

Building Bridges Across Generations in the Workplace

A Response to Aging of the Workforce



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Introduction

The Canadian labour market is about to experience some major upheavals. The prospect of the upcoming transition period, in which a significant portion of the workforce – the baby-boom generation – will make the rapid shift into retirement, raises a number of questions:

- What impact will the retirement of baby boomers have on the decades ahead?
- Is there a risk that Canada will undergo a shortage of skilled labour or even a general workforce shortage following the baby boomers' retirement?
- What legacy will the baby boomers leave to their successors in the labour market?
- Can the baby boomers transmit their wisdom to younger workers?
- And what policies and practices are in place to cope with the aging of the baby boomers in the labour market?

What impact the baby-boom generation has had and will continue to have on the labour market over the next two decades remains an open question. In the following pages, the magnitude of the coming transition is discussed and some hypotheses regarding the effects of the aging of the baby-boom generation on the labour market are explored. Based on a review of the literature¹ and focus group meetings² with active members of the labour force in their respective provinces of Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, an attempt will be made to measure some of the impacts that the aging of the baby boomers will have on the labour market in the coming years. As well, the importance of this phenomenon will be evaluated and means proposed for dealing with it.

To begin, a description of the phenomenon of the aging of the Canadian population in general and the aging of the workforce in particular will be provided. This is followed by a brief description of the evolution of the labour market over the last two decades, viewed as a function of age. This deals primarily with two periods of major transition: the transition from school to work, and the transition from work to retirement. Thirdly, the prospect of a labour shortage due to the rapid retirement of the baby boomers will be discussed. To conclude, policies and practices designed to manage an aging workforce

¹ The available literature was identified by performing searches using electronic research tools and keywords such as “age, youth and labour market,” “older workers,” “retirement,” and “early retirement,” for all publications and articles published in Canada over the last 12 years.

² Three focus groups made up of young workers, middle-aged workers and workers in early retirement ages were organised for the purposes of this study. These discussions were held in January and February 2001 in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, with the goal of discussing current and future challenges in the labour market.

will be examined, notably those that contribute to forging links between generations in the workforce.

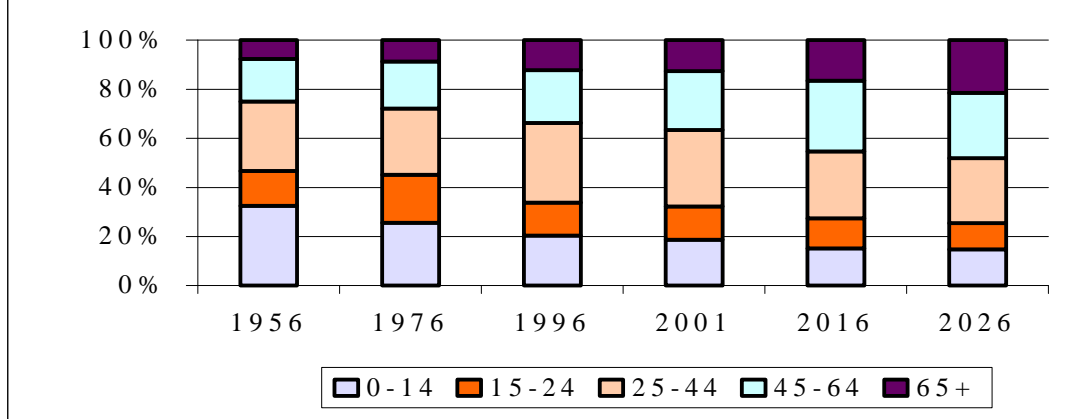
Aging of the Population

On July 1, 2000, the population of Canada reached the 30,750,000 mark. From July 1, 1999 to July 1, 2000, the population increased by 256,700 people, compared to an increase of 245,500 the year before. The change in these figures was due principally to an increase in immigration. In the year 2000, slightly more than 205,000 immigrants arrived in Canada, an increase of 32,300 over the previous year. The impact of natural population growth – that is, the difference between the number of births over the number of deaths – continues to wane as a factor in demographic change. In 1999/2000, Canada had 5,000 fewer births and 6,600 more deaths. Natural population growth therefore made up only 41% of the demographic growth in Canada in 2000, compared to an annual average of 70% throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Canadian population growth stood at 0.8% in 2000, about the same rate as the previous two years (*The Daily*, Statistics Canada, September 26, 2000).

According to the latest demographic projections, the population of Canada will continue to grow over the next quarter-century, despite considerable aging of the population and a notable drop in the proportion of young people. A marked increase in the number of older people – attributable to the aging of the baby-boom generation – combined with the continuing fall in the fertility rate and continued increases in longevity, will bring about a rapid aging of the general population (*The Daily*, Statistics Canada, March 13, 2001).

A study of the distribution of the Canadian population by age over various periods highlights the aging of the population and the decrease in the number of youth as a proportion of the population (see Graph 1). In 1956, 46.7% of the Canadian population were under 25 years of age. In 2000, young people under 25 made up less than one-third of the population. By 2026, they will represent only one-quarter of the population. By contrast, those aged 65 or older made up less than 10% of the population in 1956, compared to 12% in 2000, and 20% by 2026. Based on Statistics Canada's projections for aging, half the population of Canada will be over 43.6 years of age in 2026, a marked increase over the figure of 36.8 for 2000 (*The Daily*, Statistics Canada, March 13, 2001).

Graph 1
Distribution of Population by Age Groups,
Canada
1956, 1976, 1996, 2001, 2016, 2026



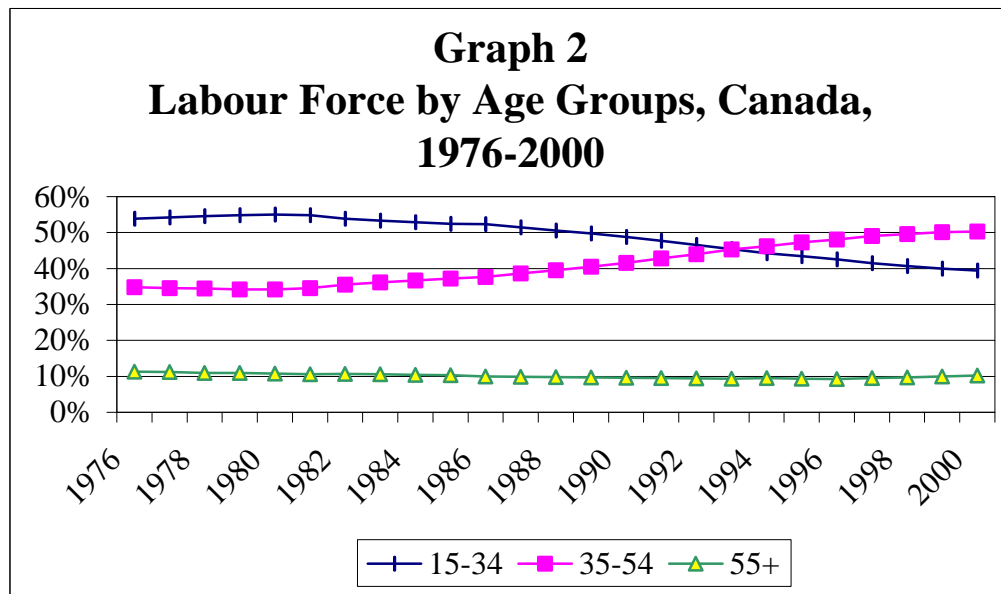
Source: Prepared by Canadian Council on Social Development using Statistics Canada's CANSIM, 6900.

The baby-boom generation – those born during the two decades following the Second World War – has exerted the strongest single influence on Canadian demographics over the last several decades. For example, as the baby-boom generation gradually moved beyond their years of greatest fertility in the 1980s and 1990s – the youngest among them reached age 35 and the eldest, born 20 years earlier, reached age 55 by the end of this period – the aging of this generation has had a significant influence on the slowing of natural population growth (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Over the next 25 years, the baby-boom generation will continue to exert a major influence on various aspects of society. One effect of the aging of the baby-boom generation is reflected in the “ratio of potential support,” which refers to the number of working-age people per older person. This ratio – which is already falling – is expected to plummet even further over the next two decades. From 2001 to 2026, it will fall from five working-age people for every elderly person, to only three per elderly person (*The Daily*, Statistics Canada, March 13, 2001). Aging of the population, as measured by an increase in the number of retired people relative to the number of working-age people, exerts significant pressures on social security programs such as public pension plans, and on social programs such as the health care system (Sunter, 2001). The aging of baby boomers has already provided the impetus for major modifications in public pension plan contribution levels across Canada over the last few years, in order to maintain the long-term viability of the plans. Discussions are also underway about the impact that aging of the population will have on the access to, functioning of, and particularly the financing of the public health system.

Aging of the Workforce

Canada's population is aging. The effects of this aging process are felt first in the labour market where, for the time being at least, there are more experienced workers than there are younger workers. Graph 2 shows this clearly by comparing the proportion of workers aged 35 to 54 in 1976, to that of today. In the year 2000, workers aged 35 to 54 represented fully half the workforce in Canada, compared to just over one-third of the workforce 25 years ago.



Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development based on Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Historical Review, 1976-2000*, cat. 71F004XCB.

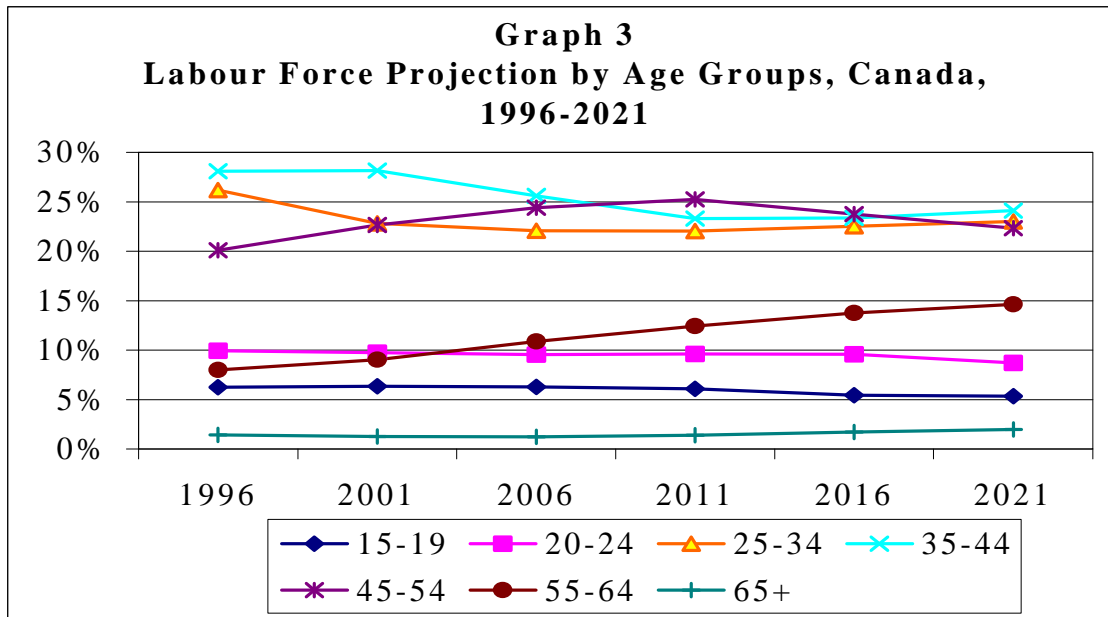
Some sectors are more strongly affected than others by this aging of the workforce. An examination of the demographic composition of each sector in terms of its proportion of workers over age 45 reveals that the phenomenon of aging has a more definitive effect on sectors such as construction, transportation and warehousing, education services, health services and social assistance (see Table 1). Generational change in the workplace will therefore be more pronounced in these sectors over the next few years. It is interesting to note that these sectors – mostly in the public domain or where larger firms predominate – are also those with the greatest labour union presence. These factors should command the attention of Canadian public administrators and labour organizations.

Table 1: Industry Composition, Distribution and Union Coverage by Age Groups, Canada, 2000

	Employees (000)	Distribution		Union Coverage		
		Aged 15+	15-24 yrs	45+ yrs	Aged 15+	15-24 yrs
Total employees	12,488.3	17.4%	29.9%	32.2%	14.2%	42.0%
Goods-producing sector	3,200	13.2%	30.1%	33.7%	20.0%	41.3%
Agriculture	123.6	35.6%	23.6%	3.5%	0.0%	5.8%
Forestry, fishing, mining, oil & gas	234.3	11.2%	32.1%	30.2%	17.6%	40.5%
Utilities	116.3	3.1%	42.4%	71.5%	41.7%	73.2%
Construction	538.3	16.0%	29.2%	32.5%	17.8%	39.2%
Manufacturing	2,187.5	12.0%	29.9%	34.1%	23.8%	41.0%
Services-producing sector	9,288.3	18.8%	29.8%	31.7%	12.8%	42.2%
Trade	2,000.8	29.6%	23.5%	14.8%	14.5%	15.3%
Transportation & warehousing	638.2	9.0%	35.9%	43.5%	24.6%	51.7%
Finance, insurance, real estate & leasing	736	10.7%	30.2%	11.0%	7.1%	11.2%
Professional, scientific & technical services	619.2	12.4%	20.9%	5.4%	3.4%	6.8%
Management of companies & administrative & other support services	385.8	23.8%	26.7%	12.8%	7.7%	17.9%
Educational services	929.4	7.5%	44.0%	72.0%	27.7%	79.3%
Health care & social assistance	1,326.8	8.6%	36.5%	54.8%	30.8%	59.4%
Information, culture & recreation	569.5	25.3%	23.1%	27.7%	11.5%	40.8%
Accommodation & food services	862.6	45.9%	15.0%	8.5%	3.7%	14.9%
Other services	458.2	16.6%	33.0%	9.9%	3.6%	15.0%
Public administration	761.7	7.2%	40.8%	70.4%	36.8%	70.5%

Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development using Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Historical Review*, 1976-2000, cat. 71F004XCB.

As the general population ages over the coming years, so too will the active population. Graph 3 shows a projection of the active Canadian population, by age group, over the next 25 years. According to a model developed by Denton et al (2000), the active population aged 45 years and older will increase considerably over the next two decades. In 1996, one of every five Canadians active in the labour market was aged 45 to 54, and one in 12 active Canadians was between 55 and 64 years of age. These proportions should increase until 2021, when one of every four active Canadians will be 45 to 54, and one in seven will be 55 to 64 years of age, after which their numbers will begin to decrease as the baby boomers leave the workforce at retirement.



Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development from Denton, Feaver and Spencer (2000).

While baby boomers are currently in their prime (aged 35 to 55), they will begin the transition toward retirement in the coming years. The eldest among them have already reached what some refer to as early retirement age (55 years). A few baby boomers have already begun the transition to retirement by accepting generous pre-retirement packages sometimes offered to those over 50 years of age. The transition period that the Canadian labour market is about to undergo – with the coming retirement of a significant part of the labour force – could have numerous consequences, including the following: a general labour shortage and/or a shortage of skilled labour; a decrease in the productivity and competitiveness of Canadian companies as a result of the loss of experienced and competent personnel; increases in social costs due to the smaller number of workers; and, a drop in levels of financing for social programs.

Several hypotheses can be formulated regarding the evolution of the labour market, ranging from apocalyptic predictions of the end of work (Rifkin, 1995), to optimistic projections of natural market re-balancing. However, before suggesting any hypotheses about the effects of the aging of the baby-boom generation, it is appropriate to study recent labour market trends, especially as they relate to age.

Recent labour market trends in Canada in terms of age

The labour market of the 1990s was marked by major upheavals. The decade began with a long recession. Between 1989 and 1993, the unemployment rate³ rose from 7.5% to 11.7%, and the participation rate⁴ fell from 67.2% to 65.4%. Only self-employment – seen by some as an escape from the unemployment of the early 1990s – rose during this period. The recovery after the recession of the early 1990s was very slow. Between 1994 and 1997, the unemployment rate fell by only 1.3%, from 10.4% to 9.1%, with the participation rate remaining nearly constant, around 64.9%. By contrast, the end of the decade was more encouraging. The unemployment rate fell to its lowest point in 20 years, although the participation rate did not return to its pre-recession level (*Labour Force Survey*, 2001).

According to Sunter (2001), the most important factor influencing the labour market during most of the 1990s was the relative weakness of demand. This would have had a negative effect on the creation of jobs for youth and older men. Comparing the labour market of the 1990s with that of 1980s, Picot and Heisz (2000) conclude that the slow growth of employment until 1998, particularly of full-time employment, was a reflection of the weakness of the economic recovery. They add that there was more downsizing during the recovery of the 1990s than there had been in the 1980s. This downsizing occurred primarily in the public services and consumer services sectors. This observation casts doubt on the claim that globalization and technological evolution contributed to corporate downsizing, since the entire market economy, not only those sectors, would have been affected. Finally, they point out that overall, unemployment grew during the recovery period of the 1990s much as it had in the 1980s in terms of rates, frequency and duration.

Thus, while weakness of demand played a major role, it was not the sole factor influencing the labour market in recent years. In addition to fluctuations related to the state of the economy, changes of a more structural nature also played a major role. The transfer of jobs to the services sector and, more particularly, the development of the knowledge economy – already underway for several decades – continues. Canadian women also continue to claim their place in the labour market. Their participation rate has risen from a mark of 45.7% in 1976 to 58.5% today. The growing number of non-

³ The unemployment rate corresponds to the proportion of people without employment (but who are actively seeking work) in relation to the active population. The active population corresponds to the sum of all people who are working or are actively seeking employment. The unemployment rate is used here as an indicator of demand for the workforce; the higher the unemployment rate, the weaker the demand for the workforce.

⁴ The participation rate corresponds to the proportion of people who are unemployed or employed in relation to the total population aged 15 or older. The participation rate is used here as an indicator of the supply of the workforce in the labour market; the lower the participation rate, the lower the level of the workforce available.

standard jobs also constitutes an important structural change over the last two decades. The proportion of employees working part-time has risen from a rate of 12.6% in 1976, to 18.1% today, after having reached 19.3% and 19.2% in 1993 and 1996, respectively. In addition, a greater proportion of workers who would rather be employed full-time are now working part-time. Except for the last two years, self-employment has also been increasing steadily: the proportion of self-employed workers now stands at 16.2% of all workers, compared to 12.2% in 1976. Finally, the labour force is better-educated than it was 10 or 20 years ago. While 13.8% of workers had a university diploma in 1976, and that rate has risen to 18% today (*Labour Force Survey*, 2001).

Other changes have also had an effect on the labour market. In addition to the opening of markets as a result of free trade agreements and the acceleration of technological changes, reforms to social programs may also have had an influence on the behaviour of employers and employees, particularly reforms to Employment Insurance (EI) and welfare. For example, by tightening admissibility criteria for EI, the mobility of the workforce may have been reduced, thus contributing to a reduction of employment opportunities for youth (Picot and Heisz, 2000).

All these changes have an impact on the active population, irrespective of age. The baby boomers, particularly the youngest of that generation, suffered due to the fluctuations in the labour market in the 1990s. Nonetheless, it seems that youth making the transition to the labour market and older men were more seriously affected than other workers by the recent transformations of the labour market.

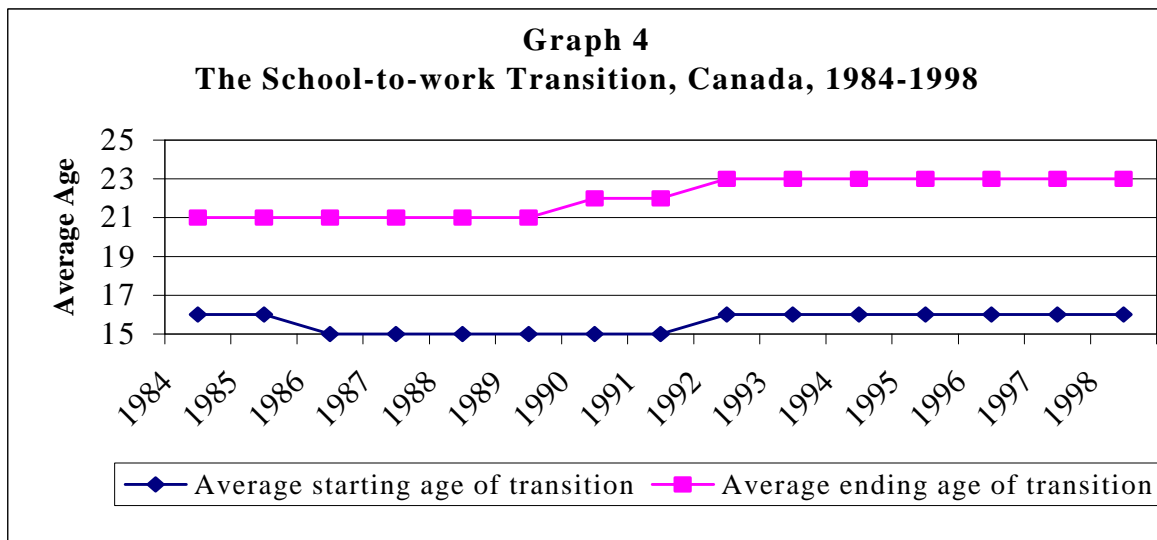
- **Youth and the labour market: The school-to-work transition**

The transition from school to the labour market is one that most Canadians undergo. In some cases, the transition is easy, while in other cases it can be difficult and can take considerable time. The transition from school to the labour market typically occurs between the ages of 15 and 24, and essentially consists of a period of gaining experience in the labour market. According to the OECD, this transition period begins at the age when most youth have stopped studying but are not yet working, and it continues until most of them are working, not studying (OECD, 1997).

The school-to-work transition has evolved considerably over the last 20 years. In 1984, nearly four in 10 young Canadians aged 15 to 24 were working without being in school, while nearly three in 10 were in school without being in the workforce. In 2000, these proportions were inverted: nearly four in 10 youth aged 15 to 24 were studying, not working, while less than three in 10 youth were working, not studying. However, a

greater proportion of youth now work and study at the same time. In 1999, 23% of youth aged 15 to 24 studied and worked at the same time, compared to 15% in 1984 (*Labour Force Survey*, 2001).

This reversal is explained by the rise in the level of school enrollment for youth during the early 1990s. More than 60% of youth aged 15 to 24 were in school in 1999, compared to 51% in 1989, and 41% in 1979. At the end of the 1990s, youth aged 15 to 24 were more likely to be in school than were youth of previous decades, and they were less likely to have finished their transition from school to the labour market. Consequently, the length of the transition period from school to the workforce has increased. Using the OECD definition, Bowlby (2000) established that in 1984, the transition period between school and the labour market began at age 16 and ended at age 21, for an average length of six years. Since then, the transition period has grown by two years, now extending from age 16 to age 23 (see Graph 4).



Source: Prepared by the Canadian Council on Social Development from Bolby (2000) and Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Historical Review*, 1976-2000, cat. 71F004XCB.

In addition to being longer, the transition from school to the labour market is now more difficult for a great number of youth. For example, among post-secondary education graduates, slightly more than two-thirds of the class of 1995 had a full-time job by 1997 – two years after the end of their studies – which is fewer than graduates from the mid-1980s were able to attain (Bowlby, 2000). Among graduates working full-time two years after the end of their studies, the class of 1995 earned about 4% to 6% less (in inflation-adjusted dollars) than graduates from 1986. In addition, only half the 1995 graduates who were working full-time said the job they held was closely related to their field of study (Bowlby, 2000).

While studying the labour market in relation to various age groups over time, Beaudry and Green (2000) also noted a deterioration in the labour market for youth. Looking at the last three decades, they found a significant deterioration of employment for young men who had only a high school education, an improvement of employment opportunities for young women, and mixed results for men with a post-secondary diploma.

Young people participating in our three focus groups provided indirect confirmation of these observations. For most youth, the transition between school and work is perceived to be difficult and frustrating, even for youth with a post-secondary diploma. Three themes emerged from these focus group sessions: the precariousness of employment; the frustrations associated with having a diploma and not being able to put it to use; and the necessity of finding a job in order to repay student loans. One participant, for example, found it frustrating to work under the supervision of someone with fewer qualifications than she had. Another participant decried the exploitation of young, highly trained workers in second-rate jobs.

- **Workers over 45 years of age: The work-to-retirement transition**

Like the transition from school to the labour market, the transition from work to retirement has evolved very rapidly over the last two decades. Not only does it take place earlier, it is increasingly diversified.

The transition period between work and retirement now begins at a younger age than it did even a few years ago. In 1976, the average age of retirement was 64.9 years, compared to an average retirement age of 61 in 1999. Men take retirement at a later age than do women (61.7 years, compared to 60.1 years). Workers in the public sector enter retirement earlier than do workers in the private sector and those who are self-employed (58.5 years of age, compared to 61.3 years for the private sector worker, and 65 years for the self-employed). Compared to 25 years ago, fewer men aged 55 to 64 are active in the labour market. In 1976, 75.9% were working or were actively seeking employment, compared to 61% in 2000. In contrast, older women are more likely to be part of the active population. Their participation rate increased from 31.8% in 1976 to 41.6% by 2000. And when a total withdrawal from the labour market is not contemplated, transitional jobs such as part-time work or self-employment are being used to fill the gap. In 1976, one in four workers aged 55 or older was working part-time, compared to one-third today (*Labour Force Survey*, 2001).

This drop in the participation rate and in the average retirement age among those aged 55 to 64 can be explained by the many factors at play. During the 1970s and 1980s, workers were able to retire earlier, thanks to the Canada Pension Plan and the Quebec Pension Plan (CPP/QPP). In the 1980s, the minimum age to receive retirement benefits went down from 65 to 60 years of age. In the 1990s, other factors also influenced the activities and retirement decisions of older workers. Budget cuts by public administrators, a growing shortage of jobs, and the long-term unemployment rate over the decade seem to have helped to push many older workers into retirement, or at least onto the transition to retirement. These hypotheses are supported by the fact that older workers lost a disproportionate number of jobs at the start of the 1990s.

While peoples' reasons for retirement are complex and varied, there is no indication that the continued fall in the average retirement age is exclusively the result of forced retirement among the active population. In fact, the reasons for moving into retirement have changed little between the expansion of the 1980s and the recession-dominated early 1990s. While the proportion of people moving into retirement nearly doubled from 7% to 12% as some people took advantage of early retirement options, the proportion who cited unemployment as the principal cause of their retirement increased only slightly, from 10% to 12% (Statistics Canada, 1998). At the beginning of the 1990s, personal preferences and health remained the principal reasons for retirement.

Among the focus group participants who were in their early retirement years, several identified broad eligibility criteria for early retirement as an important component of their decision. While they had not necessarily planned to retire, the opportunity presented itself and served as a catalyst for several people. Surprisingly, all the focus group participants in early retirement asserted that they were "not really retired." Some hoped to return to the labour market, while others needed to return to work in order to make ends meet. Some had taken early retirement options as a way of re-orienting their careers, while others were so busy with other activities, including volunteer work, that they hardly seemed to have eased their workload at all.

Some researchers studying the question of early retirement among older workers indicate that the timing of the transition to retirement, or at least towards retirement, is increasingly dictated by employers (Beausoleil, 1998; D'Amours and Lesemann, 1999), even if the ultimate decision still rests with the employees. With an eye to rationalization, employers have tended to make retirement plans more attractive in order to entice greater numbers of older workers to consider early retirement.

In addition to accounting considerations, corporate decisions in this area may also be based on preconceptions (Guérin, 1991; Beausoleil, 1998; D'Amours and Lesemann, 1999). According to Beausoleil (1998), employers attribute a host of traits to older workers – which tends to give the employers a stereotypical, somewhat ambivalent view of these employees. Older workers are perceived both positively – in recognition of the wide range of qualities related to their capacity for work and their outlook on employment – and negatively – in that the older workers are thought to be lacking in flexibility and adaptability.

Guérin (1991) characterizes the current transition period between the labour market and retirement as one reflective of an active strategy to purge older workers from the labour market. In his view, recent trends in this area are embodied in policies and practices that seek to hasten the departure of older workers, or at least to dissuade them from continuing to work.

Many people believe that this strategy is outmoded and costly, both in economic and social terms (Guérin, 1991; Beausoleil, 1998; D'Amours and Lesemann, 1999). It increases short-term expenditures for corporations, notably in the areas of recruitment and training, and involves a loss of skills for the corporation. For employees, their premature departure from work can mean physical and mental inactivity, loss of confidence and self-esteem, and the cutting of social ties – all of which can have an impact on health and health-related expenditures.

According to D'Amours and Lesemann (1999), although many companies are increasingly aware of the negative effects of massive staff departures into early retirement and the resulting shortening of careers, they nonetheless continue to promote the retirement of their aging workforce over other measures that would favour the retention of workers. Bellemare, Poulin-Simon and Tremblay (1995) explain this situation in the context of macro-economic policies which push corporations to cut labour costs by a variety of means – including the reduction of staff, decreased job security and early retirement. They also explain the phenomenon in terms of a chronic labour surplus, due in part to the availability of better-trained women and youth, thus allowing companies to move to younger personnel. They attribute the current trends to technological changes, which tend to amplify employers' mis-perceptions about the inability of older workers to adapt. Finally, the labour force's positive view of retirement – often dubbed the “Freedom 55” image – also sheds light on current trends in the area of early retirement.

- **Recent trends in labour market transitions**

In studying the school-to-work and work-to-retirement transitions, it is noticeable that over the last several years, the active life of workers is growing shorter: workers enter the labour market at a later age and they leave it earlier. The transition between school and the labour market is now longer and more difficult for many youth. Working conditions for young people, especially for young men, seem to be deteriorating when compared to the employment levels and remuneration of decades past. Nonetheless, their suitability for employment is not reduced. By remaining in school longer, current generations acquire greater formal knowledge or human capital. And at the other end of the scale, older workers now live in a social environment which militates for a shorter work life over the maintenance of employment. The labour surplus – related to the current state of the economy and to structural changes in the labour market associated with certain shifts in public policy – doubtless contributes to this phenomenon.

Hypotheses on the Effects of Aging Baby Boomers on the Labour Market

With the aging of baby boomers in the labour market, one question that quickly comes to mind is the possibility of an eventual labour shortage. Several authors (Firbank, 1996; Beausoleil, 1998) believe that the decreasing numbers of youth, combined with the gradual drop in the participation rate of older workers, could translate into a shortage of workers in the decades ahead.

Given that economists generally find it difficult to predict economic fluctuations even a few years into the future, predicting a general labour shortage in 15 or 20 years down the road would require an act of divination. The changes described above, including the movement of the economy towards the services sector, the feminization of the workplace, the development of non-standard forms of work, and the drop in participation rates for youth and older workers, all demonstrate the complexity of trying to predict which factors will influence the labour market over the next quarter-century. The aging of the baby-boom generation is, in this context, only one of many factors that will influence the evolution of the labour market, so prudence is necessary in studying its effects. Nevertheless, by taking into consideration the marked trends in the labour market over recent decades, it is possible to formulate a few hypotheses regarding the effects of the aging of the baby-boom generation on the labour market.

- **Will there be a labour shortage in Canada in the years ahead?**

The labour market of the 1990s was one of great upheavals. As a result, it is difficult to predict if a shortage of workers will occur in the years ahead. Nonetheless, it is possible to state that the labour market will be subject to cyclical fluctuations that will doubtless influence such things as the integration of youth into employment or the anticipated departure of older workers, just as it has been influenced by such factors in the past. That being said, however, the current reductions in the length of workers' lifetime labour market activities – as evidenced by the decrease in participation rates for youth and older workers – will likely continue, possibly contributing to a labour shortage or to multiple isolated worker shortages.

In fact, the gradual decrease in the participation rate of young workers will likely continue in the years ahead. The importance that youth and other labour market actors place on obtaining a diploma is holding steady, and may increase through the development of the knowledge-based economy. More youth may therefore continue to attend educational institutions and, all other things being equal, their future integration into the labour market will likely be lengthy and difficult, at least while a significant proportion of baby boomers remain in the job market, probably for the next 10 years or so.

The workplace environment in which older workers operate will also remain largely unchanged. The macro-economic contexts and policies that pressure corporations to reduce costs do not seem to be disappearing. The drive to reduce payrolls in the face of acute competition or to maintain budgetary equilibrium remains. Preconceptions about older workers also remain firmly in place. In addition, many public policies may contribute to the early departure of older workers. For example, D'Amours and Lesemann (1999) affirm that the temporary or long-term income support through EI and welfare provides some financial support to older workers making the transition to retirement, without necessarily favouring the workers' retention or their re-integration into the labour market. In addition, older workers almost invariably hope to enter retirement sooner, rather than later. At least that is the image that society and some of its major players seem to convey. The image of "Freedom 55" remains strong.

However, the older workers of tomorrow will be better educated than those of today. Workers currently aged 45 to 54 are much more likely to use computers or other work-related technologies than were their predecessors (Statistics Canada, 1998). In addition, the educational level of older workers in the future will be closer to that of their younger

colleagues. They are therefore less likely to experience the same technology-related pressures as their predecessors. They may be able to choose for themselves the timing of their retirement, rather than having it imposed on them by an employer. It is also possible that technological changes will reduce the drudgery of work, thus helping to lengthen the active life of workers. On the other hand, it may also be possible that the higher levels of income associated with workers' higher education levels will allow some older workers to contemplate early retirement.

Beyond fluctuations related to the state of the economy and the gradual drop in labour activity among youth and older workers, other structural changes could also have an impact on the labour market in the decades ahead. Already underway, the transfer of jobs to the services sector and, more particularly, the development of the knowledge-based economy will likely continue. Again, it is difficult to predict with certainty the development of key sectors of the economy. The further development of the knowledge economy could, for example, mitigate the difficulty that well-educated workers face integrating into the labour market. However, studying the aging of the workforce by sector has demonstrated that it is already having particular effects on certain sectors of the economy, especially public services. For example, the current nursing shortage is a well-documented phenomenon. And other sectors that already have an older workforce may face labour shortages in the future.

In addition to concentrations of older workers in certain sectors, the feminization of the labour market will likely continue, and it will exert a noticeable influence on the active population in the years ahead. The aging of female baby boomers, combined with the high participation rate of younger women (aged 25 to 45), will likely contribute to an increase in the participation rate of all women in the labour market, and particularly that of older women. This may help mitigate the potential labour shortage – if indeed there is one – by increasing the number of older women in the labour market. Further, the intermittent character of many women's jobs and the less-secure nature of those jobs could also help keep them in the labour market for longer periods. The loss of job security does not only apply to women, however. Men who do not have full-time, well-paying jobs with access to a private pension plan may also have to lengthen their active work lives, especially for financial reasons. And if the trend to self-employment continues, for both men and women, it could also help balance the possibility of a labour shortage, since self-employed workers tend to stay in the workforce longer.

The feminization of the labour market may therefore lessen the threat of a potential labour shortage. However, that same factor could also contribute to a decrease in the participation rates of both women and men in the coming years, and could even add to

the potential of a labour shortage. The fact that women today are more active in the labour market, and that a greater proportion of men and women aged 45 to 54 are currently covered by a retirement plan, may indicate that future retirees will be better able to provide for their own needs in retirement (Statistics Canada, 1998). It might also indicate that they would be more likely to end their labour market activities at a younger age. When deciding whether or not to retire, women seem more likely than men to take the career and retirement of their spouse into account (Gower, 1998). Consequently, they are more likely to follow the current trends set by older men and retire early, so that they can enter retirement at the same time as their spouses.

- **When can we expect a general labour shortage in Canada?**

Canada does not currently have a labour shortage in the job market. Granted, there are shortages of skilled labour, but no more so than there have been in the past, based on the results of a study by Gingras and Roy (1998). However, a decrease in the labour force is certainly a possibility in the future. According to Denton, Feaver and Spencer (2000), the labour force should increase over the next 15 years. Working from a projection model based on data from the 1996⁵ Census, and making the following assumptions – a constant fertility rate at the 1997 level of 1.552 children per woman; a level of immigration of 225,000 per year; a rate of emigration of 0.2% of the population; and extrapolating on the current trends in labour activity among youth, women and older workers – Denton et al. predict that the number of people active in the labour market will rise from 16 million in 2000, to 17.5 million by 2016. But they predict a decline in the active population after 2016.

All other things remaining equal, the Canadian labour market will, therefore, experience a decline in its labour force within a few years. Can this reduction in the active working population translate into a labour shortage? That is difficult to establish with certainty. In any evaluation of a potential labour shortage, it is necessary to recognize the adaptive capacity of the economy in general and of industries in particular. Industries could choose to invest increased amounts in technology in order to make up for a labour shortage, or they could decide to pursue their operations in an area where labour is available. In other words, the fact that there will be fewer workers does not necessarily mean that there will be more jobs to fill.

⁵ The “Standard” model of Deton, Feaver and Spencer (2000) is used in this document. The model is founded on a series of projections relating to the demographic composition of the labour market and its evolution. Readers are strongly encouraged to read this document, available on the Internet at: <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~qsep/p/qsep347.PDF>

- **Will there be a shortage of skilled labour in Canada?**

Whether or not there will be enough workers in the future is an important question in its own right. However, an equally important question is whether there will be enough skilled labour in the decades ahead. Certain sectors are already experiencing labour shortages that may be attributable to the massive and premature departure of a good portion of the aging workforce.

It is somewhat difficult to give credit to the notion of a future shortage of skilled labour when one remembers that only half the graduates from the mid-1990s who had full-time jobs two years after graduation were working in jobs unrelated to their fields of studies. This tenuous link between recent graduates' areas of studies and their labour market activities indirectly demonstrates the stockpile of formal skills still available to the labour market. This stockpile will continue to accumulate over the years ahead, given the current levels of school enrollment and the rise in educational achievements among youth.

The premature departure of baby boomers from the labour market may reveal shortages in certain sectors – such as in the areas of health and social services – but these labour shortages have occurred before and will likely always occur. As well, professions that suffer the consequences of poor planning (or no planning), or those that are not esteemed by youth may also experience labour shortages. Nonetheless, there is a considerable stockpile of workers with the minimum formal education necessary to address labour demands caused by the retirement of baby boomers.

Why worry, then, about the retirement of baby boomers, if a sufficient stockpile of formal education exists in the labour market? Because even though formal education is important in its own right, it is not the only component of the efficiency and productivity of workers. Knowledge and skills acquired on the job are also critical. When older workers leave the labour market, they take with them a considerable cache of knowledge and important experiences, much of it essential to the smooth functioning of an organization, whether it is public or private. In order to maintain efficient operations, it is necessary that there be a transfer of knowledge and skills acquired on the job. The mass retirement of the baby boomers in the coming years will bring with it the risk of losing the knowledge and skills they have acquired on the job over the years.

- **Knowledge transfer: What is at stake as the baby boomers retire?**

The transfer of knowledge and skills acquired on the job can be accomplished in a number of ways. In large or unionized workplaces, there is generally an internal job market in which workers evolve based on their experiences and the acquisition of skills, whether these come from within or outside the organization. Workers enter at the bottom of the job ladder and progress upwards as their experiences and training allow. In other sectors, such as in liberal professions or the health sector, a period of supervision is generally planned at the beginning of a career, either through an educational institution or supervision provided by more experienced workers. New employees go through a certain training period with experienced workers, thus acquiring part of the older workers' on-the-job skills. In smaller organizations, however, or in less organized workplaces – which are becoming increasingly common – the transfer of knowledge and experiences may be carried out in a less formal way – or not at all. There is, therefore, already some transfer of knowledge and acquired skills in most work environments. However, are most skills that are acquired on the job transferred to the next generation of workers?

There are suggestions that only an infinitesimal part of knowledge and skills are transmitted from older to younger workers. Over the last few years, decisions to offer or to accept early retirement options seem to have been taken very rapidly. Workers have often been given only a few weeks, or six months at most, to decide whether to accept an early retirement offer. As a result, it is difficult to imagine that such workers had time to transfer the knowledge from their on-the-job experience to their younger colleagues. What is more, the mass retirement of baby boomers over the next few years may exacerbate this problem, since they will be leaving in greater numbers and in rapid succession.

Means of Action

The first line of defence against the possibility of a labour shortage or a shortage of skilled labour is to retain older workers. In order to accomplish this, some people suggest increasing the age at which older workers can access public retirement funds, or modifying public policies in order to ensure that they do not favour the early retirement of older workers. These proposals are interesting at first glance. Re-establishing age 65 as the point of access to public retirement plans could influence the retirement decisions of some workers or influence the decisions of employers to offer early retirement options. Unfortunately, such proposals would have negative consequences on younger workers and those workers who are less well-off economically. The suggestion to lower the

retirement age was originally intended, in part, to meet the needs of older workers who lost their jobs and couldn't regain a place in the job market. By keeping one part of the labour force on the job through a higher age of admissibility to retirement plans, there is a risk of impoverishing older workers who have not yet reached retirement age but who cannot regain entry to the labour market. What is more, holding back a workforce that wishes to retire runs the risk of causing a deterioration of the workplace and reducing opportunities for younger workers.

Another way to retain older workers is to improve the environment in which they work. A less physically and psychologically demanding environment might help keep older workers on the job longer. Having a more ergonomic work environment throughout their careers, combined with more flexible schedules for those who want them, would likely have more positive effects on retaining older workers than a simple change to the official age of retirement.

There are numerous other ways to manage an aging workforce. For example, NOWIS (National Older Workers Information System) in the United States catalogued more than 269 possible strategies for managing an aging workforce. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has also published a guide of useful practices in managing aging personnel. These strategies are aimed at keeping workers as long as possible, without necessarily holding them back.

These strategies are particularly interesting when viewed in the context of potential labour shortages, but the situation in Canada is not yet at that point. On the contrary, youth unemployment, the unused stockpile of accumulated formal education, and the large number of workers forced into part-time rather than full-time employment seem to indicate that there is a labour surplus in Canada. Under these circumstances, solutions to the aging of the baby-boom generation must be understood, not in terms of retaining one part of the labour force at the expense of another, but rather in terms of benefits to the workforce and to society as a whole.

There is a whole range of possible interventions, from minor to major, which could simultaneously uphold the interests of young workers and those of older workers, employers, and of society generally. These interventions include measures specifically meant to overcome age-related barriers, as well as more general employment or human resource policies that establish work environments in which each worker can develop to their full potential, free of age-related obstacles.

These policies and practices can be grouped under the following five themes:

- recruitment and promotion (allowing all age groups access to employment);
- training, professional development and knowledge transfer (offering continuous training throughout a worker's professional life, allowing the transfer of knowledge between generations, especially from older workers);
- flexible work organization (flexibility of both the content of work and the hours worked, in order to consolidate young workers' employment and prolong the active work life of older workers);
- ergonomics/task definition (adapting work so that it is suitable to all workers, irrespective of their capacities or age); and,
- evolution of social behaviour in corporations (creating social links between workers of different age groups).

All the actors in the labour market have a role to play, whether they are workers themselves, their representatives, sectoral associations, employers, employers' associations, educational institutions or the state. Workers – especially the baby boomers – can already act in their workplace by planning the date of their retirement and taking the concrete steps necessary to allow for the maximum transfer of their knowledge to younger workers. They can also pressure associations such as unions or professional groups to request better planning for the workforce and for the transfer of knowledge within the workplace. For example, they could negotiate appropriate clauses in collective agreements that would allow for changes to retirement plans to ensure a gradual move towards retirement, and clauses that would provide a period during which the transfer of knowledge to younger workers could be accomplished.

Sectoral associations, unions and management can also play a role in workforce planning, in collaboration with educational institutions and the state. The state can improve its public policies in order to help maintain older workers in the workplace and help the transfer of knowledge within the workplace. For example, a law which would allow a certain portion of the payroll to be set aside for training activities – such as currently exists in Quebec (“the 1% law”) – would doubtless be a step in that direction.

There are a great many other possible interventions as well, some of which are probably already in place in different workplaces. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine, for example, how many companies have a plan in place for the transition of skills in the face of an aging workforce, nor how many unions have policies and strategies related to this question. More direct studies will have to be undertaken. Some collective agreements are known to offer the possibility of gradual retirement and early retirement options. It

cannot yet be determined how many of these collective agreements offer workers who are on the verge of departing the opportunity to transmit their knowledge to younger colleagues. Finally, some public and private retirement plans offer workers the opportunity to retire from the labour market before the usual age of retirement. However, it is not known how many of these plans offer the possibility of a gradual move into retirement, nor how many offer salary or pension compensation to workers as they reduce their hours in a progressive move towards retirement.

Of all the available strategies and practices, the most important should be those that favour the transfer of knowledge and skills between generations of workers. Whether they take the form of tax credits for training, or an income support program within a mentoring program between an older worker on the verge of retirement and a younger worker, these strategies, policies and practices should ease the transfer of knowledge and acquired skills from older workers near retirement to their younger successors. It would seem, however, that very few such strategies and practices have been put into action.

Before policies and strategies for the transfer of knowledge and skills can be put into place, it is imperative that the problem they address be adequately recognized. It seems that the aging of the workforce does not yet figure prominently in the view of actors in the workplace. A 1997 survey of national and international unions with a presence in Canada revealed that the aging of the workforce was considered to be 17th in importance on a list of 18 suggested issues (Kumar, Murray and Schetagne, 1998).

When asked about future challenges in the labour market, only one focus group participant in 20 identified the aging of the baby-boom generation. Fortunately, however, this lack of awareness seems to be changing. According to a recent study by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC), unions and management have begun to recognize the problem of aging of the workforce, the need to take steps to deal with it, and the magnitude of the difficulties required to replace future retirees. According to the study results, unions and management agreed that there will be a major replacement of retirees over the next five years. Management generally expects a replacement rate higher than that foreseen by unions. The hiring of younger workers is seen as a priority and should remain so over the next five years, according to the study. A few specific measures – other than training – need to be undertaken to replace those who retire, but respondents identified skills shortages as the principal aspect of the problem.

Conclusion

The problem of the aging of the baby-boom generation and its effects on the labour market can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. It can be seen through a relatively narrow and technical lens. For example, it can be discussed in terms of the opportunity it presents to raise the age at which workers can access public retirement plan benefits, in order to retain older workers in the workplace of the future. The effects of the aging of the baby-boom generation can also be viewed as a rare and valuable opportunity to observe the mutations of industrial societies in response to demographic, economic, social and political phenomena.

Demographic evolution has traditionally been ignored as a determining variable in workforce management policies, even in the face of an aging workforce. Despite this omission in the past, the issue seems poised to become increasingly important in the future. We cannot avoid the aging of the active population, but we can mitigate the phenomenon by keeping more older workers in the labour market to avoid a labour shortage or, at the very least, by implementing strategies to ensure the transfer of acquired knowledge and skills to future working generations.

The impact that the baby-boom generation has had – and will continue to have – on the labour market remains an open question. In this report, a number of hypotheses have been discussed about the effects of the aging of the workforce on the labour market. These hypotheses will need to be tested over the coming years, for the behaviour of tomorrow's older workers remains a mystery. But they will probably be more numerous, better educated, and there will be more women among their ranks than was the case in the past – three characteristics which will undoubtedly put several of these hypotheses to the test.

In any event, a number of possible solutions to the aging of the workforce already exist. Several policies have been proposed in this report. The most important among them are those aimed at facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills from one generation of workers to another. However, before policies, strategies and practices can be discussed, awareness of this problem will have to be broadened among the principal actors in the labour market.

In response to technological and other changes, certain “futurists” such as Rifkin (1995) have attempted to predict the future shape of work. Less than 10 years ago, he predicted the end of work as we know it. Clearly, trying to devine what the labour market might look like in 10 or 20 years is a task that is both difficult and fraught with risk. Faced with

the rapid aging of the active population, however, the appropriate question may not be whether or when work will end, but rather who will be doing the work, and whether they will be equal to the challenges that await them.

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