

RE-ENGAGING RETREATED WORKERS

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted labour markets globally. The short-term consequences saw many workers laid off, terminated, or suddenly having to adjust to working from home as offices closed. A significant portion of workers were deemed essential and continued working in hospitals, long-term care facilities, grocery stores, fast food restaurants, municipal services, and warehouses, under new protocols to reduce the spread of COVID.

As the pandemic eased and businesses started recalling workers and expanding their operations, many reported difficulties in finding workers. While the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Economic Region has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the province, employers continue to report that positions are being left unfilled for longer periods. Without enough workers participating in the labour market; remaining competitive and attracting workers to fill the vacancies has become extremely challenging for many employers. As frustration continues to build; many employers speculate why they can't fill their positions. Perhaps some workers just don't want to work, having become comfortable on a variety of government assistance programs, maybe others chose to retire early or start their own business due to the pandemic.

Today's workforce is the most diverse and educated labour force we have ever had. Workers have unfettered access to information not bound by time, borders, or language. This access to technology allows workers to leverage being a member of a global society, sharing workplace practices with other workers locally, provincially, across Canada and abroad, making it harder for employers to keep their workforce policies and practices private. Headlines about "Quiet Quitting" and the "Great Resignation" aren't going away. Employers are increasingly faced with new worker demands as the pandemic eases.



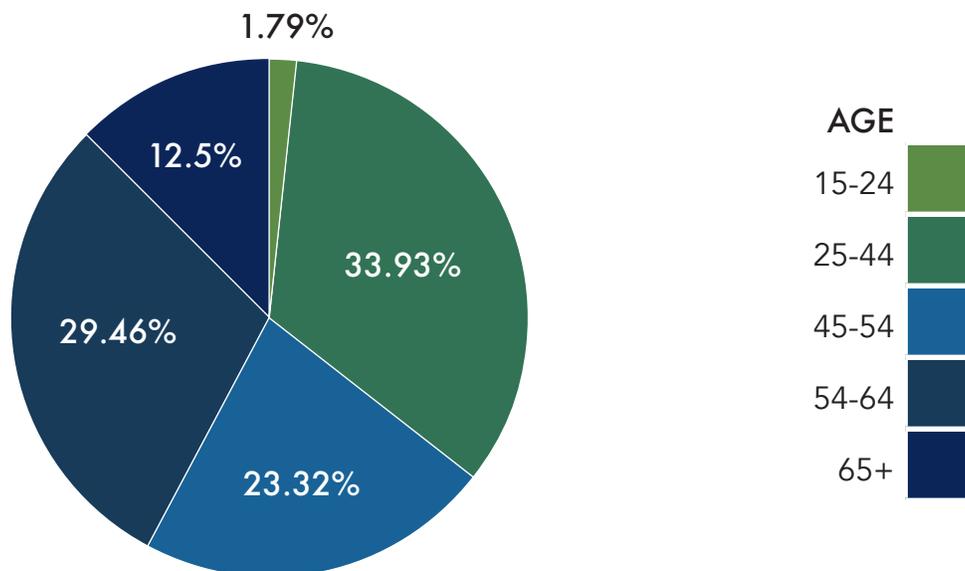
PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY

After analyzing the participation rates in the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Economic Region it was noted that 6,000 workers retreated from the workforce in March of 2020 and were no longer participating in the workforce. With close to 90% of the available workforce between the ages of 25 – 54 (Labour Force Survey 2021 Custom Data Purchase) already participating it is more important than ever to re-engage the workers who have retreated. What was creating this large number of workers to retreat from the workforce? Why are they opting out and how can we entice, support or provide them training to return? The Retreated Workers survey was designed to find the answers to these questions.

Our goal was to reach a minimum of 100 respondents; we received 112 surveys from workers in the Grey, Bruce, Huron, and Perth regions. The survey itself was digital, sent to numerous partners and community services within the Four County catchment area. Of the responses we received they indicated their regions as: Grey (48 surveys -42.86%), Bruce (19 surveys-16.96%), Huron (13 surveys -11.61%), and Perth (32 surveys – 28.57%)

Our survey received responses from 86 women, 24 men and 1 self-identified non-binary individual. The ages of respondents varied; while we did try to target youth aged 15-24 we only received 2 responses from this age group. Youth ages 15-24 make up a large portion of the available population currently not participating in the labour force. The other large group not currently participating in the workforce is the age groups 54-64 and 65+.

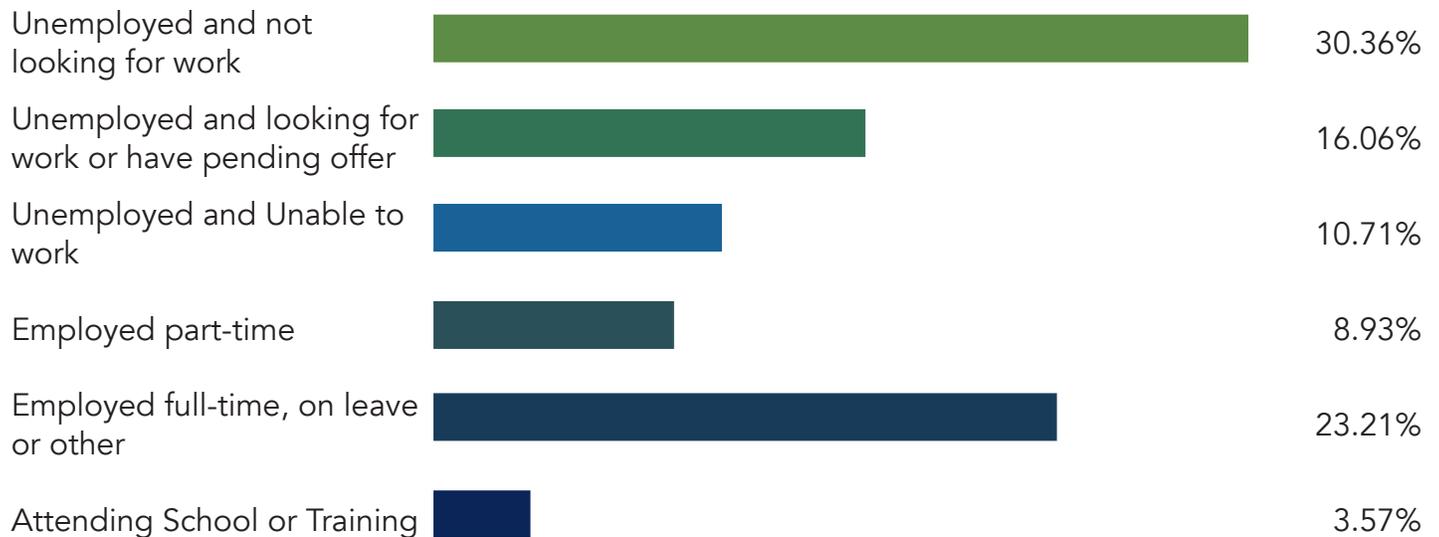
RESPONDENTS BY AGE



RESPONDENTS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

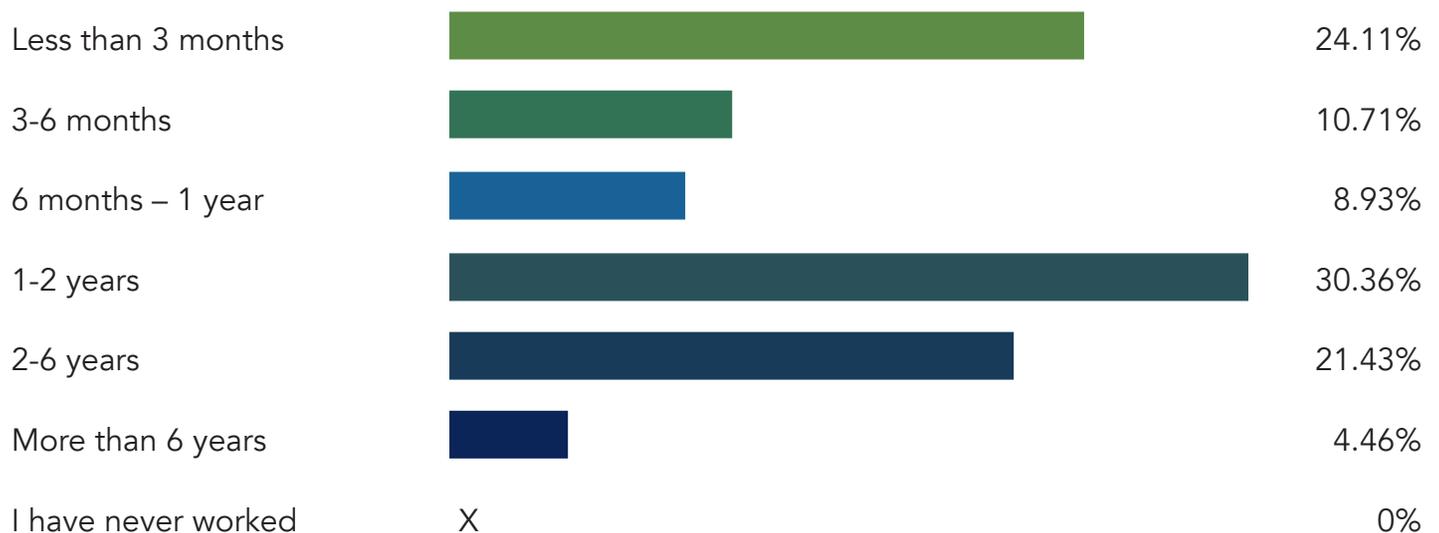
The survey questions asked respondents about their current employment status. Nearly 24% of respondents were working in some capacity: full-time, part-time, or self-employed. A smaller percentage were employed but currently on leave. When asked to add their own response, some stated they were employed but actively looking for a different job, had their own business but needed a part-time job, or were retired but were now looking for part-time work.

RESPONDENTS BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS



Next, we wanted to know how long the respondents have been out of the workforce (not participating to identify how many retreated within the timespan of the pandemic).

LENGTH OF TIME OUT OF WORKFORCE



When respondents were asked if they planned to return to the workforce in the next 12 months:



37.5%
YES



34%
NO



27%
UNSURE

Respondents were asked; Are you aware of or have access to the free services in your area to support you in your employment search? (I.e. Interview skills, resume writing, industry certification training, digital skills training and/or access to equipment)

Of the 112 respondents, 94 said they are aware of the employment services in their area and had access to them. However, we did not ask them if they have accessed the services or if not, why.



RESPONDENT FEATURE

Sex: Female

Age range: 25-44

Level of Education: College

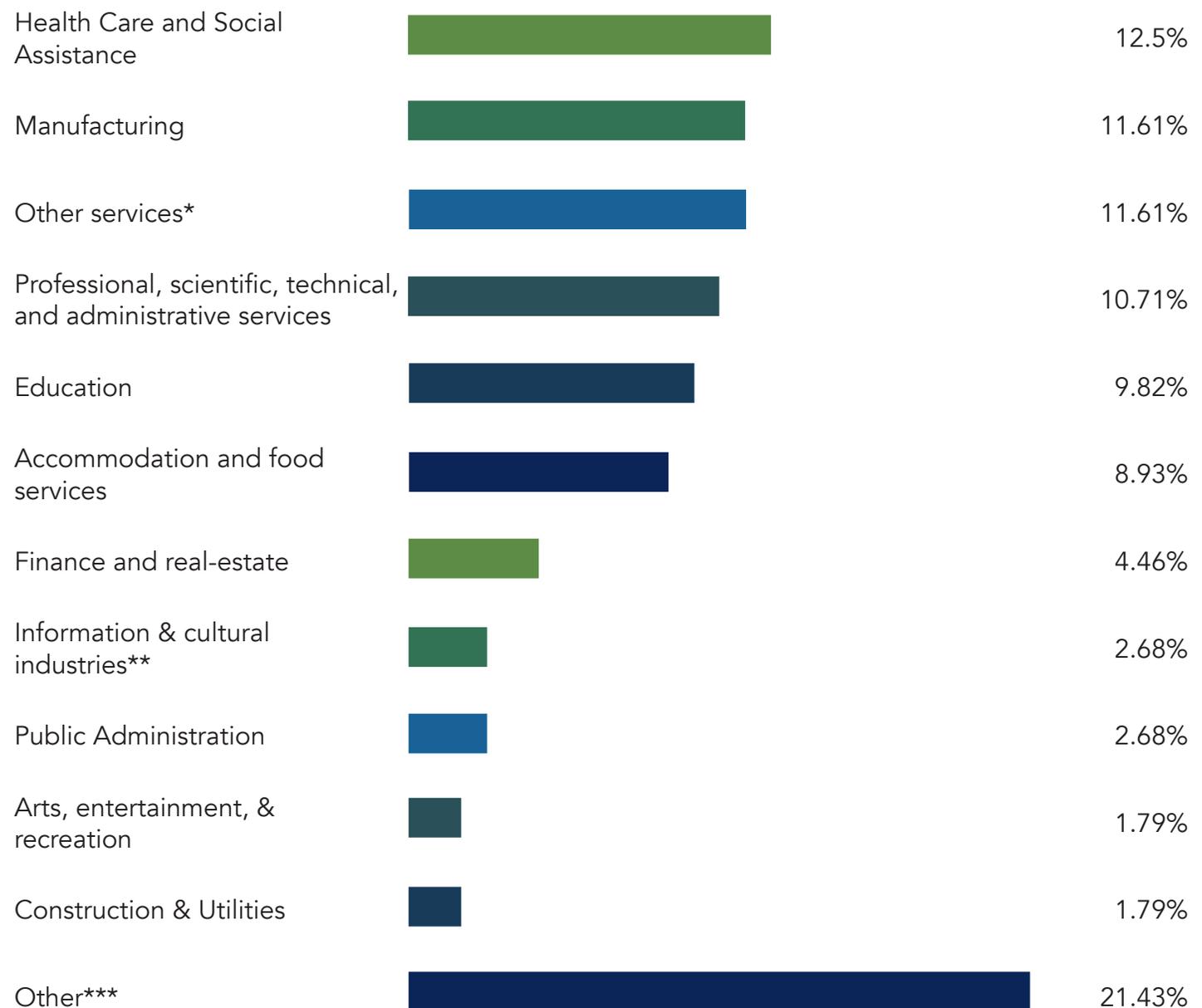
She has been out of the workforce for 1-2 years and is not actively looking for work. Her last position was a WSIB Consultant. She left her position primarily due to childcare responsibilities. The constant closing of schools forced her to step away from her job. Due to the fast pace of the industry, she writes, she is now out of date. Despite her five years of experience in the industry, the stay-at-home gap puts her back to entry level positions in her field. This respondent is currently considering leaving the province.

RESPONDENT INDUSTRY, JOB TITLE AND SKILL LEVELS

Before we delve into why these respondents retreated from participating in the workforce, let's look at the industries and positions they were working in when they decided to retreat.

We asked respondents to include their Job Title so that we could better identify the type of skill level associated with their position within the Industry they worked. As you will see from the charts provided they come from a wide variety of skill levels, Industries and Job Titles.

INDUSTRY - 4 DIGIT NOC



* i.e. non-profit sector, religious organizations, repair and maintenance, etc.

** i.e. film production, public broadcasting, journalism

*** Did not identify with these categories



Of the respondents in this survey, the majority are college or university educated. Half had a college diploma while the other half attended university earning a bachelor's degree or higher. At least 21% were high school graduates. Another 4% had Apprenticeship or other trades certificates. The remaining 6% had no certificate, diploma, or degree.

TEER SKILL LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS – BASED ON 5 DIGIT NOC & JOB TITLE

TEER 0	18%	Management occupations
TEER 1	17%	Occupations that usually require a university degree
TEER 2	8%	Occupations that usually require; a college diploma, apprenticeship training of 2 or more years, or, supervisory occupations
TEER 3	17%	Occupations that usually require; a college diploma, apprenticeship training of less than 2 years, or, more than 6 months of on-the-job training
TEER 4	18%	Occupations that usually require; a high school diploma, or, several weeks of on-the-job training
TEER 5	16%	Occupations that usually need short-term work demonstration and no formal education
Unknown	7%	Unable to identify TEER level by NOC Code or Job Title

For the purposes of this survey, position titles are categorized by their respective NOC code as per the updated Version 1.0. The NOC is the nationally accepted taxonomy and organizational framework of occupations in the Canadian labour market. The updated Version 1.0 is now the departmental standard for data collection and dissemination for occupations at Statistics Canada.

The 2021 revision introduces a new 5-digit hierarchical structure compared to the 4-digit structure in previous versions. The new NOC 2021 is extensive; the last revision was in 2011. Version 1.0 revamps the “Skill Level” structure and introduces a new categorization representing the degree of Training, Education, Experience and Responsibilities (TEER) required for an occupation.

Version 1.0 will be especially important for Employers who want to utilize the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIAs); use the Global Talent Stream LMIAs or the International Mobility Program to obtain a LMIA-except employer-specific work permits. For more information on the NOC Version 1.0 visit <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects/standard/noc/2021/introductionV1>

JOB TITLES PROVIDED BY RESPONDENTS:

Accounting
 Accounts Receivable
 Administration
 Administrative Assistant
 Armed Forces
 Assembler
 Assembly Worker
 Assistant Manager
 Associate
 Bank Supervisor
 Banker
 Bus Driver
 Business Management
 Cashier
 Childcare Cook
 Cleaner
 CNC Setter Operator
 Computer Program Design
 Consultant
 Controller
 CustomerCare Coordinator
 Customer Service/Admin
 Data Analyst
 Daycare Provider
 Daycare Supervisor
 Municipal Clerk
 Director of Care
 Dishwasher
 Dock Worker
 Educational Assistant
 Employment Counsellor
 Employment Generalist
 Executive Administration
 Executive Director
 Factory Labour
 Factory Worker
 Food and Drink Server
 Food Delivery
 Food Server
 Food Server/Bartender
 Health Care Worker
 Administration

Home Daycare Provider
 Labour/Flooring Installer
 Labourer
 Line Cook
 Machine Setter
 Manager
 Manager - Pizza Shop
 Manufacturing Sales
 Mental Health
 Midwifery
 Municipal Clerk
 Occupational Therapist
 Office Admin
 Office Administration
 Office Administrator
 Office Coordinator- LTC
 Reception
 Parent Support Worker
 Personal Support Worker
 Physiotherapist
 Prepress Manager
 Principal
 Program Coordinator
 Program Management
 Program Manager
 Project Manager
 Project Manager
 Retail Gift Shop Owner
 Retail Sales
 Retail Store Owner
 Sales
 Sales and Service
 Sandwich Maker
 Senior Management
 Senior Manager Customer
 Escalations
 Senior Software Engineer
 Server
 Service Coordinator
 Shelf Stocking, Receiving
 Shift Supervisor
 Social Worker

Software Testing
 Store Manager
 Student Services
 Stylist
 Supervisor
 Teacher
 Teacher Assistant
 Transit Operator
 Vice President
 Warehouse Worker
 Women's Advocate
 Tim Horton's
 Social Services Worker
 WSIB Consultant

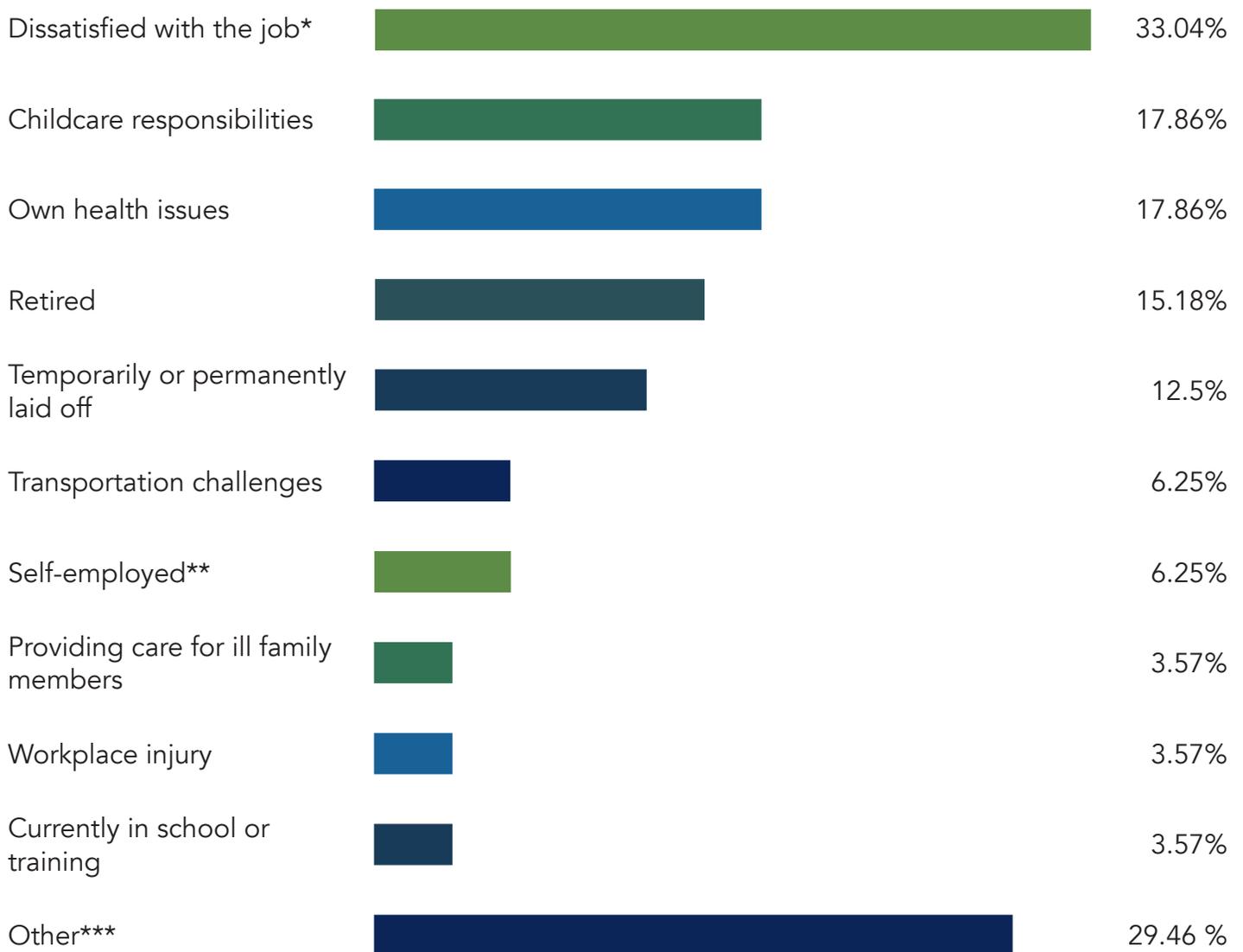


WHY DID SURVEY RESPONDENTS LEAVE THEIR POSITIONS?

Now that we know a little more about who the respondents are we can explore the reasons respondents retreated. Some of the respondents had a variety of reasons for leaving and checked off several responses. Respondents were provided with a list of options to check as well as a comment box to provide their own reasons.

For some respondents, it was an opportunity to take early retirement or upgrade their education. For others, it was a feeling of fatigue and frustration with how they were treated before and during the pandemic. For some women it was the ongoing needs of their children who during the pandemic, required an at home parent to help them with online learning or post pandemic the inability to find affordable childcare options. They were asked;

What was the reason you left your position? (Check all that apply)



* (lack of flexibility at work, poor work culture, insufficient training, lack of opportunities for growth or advancement)

** (opened own business)

*** (Reason specific to individuals)



RESPONDENT FEATURE

Sex: Male

Age range: 25-44

Level of education: University below Bachelor's

This respondent is currently in school and has been out of the labour force for 6 months to a year. As a student, he had been looking for work in his hometown of Owen Sound. Flexible working hours and access to health & dental benefits were motivating factors for entering the workforce. The respondent had secured a summer job that fell through. Despite handing out resumes and applying for positions, he couldn't get an interview. "I am convinced that a significant part of this 'employee shortage' is actually done on purpose by employers looking to save on labour costs". He also reports that he decided to stay in his university town for the summer because "the cost of living here is significantly cheaper than it is in my Owen Sound".

Health issues, mental and physical, whether it was their own issues or those of a family member, health concerns influenced their decision to withdraw from the workforce. For one respondent working in manufacturing, standing, and working with heavy work boots became increasingly difficult with knee replacements and worsening arthritis. For another, being denied time off to look after her spouse after his surgery was enough to make her leave that position.

Pay, of course, was also an issue. Housing and childcare are significant expenses so finding employers who paid a living wage was mentioned numerous times. Being paid a Living Wage would go a long way to being able to afford housing, transportation, food, internet and cell phone plans, medical expenses, clothing, and of course, childcare.

The Ontario Living Wage Network reports that the current living wage rate for Grey Bruce Perth Huron Simcoe as \$20.70. A living wage is not the same as the minimum wage, which is the legislated minimum all employers must pay and is set by the provincial government. The living wage reflects what people need to earn to cover the actual costs of living in their community. It draws on community-specific data to determine the expenses to a family with two working adults and two children. Both the United Way of Perth Huron and the United Way of Bruce Grey continuously monitor the economic resiliency of their communities and see the Living Wage "as a means to strengthen and support local community employers' efforts to attract and retain employees".



Of the thirty-three additional responses provided as reasons for leaving 12 were related to the COVID-19 pandemic specifically. Some of the comments below will provide some context as to what type of COVID related issues were responsible for their retreat from the workforce.

- For one, the position she held for 10 years was eliminated due to COVID. For another, her office was closed because of it and she was transferred to another location which caused some transportation difficulties.
- For a young worker, he left his dishwashing job because management did not follow public health requirements.
- For others working in front line positions, facing rude customers during COVID became too difficult to handle without support from management.
- One respondent said as an older worker, the risks associated with COVID were too great so she would make do with her small pension.
- And there were some who left because of the vaccine mandate, writing that the “workplace became toxic due to anti-vaxxers bullying other employees.”

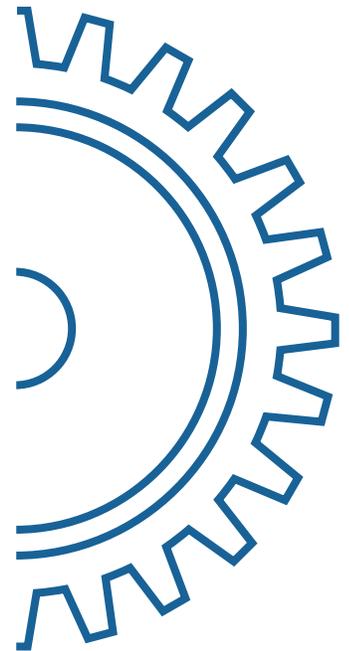
RESPONDENT FEATURE

Sex: Female

Age: 55-64

Level of education: High School diploma

The respondent has been unemployed for the last 2 years and is not looking for work. She retired from the Finance and real-estate industry. Her office was closed due to Covid, and she was transferred to another branch. She decided to retire citing dissatisfaction with the job (lack of flexibility at work, poor work culture, insufficient training, lack of opportunities for advancement), and transportation challenges to the new office. She would consider returning to the workforce for reduced hours or part-time work and health and dental benefits. She reports that being an older worker with disability or health issues affects her ability to return to work. She writes: “Covid changed all aspects of the way business is conducted. Personal face to face services is discouraged, online or digital is how companies want the business to grow. Retraining for people is going to be a necessity if they choose to stay”.



WHAT WOULD ENTICE RESPONDENTS TO RETURN TO THE WORKFORCE?

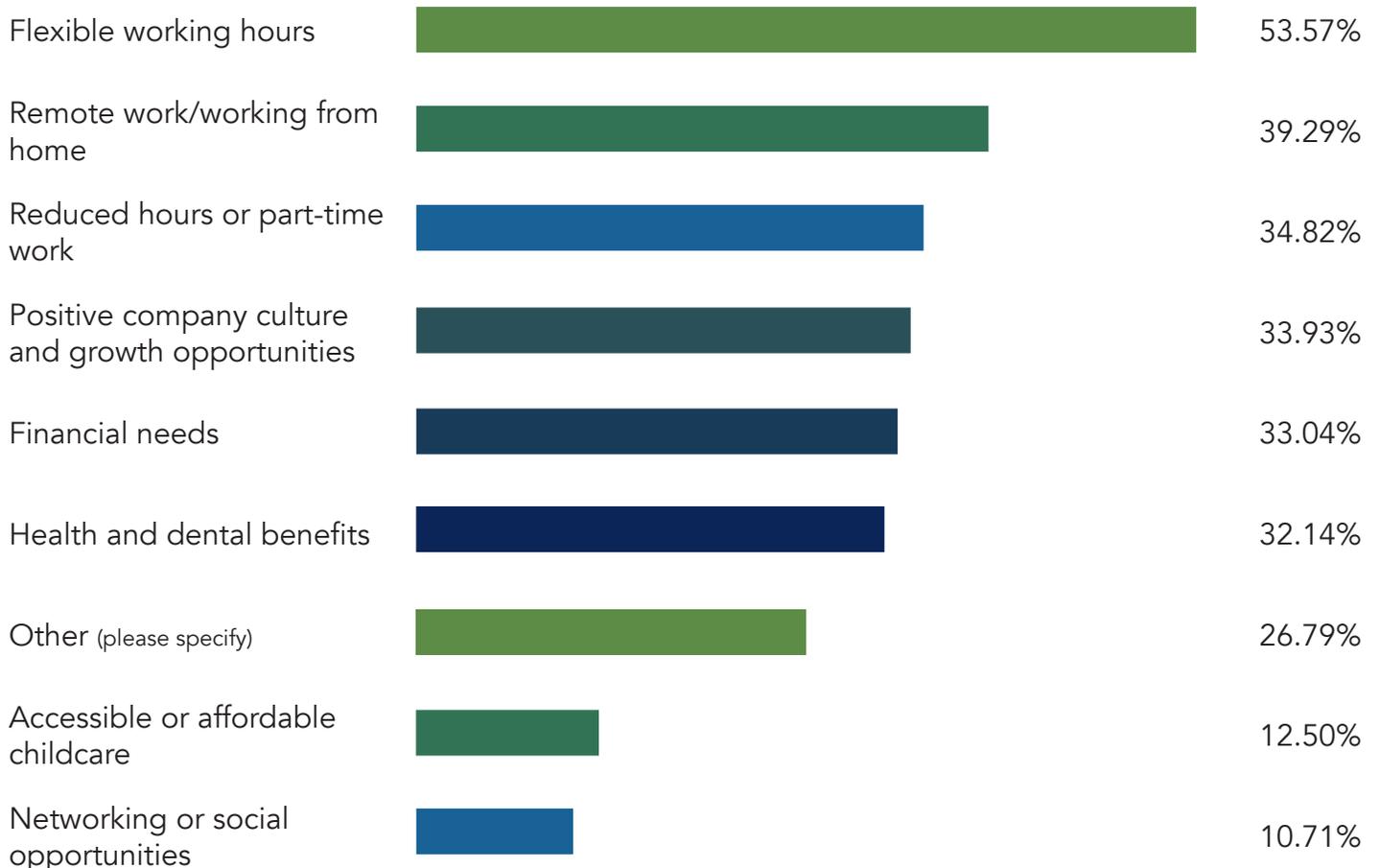
Respondents were again provided with a few options to check off as well as a comment box to provide their own feedback on what would entice them to return to the workforce. The number one driver is flexible working hours. More than half of the respondents chose the ability to have some control over their hours as a reason to step back into the labour force. Being able to work remotely was the second most important reason to rejoin the workforce. Reduced hours or part-time work came in third with positive company culture and growth opportunities coming in fourth. Equally important was the need for money as well as health and dental benefits.

One respondent wrote:

"I need a job that is flexible around my young children. It's hard to balance everything as a single parent and jobs need to be willing to flex to meet people where they are. Also, most jobs around here don't pay nearly enough to live on as a single parent family."

Respondents were asked;

What might encourage you to return to the workforce? (Check all that apply)



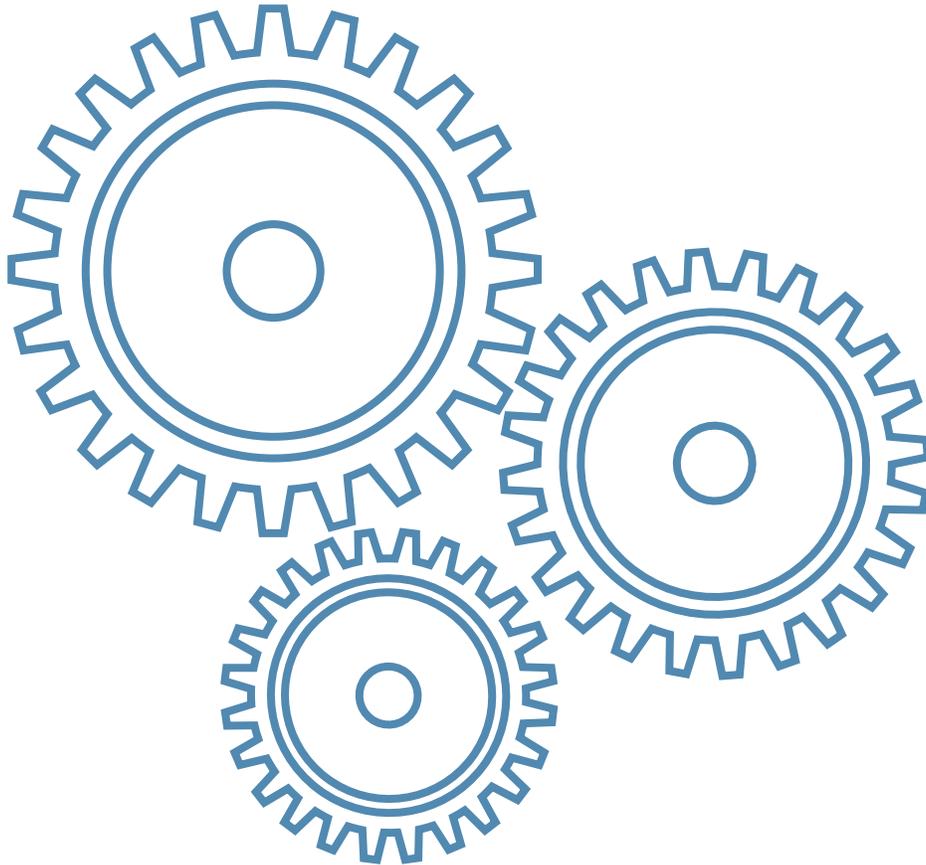
RESPONDENT FEATURE

Sex: Female

Age: 25-44

Level of Education: Bachelor's degree or higher

This respondent is unemployed but has an employment offer pending. She has been out of the workforce less than three months. She left her recent position due to childcare responsibilities, her own health issues, dissatisfaction with the job, transportation challenges, plus she had opened her own business. As a potential employee, she is looking for flexible part-time working hours, health and dental benefits, accessible and affordable childcare, positive company culture with growth opportunities, and networking opportunities. She also cites affordable housing in either Grey or Bruce counties. As a healthcare professional working in education, she reports being burnt out from unrealistic workplace demands, unsupportive work culture, high stress with stagnant pay but a high cost of living.



BARRIERS TO RETURNING TO THE WORKFORCE

Looking now at the respondents themselves, we asked them if there were any barriers standing in the way of their return to the workforce. Allowing respondents to provide their own reasons resulted in some overlap to the list provided as well as some further insight into the barriers some face when trying to re-enter the labour force.

Transportation and commute distance became an issue when one office was closed due to COVID and the respondent had to drive out of her community to work. Another said that before she became a Controller for a manufacturing company, she worked in senior roles with various financial institutions. When these positions were moved out of Stratford, she found the shift to manufacturing difficult because they didn't see how her skills could be transferrable to their industry.

As mentioned previously, the respondent's own health issues were addressed here too. Artificial knees make standing and walking in heavy safety boots difficult. Yet, trying to make the switch to office work has not been easy; administrative positions have their own knowledge and skills requirements that may require substantial retraining and education.

One respondent wrote that she left her field in mental health and addictions at age 53 due to burn out. Needing to work for financial reasons, she worked in what she "thought to be a good minimum wage work". In six months she damaged her already arthritic hands. "So at \$15 an hour with horrendous scheduling and no measures for employee safety and wellness and no benefits or help – it's not feasible. Minimum wage work is gruelling. Period. That's the reality I recently experienced. We can only push our mental health and bodies so far in the name of 'work' until we collapse. And that's what's happening for those of us living on the poverty line."



RESPONDENT FEATURE

Sex: Male

Age: 15-25

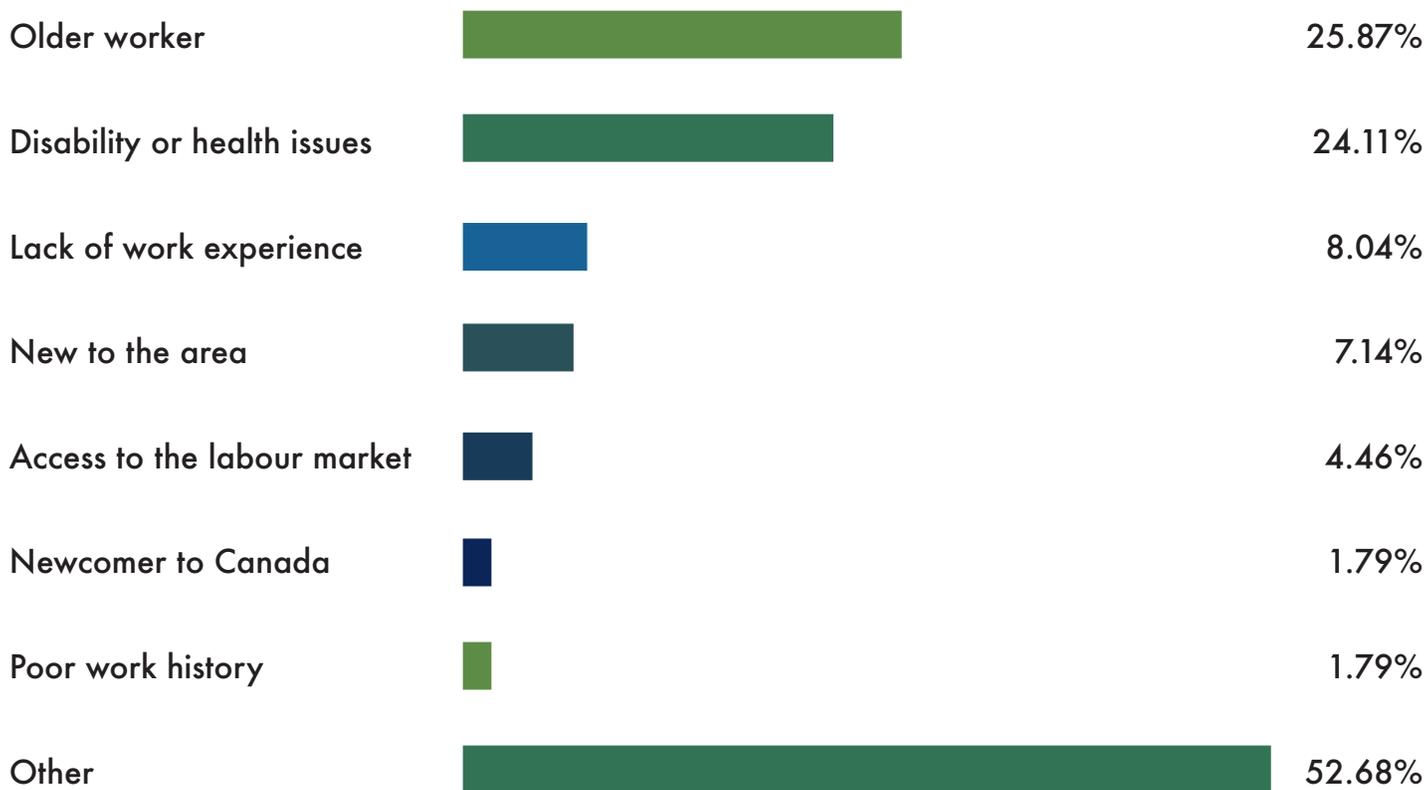
Level of Education: No certificate, diploma or degree

This respondent is currently unemployed and looking for work. He has been out of the workforce for less than three months. He worked as a dishwasher for restaurant in his previous job. He left that position because "Management did not observe public health directions regarding Covid". He is looking for a restaurant where the owners take Covid seriously by encouraging workers to wear masks and sending Covid positive employees home. He writes that employers are "missing the boat by not realizing that putting workers at risk for Covid is one of the biggest reasons why people have quit, including me, some of my friends and brothers."



Respondents were asked;

Have any of these things affected your ability to return to work or look for work?
(Check all that apply)



* i.e. inability to afford interview clothes, transportation to work

** Specific to Individual respondent

Many respondents chose to specify the reasons that affect their ability to return to the workforce. 59 respondents chose to provide details which included; transportation, receiving government assistance with no need to return to work, lack of education or experience, perception of overqualified for jobs applying for, lack of childcare, discrimination, burnout (mandatory OT), gaps in employment on resume, cost of childcare and lack of flexibility in schedules, wages not sufficient to return, lack of opportunities matching current skill set, and vaccine mandates and low wages.

CONCLUSIONS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The purpose of the survey was to find out why individuals within the Four County have chosen to step away from the workforce and how if at all they may be enticed to return. Throughout the survey, when respondents were able to add their own comments, we begin to see their thoughts on work, how COVID changed it and how work directly impacts their lives, from a health perspective and a financial one. Retreating from the workforce comes at a cost for these respondents: it's a woman deciding to stay home during COVID and then finding her skills are out of date, another taking early retirement and having to make do on a small pension, or another suffering health issues that prevent them returning to their manufacturing job, or having their local office closed due to COVID

For employers frustrated trying to find eligible workers the results of this survey provide insight into why some have left. Their answers also contain what it will take for employers to entice them back to the workforce. Now more than ever, individuals want their home and health issues considered by employers. Wages are important. But flexible hours may be more important based on their responses. COVID had a huge impact but what workers needed most was protection from not just the virus but the behaviours of an angry and stressed public. The comments below give you a good understanding of some of the responses (note not all responses were included in this report.

INDIVIDUAL COMMENTS FROM SURVEY RESPONDENTS:

Covid changed all aspects of the way business is conducted. Personal face to face service is discouraged, online or digital is how companies want the business to grow. Retraining for people is going to be a necessity if they choose to stay.

I was going to work a little longer but when the retail store opened to the public again I found that many people had anger issues. I did not want to be the person that they could shout at and so I retired.

I had a job in town that was perfect but was lost during a merger so to stay in the similar industry I had to work out of town. I stopped commuting to KW because that was incompatible with ensuring young children got to all the sports and music lessons that I wanted them to do. So, I had to switch industries to take the first available job in town, but it was much less enjoyable not fulfilling and also not compatible with raising active children... Since then, I have attempted project and part-time and freelance work and focused instead on the active teenagers/young adults. Interviews are hard to get because of the split in my industry specialization, and my age (employers think I would get bored with junior level work). I have given up but am nearly out of savings and need to restart earning.

Due to an extended maternity leave, I no longer have references that are considered "recent". As a previous very employable person, this has made it difficult to secure employment in the area. I would prefer employers to offer a trial work period when references are unavailable for reasons such as maternity leave.

We are making sacrifices to continue to have one parent home, even with our children in primary school. What I think isn't captured here is that we are valuing our time more, so to give it up costs more, and the employers aren't meeting the financial/benefit/flexibility requirements to make it worth giving our time to them.

The work force and world is changing. People just [aren't] willing to put up with things other generations did. Kids today [won't] work 12 hours or more like me, my parents and grandparents did. Why was it acceptable back then?! Who made some of the things acceptable and ok?! Wages need to work for people. I was in daycare, graduated with a diploma from a 2-year college program, registered with the college and paid (very high annual dues and got certified with the association and I made the same money as people with no education working in fast food! [Companies] need to realize this and adapt!

We thank those who took the time to fill out the survey as this local insight has allowed us to see a clearer picture of the needs of workers. Although COVID has affected their ability to participate in the workforce it is clear that it is not the only reason for the retreat. The concept that job seekers are lazy and did not want to work has been dispelled. The pandemic gave workers the time to reflect on what was important to their work life balance and in turn has changed the way they view employment. In a highly competitive market, it will be important for employers to embrace these changes and adapt their hiring practices. In conclusion; wages are an important tool in attracting and retaining the workforce needed but as this report has shown is not the most important factor. This movement has changed the way we do business and will affect this for many years to come.



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