

Workload Pressures and Stress in the Federal Public Service, 1999 to 2008

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The results of the 2008 Public Service Employee Survey (PSES) are available on the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) website.¹ This article presents a preliminary analysis of workload pressures and stress trends in the public service over the period 1999 to 2008. It also reviews the impact of the changes made to the survey methodology that affect the interpretation of the analysis.

Interpretation Problems

The survey, as the TBS indicates, “provides a snapshot of the views of employees about the organizations and units in which they work.” The first public service-wide survey was conducted in 1999. It has been repeated every three years – in 2002, 2005 and in 2008. Changes to the survey have been made each year. For the most part the methodology of the first three surveys allowed for the identification of trends over time in such areas as job support, communication with immediate superior, work unit, skills and careers, harassment, staffing, and service to clients.

Unfortunately, the 2008 survey methodology differs significantly from that of previous surveys making analysis of trends more difficult. For this paper we are concerned with two of the three changes. First, the survey population has been expanded to include employees in separate agencies such as the Canada Revenue Agency, students, and some Governor-in-Council (GIC) appointees. In 2008 about 167,000 employees responded to the survey compared to about 106,000 in 2005, about 95,000 in 2003 and 103,000 in 1999. The rationale

CHART 1

Comparison of 2008 and previous survey response scales

Survey	Response Scale						
2008 Survey	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	N/A
Previous Surveys	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	-----	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	N/A

CHART 2

Comparison of 2008 Survey Response and Summary Results Categories

2008 Survey Response 5 Point Scale Categories	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
TBS Summary of Results Categories	Agree		Neutral	Disagree	

for including students and GIC appointees is unclear.

Second, the response scale has been changed from a four-point scale to a five-point scale for the majority of questions. Chart 1 compares the 2008 response scale with the 2005 and previous survey response scales.

The TBS argues that the 2008 survey results “better reflect employee views, permit benchmarking with employee surveys of other jurisdictions, and enable more sophisticated analysis.” What is not addressed is the cost of sacrificing comparability over time. We can no longer accurately gauge for most issues whether employees believe things are getting better or worse over the past 10 years in which major change has confronted the public service.

The TBS’s summary results analysis is based on what the TBS calls “the drivers

of people management excellence in the public service,” and combined and renamed response categories. Chart 2 summarizes how the TBS combined and renamed the categories.

“Strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” responses have been collapsed into a new category called “agree;” response “neither agree nor disagree” has been renamed as “neutral;” and, the last two responses have been combined into a “disagree” category. As discussed below, the TBS’ use of these aggregated and renamed categories may give the results a more positive picture than may be justified.

Assessing the Impact of Methodology Changes

The 2008 PSES added some new and interesting questions to the survey. The questions cover key work concerns. If

CHART 3

New Question Results in 2008 PSES using the TBS Results Summary Responses Categories (percent)

Question/Response	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	AVG (0-100) Score	Total Resp.
Q. 60: I am satisfied with my department or agency	68	14	16	68	165986
Q. 8: Overall, I like my job	83	08	09	79	169038
Q. 9: I get a sense of satisfaction from my work	77	11	12	74	167378
Q. 31: My work unit provides high quality service to clients	85	7	6	82	167333

they can be correctly interpreted they could provide useful insights into the current state of the public service. Respondents were asked to give their opinion using the five-point scale on the following matters.

- Question 60: I am satisfied with my department or agency
- Question 8: Overall, I like my job
- Question 9: I get a sense of satisfaction from my work
- Question 31: My work unit provides high quality service to clients

How should the responses to these questions be interpreted? The challenge is to decide which method should be used to give the clearest and most accurate picture.

Let's start by examining the approach used by the TBS in its summary results document. Chart 3 contains results as they are presented in the TBS' summary document.

The consequence of the TBS' use of the collapsed and renamed categories in the summary document is a reasonably positive picture of the views of public servants. The results range from a low of 68 percent of respondents saying that they "agree" they are satisfied with their department or agency to a high of 85 percent that say that they "agree" that their work unit provides high quality service to clients.

Another method of interpretation the TBS uses is a formula using points

CHART 4

Point Values Assigned to Responses by TBS

Five-Point Survey Scale	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
TBS Assigned points	100	75	50	25	0

assigned to each response category. Chart 4 presents the point values assigned.

Using the TBS formula involves summing up all the points a question received and then dividing the sum by the total number of respondents to the question. As Chart 3 indicates the average score (0-100) for questions: "I am satisfied with my department or agency" is 68; for "Overall, I like my job" is 79; for "I get sense of satisfaction from my work" is 74; and, for "my work unit provides high quality service to clients" is 82. The average scores are relatively high or at least passing scores.

However, the TBS does not clearly explain the rationale for its formula or its point assignment to response categories. The assignment of points assumes that "somewhat agree" is equivalent to 75 percent of the value of "strongly agree" and that "neither agree nor disagree" – its "neutral" category — is worth 50 percent of the value of "strongly agree." Assigning 75 points to the category "somewhat agree" weighs the results to

be favourable. Assigning 50 points to a category called "neutral" is questionable logically and mathematically and favours a positive result.

What happens when the results are disaggregated into their original survey response categories? Chart 5 presents the results to the same questions using the disaggregated 2008 PSES categories.

Most people would probably interpret "strongly agree" in a similar manner.

Looking only at the "strongly agree" response, we find that the percent of respondents that "strongly agree" that their work unit provides high quality service to clients is 49; the percentage that similarly say that overall, they like their job is 41; that they get a sense of satisfaction from their work is 35; and that the proportion that "strongly agree" that they are satisfied with their department or agency is 28. The first two results are positive, but not as much as the TBS' summary results or mathematical formula results. However, the results of 35 percent and 28 percent for the latter two questions could be cause for concern.

CHART 5

Disaggregated Results to New Questions in 2008 PSES (percent)*

Question/Response	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	AVG (0-100) Score	Total Resp.
Q. 60: I am satisfied with my department or agency	28	40	14	11	06	68	165986
Q. 8 Overall, I like my job	41	42	08	06	03	79	169038
Q. 9: I get a sense of satisfaction from my work	35	42	11	08	04	74	167378
Q. 31: My work unit provides high quality service to clients	49	36	7	4	2	82	167333

* Don't Know and N/A responses are less than or equal to 1 percent.

CHART 6**Summary of “Always/Often” Responses on Selected Questions Relating to Workload Pressures and Stress by Survey Year (percent)****Question 14: I feel the quality of my work suffers because of...**

	% Always/Often Response by Survey Year				Permanent Employees 2008
	1999	2002	2005	2008	
14 (a): constantly changing priorities	44	37	40	41	42
14 (b): lack of stability in my department or agency	33	36	41	34	35
14 (c): too many approval stages	35	35	39	41	43
14 (d): unreasonable deadlines	29	27	30	27	28
14 (e): having to do the same or more work, but with fewer resources	50	42	43	40	43

There may be a consensus on the meaning of “strongly agree,” but is there the same consensus when it comes to the phrase “somewhat agree”? Synonyms for “somewhat” range from “to some extent” to “a bit” – clearly there is room for a wide range of interpretations.

Thirty-six percent of respondents “somewhat agree” that their unit provides high quality service, 42 percent “somewhat agree” that they like their job, a similar percentage “somewhat agree” that they get a sense of satisfaction from their work, and 40 percent “somewhat agree” that they are satisfied with their department or agency. Given the range of possible interpretations, there should be concern about the large number of responses in this category and a degree of caution about combining them with the “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” responses.

Similarly, what should be the meaning attributed to a person’s response that he or she “neither agrees nor disagrees”? Does this mean they are “neutral” as the TBS contends, or does it mean they cannot decide, are indifferent, are not interested in giving an opinion, or are afraid to give an opinion?

Further, what happens if we postulate that the phrases “somewhat agree” and “somewhat disagree” are really closer in meaning to the “neither agree nor disagree” category than, respectively, to the “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree” categories? And thus, it makes more sense to combine the three middle categories. Except for the results for providing high quality service to clients, the majority of respondents could be interpreted as at best being lukewarm about their satisfaction with their job, their work, and their department.

The TBS’ 2008 PSES survey respon-

es categories and the summary analysis of results is problematic. Using alternative approaches that are more credible gives a less positive picture of the views of public servants.

Workload Pressures and Stress

Fortunately, some questions and response categories in the 2008 PSES are essentially the same as questions in previous surveys. In particular, the following five questions relating to workload pressures and stress allow for a trend analysis since 1999.²

- Question 14a. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of constantly changing priorities.
- Question 14b. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of lack of stability in my department or agency.
- Question 14c. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of too many approval stages.
- Question 14d. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of unreasonable deadlines.
- Question 14e. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of having to do the same or more work, but with fewer resources.
- Question 11. I have a say in decisions and actions that have an impact on my work.

The response categories of previous surveys were “always,” “often,” “sometimes” and “rarely or never.” The 2008 PSES divided the “rarely or never” category into two categories — “rarely” and “never/almost never.” It is unclear whether this distinction results in greater explanatory power. In any case, the TBS combines these categories in its presentation of summary results.

To examine trends in workload pressures and stress the author combined the

categories “always” and “often.” Chart 6 presents results by survey year of the percentage of respondents who replied that their work “always/often” suffered from certain workload pressures.³

As Chart 6 indicates, overall, from 1999 to 2008, public servants continue to experience about the same level of significant workload pressures and stress. For example, in 1999, 44 percent of public servants said that they felt the quality of their work “always/often” suffered because of constantly changing priorities (question 14(a)). In 2008, the percentage was 41. In 1999, 33 percent of public servants responded that they felt the quality of their work “always/often” suffered because of lack of stability in their department or agency (question 14(b)). In 2008, this proportion was about the same. Permanent employees responding to the 2008 PSES say that they “always/often” experience higher workload pressures than the general employee population. In part, these results are the result of including students and GIC appointees who report much lower workload pressures and stress. (See Chart B in Appendix 1 for detailed response results for students and GIC appointees.)

The author combined the categories “sometimes” and “rarely/never” to review response trends to question 11. In both 1999 and 2008, 56 percent of respondents said that they only “sometimes” and “rarely/never” had a say in decisions and actions that have an impact on their work. The less input employees feel they have on work decisions is generally recognized as being a cause of stress. (See the results to question 11 in Chart A in Appendix.)

There is one possible bright spot. In 2008, 40 percent of public servants

APPENDIX 1

Chart A: Detailed Results on Selected Questions Relating Workload Pressures and Stress (percent)*

Question 14a. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of constantly changing priorities.

Year	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	DK**	N/A**	Total Resp.
2008	12	29	35	22	1	2	168463
2005	12	28	39	19	1	2	105511
2002	10	27	40	20	1	2	94229
1999	12	32	39	17	1	0	102755

Question 14b. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of lack of stability in my department or agency.

Year	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	DK**	N/A**	Total Resp.
2008	12	22	29	32	2	3	168170
2005	15	26	32	24	1	2	105480
2002	12	24	34	27	2	3	94179
1999	15	28	34	22	1	0	102700

Question 14c. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of too many approval stages.

Year	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	DK**	N/A**	Total Resp.
2008	17	24	30	25	2	3	
2005	15	24	33	22	2	4	105480
2002	12	23	34	25	2	4	94179
1999	12	23	35	26	3	0	102700

Question 14d. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of unreasonable deadlines.

Year	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	DK**	N/A**	Total Resp.
2008	9	18	33	36	1	3	168055
2005	9	21	37	29	1	3	105460
2002	7	20	39	30	1	3	94147
1999	8	21	39	31	1	0	102620

Question 14e. I feel that the quality of my work suffers because of having to do the same or more work, but with fewer resources.

Year	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	DK**	N/A**	Total Resp.
2008	16	24	28	28	1	3	168121
2005	17	26	30	22	1	3	105566
2002	16	26	30	23	1	3	94237
1999	21	29	29	19	2	0	102644

Question 11. I have a say in decisions and actions that have an impact on my work.

Year	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never	DK**	N/A**	Total Resp.
2008	14	29	34	22	1	0	168939
2005	11	31	36	22	1	1	106112
2002	11	32	36	19	1	1	94627
1999	11	33	36	20	0	0	103192

* To increase comparability with previous surveys the 2008 PSES response categories "Rarely" and "Never/Almost Never" have been combined into the category "Rarely or Never."

**DK: Don't Know; N/A: Not Applicable

(43 percent of permanent employees) reported that their work "always/often" suffered because of having to do the same or more work, but with fewer resources. While still a high percentage, the proportion appears to have fallen from 50 percent in 1999.

Conclusion

The TBS' 2008 employee survey methodology represents a major change from that of previous surveys. The

changes make trend analysis difficult and do not appear to result in greater analytic subtly or explanatory power. The changes to the response categories make the interpretation of the 2008 PSES problematic. In particular, the TBS' report of the summary findings of the 2008 survey uses collapsed categories and point values that are questionable.

Fortunately, certain comparisons, subject to the noted methodological caveats, can be made between the 2008 results

and those of previous surveys. Overall, comparisons focusing on workload pressures and stress indicate that public servants, particularly permanent employees, do not believe that situation has improved since the first survey in 1999. These results suggest that there are continuing and significant systemic problems in the public service work environment. It also suggests that the TBS summary results analysis underestimates the extent of concern among

Chart B: Summary of “Always/Often” 2008 PSES Responses on Selected Questions Relating to Workload Pressures and Stress by Employee Status (percent)

Question 14: I feel the quality of my work suffers because of....

	% Always/Often Response by Employee Status			
	Total Population	Permanent	GIC	Student
14 (a): constantly changing priorities	41	42	22	23
14 (b): lack of stability in my department or agency	34	35	20	18
14 (c): too many approval stages	41	43	16	32
14 (d): unreasonable deadlines	27	28	21	09
14 (e): having to do the same or more work, but with fewer resources	40	43	26	13

public servants about their work environment and clouds the real picture that generally things have not improved over the last decade.

/20071122072717/http://www.psaagency-agencefp.gc.ca/survey-sondage/2005/results-resultats/00/result-e.htm

3. Chart A in Appendix 1 presents the detailed results of responses to the questions from the 1999, 2002, 2005 and 2008 categories.

2. The question numbers are those of the 2008 PSES.

Reference

1. Detailed results of the 2008 PSES can be found at <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pses-saff/2008/results-resultats/res-eng.aspx?o1=00>; The TBS' summary results of the 2008 PSES can be found at <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pses-saff/2008/report-rapport-eng.asp>; Detailed results for the 1999, 2002 and 2005 surveys can be found at <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives>

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