

NEWS

'Family Day' in February gets mixed response from business world

According to Chinese philosophy, there is a Yin and a Yang to everything. A harmony of opposites. That description seems to best characterize the differing views on the new public holiday added by the Ontario Liberals last fall. On the one hand there's a big "woo-hoo!" in favour of a day off in the dead of winter – the third Monday of February, to be exact – after decades of having to work straight through from New Year's Day to Easter (is that why they call it "Good" Friday?).

On the other hand, it's not as simple as celebrating another holiday. Who, you might ask, would complain about a day off? Well, as it turns out, lots of people will – as long as you promise not to mention their names. And no, these are not workaholic ingrates, or pessimistic killjoys but leaders of some of our best businesses.

But first, to be clear, the new holiday does not apply to all businesses in Ontario. Those industries that are federally regulated, such as airlines, banks and broadcasters, are not covered by the addition of this holiday to the Ontario Ministry of Labour's Employment Standards Act, 2000. As well, those employed in continuous hour operations such as tourism, hospitals and others might still be required to work on February 18th receiving pay in lieu of time off.

For a majority of businesses and organizations in Ontario, though, February 18, 2008 will be a day off work. I think we can infer from the name "Family Day" that the idea is people will relax and spend this time with their families, perhaps playing board games, tobogganing and drinking hot chocolate. (Hmmm - I wonder what they'll really be doing.)

In my quest to determine what the perceptions were about Family Day, I conducted a small impromptu survey of 30 or so different organizations in the GTA, many in Mississauga. I asked 3 key questions.

1. Do you, as an employer, support the new holiday?
2. Will it be a burden, financially or operationally, to the organization?
3. What are the advantages to the organization, and employees, of the new holiday?

Before I got the answers, I realized that some people needed to vent, and since I am in the HR business, one of the things I'm supposed to be able to do well is listen. (Truthfully, I'm way too extroverted to be a superb listener – but that'd be a whole different column on personality profiling.) So there I was, listening as hard as I could when I discovered something. (Amazing what you can find out when you really listen.) It struck me that there was a very clear trend developing.

It seems that publicly funded or government organizations and large corporations with decent profits – these employers are elated to give another day off. This new holiday is, arguably, a mere blip in their annual payroll budget and many of them are already giving their employees extra floater days anyway, one of which will now become Family Day.

These financially well-off employers are delighted to have another way to say, "we are a 'Family Friendly' organization," and who can blame them? In response to question 1, one of them put it this way:

"This (holiday) is a great opportunity for people to relax and enjoy each other's company."

Another said: "We value the importance of balance and wellness for all team members and are supportive of a holiday dedicated to family."

And finally: "(We are) supportive of family-friendly policies and practices already, and of work-life balance; this helps us build on that commitment."

These organizations are "employers of choice" and it shows in their attitudes towards their employees. Their commitment is more than a mission statement – they have actually allocated resources to make life more pleasant for those who work at their organizations and truly see Family Day as an opportunity.

As far as question 2, most of the government organizations and large corporations in my survey felt that the holiday might be a bit of a burden, but not so much as to take away from the benefits. For question 3, the advantages were cited as promoting work/life balance, a rest in winter and employees returning more refreshed.

No argument from anyone in this group that having another day off is fabulous. And that takes me back to the trend. It seemed that the organizations that could more easily afford the holiday were in favour of it. These were generally the larger businesses for whom a day's wages represents a smaller percentage of their total payroll.

Most of the small to medium business leaders I surveyed were not so happy. For one thing, many accused Dalton McGuinty of having promised the new holiday simply to get votes. They also complained that he should have given a little more notice – perhaps implementing the new holiday in 2009. On the point of timing, Premier McGuinty had this to say, according to The Canadian Press, Ottawa: "We had a bit of a consultation on this issue during the course of the past provincial election, and Ontarians spoke very clearly." Nevertheless, four months is an awfully tight timeframe within which to make appropriate decisions, arrange for funding, prepare announcements, renegotiate contracts, change systems, adjust schedules and all the other activities that need to occur to implement a new organization-wide holiday.

As to my survey questions, a majority of the small to medium business leaders were critical of the Liberals' new Family Day. They see it as a financial and operational burden. Here is a selection of their thoughts:

"We are extremely busy and support U.S. businesses – both of which are not helped by a (one day) business closure."

"For those sectors that provide a service to those in need, it places hardships with scheduling, paying at a higher wage for those who are scheduled to work on this day."

"Nice of the government to make me pay an (extra) day's wages for no work. Essentially once again they're spending my money for me, without consultation or representation."

"I am definitely not in favour of "Family Day". At a time when the economy is headed into a potential recession, when we are facing more and more competition from foreign markets, when our productivity, per capita, is decreasing, when our taxes, social and health costs are going over the top, the last thing we need is more time off and more burden on small and big business."

So there you have it, both passionate support and strong objections; the Yin and Yang of Family Day. And yet, I'm sure that we Ontarians will manage, like Alberta and Saskatchewan, to fit in this extra day somehow, maybe working a little harder on other days.

Personally, by February 18th I will be

feeling just lazy enough and tired enough to abandon my entrepreneurial spirit and enjoy the day off.

Maybe I can finally get someone in my family to play Scrabble with me...

Hanna Dunn is a human resources professional and president of Dunn People Strategies Inc. She has been helping businesses in and around Mississauga to maximize employee engagement and corporate performance for over 20 years. You may reach her through www.dunnpeople.com



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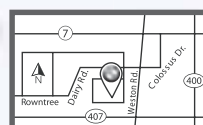
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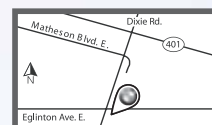


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