



**Chambre de commerce
du Montréal métropolitain
Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal**

October 8, 2004

Mr. Claude Bécharde
Ministre de l'Emploi, de la Solidarité sociale
et de la Famille
425 Saint-Amable Street, 4th Floor
Québec, Québec G1R 4Z1

Dear Mr. Bécharde:

With this letter, the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montréal, on behalf of its some 7,000 members, wishes to respond to the consultation document entitled "Toward a policy on work-family balance", which was made public last June and is the subject of these recommendations.

To begin, the Board of Trade would like to stress that its members—entrepreneurs and employers, as well as employees and self-employed people—expressed a high level of interest in this issue. In an economic environment where companies and workers are constantly asked for proof of greater flexibility and adaptability, it goes without saying that the challenge of balancing professional and family life affects a growing number of individuals. During its consultation process among its members and, especially, with its strategic analysis committee on Social Affairs, the Board of Trade also came to recognize the importance of the issues related to work-family balance. In the context of a declining population, there are many challenges, ranging from absenteeism at work to the health of Québec's public finances.

For all these reasons, the Board of Trade welcomes the government's desire to explore ways to make it easier for the greatest number of Québécois to balance their work and family lives. With this letter, therefore, we wish to share with the government two major courses of action that the business community of the Greater Montréal region considers crucial. The first of these relates mainly to family life; the second to the work environment.

1. When planning and allocating public services, take into account the direct impact policies will have on family life and the work-family balance

To address the issue of balancing work and family is to reflect upon two areas of activity that are the most important to the vast majority of Québec's citizens. It also makes one aware of the many factors that affect the level of ease with which, as individuals, we can fulfil *both* aspects of our lives. It is this fact that leads the Board of Trade to recommend to the

government, as a first course of action, that it take into account the impact of its actions on the work-family balance when it plans and allocates public services that have a direct impact on family life.

Indeed, the Board of Trade believes that, before even considering new government programs to address the work-family balance, it would be wise to evaluate how existing services affecting family life, which are provided by various levels of government, could, in a practical way, better respond to the needs of parents who are active in, or wish to enter, the workforce. What is especially important, in the view of the Board of Trade, is to improve or adapt these services as much as possible within the current framework, without any increase in cost. In the opinion of the Board of Trade, a greater flexibility and provision for the realities of family life and the labour market could contribute to a real and positive difference in the work-family balance of a great number of people.

Upon reflection, the Board of Trade came to the conclusion that, among the many factors that could ease the work-family balance, there are many services that were not set up with this result specifically in mind. Many of them concern infrastructure, such as the health system, the public transport system and the school system. The family is not at the heart of these systems' missions but they are very often at the heart of family life.

For example, one of the biggest organizational headaches for many families is the school year and its pedagogical days, which have to be coordinated with the work schedule, babysitting services and day camps during the summer months. Is there not some way to adjust schedules in order to minimize the inconvenience? Would it be possible to delay the return to classes at the college level so that college students could work in day camps one more week, allowing this service to continue until primary students return to school? Would it be possible to better synchronize school breaks and pedagogical days at the primary and secondary levels, so life could be made easier for those parents who have children attending more than one level of school? Lastly, could the open hours of day cares be extended and day cares in the workplace be encouraged, so that parents have more flexibility in travelling to and from work?

The same is true of the accessibility of some public services, especially health care. In the case of consultations that are not urgent, families rarely have alternatives outside normal working hours, especially at CLSCs. While recognizing the difficulty—and the cost—of extending open hours across the board, perhaps there is a means of creating a service specifically for families that can accommodate their special needs.

From this point of view, the role of the Québec Government is, without doubt, one of leadership. By setting an example and encouraging its counterparts at the federal and municipal levels to do the same, the Québec government could demonstrate how, in a practical sense, it is possible to further take into account the work-family balance when planning government initiatives that have an impact on the lives of families.

2. Stress the importance of work-family balance issues as factors that could enhance the competitiveness of companies through the attraction and retention of talented people

Without doubt, working conditions have a determining influence on the ease with which employees can balance their work and family lives. For the Board of Trade – and this reflects our previous recommendation – it is important that, in the matter of work-family balance, government action be focused on making improvements within the existing framework, rather

than by implementing new measures in the form of regulations or obligations governing businesses. The Board of Trade believes that we must concentrate on current trends in the labour market that motivate companies to innovate in this area and to build on these innovations.

For a number of years, there has been a trend towards increased mobility on the part of workers, who move from one company to another seeking a workplace that best meets the needs of their professional and personal aspirations. This is especially true of the most talented people, in particular those that the American specialist in regional economic development, Richard Florida, calls “the creative class”—workers for whom creativity, innovation and producing new ideas lie at the heart of their work.

The increasing mobility of talented workers results in significant changes to the workplace and its surrounding environment: increasingly, companies realize that salary and tax breaks are not the only factors that attract talented workers and make them loyal employees; increasingly, talented workers seek out working environments that provide them with a high quality of life.

Given the declining population referred to above, it is clear that Québec—and, in particular, its economic engine, the Montréal region—must do its utmost to train, attract and retain talented people. Among the areas of action that should be considered, the Board of Trade is of the opinion that it is in the best interest of Québec companies to develop innovative initiatives for balancing work and family because, by doing so, they will increase the competitiveness of the working conditions they offer.

In this regard, the Board of Trade has concluded that a number of its members not only already share this vision but have also taken some interesting initiatives to this end. We must single out the case of RBC Financial Group which offers all its employees options for integrating their work with their family activities and responsibilities, for example, through off-site working, either from the home or from a satellite office. The Merck Frosst company is another firm that offers flexible work arrangements, a babysitting service on-site or within the family, as well as day camps for children during the summer and school breaks. Unfortunately, these sorts of programs are, for the most part, little known outside the companies involved. In the view of the Board of Trade, it would be beneficial, not only for employees but for all those involved in the socioeconomic life of Québec and Montréal, if more appreciation were shown for such initiatives.

On one hand, if positive experiences in balancing work and family within companies were more widely publicized, it could help demonstrate how favourable such programs can be to those companies that are less involved in this area. When it comes to attracting and retaining talented people, it is crucial for Québec and Québec employers to be very well informed of and involved in activities that promote work-family balance. On the other hand, publicizing successful programs would allow for a greater amount of sharing of experiences and practices among various employers.

It goes without saying that the Québec government should play a key role in recognizing achievements and in communicating innovations concerning work-family balance among businesses and the public. In addition, it is a role in which the government could join forces with the major business groups, such as the boards of trade. In this respect, the Board of Trade believes that it would be wise to take the lead from what has already been done in the areas of worker integration and intercultural relations: whether this be through sensitizing activities, such as the *Semaine québécoise des rencontres interculturelles*, or giving recognition

to company achievements, such as the awarding of the Maurice-Pollack Prize. This year's prize was given to the Société de transport de Montréal for their program of access to equality in employment.

For the Board of Trade, changes in the labour market, the increasing mobility of workers and the need to attract and retain talented workers are already powerful incentives for Québec companies of all sizes to explore ways to ease the balance between the family and professional lives of their employees. The government of Québec should first concentrate on such incentives and support more study of this area, rather than dictate, through legislation, the steps that employers must take.

For the Board of Trade, research into improvements in the balance between family and professional life will not only make working parents' lives easier, but could also become a competitive factor for Québec companies who wish to attract a talented and loyal workforce. For these reasons, the Board of Trade hopes that any future policy on work-family balance will give priority to practical modifications to existing programs and services and allow Québec businesses to be major partners in the quest to add value to these initiatives in the workplace.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Labonté', written in a cursive style.

Benoit Labonté
President and chief executive officer