

# EXAMINING QUALITY OF WORK IN GRAND ERIE:

An assessment of needs, gaps and opportunities





The Future Skills Centre (FSC) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada, and is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

The Workforce Planning Board of Grand Erie is the expert in the labour and job market in the communities of Brantford, County of Brant, Haldimand County, Norfolk County, Six Nations of the Grand River and Mississaugas of the Credit.

We are one of 26 community-based, not-for-profit corporations established in Ontario to play a leadership role in labour force development. Comprised of representatives of Labour, Business, Education and Equity Groups, the board works collaboratively with community partners to identify key labour force issues and challenges, and to develop effective workforce development strategies.

## Acknowledgements

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The research design and report was developed by WPBGE's lead researcher, Wynona Mendes.

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The Quality of Work Advisory Committee includes representatives from:

Economic development departments, Chamber of commerce groups, Business associations, Business resource centers, Industry groups, Educational institutions, Employment service providers, Literacy and basic skills organizations, Ontario Works, Equity-seeking community groups

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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.



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# Table of Contents

1

Executive Summary

3

Introduction

5

Overview

8

Findings

24

Implications and future directions

## Executive summary

*The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with economic uncertainty, has prompted various members of the workforce to consider quality of work more holistically by acknowledging the interconnectedness of work quality as perceived by employers, job quality as perceived by workforce members, and workforce development as perceived by local labour market experts. And they are examining how all of this ties into individual, organizational and community prosperity.*

Local community organizations and government have limited understanding of the barriers faced and programs and policies required by local businesses to support quality of work within their workplaces. Recognizing this, this project set out to identify gaps in how employers, employees and job seekers within six selected industries in the Grand Erie area support and experience quality of work. The industries are located in Brantford, Six Nations of the Grand River, Mississaugas of the Credit, and Brant Haldimand and Norfolk counties. The research examines the following six dimensions: income and benefits, career prospects, work intensity, working-time quality, skill development and social environment.

It comprises a workforce survey (485 respondents), an employer survey (160 respondents) and a series of follow-up interviews amongst business executives and human resource representatives (30 interviewees). This results in a diverse range of perspectives from employers, employees and job seekers within various business sizes and sectors across each of Grand Erie's communities. This report provides a summary of findings from primary and secondary research on how Grand Erie employers and residents — both those working remotely and those that travel in to work — perceive quality of work. Supplementary reports containing a deeper analysis of each of the six key sectors studied will follow in various formats.

### Key findings include:

- **Strengths and weaknesses in current quality of work provisions:** Grand Erie's businesses excelled at creating positive social environments, and ensuring favourable work intensity and working conditions. Income and benefits packages and career prospects, on the other hand, were not as well rated by respondents.



- **Communication gaps between employers and employees:**

Significant discrepancies were observed between employees' and employers' perceptions of wage increases, skill development offerings and career prospects, indicating a need for stronger communication channels within workplaces.

- **Gaps between compensation packages offered and the local living wage:** Meeting employees' compensation needs was deemed critical by workforce respondents, with low pay beneath the local living wage figure for many being the primary reason employees considered quitting their jobs.

- **Workforce shifts prompted by job quality variations across sectors:** By understanding shifts in where the workforce is opting to work, employers and educational institutions may be better equipped to support both employee retention and seamless transitions across occupations and sectors.

- **Government and community supports required by businesses:**

Among other supports, employers specified a need for increased availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of soft, essential and technical skills development training programs. They also stressed the need for mental health and wellness supports and training, emphasizing the value of timely responses from government and funding terms that extend beyond one year. Residents with low paying jobs or lower educational attainment and individuals belonging to equity-seeking groups would especially benefit from enhanced, targeted supports designed to improve their work quality.



Based on key findings, businesses are encouraged to consider ways they can improve communication systems, strengthen compensation structures, establish more flexible and innovative working conditions, and enhance managerial capacity to foster positive quality of work.

Recommendations for community organizations include identifying and disseminating information on sector-specific best practices, collaborating to create workshops to educate employers about ways they can improve job quality, expanding the types of training opportunities available, and increasing marketing of existing and new services offered.

Governments can support better quality of work in several ways. These include improving hiring policies in response to barriers identified by various industries, offering funding to support training and benefits packages, investing in building more robust mental health and wellness supports, and broadening community infrastructure systems such as transportation, housing and daycare.

Going beyond the workplace, additional feedback included strengthening community integration as critical to attracting and retaining talent. This could include through peer mentorship and training opportunities and inclusive, diverse, family-friendly programming to assist newcomers with acclimation.

This paper presents Grand Erie's economic development organizations, educational institutions, community service providers, employers and policymakers with data they need to support decision making around practices, projects, policies and partnerships that would be most beneficial to supporting and strengthening quality of work locally.

# Introduction

*Business consultations conducted by the Workforce Planning Board of Grand Erie (WPBGE) before and over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a pressing need to strengthen organizational health as a means of addressing the labour shortage. Understanding quality of work is a pivotal step in achieving this goal. This report approaches quality of work as a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted concept, with each of its elements converging to support sustainable workforce development. It recognizes that how workers perceive and qualify the work that is expected of them influences their performance and productivity levels. Thus, improving quality of work — through fostering good, fulfilling jobs — benefits businesses, society and the broader economy. Quality of work is examined objectively, through reviewing measurable dimensions such as wage levels and skill development opportunities, and subjectively, through considering job quality and the extent to which work meets workers' preferences. More specifically, six dimensions are studied: income and benefits, career prospects, work intensity, working-time quality, skill development and social environment.*

Globally, measurement frameworks have been developed by organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and Eurofound to better conceptualize quality of work. However, due to difficulties measuring job quality indicators (many of which are subjective), and the multi-dimensionality of this subject, the integration of these frameworks into policies and practice remains sparse.

In 2010, the Organization for Economic Corporation and Development (OECD) ranked Canada in the upper tier when it came to earning quality and quality of working environment, and in the middle tier in terms of labour market security.<sup>1</sup> More recent research by Statistics Canada revealed that about 26 per cent of workers had poor overall job quality



— defined as jobs that local residents rated unfavourably across the six job quality dimensions assessed.<sup>2</sup> WPBGE’s research suggests that this value may be even higher today amongst local workers, and particularly so amongst some equity-seeking groups.

WPBGE’s 2020 work-life balance study found that a significant portion of the Grand Erie labour force frequently worked overtime hours, felt overwhelmed by the amount they needed to do for work, and were dissatisfied with their work-life balance. More than one in two employees had considered leaving their jobs in the last year due to burnout and dysfunctional workplaces.<sup>3</sup> Grand Erie’s 2023 EmployerOne survey revealed that according to 47 per cent of employers, retention has become a greater issue since the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Job vacancy data for the Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula, which encompasses Grand Erie, indicates that vacancies have almost doubled over the past five years, which inhibits business’ ability to expand.<sup>5</sup> Employers, government and community agencies alike are eager to understand why people stay in and leave certain jobs, and keen on obtaining data that will allow them to develop appropriate policy and practical responses to support economic growth.

While research on job quality has been sporadically undertaken for the last few decades, it has gained significant traction in recent years. Today, job quality is regarded as both a key determinant of individuals and household well-being, and a driver of increased labour force participation. Despite this recognition, for some, job quality is on the decline. The COVID-19 pandemic spotlights pre-existing and emerging discrepancies in how quality of work differed across demographics. Gallup’s 2020 Great Jobs Report found across most dimensions, job quality decreased between 2019 and 2020 for people from racialized groups as well as those with lower education and income levels.<sup>6</sup> In the face of increasing labour shortages and slowdowns in labour force participation growth, there is a dire need to better understand how individuals and businesses within the workforce ecosystem can be better supported.

The results of WPBGE’s quality of work study reinforce the notion that no one dimension of job quality trumps the rest. For job seekers and employees, a good job is a combination of each of the six dimensions examined. However, considering the rapid cost of living increases, job seekers and employees revealed that decent wage offerings are becoming increasingly important. Employers, on the other hand, are struggling due to supply chain issues, decreased demand for certain goods and services, reduced productivity resulting from staffing shortages and more — all of which limit their ability to meet their employees’ income expectations. Reconciling this is key to supporting economic development and community building, and involves collaboration, innovative thinking and systemic shifts within businesses, educational institutions, labour groups, government, skill development and literacy organizations.

This research was designed to examine the current state of job quality and types of supports that the local workforce would find most beneficial. Findings highlight a need to enhance experiential learning opportunities, community programming (namely more accessible, affordable, and quality skill development programs and health and wellness supports), government investments in public transportation, childcare, housing, and mental health, and policy changes to facilitate local and international hiring. The report also illustrates where supports are most required. Stakeholders are encouraged to use these findings to develop and execute action plans to create and enhance policies, programs and partnerships that support the workforce holistically and equitably.

If addressed collectively and in a timely manner, these actions have the potential to reduce labour shortages, raise living standards and foster working environments that are more inclusive, productive and enriching.

This report draws on the results from the Examining Quality of Work in Grand Erie study, including its research questions, methodology and limitations, to outline a series of key findings. The views of employers, employees and job seekers on each of the six dimensions of quality of work are detailed. Gaps and opportunities to address these are then identified by considering the perspectives of the workforce and employers. The paper ends by reviewing the implications of this research and recommends future directions for a variety of stakeholders.



# Overview

## Research questions

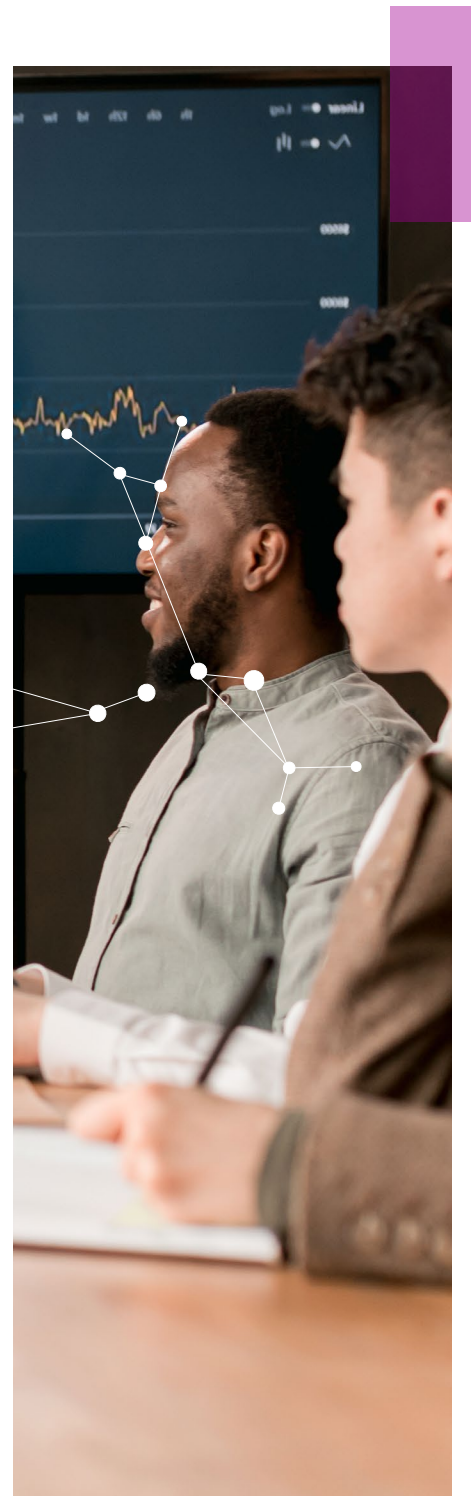
*This research project was designed to explore the perceptions of quality of work amongst employees, job seekers and employers across Grand Erie. A three-tiered approach was undertaken to gather data:*

1. An online workforce survey was targeted towards employees and job seekers residing in Grand Erie. Respondents were asked to assess their job quality and identify human resources (HR) and government policy shifts that they would find most beneficial to improving their quality of work. By mass distributing this self-administered survey, WPBGE was able to reach a large and diverse sample of Grand Erie's workforce.
2. An employer survey asked executives and HR representatives of Grand Erie businesses about existing practices, incentives and policies that support quality of work. Similar to the workforce survey, this self-administered questionnaire allowed for WPBGE to reach a large, representative sample of local businesses. It also allowed employers to respond at their own pace.
3. Among employers that opted in, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the barriers employers face in implementing strategies to improve quality of work within their workplace. This allowed for a deeper dive into sector-specific supports required, and for the research team to clarify ambiguous responses received.

These findings were cross-referenced with secondary data collected by Statistics Canada, the Future Skills Centre and various other research institutions to examine how local responses compared to regional and national studies.

## Methodology

This report is based on exploratory research from two interrelated workforce surveys, and follow-up employer interviews. An emphasis was placed on six industries in the Grand Erie area that employ a large portion of the workforce, are experiencing growth in labour demands and have been particularly hard-hit by COVID-19-related workforce shifts: manufacturing, health care and social assistance, retail trade, construction, accommodations and food services, and agriculture.





The workforce survey, conducted between August and November 2022, collected input from 485 Grand Erie residents (406 employees and 79 job seekers) to assess and identify priorities in their quality of work. Employees were also asked if they had considered quitting their jobs and why. Job seekers were asked about their previous sector of employment and sectors of interest. Respondents were recruited by community partners across the region and through social media and local media coverage.

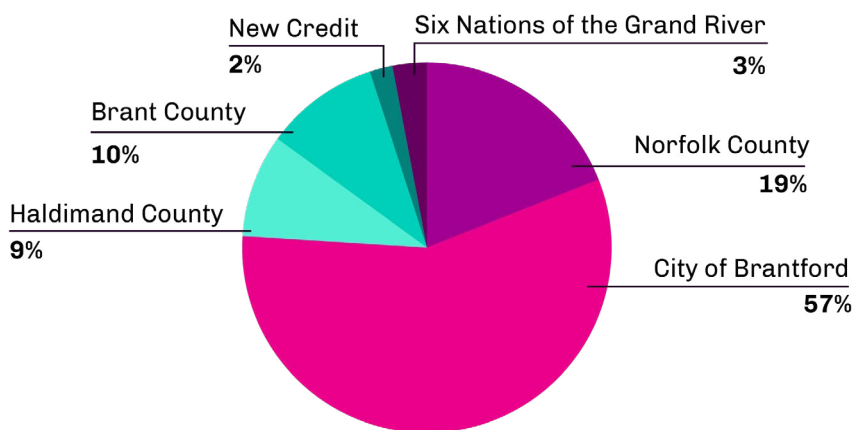
The workforce survey offered respondents the opportunity to identify as belonging to a number of different equity-seeking groups. Sufficient response was received from women, students, Indigenous Peoples, racialized persons, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and people living with physical or cognitive disabilities to identify particular opportunities and challenges experienced by these groups. For populations for which census data was available, the proportion of the population was used to determine an appropriate target sample. Where unavailable, 5% of total responses (i.e. 25 respondents) was deemed to be sufficient. WPBGE’s Quality of Work Advisory Committee representatives from these groups were invited to share suggestions on recommendations that must be made to support the needs of diverse groups within our community.

The employer survey, conducted in January 2023, examined how 160 Grand Erie employers perceive and support various facets of quality of work within their workplaces. Employers were recruited through WPBGE’s employer network as well as by each municipality’s economic development team and local service providers.

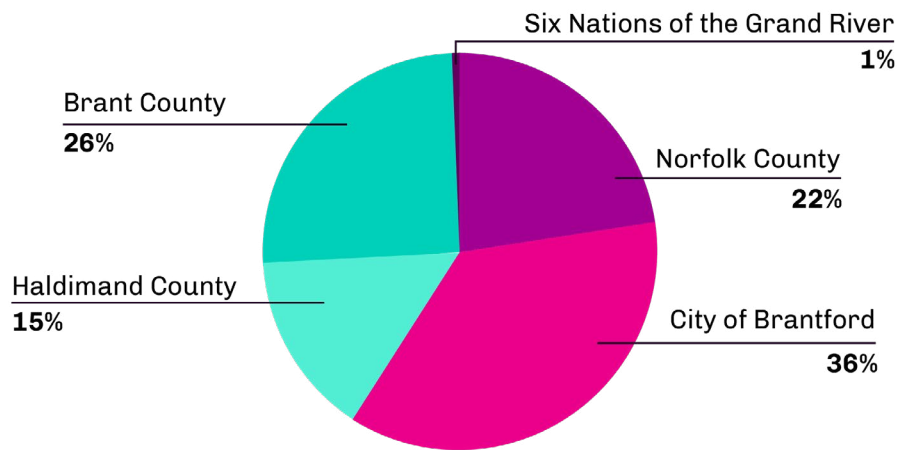
Unless otherwise specified, statistics on the quality of work supports offered by employers are based on those that indicated providing the applicable supports to all or just full-time employees.

Amongst employers who agreed to participate in a follow-up interview, 30 were selected, five from each of the six sectors in focus. The recorded responses were thematically analyzed using an inductive coding method that involves determining themes based on the data collected. They were refined to come up with a list of strategies, initiatives and polices that local employers consider most effective in supporting their workforce.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Workforce Respondents by Location**



**FIGURE 2:**  
**Employer Respondents by Location**



## Limitations

While this study presents Grand Erie’s workforce stakeholders with unique opportunities to collaborate on strategically addressing the issues and gaps identified, it does have some limitations. Considering that all respondents completed the survey voluntarily, it is likely the survey received greater response from employees and job seekers, as well as employers, who place emphasis on quality of work issues. It is therefore likely that the survey may be biased towards volunteer respondents, and that perspectives of those with limited digital literacy skills may not have been adequately captured.

Despite being underrepresented in the local labour market, women were overrepresented within this survey. Further, older adults and individuals with a high school degree or below were not well represented in the survey, largely due to an inability to reach individuals in these demographics.

Amongst businesses, Haldimand and Norfolk County employers were slightly underrepresented while Brant County employers were overrepresented. The survey also reached a larger number of manufacturing businesses, although all of the other sectors in focus were adequately represented.



# Findings

## General overview

### Key insight:

According to the local workforce, Grand Erie’s businesses excelled at creating positive social environments and to a lesser extent ensuring that work intensity and working conditions were favourable. Income and benefits packages and career prospects, on the other hand, were not as well rated by respondents.

Across most quality of work dimensions assessed, satisfaction increased consistently with educational attainment. High school diploma holders viewed their job quality considerably less favourably than Masters and PhD degree holders. This was observed both between employees and job seekers assessing their last job, but the difference was far more pronounced amongst those currently employed.

Further, quality of work provisions generally increased with business size, with some exceptions such as flexibility in job design and structure and in working hours.

**TABLE 1:**  
Quality of Work Workforce Priorities

| Top Quality of Work Priorities According to Employees: | Top Quality of Work Priorities According to Job Seekers: |
|--|--|
| 1. Health and dental plan                              | 1. Health and dental plan                                |
| 2. Pension plan  | 2. Four-day work week                                    |
| 3. Four-day work week                                  | 3. Regular schedule                                      |
| 4. Supportive managers and positive leadership         | 4. Supportive co-workers and a positive team environment |
| 5. Flexible hours                                      | 5. Supportive managers and positive leadership           |
|  | 6. Working from home                                     |

Additional comments provided by respondents emphasized that a variety of supports are pivotal to a good job, and that they had trouble picking just five. Further, above most other non-monetary factors listed, compensation that matched the living wage was critical. This is particularly relevant given the drastic increases in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) across Ontario between January 2022 and 2023, particularly for essentials like food (10 per cent), energy (9 per cent) and shelter (7 per cent), all significantly higher than average wage increases documented over the past few years.<sup>7</sup> While 2022-2023 income data was unavailable during the writing of this report, the average income in Ontario between 2017 and 2021 increased by an average of 2 per cent annually.<sup>8</sup>

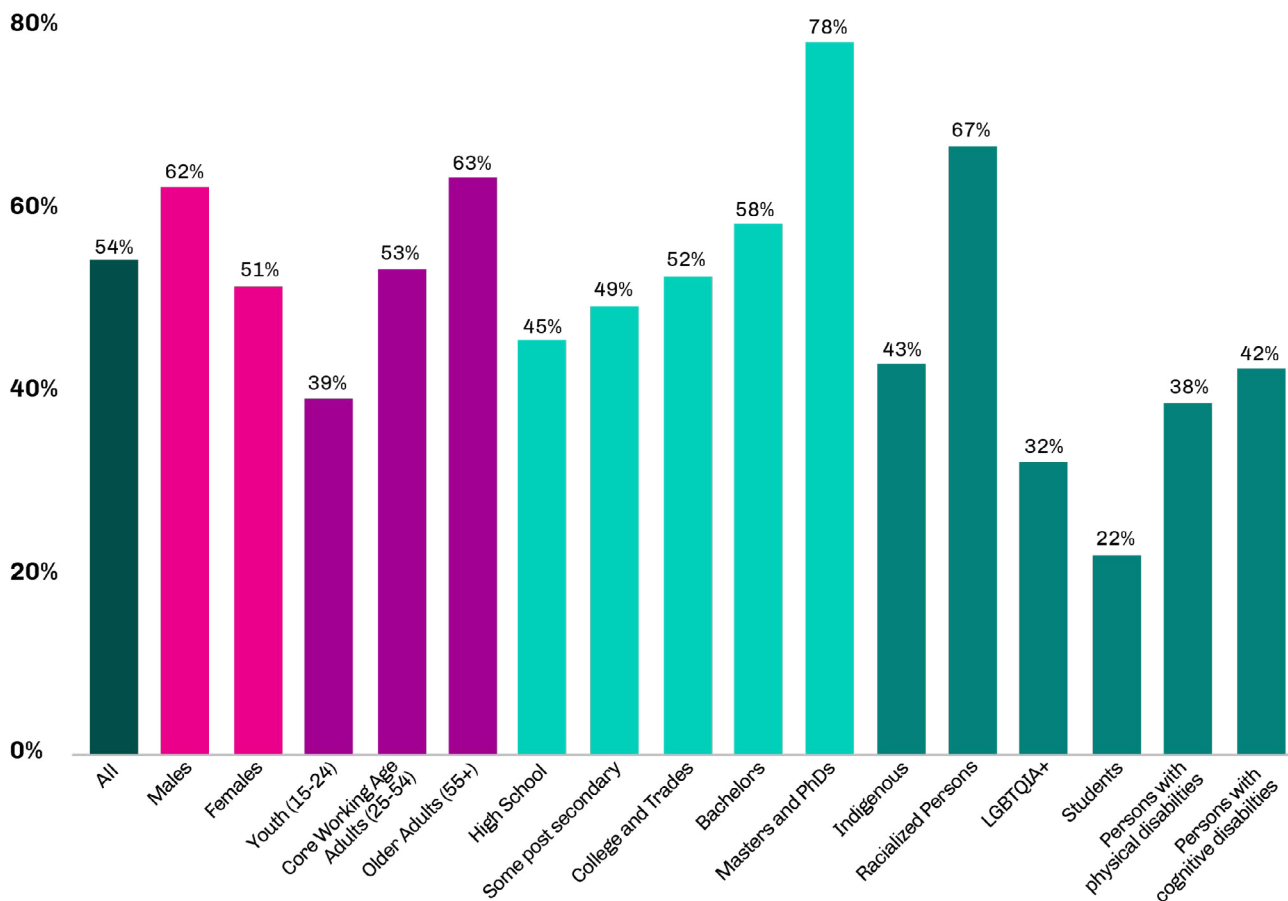




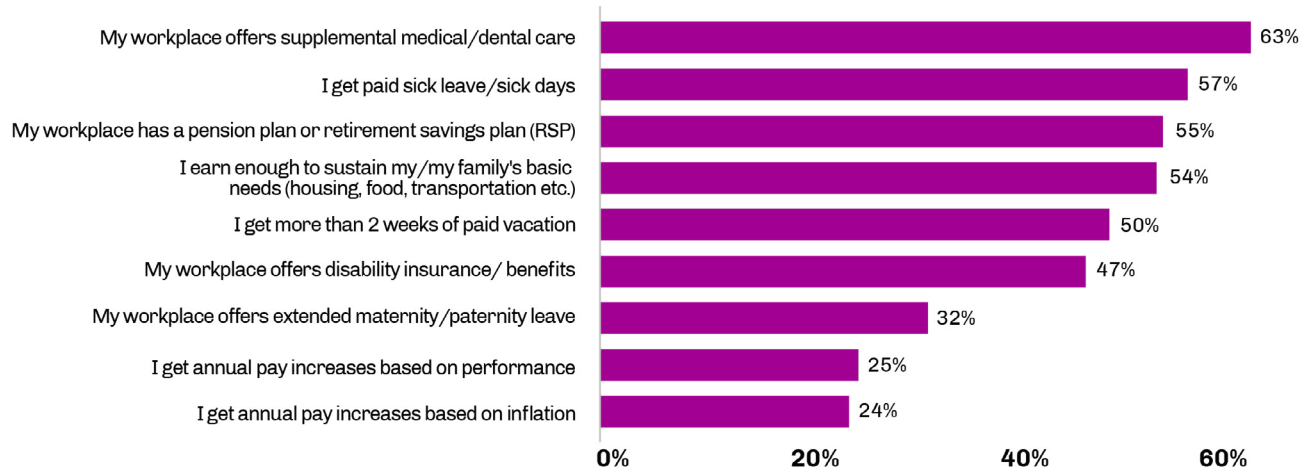
## Income and benefits

Based on 2020 income data reported in the 2021 census, approximately 49 per cent of Grand Erie residents with reported income were earning less than the 2022 living regional wage rate — \$19.80 an hour, or \$38,610 annually — calculated by the Ontario Living Wage Network.<sup>9</sup> This was consistent with the workforce survey results that found only 54 per cent of respondents indicated they earn enough to sustain their family’s basic needs, with significant differences across demographics.

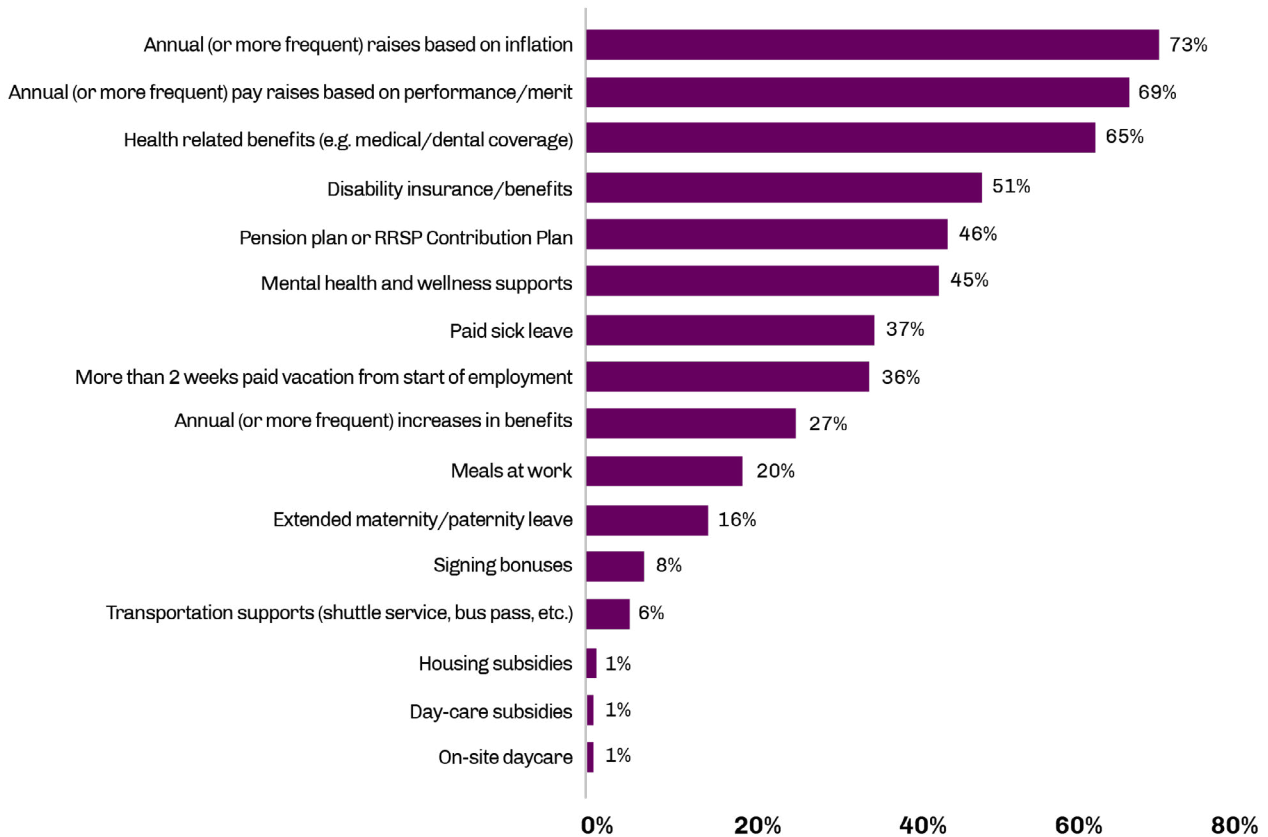
**FIGURE 3:**  
Proportion of respondents that indicated earning enough to sustain their basic needs



**FIGURE 4:**  
**Workforce Assessment of Income and Benefits**



**FIGURE 5:**  
**Employer Assessment of Income and Benefits**



Due in part to which sectors men and women typically worked in, men were more likely to get pay increases based on inflation as well as disability insurance. Men more frequently work in the construction, transportation and warehousing and manufacturing sectors. Women more frequently noted receiving paid sick leave.<sup>10</sup> They make up a larger portion of the health care and social assistance, educational services and accommodation, and food services workforce.

While youth aged 15-24 were least likely to receive any benefits, interestingly, fewer older workers aged 55+ reported receiving benefits like paid sick days and RSP plans, compared to their core-working age counterparts aged 25-54.

Members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, students and people living with physical or cognitive disabilities were less likely to receive most of the previously mentioned benefits, as were unemployed people referencing their last job.

In stark contrast to the 29 per cent of full-time employees that indicated receiving annual pay increases based on inflation, about 73 per cent of businesses said they offer inflation-based annual raises to all or full-time employees. This gap may be due in part to the fact that employees feel their wage increases are not substantial enough to offset increased living expenses. It is also possible that businesses surveyed will not have wanted to completely divulge their internal salary practices, noting there are different ways of interpreting appropriate wage increases for employees. For-profit businesses offered pay raises much more frequently compared to government and not-for-profits, but these institutions were more likely to offer other benefits.

Benefits were significantly more common among unionized businesses, as well as health care and manufacturing businesses. Benefit offerings increased with business size, with two exceptions. Transportation supports and housing subsidies were primarily offered by small-businesses comprising one to four employees.

Contract and temporary employees were not considered for most income and benefits related perks. Aside from a handful of businesses that offered annual wage increases to part-time workers, and even fewer that offered additional perks like paid sick leave, RSP contributions and more than two weeks of paid vacation, most of these workers also did not receive income and benefits perks.

*“Decent pay means more than the minimum wage. My pay is insufficient when the social services claw back is considered.” – Local job seeker*

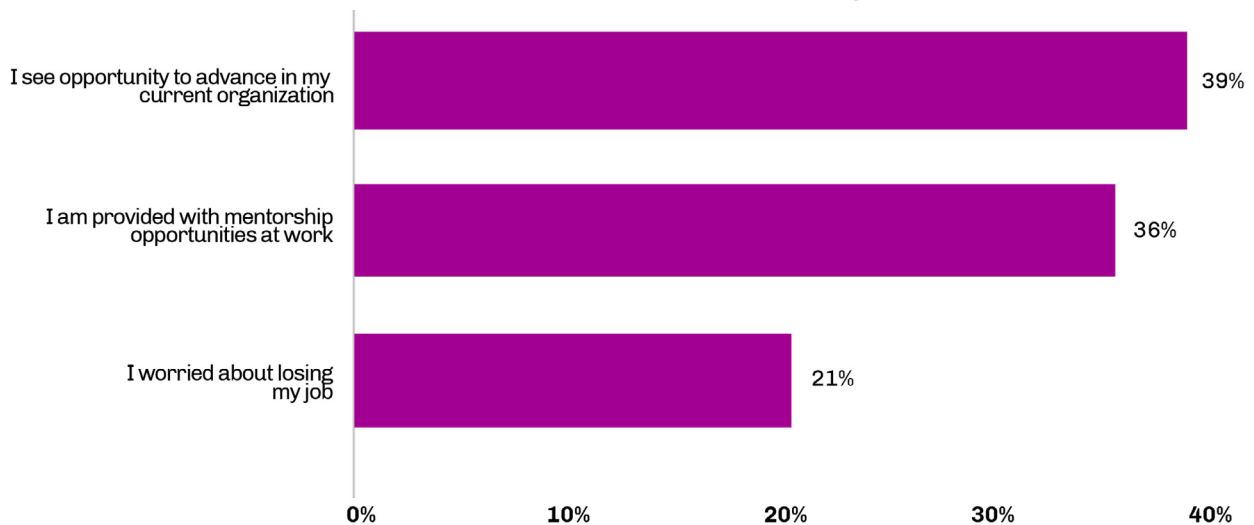
*“Wage increases are critical. With the increase in cost of daily living, including groceries, gas, hydro, and water, families who should be doing extremely well such as mine are struggling to make ends meet, all while my industry is on a three-year wage and incentive freeze from the Ontario government.” – Local employee*

*“The market has changed dramatically in terms of attracting staff. The competition for staff is huge...So we ask ourselves, ‘how are we competitive within the market? Can we address equity issues through reducing overlap between positions with higher responsibilities?’” – Local health care employer*

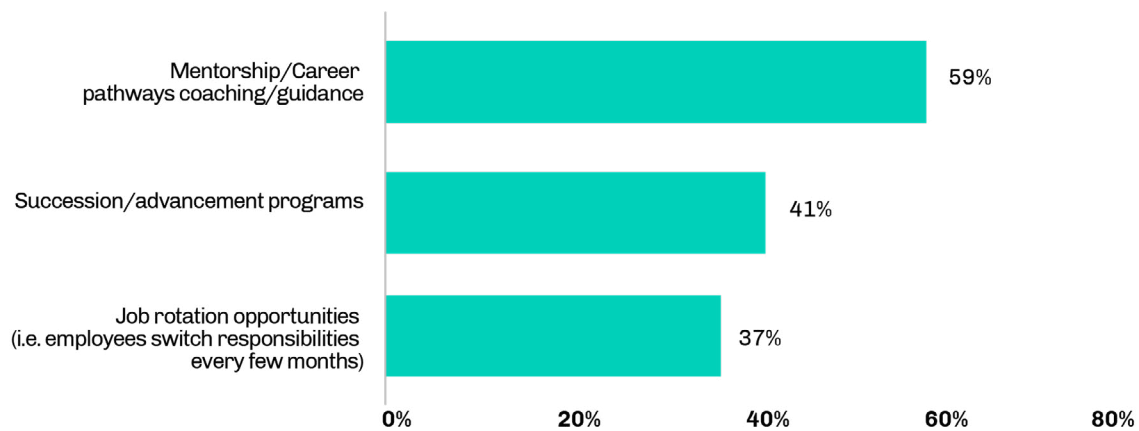
*“We try and pay our staff, probably a little above or at least at the best retail rate. We try and look after them. We were hoping to somehow provide benefits, but trying to provide benefits in a situation that’s as small as us, we’ve tried several places and we just can’t do it. We treat our employees well, they get little perks. There’s no issue with if they need a day off when they need it due to personal or compassionate family reasons. We pay for some time off. We try and do those extra things”. – Local retail employer*

## Career prospects

**FIGURE 6:**  
**Workforce Assessment of Career Prospects**



**FIGURE 7:**  
**Employer Assessment of Career Prospects**



About 16 per cent of employed respondents worried about losing their jobs. This was three times higher among unemployed people who were asked about their last job, illustrating the high degree of precarity across some occupations and sectors over the past year. While most workforce members did not worry about job security, few saw potential for their careers to grow. Roughly, one-third — fewer among women — were provided with mentorship opportunities, or opportunities to advance within their organizations.

Career prospects were inversely related to age. Youth noted advancement and mentorship opportunities much more frequently than core working age and older adults. Fear of job loss, on the other hand, was highest among older adults.

While employer and workforce responses aligned on succession and advancement opportunities, a discrepancy was observed with regards to perceptions of mentorship opportunities, suggesting a lack of awareness among some employees about available career development pathways.





*“An important factor for me is being able to make a difference in the community I serve” - Local employee*

*“I think it’s great if you can keep people, but the reality is you should always wish people well, treat them well when they’re here. And if they do great work and move on to a different or better opportunity, you wish them well too.” – Local health care employer*

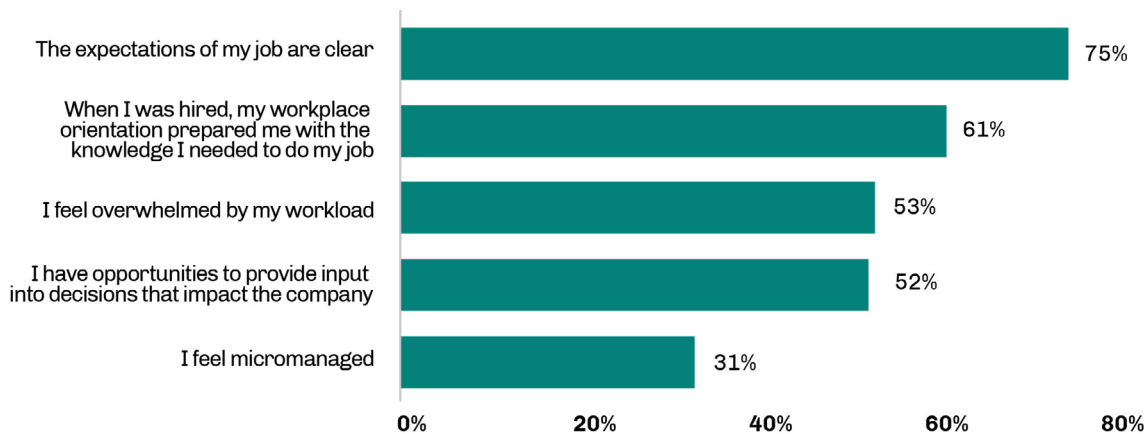
*The cost of all the staff perks — whether it’s going to Niagara or retraining, or encouraging their own training — furthering the skills of the employee that’s already here - that’s nothing compared to hiring and training someone from scratch.” – Local agriculture employer*

*“For government-funded organizations, there can be lot of uncertainty about whether funding will be renewed, and this inhibits our ability to plan for the future.” – Local social assistance employer*

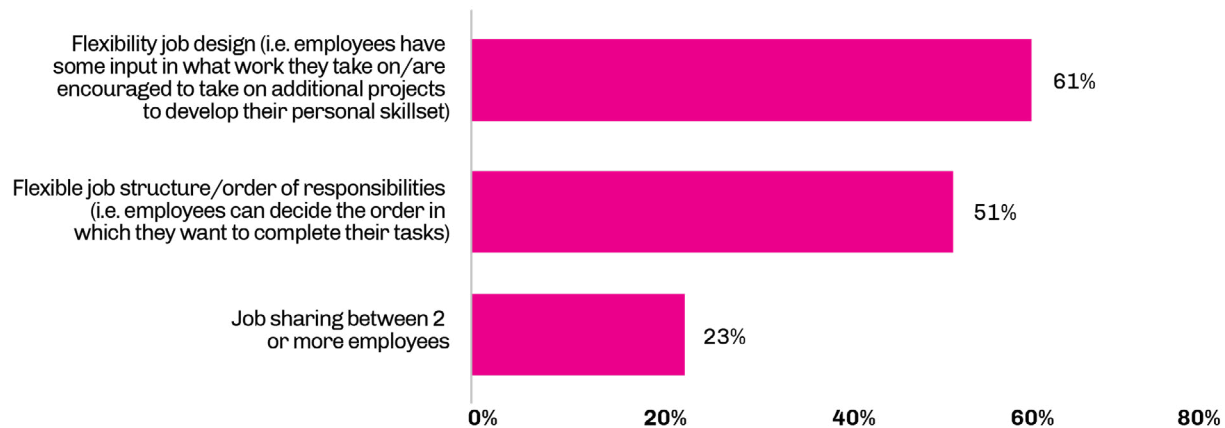
## Work intensity

About 60 per cent of employers said they offered employees flexibility in their job design. This was highest in the accommodation and food services and health care and social assistance sector and lowest in the retail trade sector. A slightly smaller proportion also offered employees the ability to decide the order in which they take on their tasks. This was much more common among not-for-profits and government.

**FIGURE 8:**  
**Workforce Assessment of Work Intensity**



**FIGURE 9:**  
**Employer Assessment of Work Intensity**



This was fairly consistent with workforce survey responses on discretion and autonomy, which indicated that across various demographics a majority of employees felt they had opportunities to provide input into decisions that impact the company. However, Indigenous and racialized people, students and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were considerably more likely to report feeling micromanaged. Autonomy was found by Statistics Canada to be one of the main drivers towards self-employment, so a lack of it may have significant impacts on employee retention.<sup>11</sup>

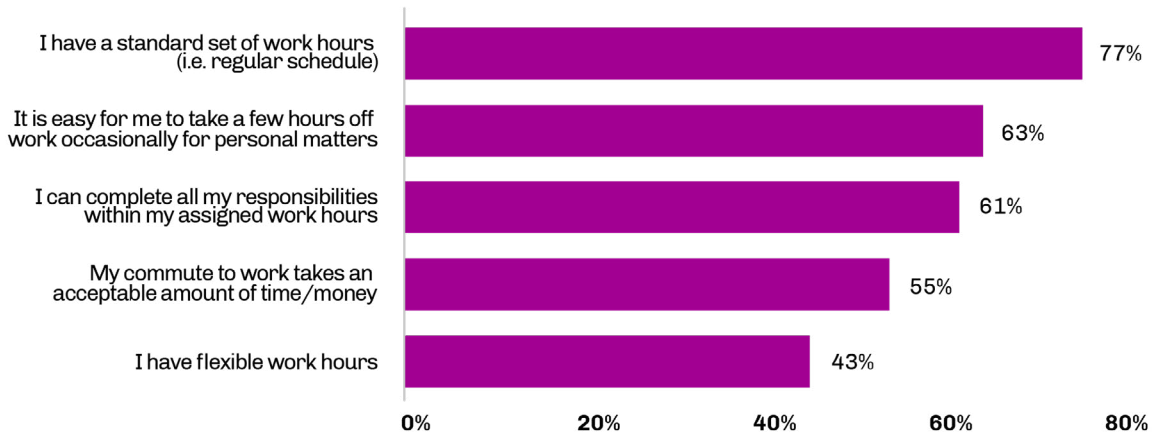
Women more frequently reported feeling overwhelmed by their workload, leading to burnout. This may partially explain why women’s participation and employment is rising at a slower pace than that of men post-pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

*“There needs to be an understanding that some people do not work as fast as others and that if you have expectations that things need to be done we are given time on the clock to complete them.” – Local employee*

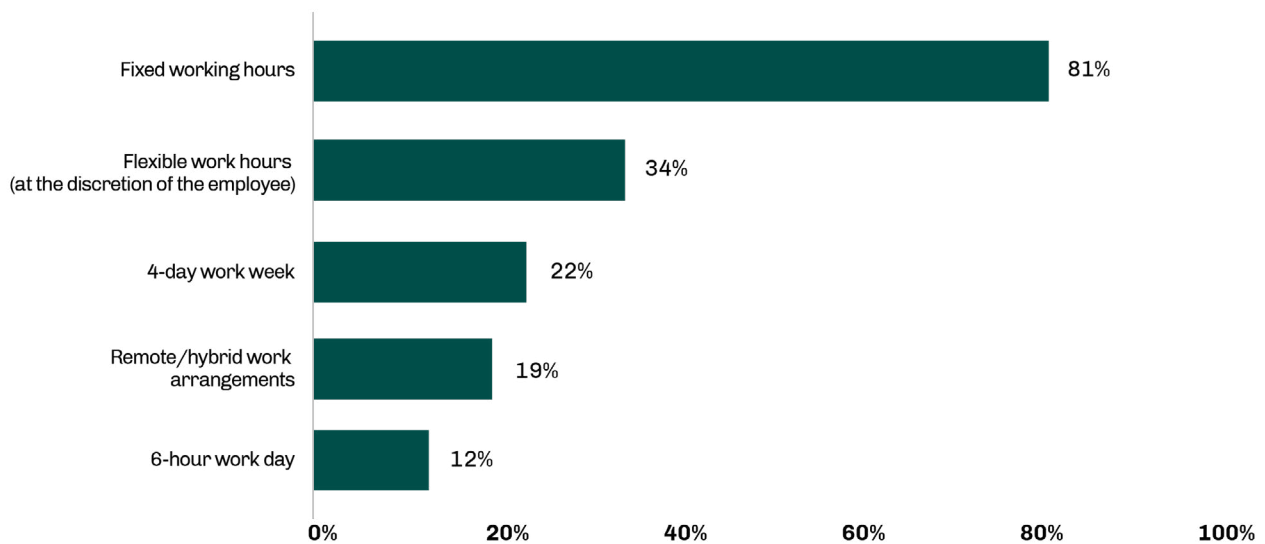
*“I do not want to be micromanaged. Train me, let me do my job, and encourage me to contribute to improving my job and the company.” – Local job seeker*

*“We ask ourselves: ‘how can we continue to meet our big goals with our small team?’ By job sharing and making sure that everyone is cross trained in what it is that they can do, so a staff member taking emergency leave is something we’re equipped to handle. But it begins with our management team and making sure that they know how to conduct a performance review and that this type of follow up and feedback is given because it goes a long, long way.” – Local retail employer*

**FIGURE 10:  
Workforce Assessment of Working-time Quality**



**FIGURE 11:  
Employer Assessment of Working-time Quality**



While most quality of work benefits increased with education, so did time required to complete responsibilities, much of which is unpaid for salaried workers. University graduates were most likely to say their tasks took longer than their working hours, followed by college graduates. This was also true of more core-working age adults and seniors, compared to youth, who were most likely to say they had flexible working hours.

Men more frequently reported having commutes that were longer and costlier than ideal. This may be partially attributable to the fact that a higher proportion of women worked remotely. The inverse was true of job seekers: more unemployed women were previously negatively impacted by long or expensive commutes, which may be one factor influencing their decision to leave.

Alternate work models, such as the four-day work week or six-hour work day, were employed largely by accommodation and food service businesses, while agriculture and construction employers were unable to consider these options because most roles within these sectors require workers to be onsite and hands-on. These arrangements were not considered by any of the large employers that responded to the survey, likely because such changes would require time and effort to organize. Flexibility in hours worked was also less common among large employers, but these businesses were more likely to offer remote or hybrid working options.

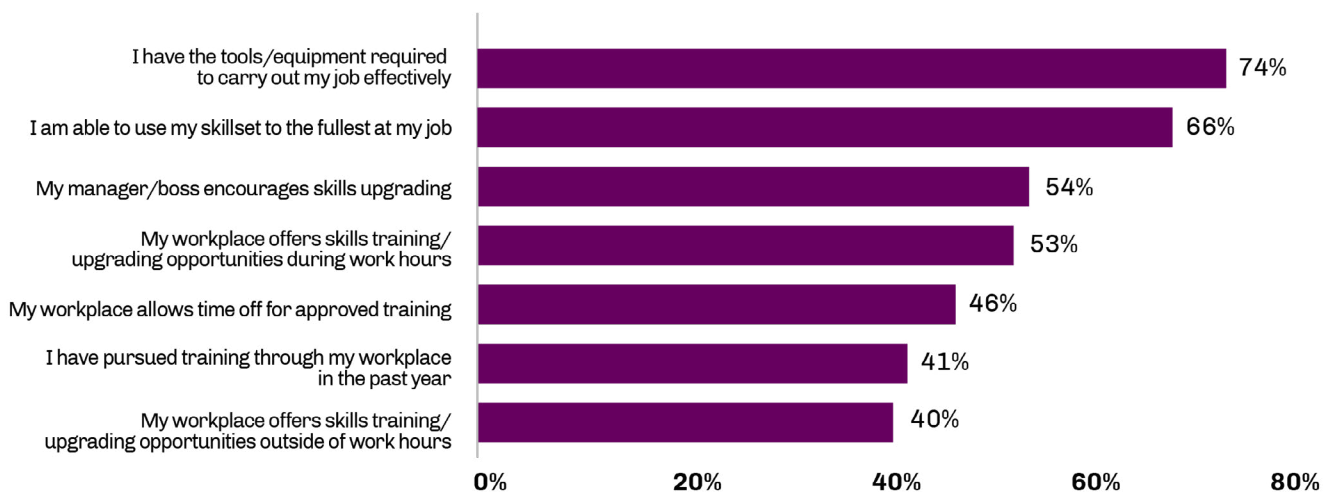
Considering that family-friendly policies such as teleworking, flexible hours and alternate work models have been proven to increase productivity and promote greater tenure, there is a strong case for more employers to consider these options when possible.<sup>13</sup>

*“I cannot spend an hour-plus travelling to and from work. It’s exhausting.” – Local job seeker*

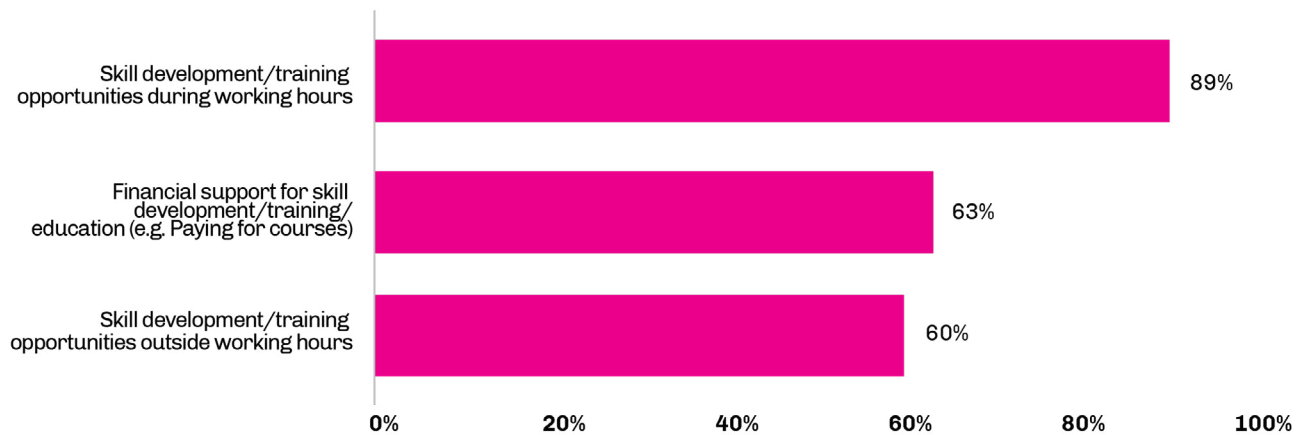
*“Not having any down time throughout your work day limits your creativity.” – Local employee*

*“I only operate six days a week. I’ve done that for a very long time, because for me, it’s important to have family time. That’s why I’ve always been closed on Sundays, even though it is financially unfavourable. The day away from everybody makes a big difference [... your work hours] flip all the time and your schedule is different week to week to week. Whereas I really work hard to make sure that it’s basically the same schedule, so everybody knows, so they can plan around it.” – Local food services employer*

**FIGURE 12:**  
**Workforce Assessment of Skill Development Opportunities**



**FIGURE 13:**  
Employer Assessment of Skill Development Opportunities



An analysis of educational attainment and employment by skill level of workforce respondents revealed significant underutilization of skills. College diploma holders were most likely to be employed in jobs that required their credentials (58 per cent), followed by trade certificate holders (53 per cent), bachelor’s degree holders (46 per cent) and masters or PhD degree holders (28 per cent). Respondents’ work quality assessments back this up. About one in three workforce members did not feel they were able to use their skillset to the fullest at their job, and this was even lower among men.

*“The Skills2Advance program helped me gather a set of skills that I normally would not have had time or finances to achieve. It was a great introduction to a very lucrative career path and awarded me skills not only for the workforce, but for my personal life.” – Local jobseeker*

*“Part of my role as the recruiter is I’m also the skilled trades development manager. That means usually every three to six months, I reach out to all of our staff and have conversations with them about the next steps in their career. I ask where do you want to go from here?” – Local manufacturing employer*

*“I think we’re always looking to try to provide professional development and different ways to upskill our staff so they stay. Obviously, in a labour shortage you want to keep the talent that you have. – Local health care and social assistance employer*

**Key insight:**

Discrepancies between employers and employees’ perceptions of wage increases, skill development offerings and career prospects suggest a need for improved communication systems and awareness raising among employers about available opportunities within their organizations.

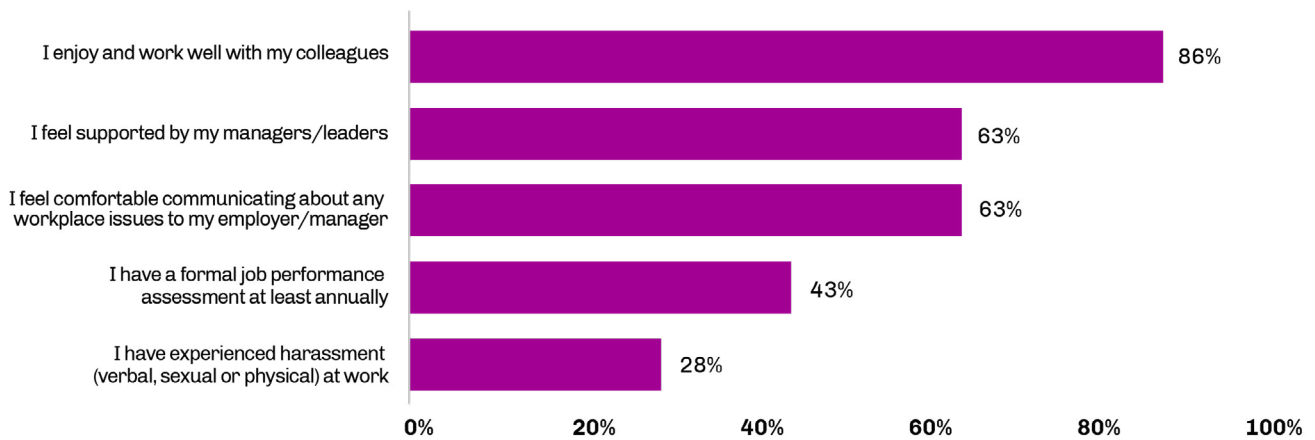
Through comparing the employee and employer survey, considerable gaps were observed in terms of how employees and job seekers and employers perceived skills-related quality of work offerings.

About one in two workforce members indicated their workplace offered skills training and upgrading opportunities during work hours, and a similar portion said their managers encouraged them to pursue these opportunities. Women were considerably more likely to pursue training when offered by their workplace.

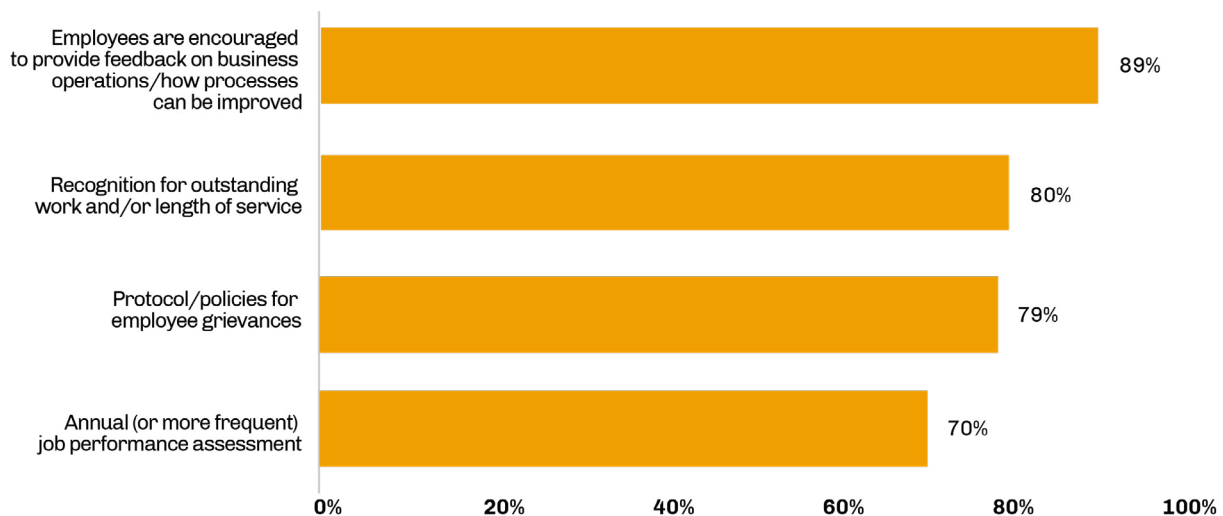
Meanwhile, almost 90 per cent of businesses said they offered skill development and training opportunities during working hours, making it the most common quality of work benefit offered. Fewer provided training opportunities outside of work hours or financial support for skill development, although the latter was more common among government and not-for-profit organizations. These were significantly less common among accommodation and food service and retail trade employers.

## Social environment, safety and rights

**FIGURE 14:**  
**Workforce Assessment of Social Environment, Safety and Rights**



**FIGURE 15:**  
**Employer Assessment of Social Environment, Safety and Rights**





According to both employees and job seekers, Grand Erie businesses boast positive social environments. An overwhelming 86 per cent of workforce members enjoyed and worked well with their colleagues, and slightly fewer felt supported by or were comfortable raising issues with their managers. This was reflected in employer responses too — 89 per cent of businesses said they strive to create an environment where feedback from employees on business operations and processes is welcome and encouraged. About four in five businesses also prioritized recognition for outstanding work or length of service. This was most common in medium and larger businesses.

Consistent with external research on workplaces, many women and equity-seeking groups — namely members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, people living with mental or cognitive disabilities and racialized people — reported experiencing harassment more frequently.<sup>14</sup>

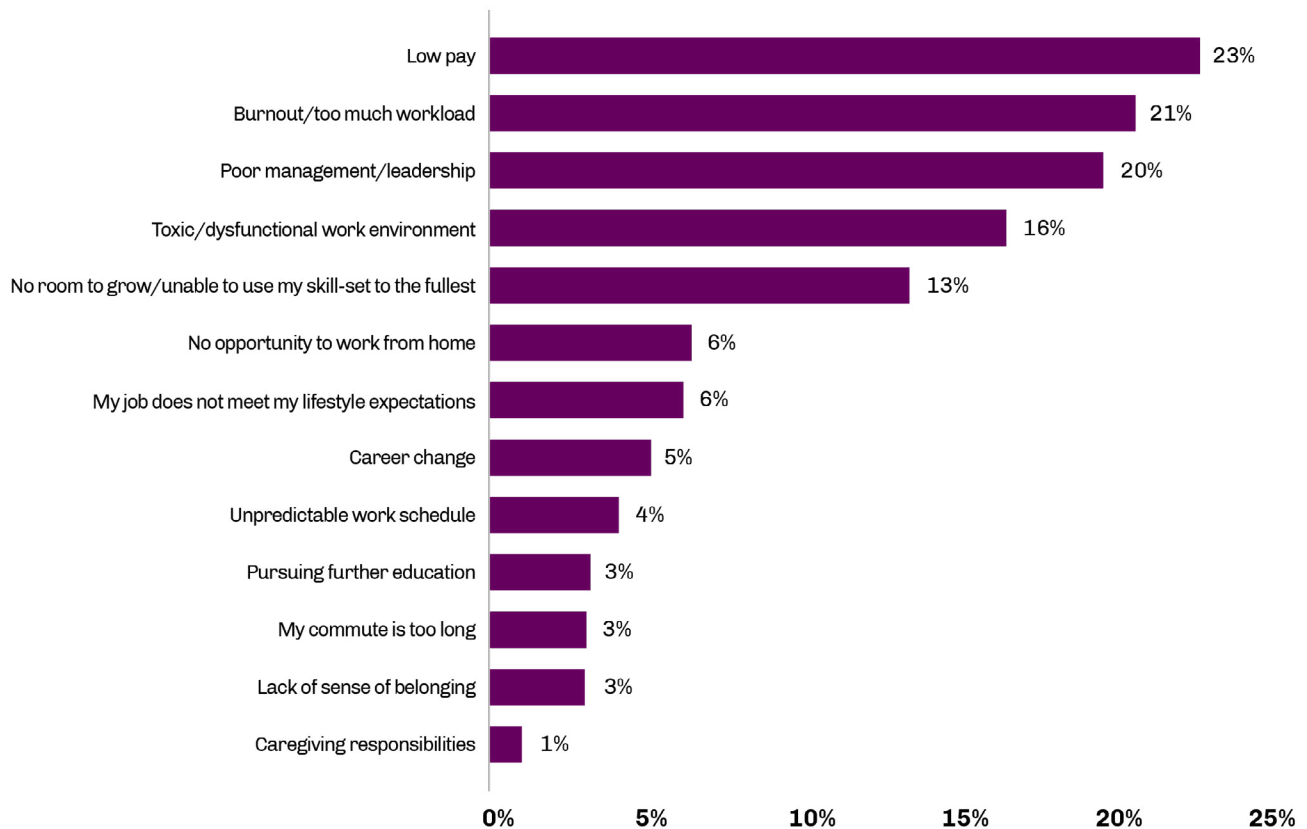
*“I feel that any employee needs to be able to feel comfortable enough with their bosses to be able to communicate that they are struggling with their mental health. If they need support, whether it’s time off, seeking medical help, or just getting some emotional support in a listening ear, they should be able to receive it without judgment or being looked at differently.” – Local job seeker*

*“It’s important to have a manager who listens and is empathetic to the hard parts of the job.” – Local employee*

*“Improving employee morale is our No. 1 HR priority. Improving the employee experience, whether that be for our current employees for retaining them, or temp workers that we’re hoping will be interested in applying for full-time roles. Keeping the employees that we do have happy and finding what makes them unhappy and trying to change that for them is very important to us.” – Local manufacturing employer*

## The workforce perspective

**FIGURE 16:**  
**Reasons Employees Considered Quitting**



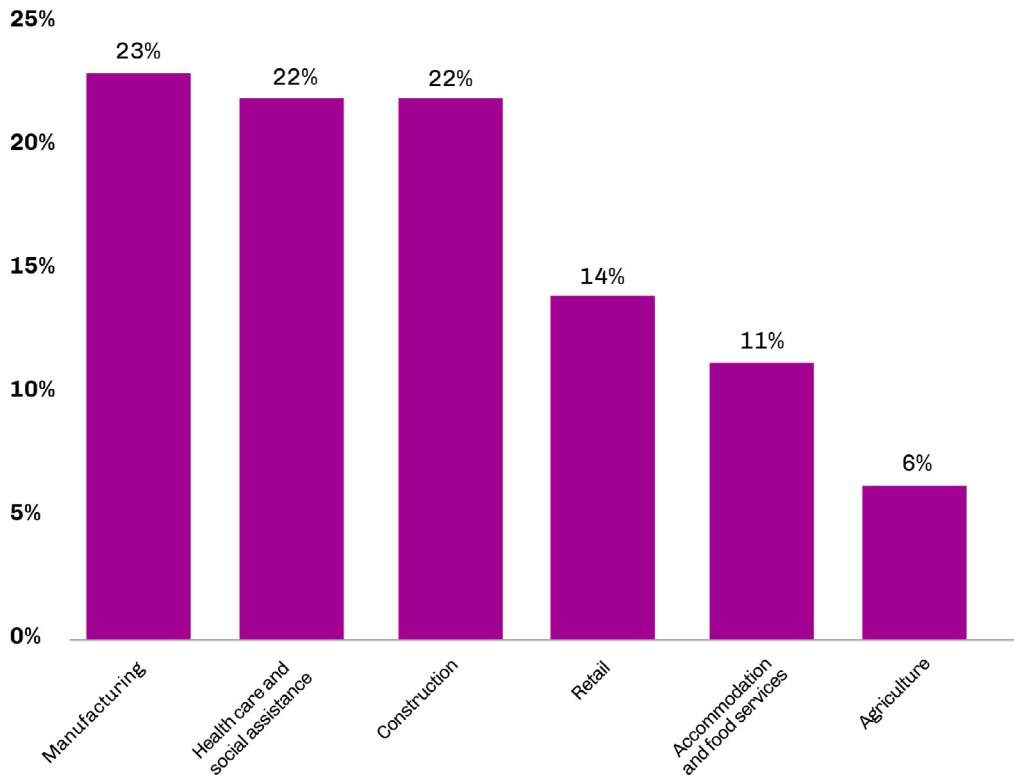
### Key Finding:

Given the reported decreases in commitment, dependency and work ethic, there is a need for employers to consider what else they may be able to do to support their workers. Meeting employees' compensation needs was deemed critical by workforce respondents, as was strengthening managerial systems to better support workers.

Roughly half of employees considered quitting their job over the past year. Few trends were observed by analyzing gender and age groups, but the study did find stark differences by educational attainment. Low pay was the primary reason cited by high school and bachelors' degree holders, as well as most equity-seeking respondents such as Indigenous persons, racialized persons, persons living with a disability and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Masters and PhD degree holders more frequently cited burnout, and those with a college diploma considered quitting largely due to poor management.



**FIGURE 17:**  
**Sectors of Interest**



When asked about sectors of interest, manufacturing topped the list, with about 23 per cent of job seekers indicating this was a sector they were looking to work in. For many men, older adults and high school diploma holders, this was the primary sector of interest. About 22 per cent said they were interested in health care, which appealed particularly to women, bachelor’s degree holders and students. Another 22 per cent expressed interest in the construction sector, including many youth and core-working aged adults, as well as those with a college diploma or trades certificate. Among the six sectors in focus, agriculture was of least interest, selected by six per cent of job seekers. This was followed by accommodation and food services selected by 11 per cent of job seekers, and the retail trade sector at 14 per cent.

**Key insight:**

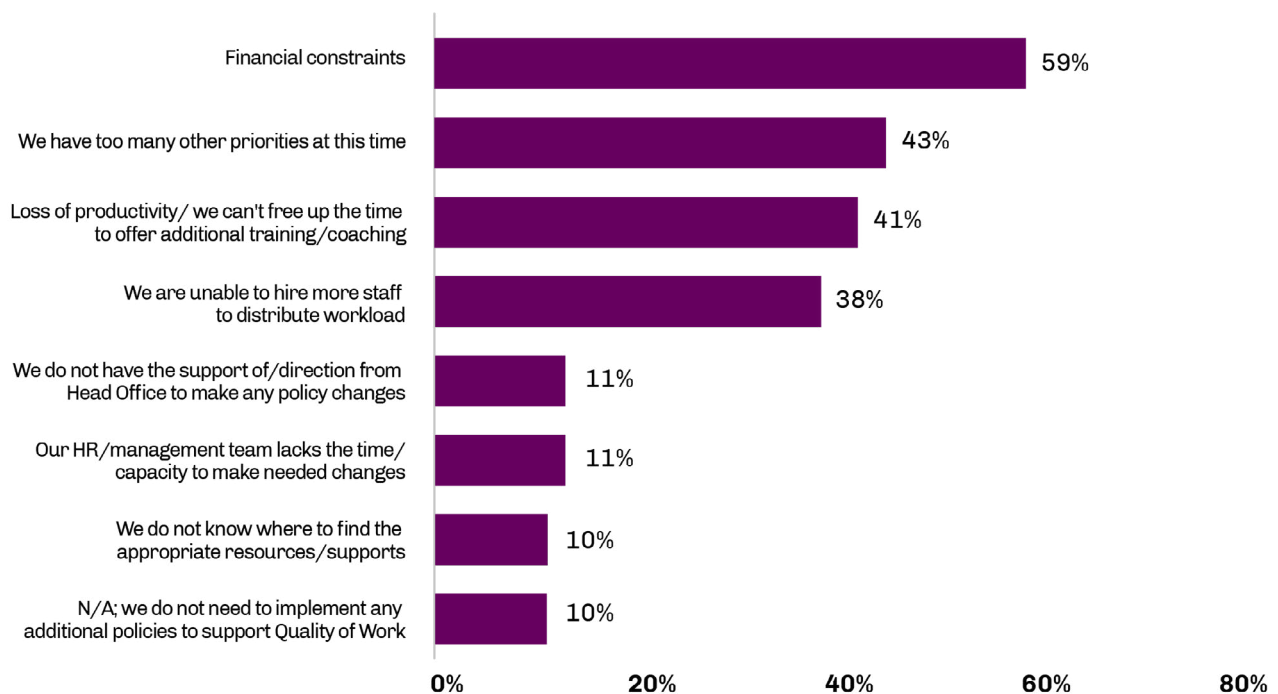
Job seekers are turning to sectors that offer better quality of work. Understanding these movements is essential to educational institutions looking to support job seekers with identifying transferable skills and developing other required ones. It is also key for employers in sectors experiencing hiring challenges who may need to integrate more quality of work supports to retain and grow their workforce.

An analysis of last sector of employment and sectors of interest revealed that the majority of those who were formerly employed in construction, health care and social assistance and manufacturing were keen on reentering their respective sectors. Among construction workers that wanted to make a switch, manufacturing was of particular interest, and for former manufacturing workers, transportation and warehousing was a key sector of preference. Former accommodation and food service and retail employees were much less interested in returning to their previous sectors of employment.

## The employers' perspective

*“We definitely are looking to support equitable hiring and making sure that our staff represent the clients that we’re helping. That is definitely considered in our hiring practices. It’s something that we’re continually trying to evolve and get even better at.” – Local health care and social assistance employer*

**FIGURE 18:**  
Top Barriers Faced by Employers in Supporting Quality of Work



Financial constraints were most commonly noted by businesses as the top barrier to supporting quality of work. This was particularly true of accommodation and food service and health care businesses. About 10 per cent, mostly smaller businesses, felt they did not need to implement any additional supports.

Most other employers acknowledged the impact of these labour market shifts, and noted that a key priority for 2023 was retention. To support this, employers were willing to consider integrating other supports for their workforce, namely:

- Skill development opportunity outside of and during work hours
- Annual performance or merit-based and inflation-based pay raises
- Four-day work weeks
- Recognition for outstanding work

- Financial support for skill development opportunities
- Flexibility in job design
- More than two weeks paid vacation from start of employment
- Mentorship and career pathways coaching and guidance
- Succession and advancement programs
- Job rotation opportunities



The variation in this list suggests employers recognize the multi-dimensional nature of job quality, and are interested in supporting it more holistically where possible.

To do so, employers indicated they required support from community organizations and government.

While survey results echo national research about significant and growing gaps in the workforce, this study found that contrary to Statistics Canada’s 2021 Survey of Employers on Workers’ Skills, the biggest gap is in soft skills, not technical skills.<sup>15</sup> More than one-third of employers interviewed noted that the availability and accessibility of soft skills training was critical to supporting job quality in the workforce, citing challenges such as an inability to deal with hostile customers, difficulties taking constructive criticism, and a lack of cultural competencies among their workers. Digital literacy and essential skills training came close behind, as did mental health training to reduce and address burnout, both for staff and managers.

Employers also indicated that more co-op opportunities, pathways and programming was a critical step to supporting work quality, noting that new workforce entrants often have a poor understanding of job demands such as long or inconvenient hours or laborious work. Community agencies also highlighted the benefits of expanding the availability and scope of peer mentorship and training opportunities and programs that promote community integration as a means of resident attraction and retention.

### **Key insight:**

To support workforce growth, employers agree that community organizations and governments must work collaboratively on broadening and strengthening the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of soft, essential and technical skills training programs, as well as mental health supports.

Beyond this, employers believed community organizations could help support good work by raising awareness about the training services they offer, as well as community job fairs through email or in-person visits to local businesses. Some also indicated that they could use help with writing job descriptions and business development coaching to navigate uncertain times through strategic planning.

From the government, businesses primarily asked for more accessible, affordable and frequent public transportation, and training dollars both for upskilling workers and for leadership training. Improved mental health supports, and subsidies to access these resources, was next on business’ list of priorities, followed by daycare and affordable housing. For many, the key to reducing burnout was tied to attracting more workers. This can be achieved through increasing and diversifying training programs in the community, reducing barriers to immigrants entering the workforce and campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of and benefits within sectors in decline.

## Implications and future directions

*Through surveying employees, job seekers and employers, this research project set out to deepen the local community and governments' understanding of how quality of work is perceived and experienced across various demographics, as well as to investigate what the local workforce requires to support enhanced working conditions and improve business retention.*

There were some limitations posed by the self-administered nature of the surveys, namely that some respondents may not have been entirely truthful and that the perspectives of non-volunteers may not have been adequately captured. Still, the data highlighted several pronounced trends that help us identify key points of intervention.

Results revealed both similarities and differences in quality of work offerings across businesses and workforce members. The study found that quality of work generally increased alongside educational attainment, and that larger organizations were more equipped to implement a multi-faceted approach to supporting job quality in their workplaces. That said, significant gaps were observed in the availability of adequate income and benefits packages and career prospects. The discrepancies between employers and employees suggests that there may be some opportunity to enhance organizational communication systems. Beyond that, the results highlight a need for businesses to strengthen their compensation structures and to invest in leadership training to increase managerial capacity to address and prevent burnout and foster positive, enriching work environments.

Employers are encouraged to consider practical ways they can improve working conditions for their employees, such as establishing longer breaks, quiet rooms for people to clear their heads, and informing staff of community resources available to support health and well-being. Given the complex industrial make-up of Grand Erie, sector groups and business associations can play a significant role in offering practical recommendations based on approaches that are more relevant and applicable to their respective businesses.

Community service agencies, local chambers of commerce and industry groups may be able to support by collaborating to create a series of workshops for employers on some of the themes detailed within this report. Government, community organizations and educational institutions also have a big role to play in the timely dissemination of information about identified workforce needs, and in developing appropriate programming, policies and partnerships to help employers retain and grow their



workforce. While businesses listed a myriad of supports they would find beneficial, an overarching theme across many of these responses was increasing the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of skills training programs within the community.

To achieve this, a deeper understanding of how to build soft skills is required. Local literacy and basic skills organizations and Employment Ontario have undertaken some innovative projects to address this in recent years, but more research is needed, particularly to understand demographic differences in how workers may be motivated to hone these skills. Employers agree that increasing experiential learning opportunities is a critical piece of this puzzle. By creating more openings and incentives for workforce entrants to volunteer, work in paid and unpaid co-op programs, and shadow or apprentice with experienced leaders in the community, organizations can help build the work ethic and lifelong learning mentality that many employers feel is lacking among workers.

Equally important is a need for detailed analysis on the kinds of mental health and wellness supports available in the community, what is offered by employers, and barriers and gaps within this system. Employers agree that well-being is closely tied to employee performance, but few have the capacity to identify and address signs of burnout. According to local businesses, this can be addressed through community and government investments in mental health and first aid training for both managerial staff and the general workforce.

The local workforce also highlighted a need for community service providers to improve marketing around the services they offer, expand the availability of supports such as job description development and strategy coaching, and centralize information on job fairs and recruitment strategies. To broaden the reach of such services offered and to attract and retain more residents, particularly newcomers, to the region, a need to focus on community building efforts was raised.

From a policy perspective, employers called for governments to work toward improving hiring both locally and internationally. For prospective international migrants, this takes the form of connecting sponsorship to permits that allow them to integrate quickly into the workforce with minimal training, subsidies to assist newcomers with re-training to meet Canadian qualifications, and easier pathways for temporary foreign workers to become residents. Within Canada, this may be facilitated through reducing apprenticeship to journey person ratios and marketing and awareness raising campaigns to draw the public's attention toward the benefits of working in less sought after sectors such as agriculture, retail and food services. Agricultural businesses also noted that altering zoning laws to allow residences on farmland would help with labour attraction by limiting the need for transportation to rural areas.

While many businesses stated that access and availability of public transportation, daycare and affordable housing were required to attract the residents required to work Grand Erie's jobs, most considered this a government responsibility. Many employers also indicated interest in training dollars or funding for benefits to increase job quality among their workers. More investments for community service providers for the programming they offer was also mentioned by employers interviewed.

The quality of work gaps and opportunities presented through this research appear complex and multi-faceted. But considering the diminishing optimism amongst employers and employees alike about the state of the workforce, this subject merits careful consideration. Grand Erie's workforce ecosystem is encouraged to think innovatively, develop a wide range of partnerships and commit to continuously learning and adapting as they tackle these issues.

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