

Project Insights Report

# Shaping the future of work in Canada: Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic



**PARTNERS**

EKOS



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## ☰ Executive Summary

This public opinion research helped build understanding of key needs and expectations among workers emerging as a result of the experience of working through the pandemic.

The research explored the extent of economic and job quality inequities between those who had access to remote work options during the pandemic and those who did not, as well as the widening disparity in job satisfaction between the two groups. Those who worked remotely were more likely to report better physical, psychological and financial health than non-remote workers.

Survey responses revealed dissatisfaction among many remote workers about the lack of consultation with them about return-to-work planning by employers.

The project also notes that a small but sizeable number of workers who did not work remotely are considering switching careers through a training or education pathway.

Since remote work is here to stay, and increasingly workers are seeking remote or hybrid work, policy discussions are needed to outline best practices for employees and workers.

### KEY INSIGHTS

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Two-thirds of the workforce in Canada worked from home for at least several months during the pandemic, and as of October 2022, almost 40 per cent still did.

- 2 Remote workers tended to be more highly paid and had achieved higher levels of education, were more likely to be in permanent full-time jobs and more likely to work in knowledge-related sectors of the economy (with the notable exception of health care).
- 3 Only half of workers surveyed said they have been consulted about their employer's back to work policies including location of work, and only 40 per cent of those who have been consulted were satisfied about their level of input into future plans.

## ► The Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic brought substantial disruption to a variety of workplace-related practices, and exposed wide inequalities of experiences across the labour force.

During the pandemic, the initial success of new technologies and practices meant that many workplaces could continue functioning during the most restrictive lockdowns.

As workers have adjusted to these arrangements over the longer term, they have become accustomed to some of the associated personal, professional and financial benefits. Now that many measures have been lifted and anxieties about COVID-19's spread have dissipated, many workplaces are attempting to mandate a return to the office.

These attempts are revealing fault lines between worker and employer preferences.



## What We Investigated

This project was designed to take stock of workers' attitudes toward their job quality, their psychological and financial health, their career prospects, and their worries about access to skills, training and mentoring in the workplace. The report also generated insights on workers' perceptions of multiple dimensions associated with job quality during the pandemic, including the social environment, trust in management, work-life balance and income.

The study used public opinion research methods, which is useful for capturing a variety of dimensions of attitudes and behaviours during specific moments. The research was conducted just as pandemic-related entry restrictions to Canada were being lifted.

Research questions focused on understanding:

- The demographic and occupational characteristics of those who did and did not work from home
- Perceptions of their experiences
- The impact on their mental, physical and financial well-being
- Preferences for working arrangements in the future.

The sample of participants was drawn from a randomly recruited hybrid online and telephone panel and the survey was fielded from Sept. 9 to Oct. 4, 2022.

## What We're Learning

Almost 5,870 Canadians who worked at any time from March 2020 to when the survey was delivered responded to the survey. Data was statistically weighted by age, gender and region according to the 2016 Census.

### **Characteristics of those with different working arrangements**

Similar to other research conducted during the pandemic, more than two-thirds of employees worked remotely for at least several months and 40 per cent were still working from home as of October 2022. Most of these workers reported a high annual household income and higher levels of education. Home-based workers were more likely to be in permanent full-time jobs and more likely to work in knowledge-related sectors of the economy, with the notable exception of health care.

### **Perceptions of job quality**

Working from home is strongly correlated with more positive work experiences and more positive assessments of job quality. Of the 14 measures applied, remote workers were significantly more satisfied than those who never worked from home. Between 70 and 83 per cent of remote workers said they were happy with the respect they received from co-workers, their independence, their ability to carry out work, job security, work-life balance and perceived meaning in work. Notably, non-remote workers were significantly less satisfied than remote workers about the trustworthiness of their managers.

### **Perceptions of psychological, physical and financial well-being**

Building on previous findings, remote workers were more likely to report having better well-being on mental and physical measures when compared to in-person workers. Remote workers were also significantly more positive about their financial future.

### **Perceptions of remote work**

Workers surveyed had largely positive views of home-based work, citing reduced commuting costs and time. Only a small minority of workers (13.5 per cent) felt that working from home was not productive. Significant numbers of remote workers however were worried about their access to career and skills development opportunities.

### **Future work preferences and plans**

The survey revealed some important fault lines between the preferences of remote workers and the policies of their employers. An overwhelming majority of remote workers surveyed prefer to work from home either all of the time (40 per cent) or most of the time (36 per cent). At the time of the survey, just over one-quarter of workers who had access to remote working options had been mandated to return. Only half of these remote workers said they had been consulted on issues related to working arrangements. Of those, less than half said they were satisfied with the input they have been able to provide. The research suggests that many of those workers may seek other roles if directed to return to in-person work full time.

### **Perceptions around career transitions**

A small but sizeable (15 per cent) portion of the workforce believes they will switch careers or enroll in a job-relevant education program. Interestingly, non-remote workers are more likely to be thinking about embarking on job training.

## **★ Why It Matters**

The report's many findings are relevant to current discussions around remote work preferences.

Employers contemplating changing working arrangements of their remote workforce will need to balance their internal needs with the changing preferences and expectations of an in-demand workforce.

Navigating those needs means understanding the underlying factors that are driving the attitudes of workers, as well as their expectations about how employers manage future decision-making. Employers who attempt to mandate return to in-person work could find themselves facing even starker labour shortages as workers migrate to jobs that allow them to continue working from home.



### **State of Skills: Quality of Work**

As Canada navigates continuing labour shortages in critical areas of the economy, policymakers and employers are looking for more effective approaches to recruit and retain workers.

## ► What's Next

This project is part of our Quality of Work series, which explores the range of dimensions that make up quality work and how these dimensions interact with current challenges in the labour market, including skills and labour shortages across sectors. A comprehensive strategy to improve quality of work should include providing similar rights and benefits, such as employment insurance or the right to disconnect, to workers in vulnerable employment. Additionally, a thorough plan should offer upskilling and reskilling opportunities for individuals seeking to advance their careers or transition into different occupations or sectors.

The Quality of Work series explores current practices related to compensation and benefits, employment security, work environment, professional growth and overall social environment for workers, employers and policy makers. FSC-partnered research initiatives address key gaps in policy and practice related to quality of work issues in the Canadian context. We are working with partners to generate insights across the country. They will be shared throughout 2023.

Have questions about this report? Contact us [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### How to Cite This Report

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