in British Columbia have requested CWW and were denied it for operational reasons.

## **The Product Safety Program in Western Region**

### ***Operational Requirements for the Program Manager***

The program manager, located in Edmonton, supervises staff in three cities (Burnaby, Edmonton and Calgary) and reports to the Chief of the Division in Burnaby. He is in a unique position in the Region and is involved in program planning, progress monitoring, expense authorization, staffing, input coordination to policies and procedures, guiding staff, responding to media and responding to requests from senior managers. The manager is often engaged in conference calls and meetings that may or may not take him away from the office. A good portion of the manager's time involves contacting his own staff locally and in distant locations, contacting staff in other Branches and work units (Human Resources, Finance), and colleagues in other Regions.

### ***Operational Requirements for Officers***

The mandate of the regional operation of the Product Safety Program is to regulate the sale, advertising and importation of dangerous and potentially dangerous consumer products that are under the purview of the Hazardous Products Act and the Cosmetic Regulations and to provide related information to consumers, all levels of trade, other agencies and health professionals. In order to do this, a Product Safety Officer's job involves both a reactive as well as a proactive component. Officers respond to enquiries and complaints, investigate complaints related to product injuries/death, respond to media on 'hot issues,' respond to Customs referrals regarding imported products and conduct product inspections and sampling at various levels of trade. A good portion of an officer's duty involves dealing with external clients.

In addition, officers are each assigned a number of projects for which they represent the Region and participate as members on national committees. As a result, each officer is often in the lead for coordinating and delivering these projects at various times during the year. This component of the work involves participation in conference calls or meetings with representatives from across the country in the planning phase and coordinating activities of other officers within the Region in the delivery phase. Information related to each project and therefore category of product is often sent to the regional representative for redistribution within the region. The regional representative is often the person with information and knowledge on the subject matter to whom others turn for assistance and advice.

### ***Operational Requirements for Support Staff***

Each office has an assistant whose main duty is to answer straightforward public enquiries, mostly for the Product Safety Program and to a lesser extent for other programs in the Branch. Their phone numbers are listed in various directories and public communiqués. In addition, the assistant located in Edmonton also provides office assistance and administration to all staff on location while the assistant located in Calgary and Burnaby provides assistance and administrative support to staff in the Environmental Health Programs. They also provide inspection assistance to the officers in varying degree. The assistant is also the hub for leaving messages and keeping track of staff's whereabouts.

## Evaluation of CWW

### *Existing Policy Position*

With the public service's continued drive for quality service and the recent movement towards a modernized service delivery, and in particular, citizen-centred service, it is only fitting that changes in the workplace be evaluated on the basis of their impact to service. The policy objective of Treasury Board's Variable Work Week, as stated above, is to allow for the compression or extension of the work week to the mutual benefit of the employer and employees while maintaining the department's ability to operate effectively. In addition, Health Canada's policy states that under no circumstances shall the application of the variable work week result in any additional overtime, staffing requirement or other cost and reduction of operational effectiveness.

### *Staff Comments on CWW*

As stated above, CWW is meant for the mutual benefit of the employer and employees. Since CWW is initiated at the request of the employee, it is assumed that it is beneficial to the employee. Employees of the Product Safety Program in this Region were invited to comment via e-mail on whether CWW is deemed a viable alternative to regular hours of work for the group. Specifically, employees were asked three questions:

1. Given the nature of their work, the knowledge of the duties of their co-workers, the geographic location and the clients served, is CWW a viable alternative to regular hours of work?
2. If so, how can they do their job equally well and be equally effective under CWW?
3. What might be the ramifications if everyone or only certain personnel in the group goes on CWW?

Regarding the first question, staff comments received were:

- Employee satisfaction may lead to productivity;
- Staggering CWW will result in expanded hours of operation (e.g. 7 a.m.- 4 p.m. for one staff and 8 a.m.-5 p.m. for another) that may accommodate additional Customs referrals;
- Doing some of the retail work after 4 p.m. will enhance the availability in the day for client service;
- When the staff is not out in the field, being able to continually work into the early evening can actually increase work output, as there will be no interruption due to telephones or walk-in clients;
- CWW can eliminate actual loss of time at work due to family responsibilities such as doctor's appointments, dental appointments, and school appointments either for oneself or the family;
- When an officer/manager is away on CWW, the assistant's workload is lessened for that day.

Regarding the second question, comments received were:

- We could work out taking different days off;
- The assistants' phones could be responded to by officers on rotation or the officers could periodically check the messages for the assistant;

- Even in the absence of CWW, there is no guarantee that the situation will not arise where no one is available to immediately respond to an unforeseen crisis or even consumer inquiries;
- The duties of program managers often take them away from the office for periods of time and as long as someone is identified as the one filling in, the negative impact is kept to a minimum;
- Clients do not really care if the reply comes from Edmonton, Calgary or Burnaby as long as they can speak to someone and not at their expense.

Apart from the questions posed, comments by staff on perceived negative impact of CWW included:

- The program operates in 1999/00 with five officers with limited program experience and only two officers with extensive experience - CWW reduces our availability to each other for consultation on any given day and therefore does not facilitate the transfer of knowledge among officers;
- There is often a need to respond to urgent issues and requests or to consult with colleagues in other locations - CWW reduces the number of days we are available to respond to external parties;
- Our work units are very small and client service is negatively impacted by the CWW in its present form - one extra day off every second week translates to approximately 24 extra unavailable days in a year;
- It would be difficult to measure impact on productivity since we do not have a system for measuring productivity.

While many comments were provided, most centered on the benefits to the employee. It is obvious, however, that there is uncertainty as to whether CWW is beneficial to the employer.

## **Empirical Observation on Potential Benefits of CWW from an Employer's Perspective**

While no data on employee satisfaction or productivity is available for this program area, there is no indication that those who are already on CWW are more satisfied or productive than those who are not. Neither is it evident that employees on CWW take less personal time off. While CWW has not been used as a feature for attracting applicants in the past, this program area has not had difficulties in finding eligible candidates in this region.

Even though the perceived benefits outlined above sound promising, many are not realized in practice. Without analyzing each suggestion in great detail, there are several general areas worthy of discussion:

### ***1. Hours of Operation***

Most staff on CWW prefer to start early (before 8 a.m.), so the potential gain of having extended hours and coverage into the evening would not occur naturally. Since most businesses, especially retailers, rarely operate before 9 a.m. and it is not considerate to return calls to consumers too early in the morning, starting work prior to 8 am would not be particularly conducive to program operations.

While there is the possibility of extending hours of operation for the purpose of servicing Customs calls, an extra ½ hour at either end is not likely to improve the situation much when seen in the context of Customs' 24-hour operation. To put this in perspective, the Therapeutic Products Programme has a much more developed import surveillance program and yet their staff are not on CWW. Given the much lower volume of Customs referral in the Product Safety Program, it is unlikely that this aspect of the program will benefit from CWW. Even if it were desirable to extend hours of service, authorizing staff to stagger starting time (already in practice) serves the same purpose without engaging in CWW.

## **2. *The Long Weekend Effect***

Staff on CWW typically would like to have their day off on Mondays and Fridays for the long weekend effect. While this is beneficial to staff, it will conceivably leave the program operating with 15 - 30% less staff on those days, depending on the number of staff involved. Should this coincide with staff on annual leave or sick leave, program delivery could be substantially reduced on those days. Even though staff on CWW works a longer day, it does not compensate for the reduced numbers during two out of five days in a week.

## **3. *Availability for Consultation***

The underlying assumption of CWW is that as long as an employee works 75 hours over a fortnight, it matters not when. Given the nature of work of this program area, this is not necessarily so. We do not work in isolation; we are often driven by external demands and we need to consult each other frequently. The Product Safety Program covers a wide array of product categories under so many regulations that staff does not have equal knowledge and cannot respond equally well to all issues. There is a need to maximize our availability to our clients and to each other.

Managers and officers alike are periodically on duty travel that takes them away from the office and there is already a need to cover each other for sick leave and annual leave during the year. CWW will exacerbate the situation as there will be more days (24 more days/employee amounts to about 10% of work days) when staff is not at work. This is particularly significant in the summer when coupled with annual leaves.

## **4. *Business Costs***

While it is true that callers are not concerned as to whether a call is returned to them locally, the impact to the program is increased cost (e.g. responding to an Edmonton enquiry out of Burnaby means extra long distance cost). While this is already happening when an assistant is on leave or away from her desk for other reasons, incurring long distance calls to accommodate CWW is contrary to Health Canada's policy. Utilizing officers to respond to calls normally handled by assistants is also not particularly cost effective because of the salary differential.

One might say that there is a plethora of long distance call plans available today and one could even call via the internet for next to nothing. However, the Government of Canada is still paying for long distance calls on a per minute basis and cost is still an issue. In fact, cutting down on long distance calls is still a measure used in times of tight budgets.

Furthermore, if we subscribe to the notion that referring enquiries to another location is the answer to overcoming a lack of staff at a given location, then it follows that there may not be a need to maintain offices at various locations for the sake of frontline service. CWW and frontline service are at odds with each other.

### **5. *Employee/Family Leaves***

In theory, there is a potential benefit to the employer to have employees on CWW reduce loss of time at work due to doctor's appointments, dental appointments, and school appointments either for oneself or for the family. The reality is that these occasions are often not subject to planning and the employer is still obligated to grant leaves provided by contractual agreement, whether the employee is on CWW or not.

### **6. *Staff Morale***

It is suggested that CWW may boost morale, which will in turn increase productivity. While disallowing CWW may result in disappointments, there is no indication that there is low staff morale in the Product Safety Program of this region to begin with. On the other hand, if there were a lack of staff commitment to their work, then no amount of incentives such as CWW would have a lasting effect.

The current thinking of the public service is for the employer to support its employees by offering fair compensation, meaningful work and continuous learning to ensure their employability. Management has supported the reclassification of officers in the Product Safety Program to reflect their expanded scope of work. There is also strong support for staff to take courses during work hours for their professional learning and development. The benefit of CWW as a motivator is questionable and may be short-lived.

### ***Minimizing Impact of CWW to Operations***

The concerns described in points 1 to 3 above are the typical objections to CWW implementation. In response, one might say that there is room for management to improve the set-up, e.g. what would it look like if all staff started work no earlier than 8 a.m., the CWW was extended to 28-day cycle, and the compressed day off was spread evenly throughout the week?

If that were the case, then the concern of not having sufficient staff to cover the afternoon is eliminated; in fact, staff would be extending their hour into the afternoon. Instead of operating with 15 - 30% reduction in staff on 2 out of 5 days, the program will likely be operating with 9 - 14% less staff 25 to 39% of the time, depending on how many are on CWW. Scheduling an all-inclusive meeting would probably not be any easier as someone would likely be off on any given day. With a 28-day cycle, the number of days when a staff member is not available is reduced from 10% to 5% (approximately 12 days a year/employee). However, even though staff will be on CWW, most will not enjoy a long weekend.

Exercising process management, then, will likely mitigate some of the negative impact of CWW. The extra long distance cost of covering one centre from another and the inefficiencies associated with scheduling are not addressed. Overall, the CWW would be less attractive to the employee.

### ***Experience with CWW in the City of Vancouver***

The City of Vancouver implemented CWW on an experimental basis in 1976 with the intention of reducing traffic congestion. The City encouraged other employers in the city core to similarly modify their work hours to reduce traffic volume but few followed the City's lead. The impact of CWW was formally reviewed and in 1982 the City Manager recommended termination of CWW. Instead, the City Council voted to retain CWW with additional conditions imposed. Some of the concerns raised included:

- delays in providing customer service, both internal and external, in situations where one person is responsible for an issue/project and others are unable to respond
- meetings invariably have to be scheduled on three of the five working days in a week in order to ensure everyone is able to attend
- most people and businesses work a five-day week and expect their government counterparts to do the same.

A 1984 report suggested that higher morale and motivation can lead to real improvements in productivity and performance but also suggested that the benefit of CWW in employee commitment to the City had eroded over time. While reduced absenteeism was noted, punctuality and tardiness were issues that needed to be addressed.

Even though the City Council retained the right to terminate the CWW by providing sufficient notice to staff, the City has made several attempts and has encountered strong opposition and difficulties reverting back to regular hours of work.

Apart from the Vancouver experience, the North Vancouver City Council apparently rejected an experiment with CWW earlier in 1999, fearing it would be too expensive and may lead to labour trouble.

## Conclusion

Whether or not to implement CWW is a matter of balancing the needs of government operations with employee needs. The underlying criteria for the organization are effectiveness in program delivery, efficiency and cost. Embedded in effectiveness is also the capacity to serve stakeholders and citizenry and there is no reason to believe that Product Safety Program's experience will be substantially different from the Vancouver experience, except for the fact that a 28-day cycle would likely result in less of an impact.

It is noteworthy that the recent survey on citizen satisfaction with government services as reported in *Citizens First* (CCMD, 1998) identified access to service as key and timeliness of service as the single strongest determinant of service quality. Identified barriers to access include busy telephone lines, trouble with answering system and getting bounced from one person to another. While regular hours of work in itself would not improve service, authorizing CWW would minimally reduce the number of staff available on certain, if not all days.

Since there is strong likelihood that effectiveness and efficiency may be compromised under CWW and that it may even incur additional cost, CWW is contradictory to the Treasury Board and departmental policies in this instance. While CWW is beneficial to employees who desire it, it is of questionable value to the employer. The impact of CWW will likely be felt more in the Western Region than elsewhere because this is the most under-resourced region. While it may not seem fair that an under-resourced region should be further constrained with respect to implementation of the policy, it is the operational reality.

Specifically, program assistants who hold unique responsibilities at their location cannot be on CWW without compromising service or incurring cost. And since the program manager is no longer one of five district managers but holds a unique position and faces exceptional challenges in



overseeing staff in three distributed locations, it is counter-intuitive to think that he can be on CWW and further decrease his availability without impacting his performance.

Even though it is theoretically possible to have program officers on CWW, the fact that there are only a few in each location (and as little as one at a location) and that they are in and out of the office during the day means that officers are not always reachable as it is. There is also a need to cover each other for sick leave, annual leave and other leaves. If each officer were to be on CWW and be unavailable for an additional 5% of the time in a year, scheduling meetings and communications back and forth would likely be impacted. The timeliness in servicing clients and stakeholders is similarly impacted. CWW is a policy that came into being prior to the notions of citizen-centred service delivery and the two concepts may be a dissonant.

When staff was canvassed for input, there was strong support for either authorizing CWW for all or none at all for the sake of equitable access. If that were the guiding principle, then CWW should not be authorized at all in the Product Safety Program of Western Region.

It should be noted that there is already a fair amount of flexibility available to staff on an occasional to regular basis without implementing CWW. Staff already has the flexibility to negotiate their starting time under the flexible hours of work policy. Under special circumstances, teleworking is also authorized for a specified period.

#### **References:**

Canada Communication Group Inc. 1998. *Dialogue on Values and Ethics, La Rélève*.

[http://leadership.gc.ca/static/store/store\\_e.shtml](http://leadership.gc.ca/static/store/store_e.shtml)

Canadian Centre for Management Development with Erin Research Inc. 1998. *Citizen First*, Ottawa. [www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca/publications\\_e.html](http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca/publications_e.html)

Canadian Centre for Management Development. 1999. *Citizen-Centred Service: Responding to the Needs of Canadians*, Ottawa. [www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca/publications\\_e.html](http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca/publications_e.html)

Treasury Board Secretariat. 1994. Policy Manual, Variable Work Week, Ottawa. [www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs\\_pol/hrpubs/TB\\_853/Chap2\\_3\\_e.html](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/hrpubs/TB_853/Chap2_3_e.html)

#### **About the Author:**

**Ivy Chan** is currently on assignment to the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada. She was Chief of Environmental Health Programs Division, Health Protection Branch (Western Region), Health Canada when she drafted this paper in 1999. She can be reached at [chan.ivy@tbs-sct.gc.ca](mailto:chan.ivy@tbs-sct.gc.ca)