

Business Indicators ♦ July 2008

Linking Engagement to Productivity in the BC Public Service Work Environment

Research in the private sector supports the old business adage that happy employees are productive employees. Following this lead, BC Stats initiated a study on how employee engagement (i.e., satisfaction and commitment) links to productivity in the BC Public Service. A study of this nature is challenging. Productivity in the public sector is difficult, if not impossible to measure directly since service outputs are often intangible in the absence of financial returns. Assembling consistent measures that represent the diversity of outputs provided across the public sector poses a greater challenge. Instead, employees were asked directly about their opinions on productivity to gain more insight on how their engagement as well as certain work environment experiences could be shaping their productivity during regular hours at work.

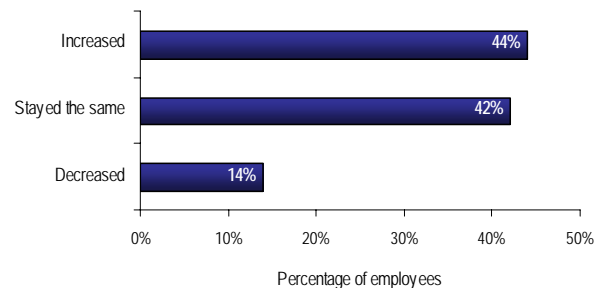
A random sample of employees who completed the second annual *BC Public Service Work Environment Survey* (2007) participated in an additional special topics survey. Employees were asked to comment on what changes in their productivity had occurred in the past 12 months and factors contributing to their productivity. The questions drew responses from over 1136 employees. A qualitative analysis of their feedback led to some useful revelations about how productivity is defined by public sector employees as well as how their perceptions of productivity relate to their

engagement and particular experiences in their work environment.

What does it mean to be productive?

Very few employees believed their productivity decreased over the study period. The majority of employees believed their productivity had either increased or stayed the same.

Two in five employees believed they increased their productivity in 2006-07.



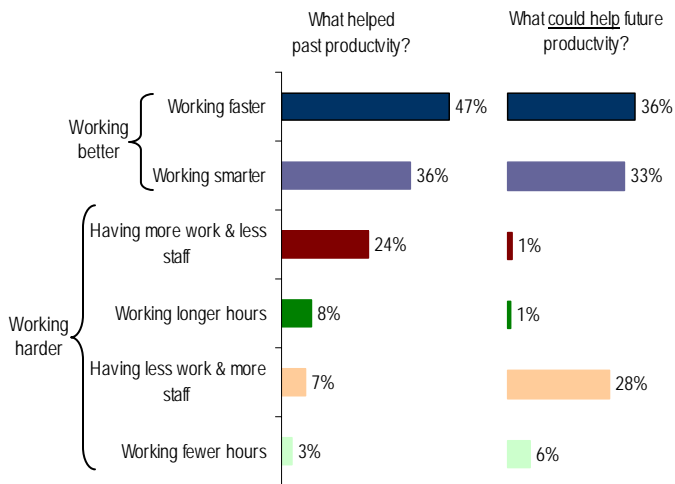
Although more employees reported positive changes in productivity, there was little consensus on what it meant to be productive. When commenting on factors that influence past or future productivity, employees expressed productivity in six different ways.

Two of these ways fell within one view of productivity identified as “working better.” For two in three employees, this meant working faster or smarter by becoming more efficient and effective in the completion of their day-to-day tasks. Factors such as “*Greater proficiencies*

of job duties” and “More focussed business plan” fell under such view of productivity.

The four other expressions fell under an alternative view of productivity identified as “working harder.” For one in three employees, working harder meant increasing or decreasing resources and hours in order to meet workload demands and expectations. For example, one comment falling under this view linked productivity to “Client demand – as there is not enough regular hours in a day to complete the tasks and workers are going without coffee breaks and lunch hours.”

For some employees productivity meant working better, while for others it meant working harder.



N.B: Themes in this figure do not sum to 100% because employees are the primary unit of analysis, and their comments could fall under more than one theme.

These different views mean employees are taking contradictory factors into consideration when assessing their level of productivity. For example, when employees say they are more productive, their assessment could be based on their perception of either completing more tasks during their regular work hours or working longer hours to complete the tasks.

Perceptions of working better are common regardless of whether employees are reflecting on past situations or future actions. Perceptions behind working harder however, are subject to employees’ frame of reference. Reflections of past increases in productivity relied on having more work and less staff as well as working longer hours, while future increases in productivity relied on the opposite situation – having less work and more staff. The working-harder view of productivity could be a reaction to workload demands, and such reaction could be interfering with their ability to work better by adopting more proactive behaviours of working smarter and faster.

Certain views of productivity are more common in some public service sectors than others. For example, one in two employees belonging to the economic sector described productivity as working faster, while roughly one in two employees from the social sector described productivity as working harder.

Economic and social sectors showed the greatest distinction in views.

Percent of Employees in Public Service Sector ¹				
	Economic	Resource	Service	Social
Working better				
Working faster	51%	45%	37%	35%
Working smarter	29%	34%	39%	29%
Working harder				
	38%	33%	41%	48%
Total number	80	305	75	377

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¹ Economic Sector: Ministry of Economic Development, Ministry of Energy, Mines & Petroleum Resources, Ministry of Small Business & Revenue, Ministry of Tourism Sport & the Arts, and Ministry of Finance & Public Affairs Bureau. Resource Sector: Ministry of Environment & Environment Assessment Office, Ministry of Forests & Range (Office of Housing and Construction Standards), Ministry of Agriculture & Lands & Integrated Land Management Bureau, and Ministry of Transportation. Social Sector: Ministry of Aboriginal Relations & Reconciliation, Ministry of Advanced Education, Ministry of Attorney General, Ministry of Children & Family Development, Ministry of Community Services, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Employment & Income Assistance, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Public Safety & Solicitor General. Service Sector: BC Public Service Agency, Ministry of Labour & Citizens’ Services, Premier’s Office, and Intergovernmental Relations.

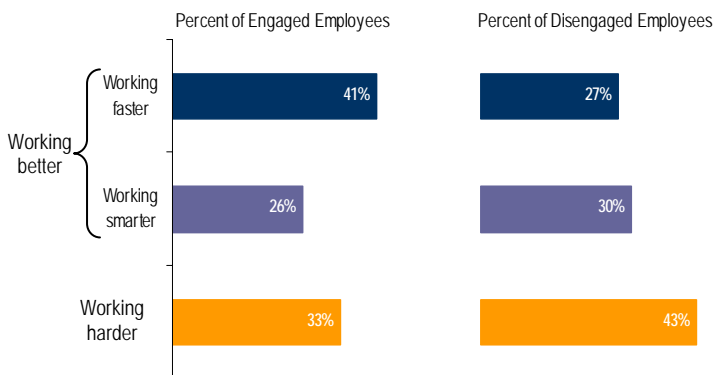
These trends suggest that productivity means different things to different work situations and sectors. Given these findings, it is not enough to simply measure self-reported changes in productivity given the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways public sector employees are viewing their past and future increases in productivity.

How does employee engagement relate to views of productivity?

Engagement is measured in the *BC Public Service Work Environment Survey* as satisfaction with one’s job and government organization as well as commitment to the BC Public Service overall (BC Stats, 2007).²

Analysis found engaged employees view their productivity differently than disengaged employees. More engaged employees perceived their productivity as working faster, while more disengaged employees perceived their productivity as working harder (41% and 43%, respectively).

Perceptions of working harder were more common among disengaged employees.

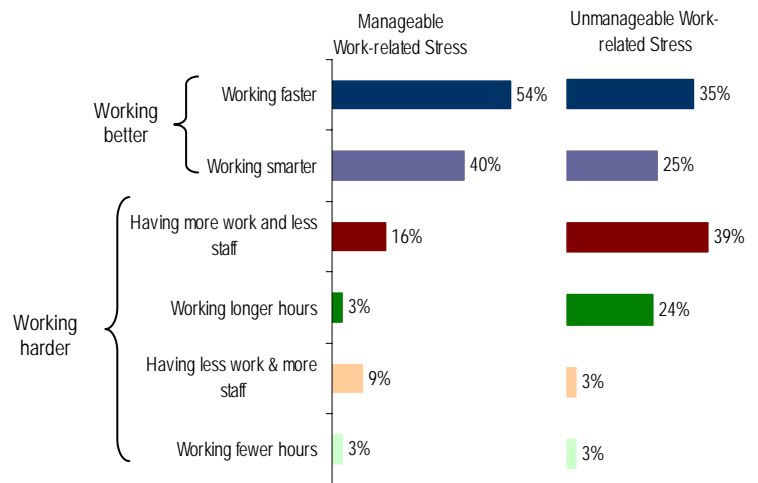


Engaged employees viewed their productivity as getting more done during regular work hours due to the streamlining of processes, improvements to tools and equipment, or on-the-job experiences. Alternatively for disengaged employees, productivity relied on increasing resources or time required to complete their work. Such results imply that addressing these situations may be needed among disengaged employees before any positive changes to working better can occur.

How does work-related stress play into perceptions of productivity?

Specific experiences in employees’ work environment could be fuelling these differing views. When employee self reports of work-related stress collected by the *BC Public Service Work Environment Survey* were analyzed alongside perceptions of productivity, clear profiles emerged.³

Perceptions of working better were more common for employees who report manageable work-related stress.



³ Perceptions of work-related stress were measured by the 2007 BC Public Service Work Environment Survey. Employees who reported “5” and “4” on the agreement scale were combined to form the “Manageable work-related stress” group, while employees who reported “1” and “2” were combined to form the “Unmanageable work-related stress” group. Themes in this figure do not sum to 100% because employees are the primary unit of analysis, and their comments could fall under more than one theme.

² BC Stats (2007). *Exploring Employee Engagement: The BC Public Service*. Report prepared for the BC Government.

Approximately one in two employees who reported having manageable work-related stress attributed their increased productivity to working better. Although employees with unmanageable work-related stress were more divided in their views, more attributed their increased productivity to the tendency of working harder due to more work and less staff and/or longer hours.

An increase in productivity should relate to less work-related stress, yet this is the case only for those who view productivity as working faster and smarter. As seen in the comments provided by employees below, perceptions of productivity as working harder could serve as a warning signal.

In the words of employees...

"Having more time to do things right the first time instead of always being in a rush to get things done ...proactive instead of reactive."

"We are currently down one staff which has meant a higher workload for everyone, creating more anxiety and stress due to looming deadlines and expectations."

"There are not enough resources— individuals are having to maintain an incredibly high pace on an ongoing basis with no valleys— just peak after peak with real danger of staff burnout."

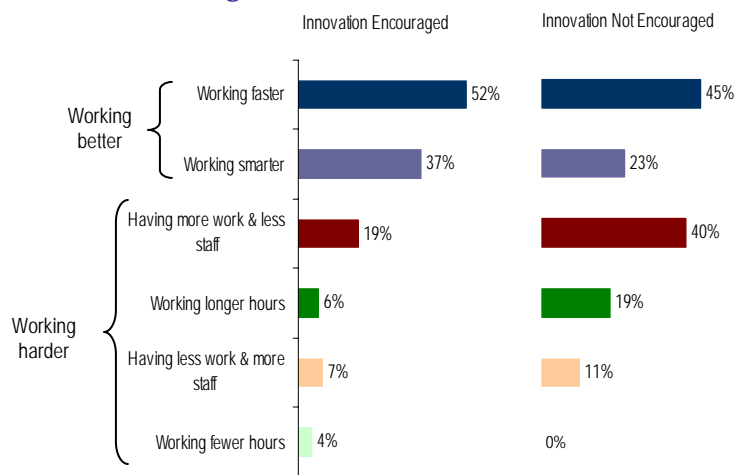
The more pronounced work-related stress found among those operating under this view could be limiting opportunities for working better, contributing to greater disengagement and burn-out at the expense of employees and their organizations in the long run.

How does experiences with innovation tie into perceptions of productivity?

When comparing how employee experiences in innovation correspond to their perceptions of productivity, a slightly different pattern emerged. Productivity as "working faster" was the most prevalent perception regardless of

employees' experiences with innovation. Experiences with innovation influenced other perceptions of productivity, however. More employees who were encouraged to be innovative also attributed their increased productivity to ways of working smarter than those who were not encouraged. On the other hand, those who were not encouraged to be innovative were more likely to refer to their productivity as working harder by due to more work and less staff.

Perceptions of working harder were more common among employees who were not encouraged to be innovative in their work.



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The perceptions of productivity offer important insight when it comes to understanding what productivity means in the public sector and how expressions of productivity are related to work-related stress and experiences with innovation. When employees describe increases of productivity per se, it does not necessarily translate into producing more work during regular work hours by working faster or smarter. It may mean employees are working more per unit of pay through adding more resources and/or time into their daily tasks. As a result, the "working-harder" approach to productivity could be blocking innovative

opportunities to working smarter and further perpetuating the cycle of working harder. Moreover, focusing workplace changes around working better may not be enough for employees who read their productivity as working harder. Addressing their misperceptions and/or work environment situations may be required before any positive changes made towards working better can occur.

What would boost future productivity?

Although employee feedback was primarily used to understand how they defined productivity, comments offered a variety of ways to improve future productivity by working better and not harder. Comments distilled down to six key suggestions. Three suggestions focused on work environment changes, while three leaned more towards employee self-development and professional growth

One in three employees believed a change in workload would increase their productivity.



The top suggestion for improving productivity related to reducing workloads. For one in three employees this meant, *“less managers, more staff,” “less workload so a person can do a better job,” “delegating work to others”* or *“more time to be better organized and do the work properly.”* Reducing workloads would halt the cycle of working harder by simply enabling employees the time to work smarter.

The second most common suggestion related to improvements to the physical environment and work processes. For over one in four employees this meant *“streamlining of processes,” “fewer interruptions,”* and/or *“utilizing technology to automate certain manual pieces of my job.”* Making changes in this manner would enhance employees’ ability to work faster.

Strengthening leadership and management was another popular suggestion for boosting productivity. For one in five employees, this meant, *“being involved with decision making,” “clear communication of expectations,” “better understanding on the part of management as to what I am responsible for,”* or *“better managers/supervisors who can mentor employees effectively.”* The state of leadership and management creates the climate of productivity, particularly when it comes to working smarter.

The present findings help to illuminate ways to redirect and build productivity in the BC Public Service while offering insight on how varying views of productivity link to employee engagement, work-related stress and innovation. Although developing a public sector model of productivity is beyond the data currently available, findings provide a tentative, but informative step closer to this goal.