



Future of Work:

Looking at the Workforce's
Thoughts for the Future



Workforce Planning Board
of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin

Our Vision: We envision the continuous development of a leading edge workforce.
Our Mission: Engage partners to find solutions to local workforce development needs.
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Executive Summary



This report is exploratory research into what the workforce, current and future, thinks of the future of work, where they are prioritizing skills development and the trends that they think are most impactful. While there is a wealth of information around future of work trends in the workplace from organizations such as Deloitte, Manulife and Brookfield Institute, there is less information on how those trends are being perceived.

For this research, several different organizations participated to help develop some early trends and results. Secondary and postsecondary students, newcomers, literacy and basic skills learners and persons with disabilities were some of the targeted groups that were included in the research survey. There were also e-mails sent out among the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin's network through the mailing list to capture the general working population as a random sample. A health care organization, school board, construction organization and finance company also shared the survey with employees to increase the perspective of the working population.

Many people are aware of some of the trends that are affecting our working environments. They see these trends as consumers and, in some cases, are living the trends as they study and work from home. While the groups have some similarities in their priorities and needs, there are also surprises that emerge. Students as young as 15 are talking about work-life balance and the need for socialization. Fewer groups are prioritizing people skills as skills for the future. The need for technology training and access, as well as internet access, is being mentioned by everyone.

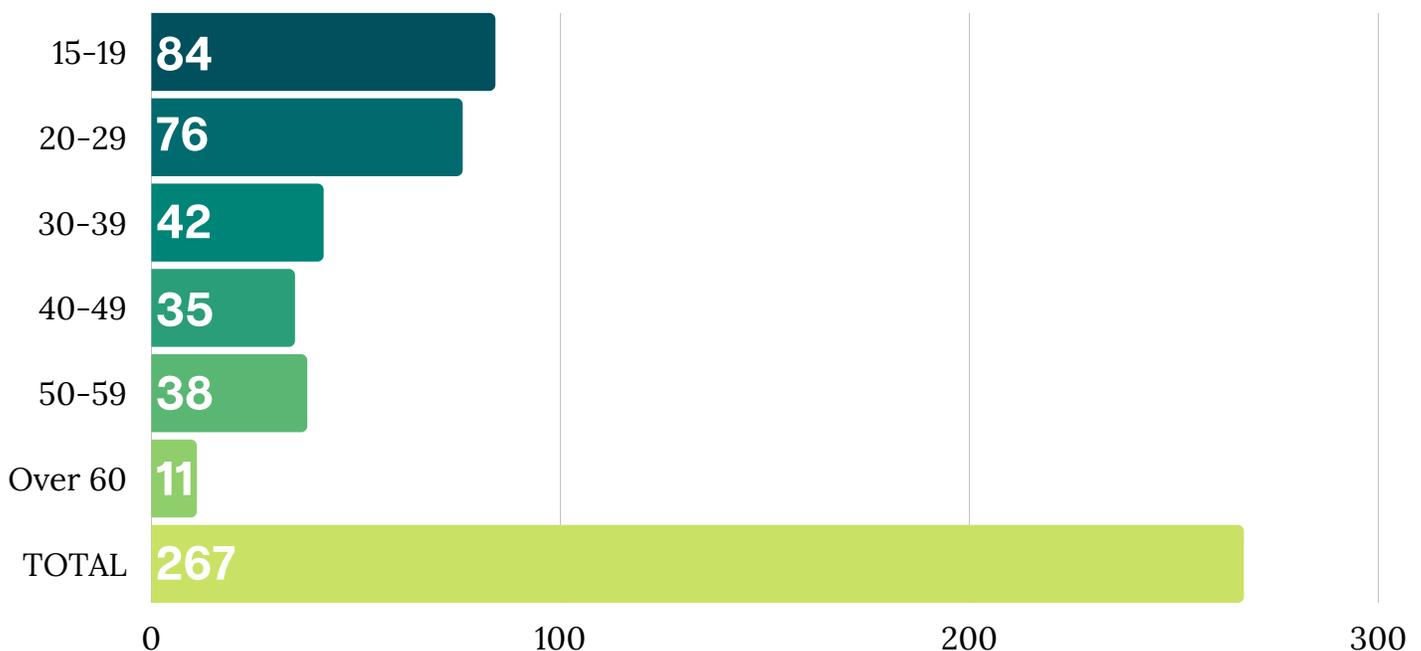
There are opportunities to explore some of these topics more in-depth and undertake more targeted research, like the University of Waterloo has done with its students. There are also projects that community partners could collaboratively explore as new models for training – beyond micro-credentialling or other established training funds as they do not always provide equitable access. There is also the chance to work with support agencies to share this information and the broader trends with staff. One or two clear messages around the future of work could help people manage the stress that comes with the change that our society is undergoing. It is going to take the whole community to move everyone forward.

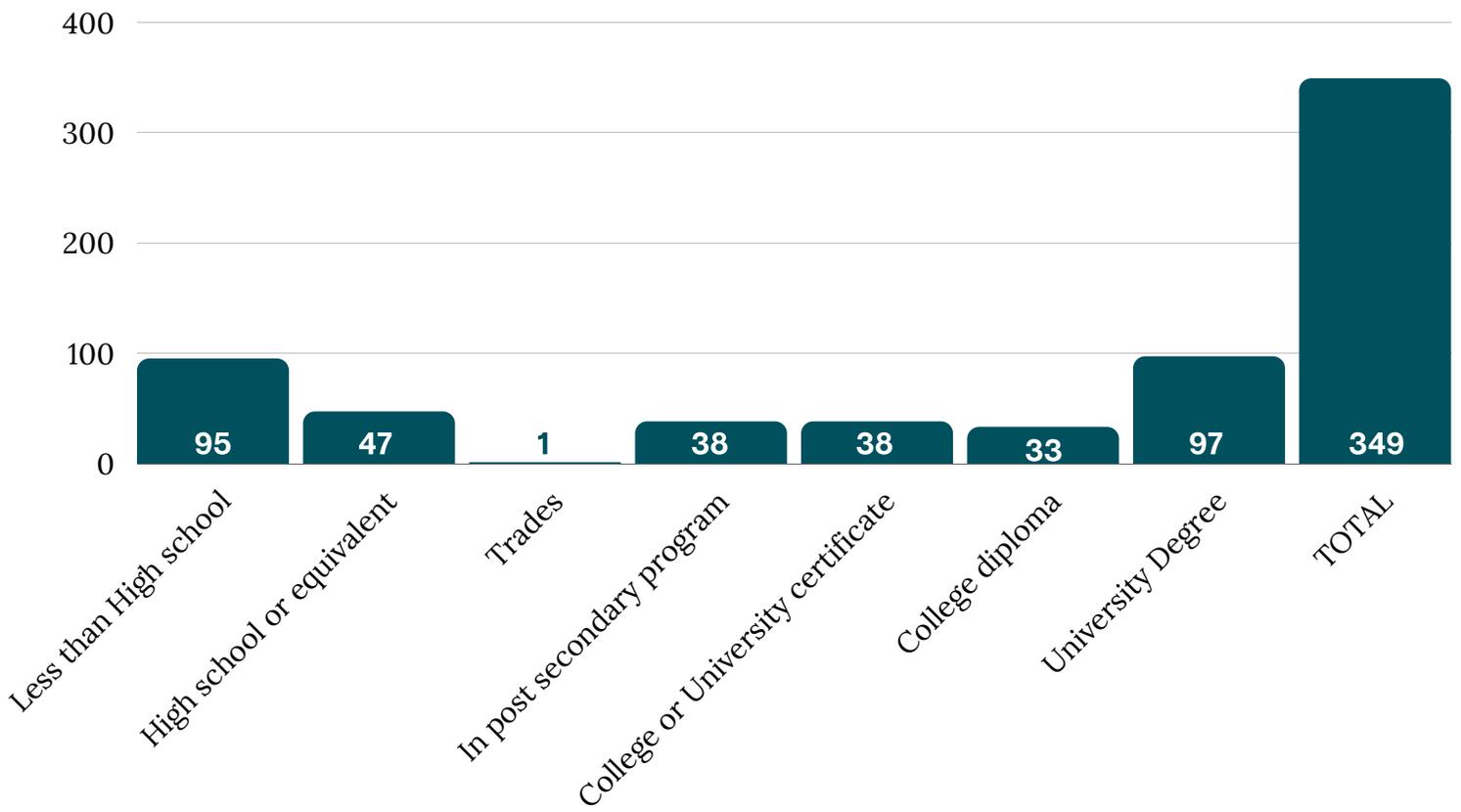
Who Answered The Survey?



This section covers some of the demographics of the participants to keep in mind as the results are provided.

The group overall skewed on the younger side, but these younger groups included those working and in education. The postsecondary group included international students in the responses. 153 of the participants are between the ages of 20 to 49; this group includes what experts term the prime working group - 25 to 44 years of age. We asked participants to identify all of the educational experience they had. Many had some form of postsecondary education. The large number of people without high school included many of the secondary students who took part in the survey. The population was almost split on whether they were working or not. This held as true for students as it did for other groups. The only group that swayed one way was our general working group where around 2/3 were working.





Working

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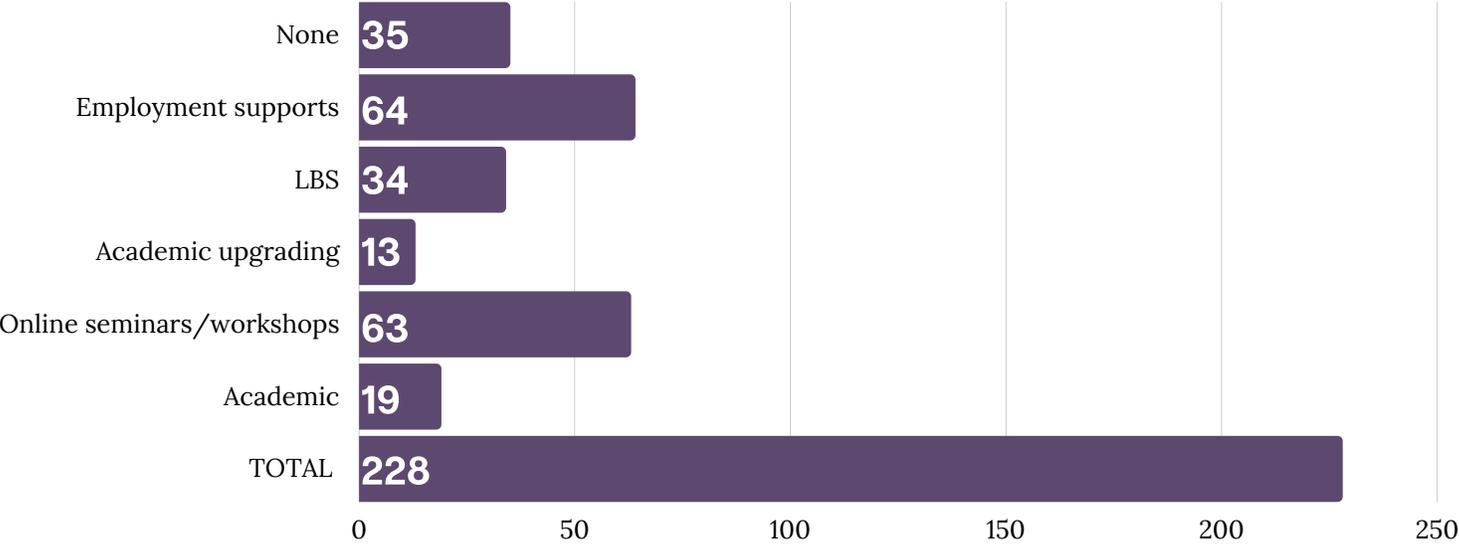
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We asked people if they had accessed any learning, training or work supports. This question was to gauge how involved participants were in developing their skills and knowledge and what methods they were using to do so. As well, we sought to understand how many needed support in their employment path. Please note, that the postsecondary group was not asked this question as they were all in academic programming at the time of the survey.



Training/work supports



Many reported that they had accessed some type of support in the past year. Only 35 participants did not access any type of support. Employment supports (assistance to help people find jobs) and online workshops and seminars were the most in-demand supports. People need help finding work and with any future changes, this number could grow and include people from many different industry backgrounds and experience levels. There is some evidence that our respondents are looking for quick opportunities to improve skills and get knowledge, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic driving so much on-line content.



Thinking about the Future



In this section, all participants' answers were recorded and then we separated out answers by different groups to see where there may be variations within the populations we surveyed. These differences provide insight into where more information may need to be shared or further research may be needed.

How far away is the future of work?

For 64% of respondents, the future of work means 3 years from now or longer. In much of the research done prior to the pandemic, this is often the shortest timeline that has been considered “future of work”. There has been a consensus in the research that there is time to adjust, to move slowly into that future and time to plan. The COVID -19 pandemic sped up that timeline on some future of work trends, like virtual learning and working from home/flexible work environments. The 25% of individuals who responded 1 to 2 years from now may be more in-line with the rapid adoption of technology and workplace trends that seem to be happening, due to the pandemic. With these changes anticipated to happen sooner, there may not be the time to adjust as jobseekers, learners and employees.

For 12%, the future of work means next week or next month. This may signal that they have skills needs that may be keeping them from working and that is their time horizon. They cannot think beyond these immediate timelines to a possible future that is already showing up in the workplace and may affect their ability to secure and retain work. The respondents with disabilities and the literacy and basic skills groups had higher percentages of people who were feeling this way. They do not appear to be thinking more long-term and potentially not developing skills for what could happen in the labour market.

Actual Numbers

	Everyone	Newcomers	Post-Sec	Secondary	Persons w/ Disabilities	Literacy & Basic Skills	Working
Next Week Month	32	7	5	3	5	10	2
1-2 Years	68	15	14	11	4	14	10
3-5 Years	82	14	10	22	2	7	27
5+	91	17	15	27	1	10	21

Why do people pursue jobs and are they thinking about if that job will still be there?

People could pick multiple reasons for why they were in their current roles or on their current path or provide their own answer. Overwhelmingly, across all groups, personal interest drove why people were on the paths they were on. This is a strong message to industry and education: people choose very personal reasons for why they do what they do. Those roles and skills that are in-demand need to appeal to people's interests and connect with them on a personal level. This insight could shift how training programs and employers market their opportunities to learners and jobseekers.



	Everyone	Newcomers	Post-Sec	Secondary	Persons w/ Disabilities	Literacy & Basic Skills	Working
Personal Interest	158	30	27	55	4	21	21
Thought I Would Like It	81	8	14	36	4	10	9
In-Demand Job	69	8	24	17	0	10	10
Skills Transfer	59	21	1	0	3	18	16
Survival Job/Pay Bills	42	11	3	14	2	11	1
Pays Lots	38	5	6	18	2	4	5
Someone Told Me Good Job/Career	32	8	2	5	2	7	8
Accident/Happenstance	5				2	1	2

Data around in-demand careers has less to do with why people choose careers. It registers as a higher reason to pursue a career path for postsecondary students (second highest). For all other groups, it just makes the Top 3 or not at all. This may speak to the success of postsecondary to talk about their programs within a demand environment in that students know why they are on the path they are on beyond their interest. It could also be connected to the cost of postsecondary and people wanting to know that a job is there at the end of the program. For other groups, the removal of evidence from the equation could see some individuals pursuing opportunities that may disappear or pursue opportunities where there is an oversupply of labour and skills.

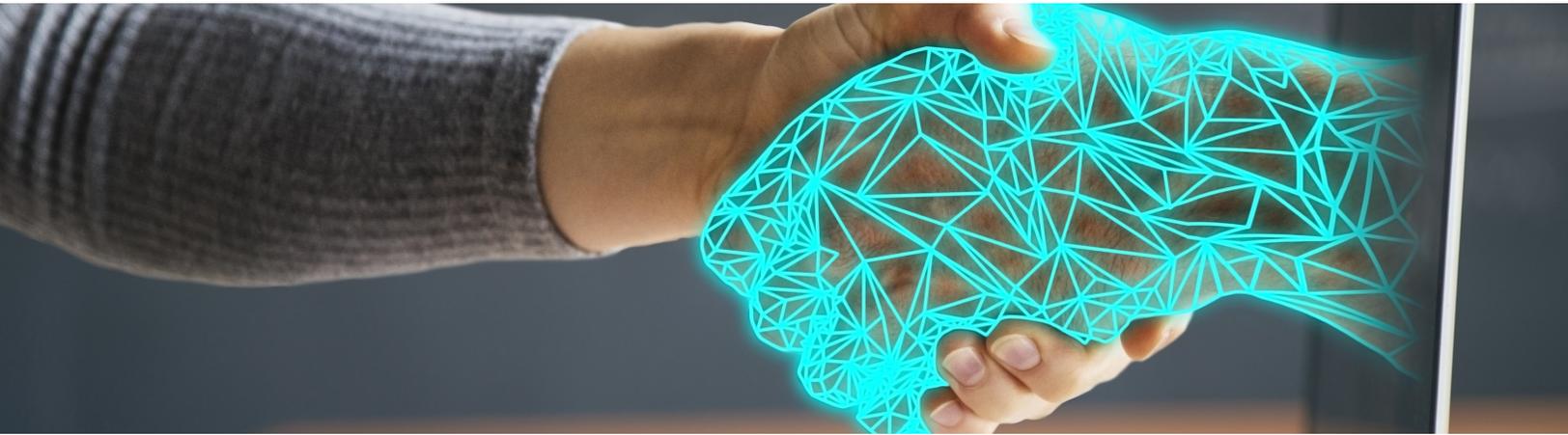
At the same time, many people have considered whether the path they are going down will be there in the future. 74% of participants did consider whether the roles they were pursuing would still be there in the future. Newcomers and postsecondary students, international and domestic, were more likely to think about this with approximately 80% of each group's respondents answering yes. Those already in the working world were slightly less likely to consider this at 70% and persons with disabilities were split 50-50.

So, while people are not specifically mentioning in-demand careers in the above question, they are gathering evidence from somewhere around the potential for the long-term prospects of their career choice.

What skills do people identify as needed for the future?

Skills attainment and upgrading has had a lot of attention drawn to it as we have moved towards the future of work. Some of this has been driven by the pandemic and the increasing unemployment rates in recent months. Institutes have written about needed skills for the future and sites, such as LinkedIn and Forbes, do yearly “the most in-demand skills” pieces. Participants identified what they believed were the Top 5 Skills they need for the future.

Everyone	Post-Sec	Secondary	Newcomers	Persons w/ Disabilities	Literacy & Basic Skills	Working
Use New Technology	Think & Solve Problems	Think & Solve Problems	Use New Technology	Good Attitude	Use New Technology	Use New Technology
Think & Solve Problems	Prioritizing	Accounta- bility	Analyze Info	Know What You Can Do (Skills)	Accounta- bility	Accounta- bility
Accounta- bility	Accounta- bility	Use New Technology	Think & Solve Problems	Use New Technology	Good Attitude	Good Attitude
Work W/ Others Different Than You	Use New Tech, Good Attitude	Creativity	Accounta- bility	Think & Solve Problems	Think & Solve Problems	Think & Solve Problems
Good Attitude	Multi- Tasking, Analyze Info	Work W/ Others	Creativity	Prioritizing, Creativity	Work W/ Others Different From You	Prioritizing



Every group had “Use new technology” and “Think and solve problems” as a Top 5 skill to have as the workplace changes. The importance of those skills varied across groups.

“Accountability”, which was defined as responsible for what you think and do, was also a Top 5 skills for every group except the persons with disabilities group. It becomes interesting from there as the whole group saw “Working with others different from you” and “Good attitude” as rounding out the Top 5. While these 2 skills did not show up in all groups’ Top 5, there were enough responses prioritizing these skills that they came out in the Top 5. Only 2 groups identified working with others as key skills for the future.

Creativity was seen as relevant by newcomers, secondary students and persons with disabilities. As well, persons with disabilities gave more value to knowing what you can do and the skills you have as key to the skills conversation. Most of the skills mentioned were cognitive skills so this creates an interesting first insight into how various groups are receiving and giving priority to the information they get around skills and the future.

What trends are the workforce seeing as most relevant?

In much of the future of work literature, there is a lot of discussion around trends that are emerging and will be affecting workplaces. Using the most frequently cited trends around education/training, technology, gig work and industry, we asked participants to identify the 5 biggest changes that they think will happen in the workplace.

Everyone	More People Will Work From Home	Life Long Learning Will Be Needed To Keep Up W/ Changes	Robots Or Machines Will Be Used More In Workplaces	AI Or Machines Will Change Jobs & What People Do	Online/Virtual Learning Will Become Normal
Post-Sec	AI Or Machines Will Change Jobs & What People Do	Online/Virtual Learning Will Become Normal	Life Long Learning Will Be Needed To Keep Up W/ Changes	If Anyone Can Jobs From Anywhere, Competing W/ People Across The World For Jobs	Tech Jobs Will Be Jobs That Will Not Go Away
Secondary	Robots Or Machines Will Be Used More In Workplaces	More People Will Work From Home	Some Industries Will Disappear & Not Be Around Anymore	Online/Virtual Learning Will Become Normal	Lack Of Tech/Internet Access Will Hurt People's Chances Of Finding Employment
Newcomers	AI Or Machines Will Change Jobs & What People Do	Robots Or Machines Will Be Used More In Workplaces	More People Will Work From Home	Online/Virtual Learning Will Become Normal	Life Long Learning Will Be Needed To Keep Up W/ Changes
Persons w/ Disabilities	More People Will Work From Home	Online/Virtual Learning Will Become Normal	If Anyone Can Do Jobs From Anywhere, Competing W/ People Across The World	Robots Or Machines Will Be Used More In Workplaces	There Will Be More Contract & "Gig" Jobs
Literacy & Basic Skills	Robots Or Machines Will Be Used More In Workplaces	Life Long Learning Will Be Needed To Keep Up W/ Changes	Online/Virtual Learning Will Become Normal	More People Will Work From Home	AI Or Machines Will Change Jobs & What People Do
Working	There Will Be More Contract & "Gig" Jobs	More People Will Work From Home	Life Long Learning Will Be Needed To Keep Up W/ Changes	AI Or Machines Will Change Jobs & What People Do	People Will Need To Manage Their Own Careers/ Learning & Not Depend On Employers

The respondents' answers reflect a lot of the changes we have seen in the workplace in the past few years. On-line/virtual learning became a reality for a lot of people in the workforce with children as young as 4 going on-line to engage with their teachers and classmates in a modified learning environment. Parents had to cope with that shift in learning as well as students. At the same time, the work from home trend received a lot of attention in the media and many people in the workforce ended up in the middle of that trend. The expansion of the self check-out in retail is a concrete example of how robots and machines are being used in more workplaces. From there, it is not hard to imagine how artificial intelligence and machines will change jobs as they are doing already for retail cashiers. These examples are affecting a lot of people now so they may be the ones that most people see easily.

The interesting pieces in this section are the differences, or lack of.

- Newcomers and LBS learners identified the same trends as the overarching group. They were in a different order of priority but they had the same five.
- Postsecondary students and respondents who identified as having a disability felt that the competition for jobs was going to become global as a relevant trend.
- Only postsecondary students felt that tech roles were going to be the jobs that were not going to disappear as a Top 5 trend. This could impact their future training decisions.
- Secondary students rounded out their Top 5 trends with 2 unique answers: there were going to be industries that they expected would disappear and the lack of technology and internet access as a barrier to employment and learning. The second point is very interesting as it is probably coming from lived experience. There have been students who have not been able to access any type of on-line learning for the past year due to lack of access and students would be very aware of their peers lacking that opportunity.
- Persons with disabilities and those who identified in the larger working/seeking work group both identified the trend of expanding contracts and “gig work” as major trends. This may reflect their job searching experiences.
- The working/seeking work population also felt that people managing their own careers, without their employers, was going to be a big trend. It is possible that many in this group are already exploring that next step and their employers are not aware of this potential change or how it could affect their business.

Getting Ready for the Future



Looking at what the majority perceive as the future of work – 3 years out – and the skills and trends that they anticipate as being the most in-demand and the biggest changes, participants answered if they felt they were ready for what they believed was going to happen. 43% of respondents felt ready or very ready. This was highest in those who were already working or looking for work, including newcomers, and the postsecondary group. A further 40% felt somewhat ready with the changes they saw ahead. 17% were either unsure or felt not ready at all. There is an opportunity to help this 57% understand what skills they have and how they anticipate those skills being used in the future.

Respondents let us know what they needed to be ready for the future workplace.

Tech needs

- Technology training. The skills identified varied from understanding the basics of technology and software through to the naming of cloud computing, data analysis and coding as specific areas where more training was needed.
- The need for technology and the internet. This speaks to the technology divide between rural and urban communities and between different socioeconomic groups. There is an awareness that people need tech to learn and job search but the ability to have the tech and reliable internet is a major hurdle.

Education and training

- Programs that can adapt quickly to changes that are happening – employer driven. There was a strong desire for employers to be more engaged in educational programming with the hope that programs could shift quickly to meet employer needs.
- More industry and occupational information. Secondary students really felt that more information from guidance would be helpful as well as more careers training, better descriptions of programs and courses and the different programs that postsecondary institutions are well known for so that they could make better decisions. For the other groups, this piece really revolved around knowing how industry was changing and that the programs they were taking would help them meet that change.

- Resourcing for undertaking education. There is a lack of awareness about dollars to undertake training and a lack of funding options when you are already working and don't want the employer involved. Secondary students are worried about the rising costs of education and financing it.
- Respondents were very eager to undertake training if asked by an employer: 95% of respondents would gladly take training that their employer recommended. Challenges in taking it included: understanding who was paying for the training and how it affected pay, having the opportunity to choose the training format (virtual vs in-person vs hybrid), if it was compatible with any accommodations a person needed, understanding how it could affect promotion opportunities.

Dealing with change

- Respondents were very interested in anything that could help them cope with change. One example was the need to connect with people who had undergone large changes in their life and had succeeded in navigating that change. Although not said directly, it sounded like people were looking for tools to help them navigate changes.
- Employer role in managing change. Employees felt that employers who openly communicated with their staff about potential change or why a shift was happening in the workplace would help more people be ready for change. Improved job descriptions were mentioned. The more information people felt they had from employers, even if the change was delayed, the more they felt they could be ready to meet those changes.

Work experience

- Every group mentioned work experience. Postsecondary students were looking to practice what they learned in the classroom in the real world. Secondary students were looking for more part-time positions where experience was not necessary to start and they could gain experience. Those who were working, or seeking work, were also looking for opportunities to experience different careers. For those unemployed and seeking work, the focus seemed to be more on getting experience. Newcomers were seeking Canadian experiences.



Work-life balance, wellness support and working from home

- Secondary students wanted their educators to reach out to see how they were doing as education has been through a lot of change in the past year. If change continues, this need may still be there. This group was also very worried about the availability of jobs that will be well-paying and secure which is a factor in well-being.
- The general working group felt that support was needed in the workplace. Recognition of the stressors that employees may be under and providing some flexibility, where possible, would help people navigate changes and what the future could bring.
- Respondents were also asked if they would consider working from home. 79% of respondents would work from home if given the opportunity by an employer.
- Secondary students had some of the highest negative responses when asked if they would work from home – 24% responded no. For some, this may be connected to their experiences with lockdown and how successful they have been learning on their own.
- Respondents who had disabilities were also less likely to want to work from home as their inexperience with technology and their needed accommodations may make that option unavailable to them.
- The number one reason that people were hesitant to work from home circles back around to work-life balance and wellness. Many who liked the option were employed or looking for work and, potentially, juggling busier lives. Some people liked the idea of no commute, creating a work-life balance that suited them and their life and working at their best times. They felt that having that control would be the best reason to work from home. Of course, reliable internet and the tools needed to do the job had to be available.
- One the other side of working from home was an intense need for person-to-person interaction, especially among secondary students who are the workforce of the future. This, again, may be a reaction to how their lives have changed in the past year with reduced socialization and increased virtual environments in formative years. Students mentioned the long-term effects on social and mental health, in-person communication being better for reading people and building relationships and the strong need for their work environment to be separated from their living environment. There was a fear that work and life would mix together and that life would just become all about work.

Continuing to Understand and Create Connections

These are just some of the ways that our local community could start to support the workforce, current and future, in getting ready for the future of work. These are not complete but highlight some opportunities to bring together the larger community as a whole to address some concerns and move the workforce forward. There are also opportunities for individual organizations and individuals to look at this research and think about what they can do differently to support employees and job seekers.

1. More programs with quick turnaround training to serve a variety of people. They need to be cost effective or funding needs to be put into place to support people. Canada-Ontario Job Grants administered by Employment Ontario may help some companies get those individuals ready. We have a population that believes they have 3 years or more to get ready for future work trends and that timeline seems to be approaching more rapidly.
2. We have a population, 12% here but could be higher, who are not thinking longer term because they cannot imagine that length of time or are caught up in living their day-to-day. This population may not have the basic skills for the quick training mentioned above so other options need to be made available that develop their basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and then build out on that foundation for longer than 16 weeks. These programs probably need to build up essential skills and then move on to further training. The day-to-day living challenges need to be addressed in these models.
3. Employers who promote their industry to any group should personalize their presentations, talk about who likes working in their industry since so many people connect their paths to their personal interests.
4. Further research into what resources the workforce is using to determine if careers are viable for the changing workplace of the future. Where are people getting their information and what is the reliability of that information?
5. More research into the skills that people believe will be needed for the future. There was a big focus on cognitive skills when talking about skills needed for the future.
6. Follow-up could be done about what people-oriented skills the workforce believes it will need to round out the picture more.

7. Develop a Future of Work professional development series for Employment Ontario, and EO-adjacent, staff so that they can help people understand the changes happening. There could be seminars on future skills, trends, coping with change and even tools to be shared with clients to encourage them to be ready for changes.
8. Further research into how people are planning for their next step and what they are doing to manage their careers (ex. Formal training – certificates, diplomas, degrees or information training as well as expenses incurred and where they are facing other barriers to training).
9. Explore a service that people who are working can connect with to support their career growth, a career guidance model, with information on training resources, potential for employment and the return on training investment for that person.
10. Develop/market skills assessment tools that give people a baseline of their skills and what their proficiency levels are. Literacy and basic skills use a couple of different tools and could develop/shift/rebrand current programming to speak to the future of work.
12. Undertake a similar research project with employers. The picture from experts has been created. The workforce input is starting to become more concrete. With the pandemic, what are employers feeling are the trends affecting them most and what are their perspectives? There is opportunity to really explore how small and medium-sized businesses are looking at these changes.





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