

## **Challenges women face in the labour market - Part I**

The last few articles have been directed at job search strategies. Today I will shift the focus a little and talk about challenges women face in the labour market. It is no secret; women are among those who are most often disadvantaged in the labour market. The vast majority of women are now working outside the home, either because they choose to or because they must. Women have fundamentally changed the nature of their work over the last forty years by shifting en masse from unpaid labour in the home to paid employment in the labour market. Although in some cases this shift has been driven by economic necessity, there is good reason to think that in many more instances it represents a fundamental change in preferences, self-image and possibilities. For example, during the Second World War many young women took on new responsibilities within the workforce in order to replace men who went to war.

Those who return to school or work after being away for some years, usually feel in need of direction. There are several other common barriers and challenges women should note when entering or re-entering the workforce:

1. Women still flock to clerical occupations, which are being severely affected by new technologies and is also highly competitive.
2. The lack of affordable day care can prevent women from entering or re-entering the labour market.
3. Barriers faced by women because of social stereotyping or systemic discrimination are compounded if the woman is also a visible minority or a person with a disability.

We will discuss these three key issues in relation to the BC labour market:

### **1. Advances in technology and increased competitiveness in clerical occupations**

Women dominate approximately 91% of clerical positions. The impact of technology on the workplace is astonishing. And, because of the rapidly growing high tech sector, it is more important than ever for young women to learn mathematics and science during their formal education. Although some employers in the clerical field accept less than grade 12, most prefer applicants with a high school diploma and courses in English, business and computer use. The average age of workers is 37, and about 18% of clerical workers under the age of 25. From these figures we can guess that for women these are often entry-level jobs.

Because there is an oversupply of qualified candidates it can be difficult to get your foot in the door. Anyone planning to enter this field must have good computer and clerical skills and should be prepared to upgrade these skills continually. As always, those with current experience and good training will have the best chance of securing these jobs.

Between 1998 and 2008 it is expected that 8,800 positions will become available in this area, with most of those openings (78%) being also a direct result of replacing retiring workers. The standard 35 to 40 hour week may be a thing of the past. Just over 40%

work full time, full year, however industry sources expect that part-time and contract opportunities will increase. Many organizations have found it cost-efficient to hire people only as long as they are needed, rather than take on full-time permanent staff.

Key-skills and employment experience have quickly become a standard. Many businesses have set specific standards on hiring clerical staff. Banks for instance, have been known to ask for specific computer skills, typing speeds, as well as a minimum of 6 months experience.

Anyone thinking of taking additional training would do well to research BC public colleges and university colleges such as Vancouver Community College, this will help locate cost-effective yet highly respected programs that teach basic office skills / office administration. Some private post-secondary institutions have been known to “cash-in” on the need by eager job seekers to find clerical work, yet do not provide quality education at fair prices. The bottom line is to research what employers think of a schools program prior to signing up for any training.

## **2. Lack of affordable day care**

Families are particularly hard hit by the variability in working hours, lack of job security and the new forms of work. Probably the biggest factor affecting families is the increasing participation of women in the labour force. Most two-parent families are now two-income families and the proportion of families with a parent staying home to assume child-care duties is decreasing. This means that most parents are juggling family responsibilities around work commitments rather than the other way around.

Accordingly, many parents need certain services to help with the activities associated with "managing" a family. In the area of child care alone, parents increasingly need services that are often not available or are prohibitively expensive — for example, services that are available for people who work shifts or who have extended or varying working hours.

Research has shown that access to affordable, quality and appropriate child care plays a major role in a working family's ability to gain economic security, yet finding suitable child-care facilities at affordable prices can be a difficult task. Parents will pay up to \$500 per month per child in order to send their children to daycare facilities. This can bring even the most well paid family down to the poverty level, especially if it is a single parent family.

To combat this problem the BC government has implemented a childcare subsidy rate system. The childcare subsidy is a monthly payment that helps BC families with low income meet the costs of childcare. There are a number of guidelines to follow, and a maximum number of 20 days per month may be claimed. Subsidy rate charts are available online at: [www.sdes.gov.bc.ca](http://www.sdes.gov.bc.ca)

One key element to the subsidy rate system is that if you begin to earn a salary over a designated cutoff point then you will have to pay 100% of your child-care cost; essentially plunging you back down to the poverty level.

More and more women combat the increased need for money by combining and bundling two or more part-time jobs to get the hours of work they want. One in four jobs offering only part-time hours, and for the great majority of them pay is significantly less than comparable full-time jobs. Back in 1997 four in five working women did not hold permanent, full-time, above average wage jobs. The dangers for women are that they usually provide no or very limited pension and other benefits, and require unstable and unpredictable hours. It is no wonder that “managing” a family can add a great deal of stress to a person's life.

Next week we will wrap up this article with point #3 and a conclusion. If you have any comments or feedback on this topic feel free to e-mail me at [jakes@pepjob.com](mailto:jakes@pepjob.com).