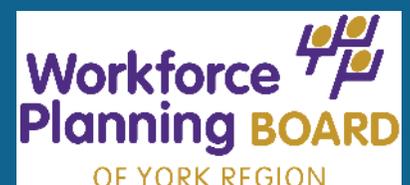


COVID-19 IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT IN YORK REGION

SURVEY RESULTS

JANUARY 2021



www.wpboard.ca

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About the Workforce Planning Board of York Region

The Workforce Planning Board of York Region is a non-for-profit, community-based organization working to develop solutions to local labour market needs and issues. Governed by a volunteer Board of Directors, the Workforce Planning Board is one of 26 independent, non-government corporations in Ontario mandated to engage our community and community partners in a local labour market research and planning process that leads to cooperative efforts among partners to find local solutions to local issues. The Workforce Planning Board is funded by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.



Workforce Planning Board of York Region
acknowledges the funding from:



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Acknowledgment

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the employers who participated and informed this survey.

Their support was invaluable.



Introduction

While the COVID pandemic affected all of us and had an extraordinary impact on our economy, for individual businesses and employment, the fall-out was experienced in diverse ways and to varying degrees. Different establishments had varying proportions of essential workers as well as varying capacities to shift to remote work or delivering their products and services on-line. As a result, the range of coping strategies open to an employer varied by the size of their operation and by their industry. And while employers pivoted to on-line platforms or reliance on more employees working from home in response to the pandemic, some of these adaptations will likely continue even after this crisis has passed.

These are some of the findings from the survey of employers carried out by the Workforce Planning Board of York Region in the last two weeks of January 2021. The purpose of the survey was to obtain employers views on the impact of the COVID pandemic and its aftermath on their business.

Methodology

For the purpose of analyzing the survey results, cross tabulation tables were created for each question, based on select groupings, such as employee size or industries, to compare responses. The survey is not a random sample survey. It is based on which employers are contacted and which employers chose to respond to the survey. The survey sample is compared in its various characteristics (in particular, industry and size) to the distribution of all employers in the survey target area as one gauge of the degree to which the survey represents the universe of employers in York Region. We also believe that the cross-tabulated comparisons provide insights into how the pandemic affected employers by industry and by size of establishment, as well as into the differences in the strategies they used to respond to the impact of the pandemic.

Profile of Employers

In the last two weeks of January 2021, the Workforce Planning Board of York Region (WPBoard) administered an on-line survey to over 23,000 local employers to obtain their views on the impact of the COVID pandemic and its aftermath on their business.

Apart from two classification questions (industry and size), and later questions about follow-up and contact information, the survey had eight substantive questions regarding impacts on employers, including necessary adjustments to business practices and their workforce, as well as expectations regarding the near term.

TABLE 1: Distribution of survey respondents by industry compared to actual distribution of establishments with employees in York Region

Industry sector	Survey	Actual
Accommodation and Food Services	7.2%	6.1%
Administrative & Support, Waste Management	0.4%	5.0%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	0.7%	0.5%
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	7.4%	1.1%
Construction	7.9%	12.6%
Educational Services	4.6%	1.6%
Finance and Insurance	6.5%	4.1%
Health Care and Social Assistance	11.3%	8.8%
Information and Cultural Industries	0.7%	1.3%
Manufacturing	9.0%	5.2%
Mining and Oil & Gas Extraction	0.2%	0.1%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	14.1%	7.8%
Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	10.9%	19.1%
Public Administration	0.0%	0.0%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1.4%	5.4%
Retail Trade	12.3%	9.8%
Transportation and Warehousing	2.3%	4.0%
Utilities	0.0%	0.1%
Wholesale Trade	3.3%	7.0%
TOTAL	100.0%	99.6%

The figure for actual number of employers by industry is derived from Statistics Canada's Canadian Business Count, June 2020. The total percentage for the Actual establishments does not add up to 100% because the Management of Companies sector was excluded. The 0.0% of firms in Public Administration in the Actual column represents the rounding off of the 20 establishments in this category, as it represents 0.04% of all establishments with employees.



The distribution of employers by industry provided a good mix of different types of businesses, in many cases reflecting the broad distribution of these businesses in York Region. Table 1 provides the percentage distribution of survey responses by industry and compares them to the distribution of establishments with one or more employees in York Region in June 2020.

Among industries where there is a significant discrepancy in proportions, there is an over-representation in the sample of firms in Arts, Entertainment & Recreation and in Educational services, while there is an under-representation of firms in Administrative & Support as well as Real Estate and Rental & Leasing.

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of all businesses with employees by number of employees. While the survey is over-represented among the larger employee size categories, even the smallest category of 1-4 employee firms has a very healthy representation in the sample. In most cases, the survey sample represents at least 1% of the universe of employers in that category and even in the category with the fewest employees, the survey sample accounts for 0.6% of all employers. (For the sake of this calculation, firms with no employees were not included.)

TABLE 2: Distribution of survey respondents by number of employees

	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES				
	1-4	5-9	10-19	20-99	100+
Actual number	34,681	8,565	5,323	4,839	969
Actual percent	64%	16%	10%	9%	2%
Survey percent	42%	26%	13%	15%	4%
Survey as percent of actual	0.6%	1.6%	1.3%	1.6%	2.3%

The figure for actual number of employers by number of employees is derived from Statistics Canada’s Canadian Business Count, June 2020

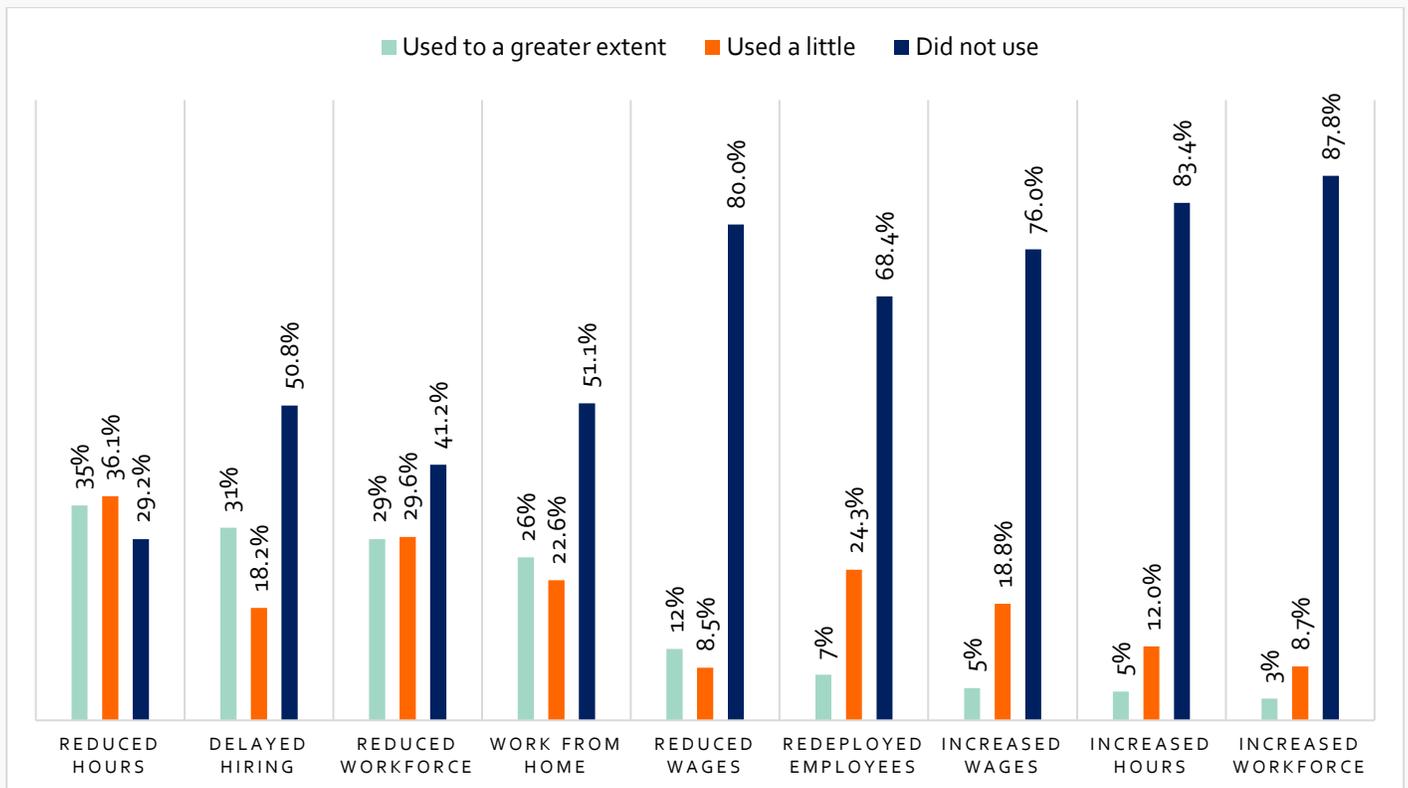
Strategies in response to the lockdown

Employers were asked what responses they put in place after the first lockdown came into effect in March or since then. The options provided were the following:

- Reduced the size of their workforce
- Increased the size of their workforce
- Reduced the number of hours worked
- Increased the number of hours worked
- Reduced wages
- Increased wages (including bonuses)
- Redeployed employees to different roles
- Had some or all employees work from home
- Delayed hiring

Chart 1 illustrates the distribution of all responses by these different strategies. Four strategies were used by at least one out of four employers: reducing hours; delaying hiring; reducing the workforce; and having employees work from home.

CHART 1: Degree of reliance on workforce strategies in response to lockdown



At least three-quarters of respondents did not use any of the following strategies:

- Reducing wages
- Increasing wages
- Increasing hours
- Increasing their workforce

There was limited variation in these responses by size of firm. Very small firms (1-4 employees) were more likely to reduce the number of hours worked (41% of respondents) and to reduce wages (17%). Firms with 20-99 employees were most likely to increase wages (14%). (Cross-tabulations were not done for firms with 100 or more employees because their sample was too small.)

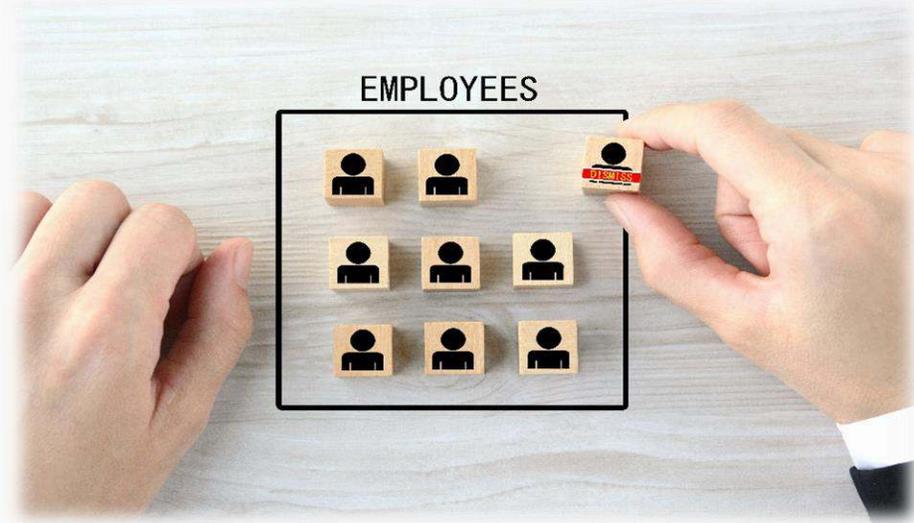
There were far greater variations in responses based on industry, which is not surprising given how differently industries were affected by the pandemic and the lockdown.

According to the survey, employers in the Arts, Entertainment & Recreation sector (includes performing arts, spectator sports, heritage institutions, casinos, gyms, golf courses, bowling centres, skiing facilities and marinas) made far greater use of these strategies, reported using the following to a greater extent: reducing hours worked (69% of respondents); reducing their workforce (63%); delaying hiring (46%); and reducing wages (32%).

Employers in Accommodation & Food Services had comparable responses: 50% reduced their hours worked; 49% reduced their workforce; 38% delayed hiring.

Health Care & Social Assistance had responses that presented diametrically opposed impacts, reflecting the fact that this category included subsectors which experienced increased demands on their workforces (hospitals, nursing homes) as well as other sectors which had to either close or work remotely (social services and childcare centres). As a result, 52% of these respondents reported that they reduced hours worked, while 9% (the highest of any industry) indicated that they increased the hours worked. This sector also had 37% of respondents who reduced the size of their workforce.

There was a great variation between industries in terms of having employees work from home: 59% of employers in Professional, Scientific & Technical Services (for example, consulting, accounting, engineering and legal firms) relied on this strategy to a greater extent, while Accommodation & Food services (only 3%) and Retail Trade (9%) could hardly make use of this option. Retail Trade had the highest proportion of employers who increased wages (at 9%), followed closely by Manufacturing (7%).



Change in composition of workforce after the lockdown

Employers were next asked the following:

Compared to the pre-lockdown period, has the composition of your organization’s workforce changed or do you expect it to be changed in any of the following ways?

Table 3 presents the distribution of responses. The first column indicates the percentage of employers who answered not applicable. The last column indicates the difference between the percentage of employers indicating an increase minus the percentage of employers citing a decrease.

TABLE 3: Percent of employers commenting on change in composition of workforce

N/A	Category of worker	INCREASE	NO CHANGE	DECREASE	+/-
84%	Workers from temp agencies	10%	63%	23%	-13
64%	Contract workers (short- or long-term)	20%	52%	28%	-8
45%	Part-time workers	20%	51%	30%	-11
18%	Permanent employees	8%	65%	27%	-19
73%	Consultants	16%	61%	24%	-8
66%	Outsourcing to other companies	23%	52%	25%	-2
83%	Outsourcing to gig workers	32%	44%	24%	+7

The figures across a row may not add up or the +/- differential may appear off due to rounding.

In almost every category, at least 50% of employers expected no change in the composition of that category of worker. However, in every category except one (outsourcing to gig workers), the net response was an expectation that that category would form a smaller proportion of their workforce in the future. The largest net negative outcome (at -19%) and the category which had the most overall responses was for permanent employees (only 18% said this category was “Not Applicable” to them). The category of part-time workers had the next highest net negative outcome (-11%), which also had the second largest number of respondents.

While over 60% of all firms expected to see no change in the share of their workforce represented by permanent employees, firms with fewer than 20 employees were much more likely to expect a net decrease in their share of permanent employees. On the other hand, firms with 20-99 employees were more likely to have a net decrease in their share of part-time employees.

By industry, the largest net decreases in permanent employees were found among:

- Accommodation & Food Services (-37%, compared to the average of -19%)
- Arts, Entertainment & Recreation (-33%)
- Retail Trade (-28%)

These same industries, together with Other Services, also had larger decreases among part-time employees. While no category of employer reported a net increase among permanent employees, two sectors did have larger net increase for part-time workers: Construction (+33%) and Health Care & Social Assistance (+24%).

With regards to contract workers, several industries expected a net decrease: Arts, Entertainment & Recreation; Health Care & Social Assistance; and Professional, Scientific & Technical Services. Employers in Construction anticipated a net increase in contract workers.

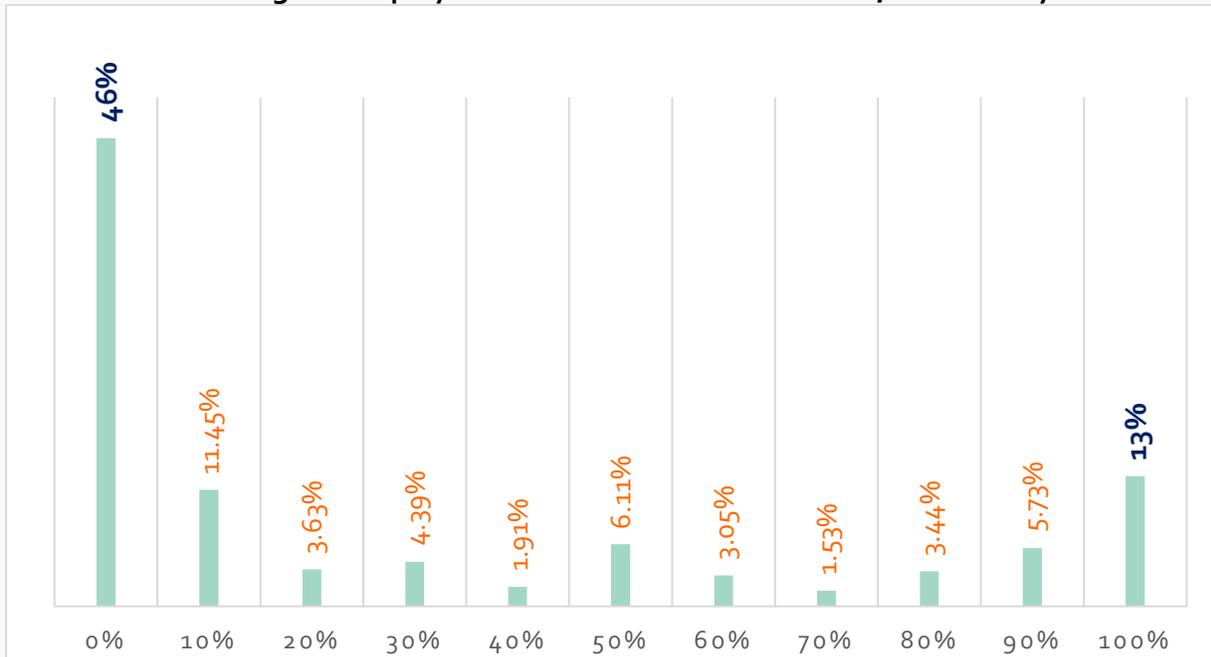
In most other categories, there were not a sufficient number of respondents by industries to make a firm judgment, except in the case of Professional, Scientific & Technical Services firms, who forecast an increased reliance on gig workers that are people who take a series of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs.



Working from home

In order to probe the issue of working from home, the survey first asked respondents what percentage of their workforce could work from home, if necessary. Chart 2 shows the distribution of responses of all employers, by percentage of employees who could work from home.

CHART 2: Percentage of employees who could work from home, if necessary



Almost half (46%) of respondents said that none of their employees could work from home and a very small proportion (13%) said all their employees could work from home. Of the remainder, a slight majority of employers said that less than half of their employees could work from home.

Table 4 shows the responses by size of establishment, using three categories:

- None could work from home (0%)
- Some could work from home (10% to 80%)
- Most could work from home (90% to 100%)

Firms with 20-99 employees are more likely to say that some of their employees can work from home, whereas for the smaller firms, most say none can, while in the case of firms with 10-19 employees, it is almost an even split (45% say none and 47% say some). There is much less difference in the proportion who say most employees can work from home.



TABLE 4: Distribution of respondents by proportion of employees who could work from home, by size of firm

	ALL	Number of employees			
		1-4	5-9	10-19	20-99
None	46%	50%	49%	45%	34%
Some	36%	28%	34%	47%	50%
Most	19%	22%	17%	8%	16%

There are significant variations in employer responses by industry (Table 5). For both Accommodation & Food Services and Retail Trade, a large majority of employers say none of their staff can work from home and almost none say that most can work from home. At the other extreme, Professional, Scientific & Technical Services firms are very likely to say that most can work from home (45%) or that some can (37%). In between, employers in Arts, Entertainment & Recreation as well as Construction are as likely to say none can work from home and some can work from home. Almost each industry presents a different distribution of responses.

TABLE 5: Distribution of respondents by proportion of employees who could work from home, by size of industry

	Accommodation & Food Services	Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	Construction	Health Care & Social Assistance	Manufacturing	Other Services	Professional, Scientific & Technical Services	Retail Trade
None	84%	42%	44%	63%	38%	46%	18%	69%
Some	16%	39%	49%	27%	57%	26%	37%	28%
Most	0%	18%	7%	10%	4%	29%	45%	3%

The figures from the survey suggest a lower capacity among firms for having employees work from home, compared to findings from elsewhere. A study carried out by Statistics Canada soon after the lockdowns started estimated the potential for remote work at close to 40% of all occupations, based on the functions that were being performed. It may be that the higher.¹

¹ Zechuan Deng, Rene Morissette and Derek Messacar, "Running the economy remotely: Potential for working from home during and after COVID-19," Statistics Canada, May 28, 2020.

TABLE 6: Estimate of potential to work remotely by industry

INDUSTRY	REMOTE WORK CAPACITY
ALL INDUSTRIES	38.9%
Finance and insurance	85.3%
Educational services	84.6%
Professional, scientific and technical services	83.9%
Information and cultural industries	68.5%
Public administration	58.2%
Wholesale trade	57.3%
Real estate and rental and leasing	47.8%
Arts, entertainment and recreation	40.1%
Utilities	38.6%
Administrative and support	35.1%
Other services	31.4%
Health care and social assistance	28.8%
Transportation and warehousing	24.5%
Mining and oil and gas extraction	23.9%
Retail trade	22.0%
Manufacturing	19.1%
Construction	11.1%
Accommodation and food services	5.6%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and farming	3.9%

Source: Statistics Canada

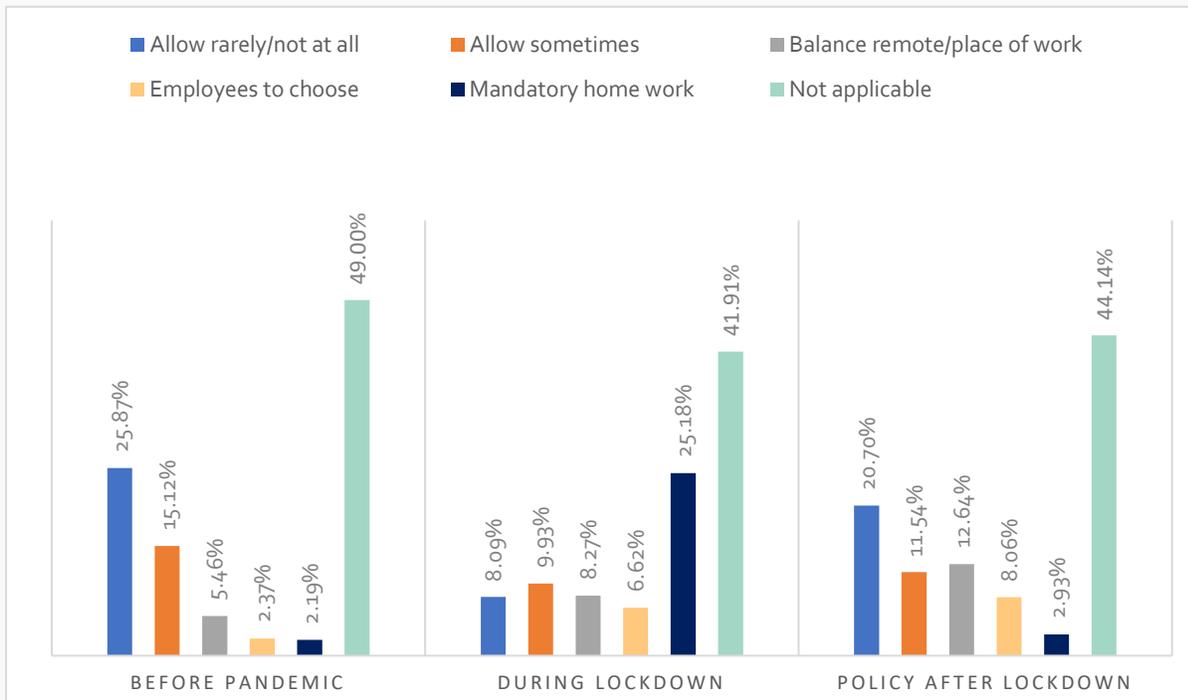
The survey next asked about employer’s policies regarding working from home, comparing before the pandemic, during the lockdown and the likely policy after the lockdowns. Chart 3 presents the responses for all employers. The choices presented to employers were the following:

- Allow remote work rarely/not at all.
- Allow remote work sometimes.
- Balance between remote/place of work.
- Allow employees to choose.
- Mandatory to work from home.

Clearly, the lockdown made it necessary for more employers to mandate that employees work from home (25% in the survey). However, the lockdown period has evidently changed thoughts about policies for the future.

Overall, comparing pre-lockdown and expected post-lockdown policies, the percentage of employers who rarely allowed employees to work from home dropped five percentage points, those who would allow it sometimes dropped three percentage points. The percentage who now sought a balance between working remotely and being at the place of work increased by 8% and those who would allow employees to choose, rose by 6% (even those for whom this question was not applicable declined by 5%).

CHART 3: Policies towards working from home, before, during and after the lockdowns



The most significant variation from the average results by size of firm was among firms with 20-99 employees for the response relating to a balance between working remotely and in the usual place of work: before the pandemic, only 4% of respondents relied on this option, whereas after the lockdown, 21% considered this as an option.

By industry, there were three ways to characterize the difference between the policies relating to remote work before and after the lockdowns:

- Industries where there was virtually no change: Accommodation & Food Services; Retail Trade;
- Industries where there was some increase in considering employees working from home: Arts, Entertainment & Recreation; Construction; Health Care & Social Assistance; Manufacturing; Other Services;
- Industries where there was a notable increase in considering employees working from home: Professional, Scientific & Technical Services.

For firms in the Professional, Scientific & Technical Services sector, this increase was across several categories:

For the option of a balance between working remotely and in the usual place of work, pre-lockdown 16% of this sector applied this approach, while 24% were considering it for after the lockdowns:

- For the option of allowing employees to choose, pre-lockdown 6% of this sector applied this approach, while 19% were considering it for after the lockdowns;
- For the option of mandating working from home, pre-lockdown 8% of this sector applied this approach, while 10% were considering it for after the lockdowns.

While it may be premature to predict the impact of the pandemic on the labour market during the recovery in 2021, the potential for more work to be executed from home could have significant consequences for York Region. We are home to a large proportion of workers in professional occupations including STEM, administration and general office work. As a large portion of these jobs would normally commute daily outside the Region, primarily to Toronto, there is a greater potential for some of these functions to now be performed from a home base. This could result in an increase in demand for local services.



Skill requirements for lower-skilled jobs

Employers were asked regarding their skill expectations for lower-skilled jobs. The precise question was:

“What skill requirements are or will be a priority for you in the pandemic and post-pandemic period for entry-level or lower-skilled jobs. These entry-level/lower-skilled occupations include: general labourers, material handlers, order pickers, shelf stockers, general office clerks and retail sales person.”

Employers were asked to indicate their expectations along the following dimensions:

- Basic employability skills: Attendance, punctuality, taking direction, self-regulation
- Basic essential skills: literacy, numeracy, English language communication
- Digital skills: Basic computer knowledge and/or working with personal assistant or virtual assistant devices
- Soft skills: Working in teams, communication skills, customer service, managing conflict, taking the initiative
- Technical skills: Specific vocational skills related to the occupation

They were asked to rate their expectations by the following measurements:

- Do not find this an issue
- Somewhat of a concern
- A major priority

Each response was assigned a value:

“0” for “Do not find this an issue”

“1” for “Somewhat of a concern”

“2” for “A major priority”

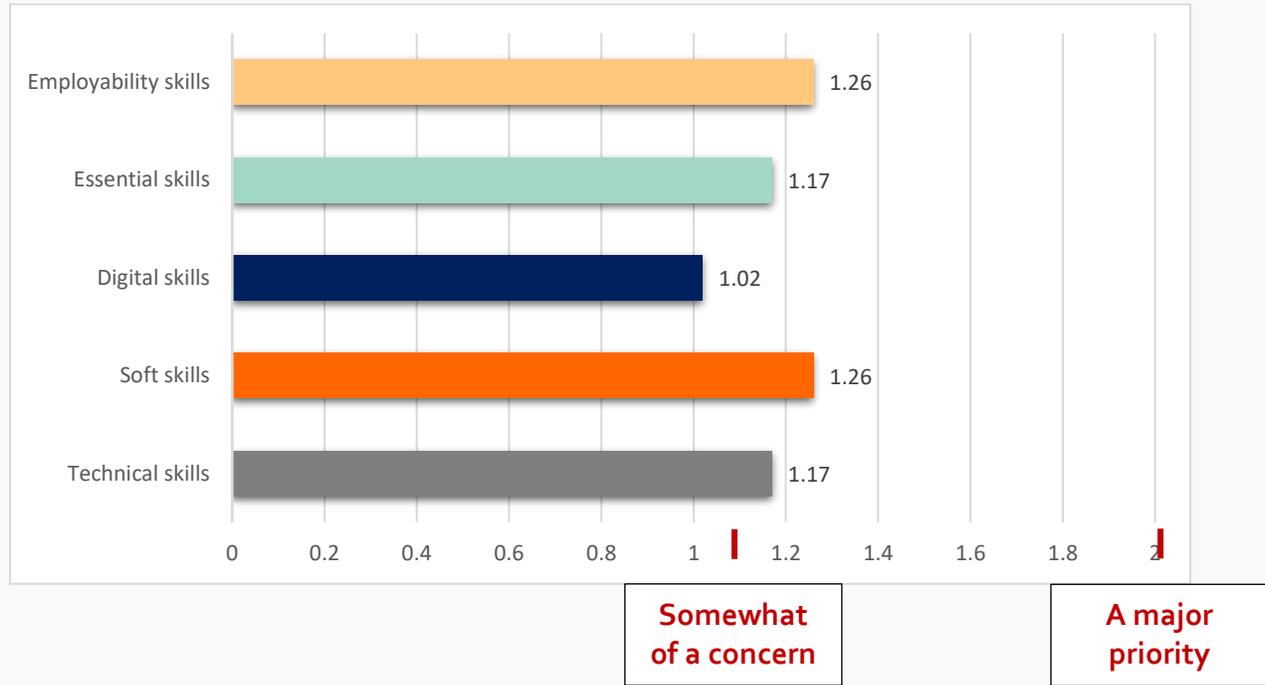
These values were added up and divided by the number of employers who provided a rating, thus producing an average score for each skill dimension. Chart 4 presents the responses for all employers.

Employability skills and soft skills rank highest as concerns, followed closely by essential skills and technical skills. Lagging further behind, though still “somewhat of a concern” are digital skills.

The significant variation by size of firm was among establishments with 10-19 employees, which ranked the following skill expectations much higher than average: employability skills (1.42); soft skills (1.42); and essential skills (1.37). While not as high as these others, their ranking of technical skills (1.28) was also considerably higher than the higher score.

By industry, Construction (1.48) and Health Care & Social Assistance (1.44) were the only sectors which ranked technical skills higher than any of the other categories. These two sectors also ranked employability skills and soft skills almost as highly. Manufacturing firms gave a high ranking to employability skills (1.41), but less so for soft skills (1.18).

Chart 4: Average rating for skill expectations



Preparing youth for future careers

Youth were especially hard hit by the pandemic. Not only did they experience the highest unemployment rates (through many months in 2020, the youth unemployment rate in the Greater Toronto Area was around three times or more that of adults), but also many students were unable to participate in co-op programs, internships and other forms of experiential learning. The survey explored the degree to which local employers were willing to address this issue by asking the following question:

“We wish to know what you are currently doing or willing to do to prepare our youth for future careers.”

Employers were provided with a long list of employment and experiential learning opportunities for different categories of youth, as follows:

Hire a high school summer student	Host a university co-op student (unpaid)
Hire a college summer student	Host a high school intern student (paid)
Hire a university summer student	Host a high school intern student (unpaid)
Host a high school co-op student (paid)	Host a college intern student (paid)
Host a high school co-op student (unpaid)	Host a college intern student (unpaid)
Host a college co-op student (paid)	Host a university intern student (paid)
Host a college co-op student (unpaid)	Host a university intern student (unpaid)
Host a university co-op student (paid)	Host an apprentice

They were asked to indicate their responses by way of the following options:

- Already do this
- Already do and would consider doing more
- We do not do this but would be willing to consider
- We do not do this; please provide more info
- Not an option for us at this time
- Not applicable

This question presents a large set of potential actions and several distinct options for responses and so could pose a great challenge when it comes to analyzing the results. As it turns out, there were several patterns in the responses:

- If a respondent answered either “not an option” or “not applicable” for any action, there was a high probability that one of these responses was also applied to every other action;
- The action which received the highest proportion of responses was “already do this” for hiring a student, with around the same percentage of responses for each category of student: high school student (20%); college student (20%); university student (22%);
- Around 7% to 12% of respondents already host a co-op student, while around 3% to 5% host a student intern (the ranges vary by category of student); around 8% host an apprentice.

In short, employers are more likely to hire a summer student, then somewhat less likely to host a co-op student and finally somewhat less likely again to host an intern.

In terms of understanding the other response options, as well as the differences between sub-categories of respondents, we used the following approach: for each response, we developed an average score across all the activities. Thus, in the case of all employers who “already do this,” the average score was 9%. These “average” scores mask the range of responses, as we know that around 20% of respondents hire summer students while 3% to 5% host an intern.

Calculating an average score for each response gives a sense of proportions. For example, the average score for “already do and would consider doing more” was 6%. Table 7 shows the distribution of average responses across the various answer options and by respondent category. Cells with responses that are much higher than the average for any column are shaded green and those with responses much lower are shaded orange.



Overall, in terms of initiatives to support youth to get workplace learning or employment experience, these average scores show that a large proportion of employers would not consider these activities, either not at this time or because they are not applicable to their firm: for the average score, one third (32%) said these activities were not applicable to them and one third (34%) said it was not an option at this time. Firms with 10-19 employees and Manufacturing firms were more likely to say this was not an option at this time.

Roughly one out of five (20%) of employers who do not already do any of these activities might be

willing to do so or would want more information. Employers in Arts, Entertainment & Recreation appears especially interested in the possibilities these activities present. In addition, employers in this sector as well as in Accommodation & Food Services had the highest average scores for employers who already did these activities but were willing to consider doing more.

The likelihood of already engaging in these activities was co-related to the size of the firm: small firms were less likely to either hire a student or host a co-op or intern. For example, among firms with 1-4 employees, 16% said they hired a university summer student, whereas 37% of firms with 20-99 employees said they did so. Overall, there exist categories of firms, by size and by industry, which could be targeted for customized outreach to increase student summer hiring as well as student experiential learning opportunities.

Table 7: Average response by answer option and respondent category

	Already do this	Already do, maybe more	Do not do, willing to consider	Do not do, want more info	Not an option at this time	Not applicable
ALL RESPONDENTS	9%	6%	16%	4%	34%	32%
1-4 employees	6%	3%	18%	3%	36%	34%
5-9 employees	8%	7%	18%	5%	32%	30%
10-19 employees	8%	11%	9%	5%	39%	28%
20-99 employees	17%	6%	13%	5%	34%	26%
Accommodation & Food	7%	11%	17%	5%	36%	23%
Arts, Entertainment & Recreation	9%	10%	27%	6%	28%	21%
Construction	11%	6%	13%	5%	35%	30%
Health Care & Social Assistance	12%	3%	18%	3%	33%	31%
Manufacturing	10%	2%	14%	2%	40%	32%
Other Services	9%	6%	16%	4%	34%	32%
Professional, Scientific, Technical	12%	3%	13%	5%	27%	40%
Retail Trade	6%	6%	13%	4%	29%	42%



Desirable services and resources

In light of all these impacts, employers were asked in the aftermath of COVID-19 what services or resources would they find most useful. Below are the full and abbreviated resources for which employers were asked to indicate their interest.

Abbreviated form	Option as expressed in survey
Assistance	Availability of government programs and funding, for business financial support or for hiring/training employees
Employment law & COVID:	Health and safety, employers following COVID protocols, employment standards and contracts
Hiring virtually	On-line platforms and resources to find suitable job candidates
Mental health/stress	Addressing employee stress related to the pandemic, related to working from home, or balancing work and home challenges
Managing remote teams	Supervising workers remotely, maintaining productivity and team cohesion, stimulating creativity and innovation
Training your employees	Information on training programs available that increase the skill sets of your employees, i.e.: soft skills or digital skills

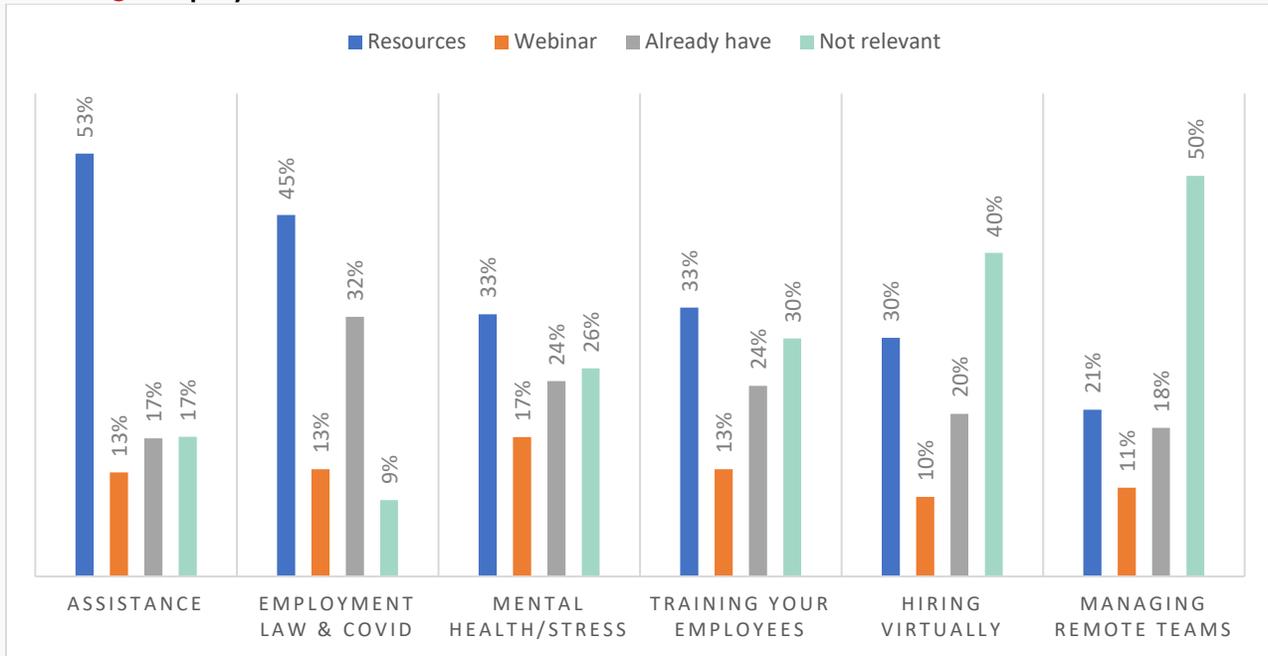
Employers were asked to express their level of interest by way of the following options (the abbreviated forms are in parentheses):

- I would likely make use of resources posted on-line (Resources)
- I would likely listen to a webinar on this topic (Webinar)
- I feel we have the information/ resources we need (Already have)
- This is not an important or relevant issue for us (Not relevant)

The following chart lists the responses, in order of highest ranking for those likely to use resources.



CHART 5: Employer assessment of service and resource needs



Two topics attracted the highest levels of interest:

- Learning about the availability of government programs and funding
- Employment law and COVID

Three other issues had a medium level of interest (around a third expressing an interest in resources): resources for mental health and stress; training employees; hiring virtually. Of all topics, the theme of mental health and stress attracted the highest vote for employers indicating they would likely listen to a webinar (17%).

The larger the size of the firm, the more likely the respondent was interested in resources or a webinar. By industry, there were clear distinctions. As a general proposition, respondents from the following industries were much less interested in any webinar, even where they had an average or above average interest in specific resources:

- Accommodation & Food Services
- Arts, Entertainment & Recreation
- Retail Trade

On the other hand, two sectors had a higher than average attraction to webinars:

- Health Care & Social Assistance
- Professional, Scientific & Technical Services

Interestingly, respondents from the Professional, Scientific & Technical Services sector were least likely to be interested in any on-line resources.

Information about government programs and funding were of particular interest to the following sectors:

- Arts, Entertainment & Recreation (79% expressed an interest in on-line resources)
- Retail Trade (64%)
- Accommodation & Food Services (61%)

Retail Trade (61%) and Accommodation & Food Services (61%) also had a higher level of interest in resources about Employment law and COVID, whereas Arts, Entertainment & Recreation (50%) and Retail Trade (46%) had the highest interest relating to mental health and stress. Finally, Retail Trade had the highest interest in on-line resources regarding training employees (46%).

Additional comments

Employers were asked if they had any additional comments to add regarding the themes covered by this survey. Fifty-two respondents volunteered their views. Multiple themes including the following:

- Need to re-open businesses/better target the lockdown rules
- Need to provide more assistance to businesses or better target the support that is available
- Make it easier for businesses to find information about government assistance
- Concern that CERB acts as a disincentive for individuals to seek employment
- Current circumstances make it difficult for businesses to consider providing employment or experiential learning opportunities to youth
- Need better clarity about the rules relating to lockdowns and social distancing requirements

Conclusions

The survey had a high number of responses which allowed for useful cross-tabulations by size of establishments and by industry, highlighting the different ways in which sub-categories of employers were affected by the pandemic and the associated lockdowns.

Overall, it was evident that three industries were most affected by the pandemic:

- Arts, Entertainment & Recreation
- Accommodation & Food services
- Retail Trade

The sector which appeared most able to weather the challenges was Professional, Scientific & Technical services. As well, smaller firms were affected more severely and were less able to put in place strategies to reduce the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown.

In response to the lockdown, between one-quarter and one-third of employers:

- Reduced the hours of employment of employees

- Delayed hiring
- Reducing their workforce
- Required employees to work from home

While around half of employers forecast no change to the composition of their workforce, among those that did in almost cases the consequence was a reduction in various categories of employees, except for outsourcing to gig workers. The category most likely to see a net loss was permanent employees, followed by part-time workers and workers from temp agencies.

Almost half of employers felt that none of their employees could work from home, while a third felt that some could. Employers in the following sectors were most likely to report that none of their employees could work from home:

- Accommodation & Food services
- Retail Trade
- Health Care & Social Assistance

That being said, the experience of the lockdown period did result in employers in several industries (Arts, Entertainment & Recreation; Construction; Health Care & Social Assistance; Manufacturing; Other Services) expressing the view that would consider options to allow employees to work from home more often.

In terms of changing expectations for skill requirements for entry-level job candidates, employability skills (attendance, punctuality, taking direction, self-regulation) and soft skills (working in teams, communication skills, customer service, managing conflict, taking the initiative) were the top priority for employers.

Two-thirds of employers were not considering employment or experiential learning opportunities for youth, however, there was a considerable minority who were already offering those opportunities, were considering offering more or were willing to consider these opportunities in the future. This was particularly the case for larger firms (20-99 employees) and for firms in the Arts, Entertainment & Recreation sector.

When it come to possible resources or supports which employers were interested in, the two themes that attracted the most interest were:

- Learning about the availability of government programs and funding
- Employment law and COVID

The larger the size of the firm, the more likely the respondent was interested in resources or a webinar.

This survey sheds light on what changes have taken place and how employers are envisaging the future, even as that future remains unclear and at present has an indeterminate delivery date. Nevertheless, the insights gained from these responses provide initial intelligence so that labour market stakeholders can begin to plan and adjust their services for the evolving needs of job seekers, employees and employers in York Region.



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