

COVID-19: Employers Perspective

2022 is the year communities in Halton and across the province hope will spell the beginning of the end of COVID-19. Unfortunately, as Community Development Halton writes this, such a positive conclusion to a long two years may be premature. Encouragingly, though, some of the preliminary data on the reduced severity of the Omicron variant may be cause for guarded optimism.¹ Notwithstanding this renewed sense of hope, the World Health Organization (WHO) continues to discourage people from describing Omicron as “mild,” because “increased transmission is expected to lead to more hospitalizations.”²

What is perhaps less well known is an awareness of some of the research that is taking place around the impacts of COVID-19, and how the pandemic may permanently impact employment sectors, workers, and communities in the years ahead. Last year, Community Development Halton studied the impacts of COVID-19 on older adult populations and published our findings in a series of *Community Lens* publications in late 2021.³

Continuing our focus on the impacts of COVID-19, this *Community Lens*, the first of 2022, analyses the findings of a 2021 ‘GTA Employer Survey.’⁴ Undertaken by the Peel Halton Workforce Development Group (PHWDG), the survey findings provide instructive insights that are “emerging from the lockdowns and the view of labour market issues during this period of recovery.” This is the 11th annual survey of employers that the PHWDG has carried out; 2020’s survey also looked at the impacts of COVID-19.⁵

Conducted between August and October 2021, the survey was sent out to “700 employers, with an average response of 490 answers per question, from a cross-section of employers in Peel and Halton Regions, as well as from the surrounding Greater Toronto Area... 72% of the respondents are employers in Peel and Halton, many come from other parts of the GTA.” In total, 187 employers from Oakville (62), Milton (56), Halton Hills (17), and Burlington (52) responded to the survey.

The Impact of Lockdowns on Employment

Employers were first asked about the impact of lockdowns on employment levels. Unsurprisingly, smaller employers reported disproportionately larger impacts on employment levels. 39% of employers with 1-4 employees, for example, reported a large decrease (defined as over a 33% reduction of the workforce). While 23% of companies with 5-19 employees reported a large decrease, it dropped to 4% for companies with over 100 employees. Put another way, “employers were more likely to decrease their employment levels rather than increase and that tendency increased the smaller the firm.” The most impacted sectors were, due to the nature of provincial lockdowns, the Accommodation and Food Services and Retail Trade sectors, while the sector with the lowest employment impact was in Transportation and Warehousing.

¹ The Lancet, [Omicron severity: milder but not mild](#), 19 Jan 2022

² UNICEF, [What we know about the Omicron variant](#), 14 Jan 2022

³ Community Development Halton, [Community Lens Publications](#)

⁴ Peel Halton Workforce Development Group, ‘GTA Employer Survey 2021. After COVID – A Changed Labour Market’ 2021

⁵ Peel Halton Workforce Development Group, ‘GTA Employer Survey. The Impact of COVID 19’, 2020

Remote Work

Pre-pandemic the “incidence of remote work was low,” with the prevailing perception that employee productivity would be lower away from the office.⁶ The pandemic very quickly shifted this misconception, with the caveat that remote work isn’t appropriate for every employee or employer. In an analysis on remote work, the management consultancy McKinsey & Company found that “the potential for remote work is highly concentrated among highly skilled, highly educated workers in a *handful* [emphasis added] of industries, occupations, and geographies.”⁷

Before the pandemic, “61% said that their non-essential workers never worked from home and 92% said that their non-essential workers worked from home 20% or less of the time.”

During the pandemic, “48% of employers said that their non-essential employees worked from home 80% or more of the time; [while] 28% said these employees worked from home 100% of the time.”

Beyond the pandemic, one-third of survey respondents said that they can see “employees work from home 30% to 70% of the time.” The report adds, “many employees [expect] to return to the workplace, but a considerable number will work from home some of the time.”

Although workplaces in the survey shifted to remote work out of necessity and expect to retain some form of this flexibility into the future, employers were, nonetheless, more likely to offer “concerns” with remote working rather than “identifying benefits.” Employers referenced some of the challenges they envisioned with a remote work environment, namely, “maintaining a team spirit and a corporate culture and, to a slightly lesser extent, the ability to properly on-board a new employee.” In addition, closely aligned to the team spirit concern, employers expressed the belief that “innovation” may suffer in a workplace environment that was geographically splintered.

Vaccination Policy

The federal government announced on December 7, 2021, its intention to “make vaccination mandatory in federally regulated workplaces,” extending the mandate beyond the previously announced requirement that all federal employees be vaccinated against COVID-19.⁸ This followed earlier Government of Canada announcements, across several months, in which sector-specific federal mandates were declared.⁹

Other municipalities and public institutions are also developing and publishing their own vaccination policies and mandates. The City of Toronto, for example, announced that all employees would have to be “fully vaccinated with a COVID-19 vaccine series by October 30, 2021.”¹⁰

⁶ Peel Halton Workforce Development Group, ‘[GTA Employer Survey 2021. After COVID – A Changed Labour Market](#)’ 2021

⁷ McKinsey & Company, ‘[What’s next for remote work: An analysis of 2,000 tasks, 800 jobs, and nine countries](#)’, 23 Nov 2022

⁸ Employment and Social Development Canada, ‘[News Release](#)’, 7 Dec 2021

⁹ Transport Canada, ‘[Backgrounder](#)’, 6 Oct 2021

¹⁰ City of Toronto, ‘[COVID-19: Mandatory Vaccination Policy](#)’, (Effective Date: 7 Sept, 2021)

Indeed, this month (January 2022), after previous vaccination deadlines were extended, almost 500 employees that had not received the COVID-19 vaccine lost their positions with the City of Toronto.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Halton Region, the City of Burlington has introduced a “revision” to its “Staff Vaccination Policy” which now makes COVID-19 vaccination mandatory “for all City employees.”¹² The Town of Milton¹³, Halton Hills¹⁴, and Oakville¹⁵ have all made similar announcements on mandatory staff COVID-19 vaccinations at various stages over the last number of months.

The 2021 PHWDG survey found that employers are also thinking about the vaccination question in their own workplaces.

- One-third of employers are mandating that employees be vaccinated.
- One-third is either encouraging their employees to get vaccinated “or are providing an incentive.”
- Under a third of employers in the survey “have either no policy or are leaving the decision to their employees.”

Post-Pandemic Hiring Projections

Looking into the future and making hiring predictions is proving to be challenging for many employers in the survey, in a context where Ontario has had strict, unpredictable, and extended lockdowns at various points over the last two years.

When employers were asked what their hiring intentions were over the next three months, assuming there are no changes from today, they provided the following responses:

- 18% said they “cannot predict” their hiring decisions on low skilled workers in the next three months.
- 16% said they “cannot predict” for mid-skilled positions.
- 17% cannot predict their intentions for highly skilled roles in the next three months.

A reminder that the survey was administered between August 31 and October 5, 2021, during which the provincial COVID-19 picture was largely positive: “New cases, hospitalisations and ICU occupancy [were] not increasing”¹⁶; vaccination uptake was strong in Ontario (although children, 5-11, were still exposed to COVID-19 as unvaccinated individuals, authorization for this age group didn’t arrive until 19th November 2021)¹⁷; however, the upcoming inevitable cold weather, which would drive people indoors where the virus would circulate and thrive, was a recurring source of seasonal “instability” that Ontario’s Science Table was factoring into its projection models.¹⁸

¹¹ Canadian HR Reporter, [‘Nearly 500 unvaccinated workers lose jobs in Toronto’](#), 6 Jan 2022

¹² City of Burlington, [City of Burlington introduces COVID-19 vaccination mandate for all City employees](#), 7 Jan 2022

¹³ Town of Milton, [Vaccine Certificate Program](#), Accessed 19 Jan 2022

¹⁴ Halton Hills, [Town of Halton Hills Releases Employee Vaccination Policy](#), 27 Sept 2021

¹⁵ Oakville, [COVID-19 Vaccination Procedure](#), Accessed 19 Jan 2022

¹⁶ Science Advisory and Modelling Consensus Tables, [‘Update on COVID-19 Projections’](#), September 28, 2021

¹⁷ Health Canada, [‘Statement’](#), November 19, 2021

¹⁸ Science Advisory and Modelling Consensus Tables. [‘Update on COVID-19 Projections’](#), September 28, 2021

It is likely that with the rapid increase in cases experienced in December and January in Ontario, caused by the now-dominant and highly transmissible Omicron variant, employer uncertainties are beginning to resurface – if indeed they ever went away.

Community Development Halton will continue to analyse the impacts of COVID-19 across 2022. Our next *Community Lens*, which will be published shortly, will be a complimentary analysis to this issue. In it, we will investigate the experiences of racialized workers over the last two years and assess Canada's economic outlook for 2022 from a worker and consumer perspective.

As always, if you have any questions or feedback about this *Community Lens* or any of Community Development Halton's other social policy and planning work, you can email data@cdhalton.ca.

Community Lens is prepared by Community Development Halton to disseminate and interpret important community data as it becomes available. For more information please contact us at data@cdhalton.ca or 905-632-1975



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