

Protecting the Vulnerability of Shift Workers

The Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) and CCPA Saskatchewan have collaborated to hire researchers and writers to produce and publish an academically reviewed book. From a grant from the Saskatchewan government, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour Shift Work Committee provided the guidance and assistance for this project. This article is one of the topics that can be access in the forthcoming book, **Shifting Times: Current Shift Work Issues that Impact Our Daily Lives**. Interviews with Saskatchewan shift workers from a cross-section of employment sectors and perspectives (youth, women and single parent families) provide a voice to the manuscript about the lifestyle shift workers experience.

Introduction

. . .It's important that your family support you and that they. . .learn to recognize the effects of shift work on the unit as a family so you can all deal with it then.

Although there is substantial literature available on sleep and shift work, there is little research about social relationships of shift workers. In addition, no current research addresses the legal issues surrounding court decisions and contract language with respect to shift workers. In **Shifting Times: Current Shift Work Issues that Impact Our Daily Lives**, the movement away from traditional "9 to 5" jobs is examined within the difficult and often contentious framework of defining shift work and the "normal" workday. As a growing portion of the population contends with working evenings, weekends and holidays, everyone attempts to grapple with definitions of normalcy and the determination of whether a shift is 8, 10 or 12 hours long. Work tensions are heightened by family responsibilities and the desire to participate in other social activities.

. . .It was really difficult. . .getting my spouse to understand what I needed for rest time. And I don't think the education is there to teach spouses. . .about the effects of shift working, the rest needed on their days off. . .there wasn't the understanding. . .To convince or teach something like that unless they are. . .in the same situation and they would understand and sympathize.

Canadian Workforce Statistics

Statistics Canada indicates that there are now almost 16 million individuals working full time

and approximately 3 million working part time in Canada. Of that workforce, almost half are between the ages of 25 and 44, 15% under 25 and 37% 45 and older. While many have addressed the concerns of an aging workforce, there has been no focus on the workday or the work environment.

In 1997, 17% of Canada's population worked overtime and over half of these individuals were not paid or otherwise compensated for the increased hours. Many parts of the country, in fact, do have not a regulated, standard work week of 35 to 40 hours. A recent study by Statistics Canada (Elliott) reported that 20% of all full-time workers regularly worked longer than 40 hours a week before without acknowledgement of overtime and 12% worked 50 hours a week or more as their regular hours (White, p. 41-42, 2002). Although Saskatchewan workers can refuse overtime, most in non-unionized environments do not until they have completed 44 hours of work (White, p. 43, 2002). From 1980 to 1997, the number of individuals working long weeks increased from 17% to 21%.

Saskatchewan's employment industry is compromised generally of the service sector (40%), followed by Trade (16%) and Agriculture, which makes up 11% of all industries (Lovegrove). Comparatively to the rest of Canada, the level of employment is quite high in the agricultural sector; the national average for those employed in agriculture is a mere 2% according to a 2005 Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey. Those employed in the trade sector and the service sector, Saskatchewan's provincial average is roughly equal with the national average (The Daily, Labour Force Survey June 2005).

In general, men are more likely than women to work longer hours but with more women entering the workforce, this trend may change. Are these people shift workers? The answer to this question would generally be answered no, but working a lot of overtime can result in the same symptoms experienced by shift workers (health problems, stress, strain on family and social relations and so on). In addition, approximately 46% of the workforce is working some form of non-standard work that may not be included in the group "shift workers" are considered part-time work, self-employment and temporary work. The lack of job-security implied by this kind of work can be extremely stressful for most individuals.

Changing Environment of Work

Employment is generally a means of economic survival but often when the work we do and the way we do it affects not only our health but also our relationships with those around us, we need to analyze why our work may be affecting us. According to a 2001 Statistics Canada Survey, 30% of Canada's workforce works shifts. It is likely that you or someone you know will work shifts at some point.

Although many individuals enjoy the convenience of 24-hour services, many may never directly feel the negative impacts of shift work. Owners, managers and shareholders benefit from

the economic advantages of round the clock service but often, these individuals will have a hard time understanding the problems that accompany a shift worker's schedule and lifestyle. Those not working shifts assume that the premiums shift workers receive are enough to compensate for working irregular hours. Unfortunately, many fail to realize that an increase in salary cannot always compensate for the difficulties involved in working shifts. Non-shift workers also tend to assume that shift workers work shifts because they *choose* to do so. All of these assumptions make shift workers feel alienated from the "normal workforce."

Defining Shift Work

. . .An eight-hour day consisting of. . .Eight until five. . .and Monday to Friday type of thing. A forty-hour week is what I would consider to be normal. The world or society seems to really evolve around that schedule just because I think the majority at one time did that. . .

The advent of round the clock operations has created an environment in which individuals must work outside the hours considered typical. However, the issue of defining a "typical" workday has created hurdles in providing standardization of definitions. Even those whom were interviewed did not agree with a common definition.

A work week beginning at 9 and ending at 5 daily, from Monday to Friday, provided a common ground for daily business and social activities. School hours have always corresponded with typical work hours so that families could spend time together in the evening and on weekends. Even with the rise of shift work, activities, events and some business hours are still designed around the traditional understanding of the work week.

Review of the Shift Work literature indicates that providing a common definition could assist in providing a legal framework for shift workers. With the understanding that 24-hour operations require generally two or three shifts, the general dividing points for shifts are morning (beginning approximately 8:00 am), afternoon (beginning sometime between 2:00 pm and 6:00 pm) and night (beginning sometime between 10:00 pm and 2:00 am) with the length of the work day varying between 8 and 12 hours. One should note that day workers who work within the hours of 8:00 am to 6:00 pm are often considered shift workers if they do not work Monday to Friday (SGEU, 1999 p.3).

Shift Worker Profiles

A recent Statistics Canada Community Health Survey showed that 30% of men and 26% of women aged 18 to 54 employed throughout 2001 had non-standard schedules with one-quarter of those individuals working afternoon or night shifts. This report also indicates that younger people

are more likely to work shifts as well as those who are single (Shields, 2003). Additional studies have also shown that men tend to work more night and rotating shifts, whereas women tend to work afternoon shifts and part-time positions. Minorities are more likely to be employed in shift work than Caucasians (Weyerhaeuser, 2000).

Educational attainment also has an impact on the profile of a shift worker. A 1998 Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics indicated that people who have not completed secondary education are more likely to work shifts or have irregular schedules as well as those who have only completed high school. The survey also reports that Canada industries tend to employ non-standard workers in agriculture, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, and services sectors (Institute for Work and Health) that are major employment sectors in Saskatchewan. A report by Thomas Beers states "shift work [appears] less frequently in public sectors than in private sectors" (2000). Shift work is also concentrated in the most dangerous forms of work, such as mining (Josling, 2005). A Statistics Canada report on shift work noted that shift work was more common among blue-collar or sales and service occupations than white-collar or clerical jobs (Shields, 2003). The previous examples illustrate the fact that the individual's suffering the consequences of shift work may often be associated with those who are a part of equality-seeking groups as well as less recognized groups in the work force.

Impacts of Shift Work

. . .I think it all stems from sleep. Everything evolves around how much sleep you've got which affects your family, your social life and your health. So at least focus on your sleep. . .sleep is the most important. . .

Although typically considered an issue for night workers, lack of sleep can affect anyone. The need to work hours outside of what is traditionally known as the "typical" workday affects the regular cycles (circadian rhythms) of the body. The loss of even two hours of sleep in one's normal sleep cycle can be harmful to alertness and performance (Canadian Safety Council: Fatigue).

Some things work, some things don't. Your body goes in cycles. I know that when my kids were younger. . .8:30 at night I'm out. . .up at 8:00 the next morning. . .You go from that to two three hours sleep a day. It's different for everyone. . .When you talk to some shift workers. . .they've been at it for twenty five, thirty years. . .they don't sleep more than four or five hours.

For shift workers on constant rotation, internal clocks often become confused and have

difficulty maintaining the synchronization of the body's cycles because rotational shift workers never eat, sleep or socialize at the same time each day. While the body might adapt to changing sleep patterns up to a certain point, sleep debt accumulates and the level of fatigue increases each night (Green-McKenzie). When the experience is long and includes a substantial number of night shifts, changing sleep patterns can have unrelenting effects on sleep quality, leading to sleep deprivation and long-term health implications.

. . .Life is short as it is, shift work makes it even shorter. It takes years off your life. . .

Job Safety Considerations

Lack of sleep can lead to a number of consequences and safety hazards for workers. Fatigue is a condition that can affect one's mental and physical capabilities. Alertness can depend on the extent of sleep deprivation as well as particular work demands and one's environment (Schur, 1998). Decreased judgment, decision-making and memory; slower reaction time; lack of concentration; and fixation often become major areas of concern related to fatigue (Canada Safety Council: Fatigue).

Individuals suffering from sleep deprivation experience slower response rates and lack of alertness that are directly proportional to lack of sleep. Lack of sleep can also lead to dizziness, an inability to concentrate, perceptual changes, mood shifts and gastric or intestinal problems (ACTU). Many studies also suggest that sleep deprivation may lead to a lack of motor functions and alertness that are often associated with alcohol or drug consumption similar to being intoxicated. Several cases have been reported where individuals were cited for driving while intoxicated when they were actually sleep deprived.

. . .It was scary because there is a huge responsibility, not only for. . .the safety of the equipment that you are running but for the lives of other people that could be effected by something you blow up. . .Not getting. . .the rest I needed. . .it could catch up to you and that was a huge consideration when I decided to get off shift for the safety of myself and others.

Examples of the general costs of lack of sleep to our society include industrial accidents such as Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and the Exxon Valdez cases. Human error contributed to these accidents and could have been prevented. Reviewing the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the National

Transportation Safety Board determined five probable causes in which two were directly related to fatigue.

. . .Most of the major accidents that happen in the world happen between 3:00 and 5:00 in the morning and it's because of not being able to . . .make decisions. . .3:00 in the morning is when you have the most trouble because. . .You are expected to get your peek at the time your are not. . .that's generally when you are more likely to have a mistake. . .

Canadian statistics show that approximately 43,000 collisions involving big trucks kill or injure 12,000 people each year, possibly corresponding with the fact that many Canadian transport drivers work between 60 to 80 hours per week (Upshaw). The Canadian Safety Council and The Steel Alliance conduct an annual survey of Canadian drivers and in 2003 found that over half of the drivers drove while tired and 1 in 10 admitted to falling asleep while driving (Canada Safety Council). Clearly, the consequences of fatigue and sleep deprivation impact everyone.

. . .Somebody there that wasn't there because they are so exhausted. So from a safety point of view, it's a very dangerous time of the morning. . .Industrial accidents, as a whole, were operational mistakes. It generally happens wee hours at work. . .

An individual who is not alert or giving full attention to their tasks on the job jeopardizes the safety of fellow workers and their employers. In 2004, Circadian Technologies found that 61% of extended hour facilities cited fatigue problems. Additional problems associated with fatigue resulted in higher absentee rates, high employer turn over and productivity losses.

Social Impacts of Shift Work

A shift worker's schedule, regardless of what type, is out of synchronization with the rest of the world. . .Since a shift worker's schedule does not correspond with most others, a shift worker's social cycles are disrupted and potentially result in negative impacts on well-being and relationships.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions lists particular effects of shift work related to family

and social life. Many studies indicate that individuals may withdrawal from social contact due to physical impacts of shift work and the inability to interact with others. Other areas where shift work and lack of sleep may impact is the lack of contact with partners and school-aged children; reduced interest in sex; higher rates of marriage breakup; reduced friendship networks; loss of access to education, sports, and other social activities; exclusion from the community, social and cultural events; as well as irritability and anger in personal relationships (ACTU, 2002). Karen Johnson points out, "directly, [shift work] dictates the time available for family; indirectly, the physiological and psychological stresses associated with non-day shifts might lead to substantial negative carryover to family life" (Johnson).

Protecting the Vulnerability of Shift Workers

They have no appreciation for shift work. . .and you hear a lot of little ignorant, indignant comments of "Oh you guys are so fortunate to get all of that over time" and they don't realize that you're giving up important family days to have to do that job, because someone has to be there, and so we're constantly in a bickering state with management.

Labour laws are regulated for all workers through the **Trade Union Act**, the **Labour Standards Act**, the **Worker's Compensation Act**, the **Occupational Health and Safety Act**, the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms** and the **Saskatchewan Human Rights Act**. Canada is one of six nations without definitive legislation on night or shift work (SGEU, 1997) and much of this is due to a lack of acknowledgement of shift work and the lack of agreement on defining the terminology associated with shift work. There are, however, a few provisions within Saskatchewan law that touch on shift work. Normal hours of work are legislated to an 8-hour day and 40 hours per week with a maximum of 48 hours that can be worked in a week. However, aside from actual government regulation and cases brought before Human Rights tribunals, most of the enforcement for shift work legislation is through collective agreements.

. . .If you could get the companies to promote more awareness. . .If you could show the company how productive the work would be if they would only work at their shift workers, actually take steps to make them better. . .That's the biggest thing is to making the company accept the fact that shift workers have not got an easy life. . .and be a little more sympathetic. . .let's up the awareness. Employer awareness. . .if they understand what a shift worker is going

through. .it would make it easier. . .

Unions have been able to bargain with employers to provide some changes to labour laws and practices to include shift worker concerns. One major provision that has provided the groundwork for shift work recognition has been to allow employees to work 10 to 12 hours a day for 40 hours a week without having to pay overtime for the two hours to four hours worked beyond the legislated 8 hour day. Connected to the longer workday is the allowance for minimum rest periods before call ins or work when switching shifts.

Another area of concern for shift workers is excessive overtime due to call ins and according to an SGEU report, unlike most other provinces, employees in Saskatchewan have the right to refuse overtime after 44 hours of work in a week (SGEU, 1997). Additional bargaining and high profile legal cases have led to decisions that require the employer to provide free transportation to those finishing work between the hours of 12:30 am and 7:00 am (Saskatchewan Labour, Minimum Wage Board). Beyond these cases, there is little within the realm of regulatory standards for shift work.

. . .If it is a weekend, you want to spend time with your family. . .They don't understand how to deal with the shift work and if they're not compromising and you get irritable it seems to follow you. . .I think shift work causes a lot of stress on marriage or relationships but everybody thinks it's not a big deal because most management is day shift. . .you don't see them working night shifts.

Conclusion

Shift workers are an increasing, vulnerable segment of the labour force today due to global forces that have created competitive markets, the need for increased productivity and emphasis on profit margins. In order to protect and ensure the rights of shift workers, educational programs and materials; management awareness training programs and the inclusion of shift workers on Occupational Health and Safety Committees is needed. As well, revisions in the **Labour Standards Act, Occupational Health And Safety Act** and the **Worker's Compensation Act** need to be undertaken to reflect the changing conditions of the worker and to protect the shift worker's health and safety.

Well I think the people have to adapt now. . .There is not a lot of full time jobs anymore. . .I hate to see my friends. . .they have two, three part time jobs and between all of them they work as much or slightly more than I do. And I think like

that's sad because to juggle your life to have a kid, have two kids, to have a marriage it's tough enough to make a go of things let alone on shift work. . .

Women, immigrants, the Aboriginal population, youth and older individuals are becoming a growing segment of the shift work who are often relegated to part-time, low paid employment. The need for regulations and safety precautions for workers will not only benefit shift workers, but non-standard workers and over-time workers as well.

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