



# **LABOUR FORCE DYNAMICS IN RURAL ONTARIO**

PERSPECTIVES FROM  
ONTARIO'S WORKFORCE  
PLANNING BOARDS

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# Introduction

The future of rural businesses and communities is dependent on appropriate and effective workforce development strategies. Rural businesses and communities are confronted with challenges in accessing relevant human capital to support, maintain, and grow their operations. Without deliberate and place-based strategies, rural businesses and rural economies will be negatively impacted.

Researchers at the University of Guelph and Selkirk College are interested in enhancing our understanding of innovative rural workforce strategies, plans, and policies to address current and future labour gaps. To understand the experiences and dynamics taking place in Ontario we asked business supporting organizations and work force planning organizations from across the province to share insights on labour force dynamics from their communities and regions.

Building on labour force and workforce development themes from local newspapers and academic literature, an online survey was developed with a series of 10 questions. The questions asked business supporting organizations and workforce planning organizations to gauge their insights on the impact of COVID-19, the types of business supports or resources provided by organizations, and any potential innovative rural workforce strategies and policies. The online survey was circulated to all Community Futures Development Corporations and Workforce Planning Boards in Ontario.

The online survey was circulated to executive directors, or similar positions, in all 26 Workforce Planning Boards in Ontario based on publicly available contact information. An invitation to participate in the survey was circulated on September 27, 2023, with a reminder circulated on October 10, 2023. The online survey took respondents approximately 15 minutes to complete. A total of 13 Workforce Planning Boards participated in the online survey, representing a response rate of 50%. This report shares key information gathered through the online survey.

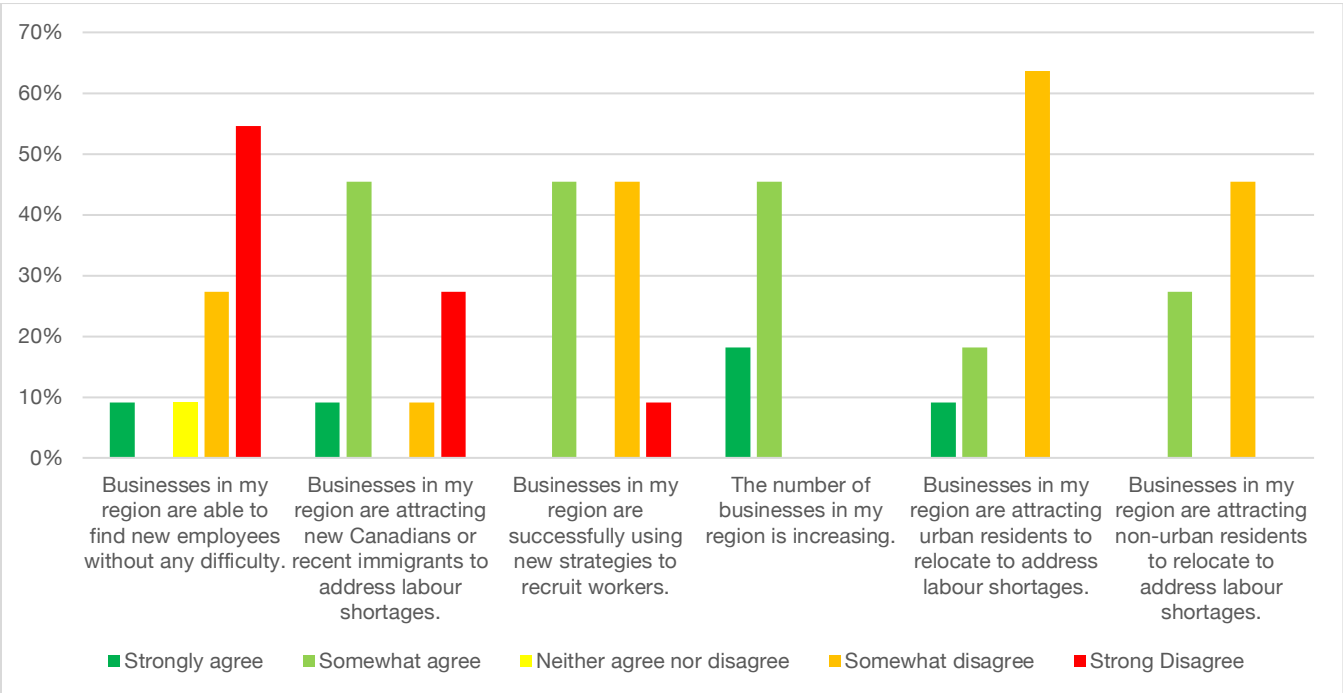
This survey is part of a multi-year research initiative examining labour shortages in rural communities called [Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction in Rural Ontario](#). This research is funded by the [Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance](#), a collaboration between the Government of Ontario and the University of Guelph.

# Findings

## Experiences of Rural Businesses

Participants were asked to agree or disagree with six statements regarding businesses in their region. The graph below outlines all responses from the Ontario Workforce Planning Board participants. Key findings from the table include:

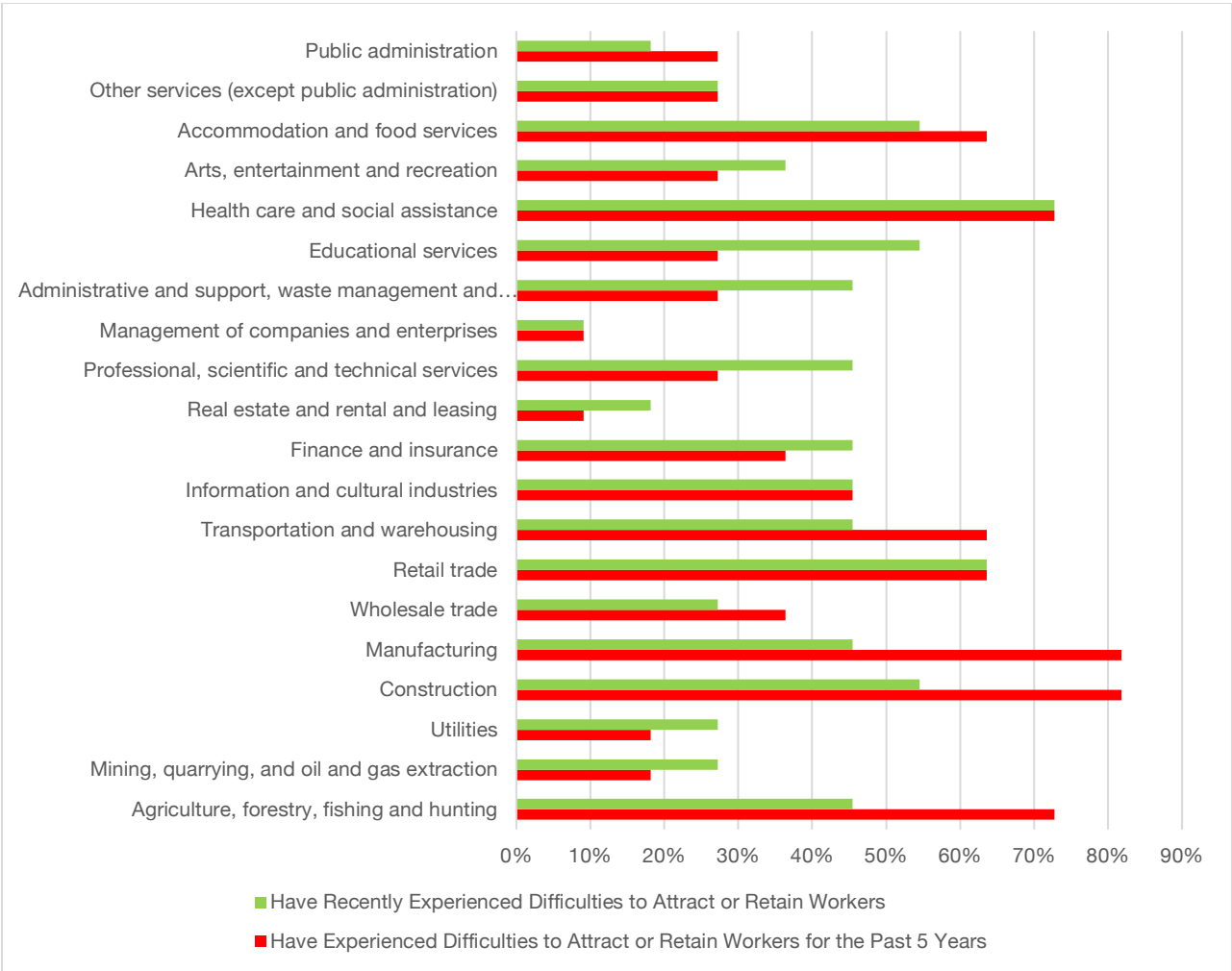
- Over 50% of respondents indicated businesses in their region are not able to find new employees without difficulty.
- All participants reported the number of businesses in their region as increasing.
- Less than 30% of participants somewhat agreed that businesses in their region were attracting urban residents to relocate to address labour shortages.
- Over 50% of respondents either strongly or somewhat agreed businesses in their region were attracting new Canadians and recent immigrants to address labour shortages.
- 45% of respondents somewhat agreed businesses in their region were successful in using new strategies to recruit workers.



# Industries Experiencing Difficulties in Attracting or Retaining Workers

Ontario Workforce Planning Board representatives were asked to identify which sectors of their economies were (a) currently experiencing difficulties in attracting and retaining workers and (b) have been experiencing difficulties in attracting and retaining workers for the past 10 years. Sectors were defined by the [North American Industry Classification System](#) (NAICS) codes. The table below outlines their perspectives.

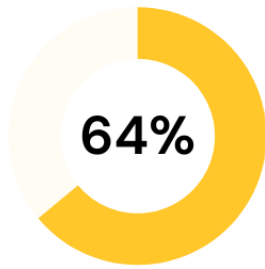
The five most frequently noted sectors experiencing the most difficulty in attracting retaining workers at the time of the survey were: Health and Social Assistance (73%), Retail trade (64%), Construction (55%), Educational Services (55%), and Accommodation and Food Services (64%). The five most frequently noted sectors experiencing difficulty in attracting and retaining workers over the past five years were: Construction (82%), Manufacturing (82%), Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting (73%), Health and Social Assistance (73%), and Accommodation and Food Services (64%).



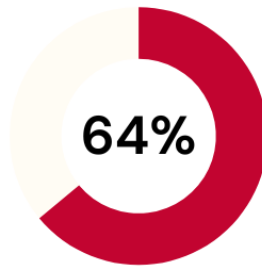
# Greatest Difficulties Experienced by Businesses

Workforce Planning Board representatives noted businesses in their regions had the greatest difficulty in the following areas:

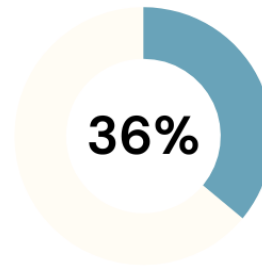




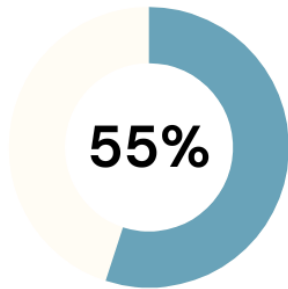
Difficulty in locating affordable housing



Difficulty in attracting workers to the community



Difficulty expectations around wage rates and benefits

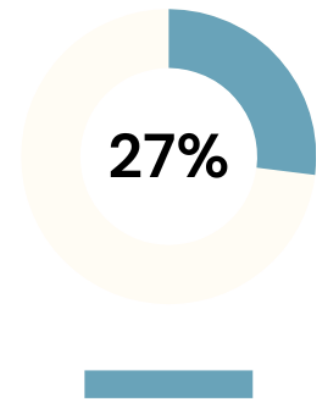


Difficulty with transportation

## Impacts of COVID-19 on the Attraction and Retention of Workers

Results of the survey noted the following about impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 27% of respondents indicated COVID-19 impacted the attraction and/or retention of workers in their region
  - One respondent indicated that there were no remote opportunities for their residents to work outside their region
  - One respondent indicated the hospitality sector has suffered as a result of difficulty retaining front facing, customer service positions
- 73% of respondents indicated COVID-19 did not impact the attraction and/or retention of workers in their region



Respondents indicated COVID-19 impacted the attraction and/or retention of workers in your region

## Innovative Workforce Strategies

Ontario Workforce Planning boards identified several innovative rural workforce strategies, plans, and/or policies had been implemented by businesses and/or industries. These included:

- [First Work Programs](#)
- Local immigration services
- Providing internet connectivity in rural areas
- Signing bonuses for positions in healthcare
- [Skills Development Fund Training Stream, offered by the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development](#)
- [The federal Rural Northern Immigration Pilot Program](#)
- [The Workforce Development Strategy by the Western Ontario Wardens Caucus](#)
- [Titan Trailers in Norfolk County](#)
- [Upskill Canada by Palette Skills](#)

## **Supports and Resources to Assist Businesses in Addressing Attracting and Retaining Workers**

Over 90% of respondents indicated their organization provides supports or resources to businesses in order to address attraction and/or retention of workers. The types of support provided include:

- Connections to employment and education organizations
- Development of Action Plans and local data
- [First Jobs Durham](#)
- Job Portals
- Labour market information
- Local Jobs Hub
- Newcomer employment services
- Short term soft and technical skills training programs for populations who experience barriers to employment
- Talent map to locate best regions to recruit from
- Wage data for competitive hiring



# Next Steps

The information collected from the Workforce Planning Boards identifies rural workforce dynamics from across Ontario. This information will be integrating into the larger Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction project. Key next activities for the project include:

- Conducting a similar online survey with Community Futures Development Corporations across Ontario (Spring 2024)
- Building summaries of Ontario innovative workforce planning approaches and initiatives identifying through the survey (Spring 2024)
- Conducting case studies on 2-4 to document innovative workforce planning approaches and initiatives in Ontario and to understanding their effectiveness, and transferability (Fall 2024)
- Sharing knowledge emerging from the project to stakeholders across Ontario (until Winter 2025)

Updates emerging from the Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction can be found at [www.ruraldev.ca/lсна](http://www.ruraldev.ca/lсна).



[WWW.RURALDEV.CA](http://WWW.RURALDEV.CA)