

Back to daily grind? Not in Quebec

By Michelle Lalonde
4 January 2008
Montreal Gazette

Anybody trying to get things done this week in Montreal, even if it was just some post-Christmas bargain shopping, noticed the many "Closed" signs on restaurant doors or heard office answering machines telling them to call back on Monday.

Isn't the world supposed to start turning again on Jan. 2? Not in Quebec, observers say.

Jan. 2 has been a de facto holiday in Quebec for years. Many businesses close not only on New Year's Day, but for several days afterward, often right up until the Monday after the holiday.

"It was unbelievable," Cynthia Lee, a communications officer at McGill University, said of Wednesday, Jan. 2, a regular workday for her and her colleagues.

"We just wanted to get some food and so many restaurants were closed downtown. People were lined up out the door at places like McDonald's and Burger King. It was such a strange feeling."

In Toronto, the business world was up and running again at 9 a.m. on Jan. 2.

"I'd say Toronto was back at least to half-scale (Wednesday) morning and I'm fairly sure there are far more people back at their desks (yesterday) in Toronto than in Montreal," said James Milway, executive director of the Institute for Competitiveness and Productivity, an independent think tank funded by the Ontario government.

Milway's organization put out a study just over a year ago comparing the total number of hours worked per year, per worker, in Ontario, Quebec and 14 U.S. states. That study found Ontarians worked 1,739 hours a year - about 3 1/2 weeks less than the U.S. workers in the study - while Quebecers worked fewer than 1,700 hours.

Paul Daniel Muller, an economist and president of the Montreal Economic Institute, said it's clear Quebecers work fewer hours than people in Ontario or the United States, and "it's days like (yesterday) that drive that average.

"I'm not going to say it's good or bad (for the overall economy). But the general rule is that if you want to earn more, you have to work more," he said.

Most wealthy countries are moving toward fewer work hours, Milway noted.

U.S. workers "are the oddballs here," he said. "All the other advanced societies are seeing hours worked go down, while the Americans keep plugging away."

Taking longer Christmas holidays might add to Quebec's reputation as a haven for slackers. But some say allowing workers to spend "down time" with family, or just relaxing, will improve productivity in the long run.

"Our view is that the entrepreneur is in the best position to decide whether it makes sense to his customers and to his operations to be closed" at this time of year, said Simon Prévost, vice-president (Quebec) of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, an advocacy group for small and medium-size businesses.

"Maybe they won't lose much business, or maybe it makes sense to offer employees the time off so they can start the new year on the right foot. We just don't want government imposing specific holiday times on business," Prévost said.

The question of whether and how long to close around Christmas is an evolving one, Prévost said, and there is no hard and fast rule, outside of statutory holidays.

"If three-quarters of the offices and shops in downtown Montreal are closed, of course a lot of restaurants are going to decide to close. But if people are lined up outside McDonald's, business people will notice and there will be an adjustment.

"I don't think there is a reason to worry about the economic impact of it, unless the whole city starts shutting down for two weeks."

Karl Moore, a professor at McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management, said Quebec has to find a balance between offering good working conditions and competing with a world that is increasingly open for business 365 days a year.

"To be honest, I was a little irritated to find things closed" on Wednesday, Moore said.

"We were in Quebec City and I just wanted to get some electronics and the whole Galeries de la capitale (mall) was closed. I couldn't even get a doughnut."

But he said Quebec's model is "mature," taking into account the human need for down time.

"As a parent and a human being, I think it's a good thing - but we have to remember that while we are relaxing, our competitors have their noses to the grindstone," he said.

"It's more balanced and mature of us, but on the other hand, when we are compared to our competitors, who are now not just across town but global, we do look just a smidgen lazy."

mlalonde@thegazette.canwest.com

