

Workforce and Employment Trends

The workforce which existed a quarter century ago, has undergone some drastic changes in its composition, functions and expectations. To begin with, there has been a significant change in the demographics of the workforce. Females now occupy many jobs which were once traditionally performed by males. The conclusion may be drawn that this presents a challenge for men who are forced to compete with women for the jobs which they traditionally occupied. This perception of a challenge can be more speculative than being rationally founded. With increasing access to education and training, the opening up of new jobs opportunities in the labour market and the push towards poverty alleviation have contributed to an expanding workforce.

With the introduction of new technologies, the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship, many have found new ways of making themselves productive. These have given the impetus to drive the learning of new skills and the development of new business initiatives. While many tend to focus on the demographics of the workforce, and limit the concern to invasion of women into the workforce, there is a tendency to miss the more salient point that our societies are positioned to be more productive. With more women being employed, it is expected that this will help to reduce the pressure which is placed on the nation's social welfare systems, as well as some of the exploitation of women by men on whom they depend for financial support.

The increasing numbers of women in the workforce coincides with the demand for labour, as new jobs are created in manufacturing, construction, services industries, tele-communications and technology sectors. With the global expansion in the business sector, there is increased demand for professional services. The list of emerging job opportunities extends to include those within the healthcare sector. Based on the evidence available, women have been making their presence felt in the workforce in the industrialized societies of the world. It has been estimated that in the latter half of the 1990s and even through the early 21st century, women accounted for nearly half of the all-paid workers in the United States of America.

There are some common demands which stand out in the changing nature of the workforce. Workers are generally accepting and responsive to the introduction of new technologies in the workplace. Hence both males and females are demanding increase workplace training and retraining. This is important to securing improvement in work efficiencies, workers' output and service delivery. Consistent with the higher level of education that is required with most jobs today, workers have become more conscious of the higher value which is placed on aspects of the jobs they are called upon to perform. With this being the case, most workers are now inclined to expect and demand much more from their jobs than good pay.

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Matters related to the issue of employment are seemingly of more concern as these have a bearing on the quality of the workforce and the expectations of both employers and employees. Employers are now more inclined to shift their attention to engaging a workforce that is educated and skilled. There is a strong bias towards skill-based technology skills, with computer literacy being of significance. Workers and trade unions as the representative body of labour, concern themselves with addressing labour market inequalities.

The fact that the educational attainment levels are higher than before, and given that trade unions are prepared to protect and safeguard the interest of workers against exploitation, this has helped to shape the thinking and responses of employers on how they treat to enhancing the employment relationship. As the new categories of professional workers move to enter into contract employment, they should be aware of the role trade unions have to play in the organizing of workers and the use of the collective bargaining mechanism. Through this medium, they are guaranteed a voice in workplace decision making process on issues, inclusive of conditions of work, wages and other benefits and safety and health issues.

In addition to maintaining its presence in a the new technologically driven work environment, the bigger challenge which remains for labour unions is that of how to get the vast numbers of unskilled or less skilled workers back to work, in a world that has been overtaken by automation. There is work to be done to reduce the strong bias towards primarily engaging workers with technologically based skills, and to get employers to employ those with other skills and talents. The emphasis should be on utilizing all skills and talents which can potentially create new and exciting job opportunities and the development of new business initiatives.