



*The Health Status of Executives
in the Public Service of Canada*



Preliminary Findings of APEX's 2002 Study



Executive Summary

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Preface

Over the coming year, the Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) will be releasing a number of reports based on its 2002 study, *The Health Status of Executives in the Federal Public Service of Canada*.

This is the first of the series. It is an overview of the changing picture of executive health and the workplace factors which contribute to it. The report examines the major themes which emerge from a comparison of the results of APEX's first health study in 1997 and those of 2002.

This most recent study was launched in February 2002 under the direction of a team of nationally and internationally recognized experts in the field of occupational health (see page 4). The survey instrument they used has proven validity and reliability. A total of 3,670 executives in the core Public Service, 1,222 in selected federal agencies and 300 uniformed executive officers of the RCMP received the 14-page survey. Responses were anonymous and results were compiled by the University of Ottawa. Almost 40% of the core Public Service executives responded, compared to 36% in 1997. (The rates were 30% for the RCMP and 26% in the separate agencies.) A sample of this size produces a margin of error of +/- 2.3%, 99 times out of 100.

The research team

APEX's *Health Status of Executives* study was conducted by a panel of nationally and internationally-recognized researchers in the field of occupational health. The groundbreaking nature of this research has been recognized by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which awarded a research grant to Drs. Lemyre, Corneil, Barette and Hepburn to examine the impact of stress and health on learning organizations.

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This initial report deals only with the results for the core Public Service. It includes some analysis of qualitative data from the questionnaires (respondents' comments) and describes executives' reactions to the preliminary findings, as gathered during the Association's annual, national consultations this past summer. As a result of these findings, APEX will create a number of working groups. These will be charged with developing specific recommendations to address the factors contributing to poor health among executives.

Subsequent reports will feature the results of more advanced data analysis and highlight individual themes identified through the research. Topics will include:

- the main determinants of health status of executives;
- the influence of work environment on health outcomes;
- the relationship between aggressive behaviours, conflict, harassment and health; and
- the effect of stress and overall health status on efforts to become a learning organization.

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Background

The Government's ability to deliver the policies and programs Canadians need depends on having a vibrant, professional Public Service. Sound management of that organization is a function of the energy and creativity of its leaders. Thus, the state of health of Public Service executives is of direct consequence to all Canadians.

APEX wishes it had better news to share on that score. The Association has just completed its preliminary analysis of the data from its February 2002 survey of the health status of executives, and the results are not encouraging. (Some of the key findings are outlined below.)

The poor results cannot be ascribed to some fault in the survey instrument that was used. Our survey research team – which is composed of nationally and internationally recognized experts in the field of occupational health – selected a well-tested research tool which is in use around the world.

There's no getting around the seriousness of the study's major finding, that the executive cadre is quite unhealthy and getting more so. This is a situation whose solution will be as complex as its creation. It has been produced over a period of years and results from the interaction of multiple factors in the work environment.

If improving executives' health status were as easy as providing gym memberships or an extra day of vacation, the situation could be easily resolved. However, even senior public servants who have healthy eating habits and exercise regularly are not immune to the negative health effects of the current Public Service environment – they just may have greater resistance to health problems. **Place a healthy person in an unhealthy environment, and eventually they will become ill.**

Because the problem is complex and widespread, we can be pretty sure that if departments' response to these results is just to compare themselves favourably to other organizations or to

offer stress management courses or name a champion, the results of the next study in 2007 will be no better. In fact, since there's been deterioration in executives' health status since APEX's 1997 study, further decline would be inevitable.

What are we seeing in the analysis of the 2002 results that is causing so much concern?



Findings

1. Health Status

The first thing to note is that executives' health status has not been static over the last five years – there has been actual deterioration. As the population's average age has only increased by 2 years, this cannot be written off as a natural trend in an aging population.

One in five executives has recently been diagnosed with some form of cardiovascular disease.

The incidence of serious health conditions has been creeping upwards. The most notable example is a significant increase in rates for coronary and cardiovascular diseases (CVD), particularly hypertension.

Other key indicators of health status also demonstrate gradual deterioration.

- 95 % report sleep disturbances and an average of only 6.6 hours sleep per night;
- 15 % report depressed mood;
- 53 % report high levels of stress, almost twice the rate for the average Canadian of the same gender and age; and
- 19 % have musculo-skeletal problems related to tension.

The data show that as a group, executives are experiencing stress in the high to extreme range.

2. Workload

All the indicators which measure workload show significant increases in work demands¹.

Executives say they have no more latitude now to make decisions than they did in 1997.

The central finding of APEX's 1997 health study was that a low level of *decision latitude* was a major contributor to poor health status. This conclusion was consistent with other studies² on the relationship between work stressors and health outcomes. The 2002 APEX data reveal that there has not been any change in the level of decision latitude despite the concerns expressed following the release of APEX's 1997 reports.

Executives are travelling more now than in 1997 and workload has not diminished.

The average number of hours worked per week remains high at 52. This does not include travel time or work on the weekends. Executives work an additional 3 weekend days per month. Work-related travel has increased and executives are spending more time away from home on both week days and weekends.

3. Resources

Our survey results suggest that the human and financial resources currently in the system are not really sufficient to meet current workload demands. This is consistent with a relentless push to "do more with less", but is contributing to executives' heightened frustration with the work environment.

Technology has brought some productivity gains. However, it has also provoked significantly

¹ Work demands are both quantitative (hours of work, scope of responsibilities, number of direct reports) and qualitative (time pressures, work pace, role ambiguity).

² See bibliography appended to Preliminary Report for research in Canada by Duxbury and Higgins, as well as studies in the UK Civil Service by Marmot et al.

higher expectations of the amount of work that can be done, contributing to higher stress and workload.

Duplication of processes and severe reduction of decision-making authority cut risk but hamper effective operations and add to frustration.

Administrative tasks not directly related to service delivery or policy development appear to be contributing to the additional workload. The effort executives have to put into managing these demands reduces the energy they have for engaging in leadership activities such as HR management and strategic planning. The Public Service's current predilection for centralized decision-making is making managers reluctant to accept even appropriate risk.

4. Work environment

APEX has looked back to Dr. Linda Duxbury's study of 8 federal departments in 2000 and its own 2001 survey on executives' retirement and career planning intentions to analyze the trends in executives' perspectives. Our 2002 health survey data confirm the earlier studies' conclusions: as soon as they are eligible (years of service, age and best 5 years of salary), a significant proportion of executives intend to retire. In addition, a large number are seeking to move from their current positions as a result of continued frustration with the working environment.

The PSC's most recent report on the intentions and interests of the feeder groups for the executive category supports our findings. Its study showed that the work environment is the factor that has the most weight in either encouraging or discouraging someone from moving into the EX ranks.

Executives' working conditions have not escaped the attention of the feeder groups. Many potential new recruits to the executive ranks indicate they are not interested in the long hours and the lack of control over their workload.

5. Implications

For any organization to be successful, it needs leaders who are dynamic, energetic, creative and innovative. Unfortunately, the high levels of fatigue highlighted by the APEX study do not encourage these characteristics to flourish.

Canadians depend on the federal Public Service to constantly improve delivery of services to citizens. The Government is proposing an ambitious new social policy agenda for the coming year. A fatigued and frustrated leadership group is going to have difficulty delivering on both these commitments.

We would have been justified in expecting some positive change in executives' health status over the 5 years since APEX's first study: it has been a period of *relative* stability – no major re-organizations and some movement on compensation issues – and the Public Service had expressed a strong desire to remedy the problems we identified. Unfortunately, preventive efforts have been focussed on individual rather than systemic issues. Improved health is not solely a result of improved individual lifestyle – even individuals who take personal responsibility cannot sustain good health in an environment that is unhealthy.



The role of leaders

Successful organizations are led by energetic, resilient and dynamic leaders. The preliminary findings of this study indicate that these aspects of leadership are in jeopardy in the Public Service.

Leaders play an essential role in determining health and productivity in today's organizations. A healthy executive can enhance the health of all those with whom he/she works – and thus the health of the organization as a whole. The converse is equally true. Unhealthy leaders can do real damage, putting their own long-term health prospects at risk, but also having a toxic effect on those whose lives impinge on theirs.

There are no quick, easy fixes to the situation this study brings to light. The complexities of the current environment will require a more sophisticated approach than offering gym memberships to executives. Not only will a superficial response be ineffective, it will engender cynicism among the people it is meant to help.

Long-term commitment by all executives to changing their habits, attitudes and behaviours is the only real solution. The tools to bring about that change will be found in new structures, new processes and new ways to ensure adherence to Public Service values.

None of this is new. APEX, among others, has urged fundamental change to the work environment before. However, there has been a noticeable upsurge recently in the number of studies on the federal Public Service: they all point to the same problems, providing irrefutable evidence of the need to act.

Sadly, there continues to be considerable inertia in the system around tackling the problems in the work environment. It is not easy to summon up the considerable time, money and energy needed to address them – yet nothing less will suffice.



APEX's commitment to action

APEX will be calling on all executives to become involved in a series of activities over the next 12 to 18 months. The first phase of the Association's plan is to build awareness and acknowledgement by all executives – from Directors to Deputy Ministers – of the leadership responsibility they share. They need to be prepared to make those long-term investments of time, energy and resources.

In the next phase, we will be refining our analysis of the study data, so that together with executives, we can develop specific 3 to 5 year action plans. The point of these plans is to bring about significant change in how we do business and to

set a series of milestones that will help us evaluate progress. Our hope is that the 2007 APEX study on the health of executives will show a much healthier executive cadre and Public Service.

Getting consensus on the right milestones and measures will be challenging, so APEX will bring researchers and decision-makers together to look at the body of research on the Public Service and decide on an appropriate way to evaluate change.

The tangible evidence of our common commitment will be found in the extent to which executives at all levels are prepared to be evaluated and rewarded for surpassing these milestones – or to accept the consequences for failing to meet them. One of the first tests will be the scope of the promised modernization of human resources management, and the investment that is made in implementing the reform.

APEX re-affirms the commitment it made in 1997 to contribute actively to the creation and maintenance of a healthy and productive work environment in the Public Service. It will continue to exercise a leadership role, bringing executives together to decide how best to tackle the problems we have identified. It will continue to press for improvements to health and well-being across the Public Service, based on its ongoing evaluation of current and future information on executives. The Association has already launched a dialogue over the course of our 2002 summer consultations. We continue to deliver briefings to key decision-makers and departmental executive committee.

APEX challenges all executives and those senior officials responsible for corporate programs to take the analyses and conclusions we offer very seriously. APEX looks forward to working with them to create a healthier, more productive work environment in the Public Service.

