

Engineers Canada's Submission to the Government of Canada on Maternity and Parental Benefits and Leaves

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Background information

Engineers Canada is the national organization of the 12 provincial and territorial associations that regulate the practice of engineering in Canada and license the country's more than 290,000 professional engineers. Together, we work to advance the profession in the public interest.

Engineers drive much of Canada's economy. Natural resources, manufacturing, technology and other sectors rely upon the expertise of engineers. As one of the top five exporters of engineering services in the world, the expertise and skill of Canada's engineers contributes to the Canadian and global economies. Engineers work tirelessly in Canada and abroad to keep the public safe and to contribute to strong, prosperous communities.

Engineers Canada is ready and willing to help the government build a better Canada. Among Canada's more than 290,000 members of the engineering profession, there are countless experts prepared to assist the government in strengthening the middle class, tackling innovations and improving the resilience of the country's infrastructure.

Overview

Employers across Canada need to actively attract and retain a more diverse workforce because “diversity has proven value for innovation, customer relevancy and project management as it introduces varied perspectives and insights.”¹

Engineers Canada is committed to enhancing gender diversity within the engineering and geoscience professions across the country. In the engineering profession specifically, women remain severely under-represented with only 12.8 per cent representation in overall Canadian membership.² Engineers Canada is committed to growing this percentage in order to ensure that the engineering profession in Canada reflects the demographics of Canadian society, where women constitute more than 50.4 per cent of the population.

However, the current system for maternity and parental leave is often seen as one of the contributing factors to the attrition of women in professional roles in Canada; specifically for women within the engineering profession across the country.

According to engineering regulators across Canada, some of the current issues surrounding Canada’s maternity and parental leave system that affect engineers revolve around:

- (1) inflexibility within the current leave policy resulting in difficulties for parents to balance professional demands with personal needs;
- (2) conditions of employment insurance (EI) eligibility that reduce the professional development of parents, especially if multiple leaves are taken, thereby jeopardizing the advancement prospects for that employee when they return to the workplace; and
- (3) the structure of the current leave policy increases employees’ disengagement from work projects and priorities while on leave.

Given these issues with the current maternity and parental leave system, it is necessary that the system be improved and modernized to reflect the flexibility that has been implemented in other aspects of today’s workplace culture. This will go a long way to helping engineering employers, and employers in general, retain and attract qualified and talented individuals to the profession.

Engineers Canada’s Support for Bill C-243

Engineers Canada fully endorses Bill C-243, entitled, “National Maternity Assistance Program Strategy Act”³; a Private Members Bill (PMB) that includes a national maternity assistance program and changes to the Employment Insurance Act. Engineers Canada believes that this PMB is a great first step towards eliminating the individual, organizational and societal barriers women still experience in many professions across Canada, including in the engineering profession. However, much more is needed in

¹ Engineers Canada and Geoscientists Canada (2016). “Managing Transitions: Before, During and After Leave – A Resource Guide for Employees and Employers.” (pg. 3). Retrieved online from:

<https://www.engineerscanada.ca/sites/default/files/Managing-Transitions-en.pdf>

² Engineers Canada (2016). “National Membership Report.” Retrieved online from:

<https://www.engineerscanada.ca/reports/national-membership-report>.

³ Bill C-243 (2016). “Bill C-243: National Maternity Assistance Program Strategy Act.” Retrieved online from: <http://www.billc-243.ca/>.

order to fully protect, support, and encourage women to participate in the workforce. Engineers Canada looks forward to continuing to engage with the government and likeminded stakeholders to better attract and retain diverse groups, including women, into the engineering profession to more closely reflect the demographics of Canadian society.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Proposed Options

Option A – A longer combined EI maternity/parental benefits and leave period (i.e., of up to 18 months, rather than 12 months)

The Government of Canada's first proposed option for an improved maternity and parental leave package outlines that an individual can combine "maternity and parental benefits and unpaid leaves to be extended to up to 18 months at a lower EI benefit rate (more time off work, with less money per month)."⁴

Advantages:

The advantages of this proposed option for an employee is the opportunity to have an uninterrupted 18 months at home with their newborn or newly adopted child if they so choose. This extended leave would also help families by providing them with six additional months to find childcare before having to return to work.

Disadvantages:

The disadvantages surrounding this initial option include:

- (1) Inflexibility within the current leave policy resulting in difficulties for parents to balance professional demands with personal needs. Mothers have been shown to be more likely to take the leave, as there are still employers that are not supportive of male employees taking parental leave,⁵ thus not addressing this key barrier for working women.
- (2) Conditions of employment insurance (EI) eligibility decrease the professional development of parents are magnified with a longer leave, especially if multiple leaves are taken, jeopardizing the advancement prospects for employees when they return to the workplace
- (3) The increased length of the proposed leave policy amplifies employees' disengagement from work projects and priorities while on leave. Research suggests that the more time women take on maternity leave, the less likely they are to return to full-time work.⁶
- (4) Extending parental leave to 18 months is not financially viable for most households.

⁴ Government of Canada (2016). "Maternity and Parental Benefits and Leaves: More Flexibility for Parents." Retrieved online from: <http://esdc-consultations.canada.ca/parental-maternity-consultation>.

⁵ Government of Canada (2015) "Leave practices of parents after the birth or adoption of young children." Retrieved online from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012002/article/11697-eng.htm>

⁶ The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (2016) "New parental leave rules may mean dedicated time off for dad" Retrieved online from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/parental-leave-for-dads-1.3540077>.

Option B -Taking EI parental benefits and leave periods in smaller blocks of time, over a longer period of up to 18 months (rather than over 12 months)

The Government of Canada's second proposed option for an improved maternity and parental leave package allows for the "current amount of parental benefits and unpaid leave to be taken in smaller blocks of time over a period of up to 18 months rather than over 12 months."⁷

Advantages:

The advantage of this proposed option is that it allows employees a flexible leave schedule. The flexibility provides employees with the opportunity to remain engaged with their employer and to manage professional demands such as projects and initiatives to maintain their standing and career progression that would otherwise be impossible if they were away on leave. This may include assignments that have short-term deliverables or that are cyclical in nature.

Option B also gives employees control over how their time on leave is distributed and aids in the balance between work and life. According to the Canadian Education and Research Institute of Counselling (CERIC), less than four per cent of mothers reported that taking a maternity leave positively affected their career and Option B provides parents a way to change the leave scenario to lessen its detrimental impacts.

Disadvantage:

The main disadvantage of this proposed option is the increased possibility for work disruptions as employers hire temporary employees to fill the individual's position for smaller blocks of time over an 18-month period.

Recommendation for Maternity and Parental Benefits and Leaves

Upon review of the Government of Canada's two proposed options for a potentially improved maternity and parental leave package, Engineers Canada favours Option B – Taking EI parental benefits and leave periods in smaller blocks of time, over a longer period of up to 18 months (rather than over 12 months).

Although there are identified advantages and disadvantages with both outlined options, Engineers Canada believes that the Government of Canada's proposed Option B provides greater flexibility in an employee's leave schedule and allows for more opportunities for an employee to continue their engagement with their employer while on leave. Engineers Canada strongly supports a modernized and improved maternity and parental leave system in order to retain and attract qualified and talented individuals—specifically women—in professions across the country.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the leave offered in Options A and B are not comprehensive strategies to successfully manage the entirety of the lifestyle change that is brought about when adding a child to one's family. While the ability of taking a paid leave should always be an available option, the reality of today is that families require flexibility beyond leave. An employee should have access to

⁷ Government of Canada (2016). "Maternity and Parental Benefits and Leaves: More Flexibility for Parents." Retrieved online from: <http://esdc-consultations.canada.ca/parental-maternity-consultation>.

arrangements that provide individuals with the ability to make the best family and career decisions. Options should therefore be broadened to include other alternatives than leave such as working part-time, teleworking or job sharing. Neither of the outlined options currently provides these alternatives.

Engineers Canada also recommends that further consultations must take place at the national level with regulated professions, such as engineering. There are many outstanding questions left to be answered by both proposed options. For example, how would Option A affect a subsequent maternity leave? Would the current 600 insurable hours continue to be required to be eligible? What earnings would the second maternity or parental leave be based on if a family chooses to have their children close together? Also, as previously mentioned, 18 months is a long period to be away from work, therefore reintegration into the workforce could be challenging. Additional consultation will help clarify these two recommendations and ensure that the federal government is well positioned to make informed decisions on whether more options are required for maternity and parental leave packages, and whether maternity and parental leave truly belongs with the Employment Insurance program.

Engineers Canada looks forward to continuing to engage in the consultation process and providing objective and evidence-based input that best serves the public interest. Our past involvement demonstrates that we can constructively engage and support the federal government's efforts.