



Part 1 Here today, gone tomorrow

Temporary help

by Irene Gessler

"Hard work spotlights the character of people: some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don't turn up at all."

—Sam Ewig

THEY WORK AS clericals, program administrators and financial administrators. They work in information management as well as technical support and development.

Some are men and some are women. Some are young and some are older.

They are almost invariably efficient and hardworking. And they have one other thing in common – they can be here today and gone tomorrow.

They are “temps” – temporary workers hired for a specific period of time to get a specific job done, often when regular employees are on leave or on vacation.

Although temps are used in the private sector, they are more frequently found in the public sector.

While it is difficult to pinpoint an exact figure, government at all levels across Canada spend “many millions of dollars” annually to pay the salaries and wages of temporary workers, according to Andrew Ross, who is manager of Business Operations for Dare Human Resources Corporation.

In business since 1987, Dare has successfully provided a complete range of integrated human resources services to public and private sector organizations across North America. It is one of several such companies providing temporary workers to federal government departments and agencies in Ottawa.

Ross says temporary workers provide employers with three main advantages.

First, he says, there is no loss of productivity in the workplace when temps are on the job to help take up the slack.

Second, temporary workers provide employers with the advantage of having a pool of screened candidates available to fill in gaps in the workforce.

Flexibility is the third advantage.

“The availability of temporary workers offers employers the flexibility of using

workers when they need them for peak periods,” Ross explains.

On the flip side of the coin, he says, there are advantages for temps in work arrangements of this kind. Temporary work provides people in career transition with income. It allows them to add government experience to their résumés and it provides them with the flexibility to work when they choose.

Pierre Henry agrees that the convenience factor is the main reason the government makes a practice of hiring temps. “Temporary workers are a quick and convenient method of responding to a resource need,” says the Project Development Advisor for the Common Administrative Services Directorate of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Although there is a learning curve with temporary workers as with other workers, in certain circumstances the curve is almost a straight line.

“In some ways, they do hit the ground running,” Henry says. “This is particularly the case if the jobs they do involve general, repetitive duties.”

“Generally,” he says, “we ensure that the candidates meet the agencies’ base educational and security requirements, then we focus on the operational requirements of the position.”

With more than 70 placement firms in Ottawa alone, there is no shortage of sources for temporary workers.

In fact, a quick flip through Ottawa’s yellow pages telephone directory produces a dizzying array of firms offering temporary help services. And, not just clerical help to lend a hand with that filing that’s been allowed to overflow into boxes on the office floor and behind the water cooler. There is a myriad of firms offering tempo-

rary help in such diverse specialties as sales and marketing, finance and accounting, data entry, information technology, biotechnology, engineering, manufacturing, administration, human resources, warehouse workers, light industrial workers, construction workers, landscapers, labourers, library and museum workers, and writers, editors and translators.

And the list goes on and on and on . . .

But, with so many firms to choose from, the choosing can be confusing. So what mechanisms do government departments use to choose their supplier firms?

The Government of Ontario, which also employs many temporary workers, uses a bidding process that is open to all temporary placement agencies.

According to Pierre Henry, two of the mechanisms used by federal government departments and agencies involve utilizing Public Works and Government Services Canada’s (PWGSC) Temporary Help Services online and issuing requests for proposals (RFPs) for standing offers.

“By using PWGSC or Temporary Help Services online, you know the base criteria has already been established,” he says. “We don’t do our own RFPs because it is a costly venture and there is no use in re-inventing the wheel.”

Firms get on the prequalification list after a check of their past performance, a check for any issues that may have been brought up with the contracting authority and a check to ensure there are no remedial actions outstanding against them.

Despite these precautions, there are still some implications for the public sector employer when hiring temporary workers.

One of the biggest implications is the varied quality of resources supplied by the placement firms.

Sometimes, the resources are just excellent, Henry says. At other times, they are somewhat less than sterling.

Staff relations and union concerns are other possible implications, he adds. If a temporary worker is making more money than a permanent staff member, it is very bad for staff relations. In other cases, un-



ions have concerns about bringing non-unionized, temporary workers into a unionized workplace.

If there are implications for the employer when hiring temporary workers, there are also implications for the temporary workers being hired. There is no job security for temps and 30 to 40 percent of their earnings go to the firms that place them in the temporary jobs.

However, Henry cautions, the 30 to 40 percent figure is not a “profit” figure. All firms must pay CPP, Workman’s Compensation, income tax, employment insurance and the employment health tax (EHT). They also pay four percent vacation pay. So, he says, average “profits” after overhead are closer to five to 10 percent of the bill rate.

Related to temporary workers – perhaps their wealthier second cousins – are the consultants who provide a wide range of professional services to government.

The official federal government electronic tendering system, MERX, lists 19 such major service categories. They include architectural and engineering services, communications services, educational and training services, professional, administrative and management support services – almost every type of service imaginable from transportation and travel services to maintenance and repair services.

With governments’ use of their services increasing by more than 50 percent over the last decade, professional consulting is a growth industry.

In 2003 alone, the Government of Canada spent 6.5 billion dollars on the services of professional consultants.

Narrower measures of professional consulting services show even more rapid growth in recent years and, indeed, may be one of the fastest growing inputs into government operating costs.

Although the factors leading to this growth are not entirely clear, it is thought they could include loss of human “capital” as a result of the federal government’s recent downsizing exercise, the flexibility offered by contracted services and the increasing need for specialized expertise too costly to retain within the public service. *mm*

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