

Organizational Ethics in Quebec

A Study of Practices and
Practitioners in the
Private, Public and Health Sectors

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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This study on ethics in Quebec organizations by EPAC-Quebec and its collaborators focuses on 107 organizations active in three sectors: the private sector (large corporations), the public sector (departments, agencies and state-owned corporations), and the sector of health and social service organizations under the Quebec government. The study was conducted using an in-depth survey followed by focus groups. We hope that the data will serve as a reference point for organizations hoping either to create effective organizational initiatives on ethics, or to improve initiatives that they have already set up.

The study deals mainly with the ethics objectives that organizations in these sectors have set for themselves, and the main initiatives they have put in place in the last three years. We have also studied the profile and responsibilities of the individuals in those organizations who are charged with implementing initiatives that encourage and support organizational ethics. In many cases, the results obtained in each of the three sectors are reported separately, making it possible to gain a better understanding of the specific characteristics of each sector. The main findings are summarized below.

Objectives and practices going beyond simple compliance

- Objectives relating to compliance with formal rules, including the law, codes of conduct, and organizational policies, are among the ethics-related objectives cited by the largest number of respondents, particularly in the private and public sectors.
- However, a significant proportion of organizations in each sector go beyond the aim of compliance with formal rules, and combine it to varying degrees with objectives and practices based on applied ethics, in the sense this term has in the Quebec literature. Examples of applied ethics include the adoption of organizational objectives on developing skills specific to ethical decision making, and creating an organizational culture that encourages dialogue to resolve problems and permits the questioning of current practices. Another example of applied ethics is aiming to develop dialogue-related skills themselves.
- The concepts “compliance with formal rules” and “applied ethics” are described in detail in the study, which includes a bibliography of the core Quebec literature on applied ethics in organizations. These concepts are somewhat different from those used in other reports on the ethics function, such as “compliance approach” and “engagement approach” used by the Conference Board of Canada in *The Evolving Role of the Ethics and Compliance Officer*, 2006.
- The present study points out that simple compliance with rules is often not enough to provide the coordination necessary between all the actors striving to achieve the quality of products and services desired by the organization. This is especially true when specific situations are not



covered by the rules or when multiple interpretations of the rules lead to indecision. Simple compliance is also not enough to ensure the quality of life in organizations.

- The concept “applied ethics” basically refers to practices that compensate for the inadequacies of rules-based approaches. This includes helping people to solve ethical dilemmas, especially in situations where they are uncomfortable with the actions to be taken, and complex or unusual situations that have ethical tensions between different stakeholders. The purpose of applied ethics in this sense is to help solve problems, improve current practices and generally help people act in the best way possible. Applied ethics also encourages employee engagement, developed through individual autonomy and exercise of judgment.
- In particular, more than three-quarters of the organizations in the health sector indicate they are aiming for objectives that include the development of skills specific to judgment and ethical decision making. The development of such skills is also a goal for about half of the organizations in the public and private sector. A significant proportion of participants indicate that presenting and discussing a model of ethical decision making, and case studies involving this type of decision, are included in their training.
- Almost a third of participating organizations used dialogue sessions between employees and managers over the last three years that focussed on their ethical practices or dilemmas. This practice is strongly recommended by the Quebec literature on applied ethics. Although more widespread in the health sector, this practice is also present in the other two sectors.
- More than half the organizations indicate that the quality of services to clients is among their ethics objectives. The health sector sets itself apart by having a large number of organizations that subscribe to this objective.

Ethics training: a predominant practice

- Training is, by far, the main practice used in the last three years by the organizations that participated in this study.
- Training of managers received the most attention: almost all the organizations offered training aimed at this clientele. Senior executives were also targeted in more than half the cases, mainly in the private sector, but also in a significant way in the two other sectors.
- Among the organizations offering training in ethics, some stood out by offering three days or more of training for certain categories of managers and employees over the last three years. Several others offered at least one day of training.
- However, the length of ethics training given in the last three years by a significant proportion of participating organizations is quite short. It often fluctuates between one and two hours, and that,

taken over the course of three years, would give an average of 20 to 40 minutes of training per year.

- It is surprising to note that almost a quarter of participating organizations did not do any training in ethics at any level whatsoever over the last three years. In addition, a significant proportion of those that provided training did not give any to their new employees during this period.
- The majority of organizations that provided training evaluated their needs before giving the training, so as to determine the themes they wished to treat or the skills they wished to develop. The evaluations used differing means: discussing the issue with their ethics committee, systematically evaluating past problem cases, or soliciting those who were to be trained.

Consultations on values and codes: a marked tendency

- Almost all the organizations have a statement of values and almost half of these formally consulted their employees (other than senior executives or managers) on its contents during its development or its review. The consultation was usually carried out using focus groups or the Internet.
- As well, almost all organizations adopted a code of conduct. Many consulted their employees during its initial development or its review. Note: There is a legal requirement for organizations in the Quebec health sector to have such codes.

Ethics officers: a real practical expertise, but limited resources

- The great majority of survey participants indicated that their role included providing advice to executives, managers, employees and their organization.
- Organizing ethics training and awareness initiatives is generally one of their principal tasks, although in the private sector less than half the participants have this function.
- The roles of investigating cases where the code of conduct may have been breached, and imposing penalties if it has, are mentioned by only a small percentages of participants. These tasks are generally given to other parts of the organization, such as labour relations, internal audit or the ombudsman.
- One organization out of five has an ethics officer who occupies this function full-time.
- Half the participants have a person who helps them carry out their duties. Some are full-time, while others are part-time.

- However, in more than half the organizations, the functions related to ethics only make up 10% or less of the workload of those responsible for ethics; the same is true for their assistants. This is particularly surprising given the objectives on ethics that organizations say they have set for themselves, and the job description of these individuals.
- The lack of time and adequate resources to meet the objectives on ethics established by the organization were raised in the focus groups in all sectors.
- More than a third of the survey participants have been in their position for more than five years. This is also true for a large number of the individuals who assist them.
- The academic training of those who carry out the ethics function varies greatly. It is notable that almost a quarter of organizational ethics officers and those who assist them have successfully passed, or are currently enrolled in, university programs specialized in ethics. This trend is particularly marked in the health sector.
- More than a third of those responsible for this function and many of their assistants were given six days or more of advanced training over the last three years. However, an almost equal number were only allowed one day or less of such training during this period, which seems too little to develop their knowledge and keep it up to date.

Ethics committees: more and more in the picture

- More than half the organizations indicated that they have formally appointed ethics committees. Like ethics officers, the tasks which they have assumed are very diverse.
- Almost a third of the organizations that have an ethics committee, offered the members training in ethics at the time the committee was established. In certain cases the organization offered them training on a regular basis, that is, at least once every three years. Some encourage their ethics committee members to take advanced training in ethics outside their organization, at its expense. On the other hand, almost half of their committee members have not received any training specific to ethics.

Directions for future action

As a structured and institutionalized field of activity in organizations, ethics is still evolving. The findings of our study present a picture of the current situation in Quebec, so that the various actors, whether executives, ethics officers, ethics committee members, researchers or practitioners in training, have a solidly documented point of departure to think about, and also to initiate a dialogue on the future directions of organizational ethics.

For additional information on this study, or a copy of the report (available in French only) please contact Ms. Diane Girard, coordinator of the project and of the Quebec Region of the Ethics Practitioners' Association of Canada (EPAC/APEC) at:
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