From Crisis to Recovery: How COVID-19 is Impacting Businesses in Thunder Bay (Part 7)

APRIL 2021 RESULTS

Thunder Bay District

COVID-19 Business Impact SURVEY

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Partners

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. They perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern communities. NPI operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. They seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

The North Superior Workforce Planning Board (NSWPB) is one of twenty-six Workforce Planning zones across Ontario, mandated through the Ministry of Labour, Training, and Skills Development to identify, assess and prioritize the skills and knowledge needs of community, employers and individual participants/learners in the local labour market through a collaborative, local labour market planning process.

The Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission (CEDC) is responsible for business development, business retention and expansion, entrepreneurial support, opportunity promotion, and collection and assessment of key business data.

They can help with community information and statistics, networking and referrals, assistance in site selection, and labour market data.

The Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce is a voluntary, member-driven organization of individuals and businesses working together to advance the commercial, financial, and civic interests of the Thunder Bay community. They pool resources to offer member learning opportunities, address policy issues, facilitate connections between members, and aim to bring businesses together to work towards common goals.

Executive Summary

As we all know, the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant impact on the Canadian economy. In response, a COVID-19 business impact survey was made available to employers in the Thunder Bay District to develop an understanding of how the pandemic is affecting business on aspects such as financials, workforce size, service delivery, and long-term viability.

The survey was open to businesses in the Thunder Bay District from April 20th to May 10th. The results from this survey are similar to those from the previous survey which was in the field at the end of January and early February. For instance, 33 per cent of employers that answered the survey classified the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects of their business as highly negative which is comparable to the results from the last survey (35 per cent). This suggests that concern regarding businesses' long-term financial prospects remain high and some believe they will have to close their business. In addition, the percentage of businesses that are experiencing reduced hours, reduced staff, and operating their business online are also similar to the results from the January survey.

In April, new questions were added to the survey to evaluate what percentage of the workforce has been vaccinated and how businesses are adapting their policies to address the blend of vaccinated and unvaccinated employees and customers. At the time of the survey, the majority of businesses that answered the question stated that zero to 24 per cent of their workforce was vaccinated and that they did not yet have policies in place. At the time of the survey, the province was vaccinating people 50 years and older. Since then, the province has opened up vaccine registration to anyone over the age of 12 in Ontario (CTV 2021). The recent increase in the vaccine rollout should increase the percentage of vaccinated workers in the next few weeks as more and more vaccines make its way into the arms of Ontario residents.

The findings that come from this survey are important because they provide community decision makers with an understanding of how businesses are faring during COVID-19, and how to then respond appropriately. As well, employers and organizations that have succeeded in finding new ways to operate could share this information with their entrepreneur peers, which could benefit the economy and the well-being of the community.

Introduction

COVID-19 has been felt all around the world, and Northern Ontario is no exception. As such, it is important to understand how COVID-19 has impacted our local economies. With this in mind, a survey targeted at businesses was developed in partnership by Northern Policy Institute, North Superior Workforce Planning Board, Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce, and Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission.

The results gathered from these surveys can be used by community partners and government to continue responding appropriately to COVID-19. As well, to get a better understanding of how businesses in the Thunder Bay District are adapting and managing throughout this crisis.

Results

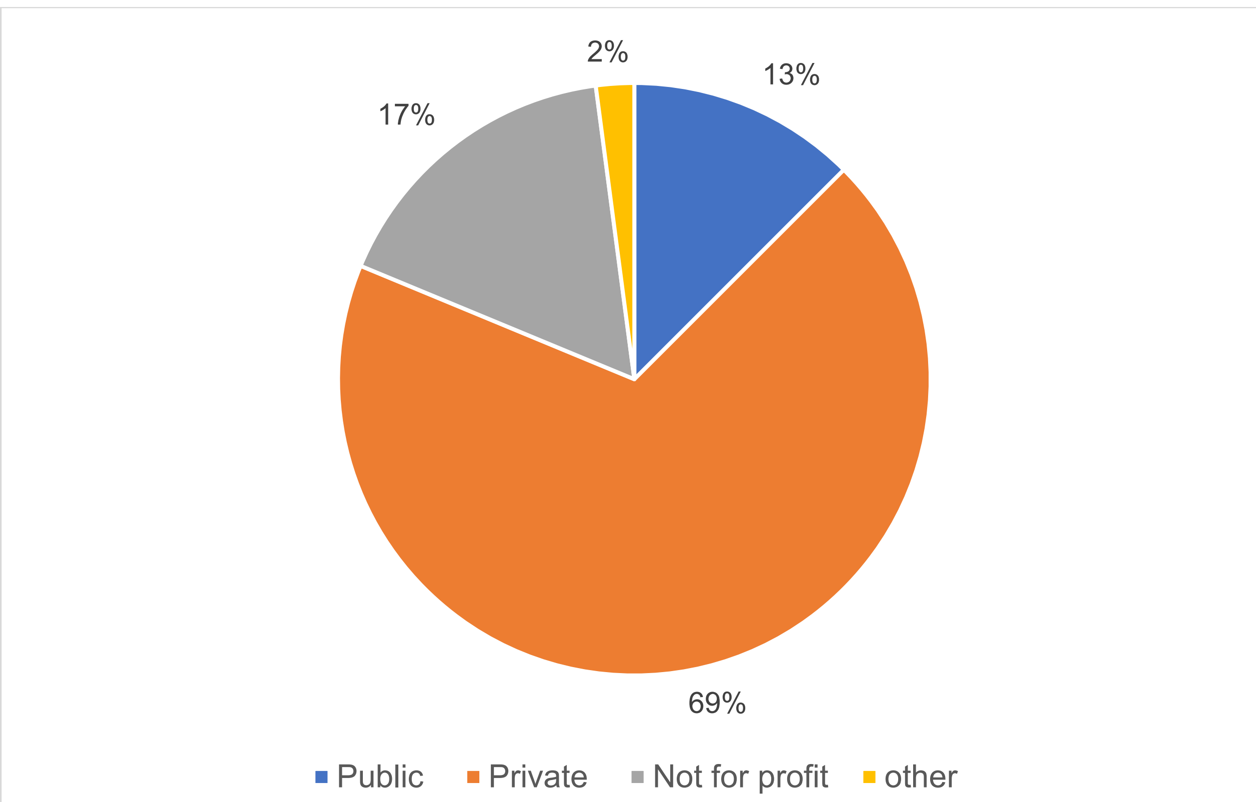
The results of Thunder Bay's Business Impact Survey for the month of April are summarized below. The survey collection period was between April 20th and May 10th, 2021. During this time, the cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Ontario increased from 424,911 on April 20th to 495,019 on May 10th (Government of Ontario 2021a). Ontario reached the peak of the third wave on April 19th, 2021 with 4,812 new daily cases (Government of Ontario 2021a). The Ontario government reinstated another province-wide stay-at-home order on April 8th which remained in effect until June 2nd, 2021.

Since the last survey, the province announced their new reopening guidelines – the Roadmap to Reopen. The Roadmap to Reopen is a three-step plan to slowly reopen the province and gradually lift public health measures (Government of Ontario, 2021b). The province will no longer be using the color-coded regional plan. The new plan is province-wide and based on provincial vaccination rates and improvements in key health indicators. The province will remain in each step for at least 21 days to allow for an evaluation of the impact of reopening on key health indicators (Government of Ontario, 2021b). Step 1 of the Roadmap to reopen can start once 60 per cent of adults have received their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. In Step 1, outdoor activities can resume with some limitations such as outdoor dining for up to four people per table, and outdoor sports and fitness up to 10 people (Government of Ontario, 2021b).

The district of Thunder Bay was one of the regions in Northern Ontario hardest hit in the second wave. However, the number of daily cases lowered significantly by the end of March and have remained low throughout the third wave. The Thunder Bay District Health Unit (TBDHU) reported 109 new cases during the time of the survey (Public Health Ontario 2021) and as of May 26th, 2021, TBDHU reported there had been 3,185 confirmed cases over the entire pandemic and 17 active cases in the region (Thunder Bay District Health Unit 2021). These numbers show a significant decrease in the spread of the virus since the last survey at the end of January/early February.
For April, the Thunder Bay survey had a total of 48 valid respondents. Approximately 37 per cent of employers are repeat respondents from the January survey. The calculation was done using the postal code provided in the survey therefore the actual percentage may be slightly different. Unless stated otherwise, all percentages are calculated based on the number of respondents to the relevant question.

68.8 per cent of survey respondents are private businesses, 16.7 per cent are not-for profit, and 12.5 per cent are public (Figure 1). The proportion of the type of organization that answered the April/May survey are similar to previous surveys. Since the release of the first survey in April 2020, the vast majority of respondents have been businesses/organizations in the private sector.

Figure 1. Percentage of employers that identify with the following type of business



72.9 per cent of respondents indicated that their primary business is located in Thunder Bay (Table 1). The proportion of businesses primarily located in Thunder Bay is very similar to the last survey in January/February. There was a decrease in the number of smaller communities represented in comparison to earlier surveys. This means that the results of the survey primarily represent what businesses in the City of Thunder Bay are experiencing and that the smaller surrounding communities are not well represented. This makes encouraging the responses from outside the City of Thunder Bay all the more important so our region has a comprehensive picture of the business landscape during COVID-19.

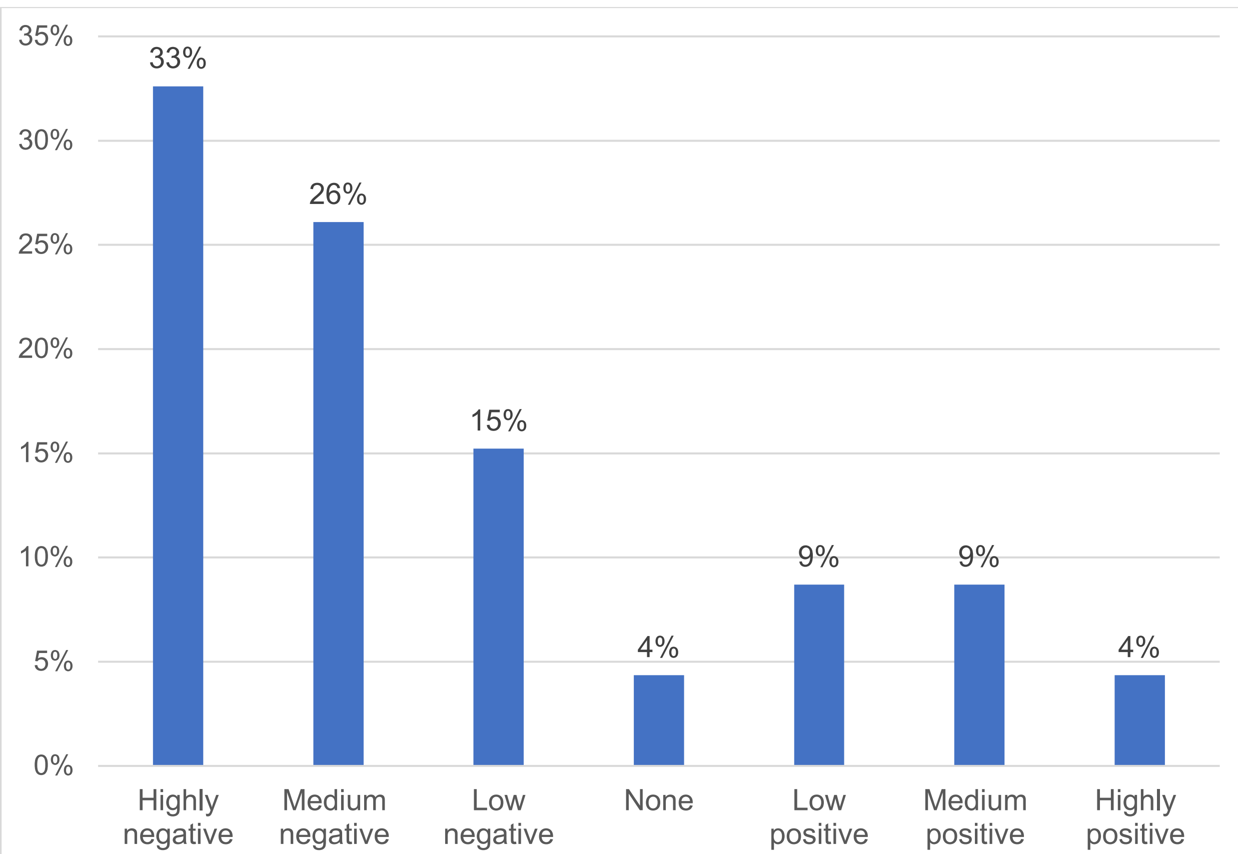
Table 1. Percentage of businesses that stated the region as their primary business location

Primary Business Location	Percentage of Businesses
Thunder Bay	72.9%
Kakabeka Falls	2.1%
Rosslyn	2.1%
Greenstone	22.9%

BUSINESS CONTINUITY IMPACT

In April, 33 per cent of survey respondents categorized the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to their business as highly negative (this could put them out of business), 26 per cent as medium negative (this is going to significantly impact their financials) and 15 per cent as low negative (this may impact their financials, but they are confident they can weather the storm) (see Figure 2). The proportion of employers that stated that COVID-19 could put them out of business was very similar to the results from the survey in January. The results from this question are also similar to the results from April of last year when the province was in the first lockdown. From the months of May to November, there was a gradual decline in the percentage of respondents that stated their level of risk as highly negative. In November 2020, 16 per cent of employers stated that COVID-19 posed a highly negative level of risk to their business prospects in comparison to 35 percent in January 2021. Since the last survey, another province-wide stay-at-home order was put into place. As a result, all non-essential businesses were required to close their doors to the public.

Figure 2. Percentage of businesses rating the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects to their business.



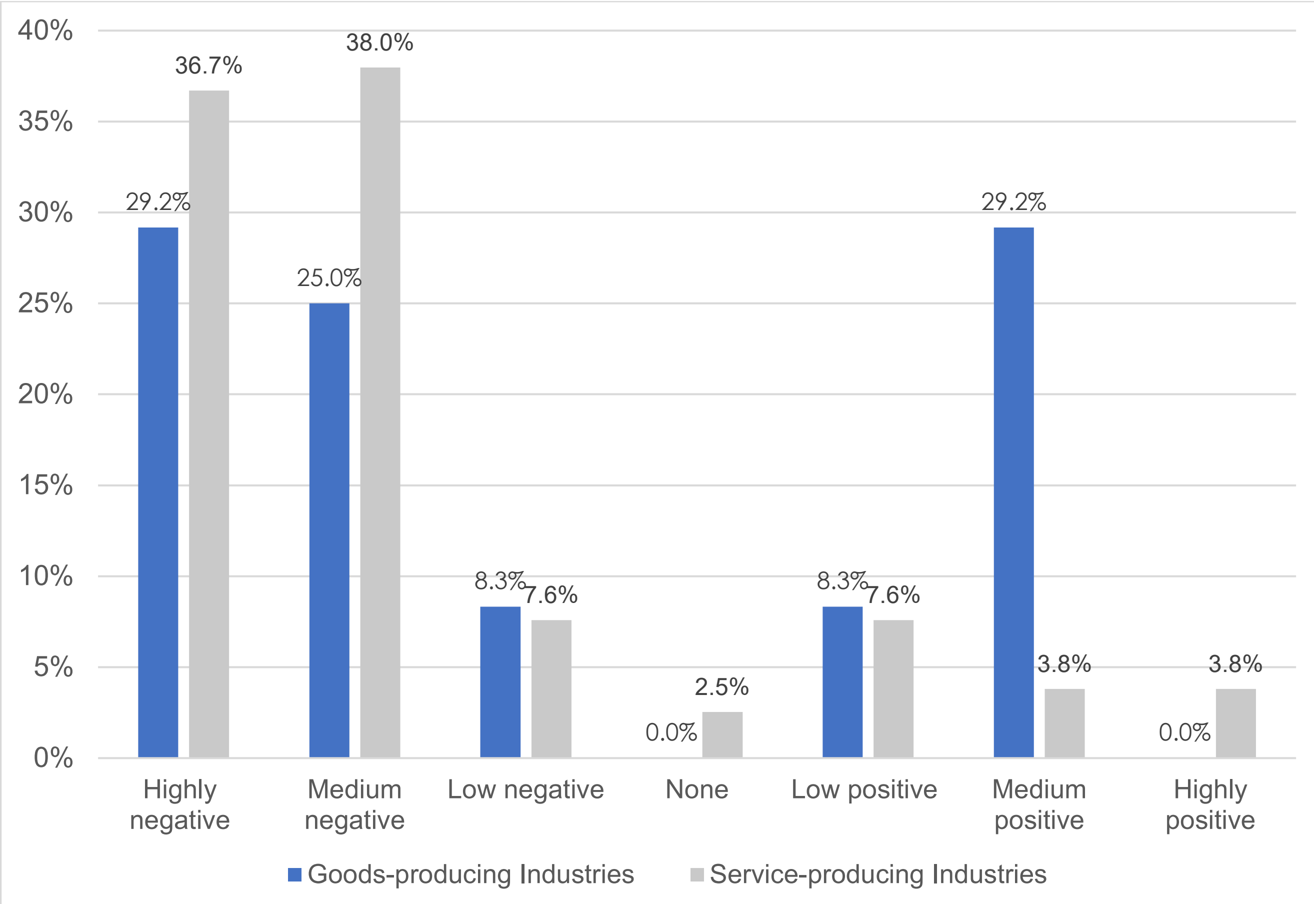
Note: Highly negative = this could put us out of business, medium negative = this is going to significantly impact our financials, low negative = this may impact us financially, but we are confident we can weather the storm, low positive = demand for our products/services has changed but is still sufficient to maintain operations, medium positive = we are seeing increased demand for some of our products/services, highly positive = we have added staff and expanded production to meet demand

The risk that COVID-19 poses to long-term business prospects by industry sector is illustrated in Figure 3. The business sectors were grouped into either goods-producing industries or service-producing industries to get a better understanding of which businesses are hit hardest by the pandemic (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2006 n.d.). Since the start of the pandemic, businesses across all sectors have been impacted in some way by the pandemic. However, data has shown that certain sectors have been harder hit then others. Generally speaking, businesses in the service industry, particularly those that are public facing, have been impacted the most by the pandemic.

The results from the survey show that a higher proportion of businesses in service-producing industries categorized their level of risk as either high or medium negative in comparison to those businesses in goods-producing industries. 37 per cent of businesses in service-producing industries stated that COVID-19 could put them out of business in comparison to 29 per cent of businesses in good-producing industries. These results also demonstrate that businesses across both category of industries have been negatively impacted and are at risk of either closing or their financials will be significantly impacted.

Overall, the service-producing industries have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. According to Statistics Canada, businesses in arts, entertainment recreation, accommodation and food and retail trade sectors are the most severely impacted by the pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2020). That does not mean that the goods-producing sector has not faced any challenges, of course. For example, sectors like manufacturing of consumer durables have been facing bottlenecks in the supply chain which impacts other sectors like retail. In addition, with the shutdown of many industries at the beginning of the pandemic, both exports and imports dropped to historic lows (Statisitics Canada, 2021). It is important to note that the goods producing industries include many types of businesses – some of which are more sensitive to changes in the economy than others. Industries like agriculture and food processing tend to be more stable. Also, good producing industries can be sensitive to different economic factors. For example, the manufacturing industry is sensitive to changes in demand, whereas the mining and forestry industry are sensitive to changes in international prices.

Figure 3. Percentage of businesses that classified the strategic risk that COVID-19 poses to the long-term prospects of their business by industry sector.



Note: Highly negative = this could put us out of business, medium negative = this is going to significantly impact our financials, low negative = this may impact us financially, but we are confident we can weather the storm, low positive = demand for our products/services has changed but is still sufficient to maintain operations, medium positive = we are seeing increased demand for some of our products/services, highly positive = we have added staff and expanded production to meet demand

In one of the survey questions, employers were asked “How has COVID-19 impacted your business’s/organization’s operations?”. Table 2 presents a breakdown of the percentage of employers that agreed with the provided options. Some important points to note include the slight increase in the proportion of businesses that have closed temporarily. In the past couple surveys the proportion of business that have reduced their hours, are operating online, have closed temporarily and/or have reduced staff has remained the highest amongst the options. Also, the results show the that the proportion of businesses that have closed temporarily decreased significantly in August-November 2020 and increased once again in January-April 2021. This is likely a direct result from the lockdowns and stay-at-home orders that have been in place since the December holidays.

These results also show that some businesses have adapted throughout the pandemic. For instance, when the province has required businesses to close to the public, the results have shown that surveyed businesses in Thunder Bay are operating more online, working remotely, accepting orders online, and delivering new services. For example, some businesses have become more tech savvy in order to communicate better with customers online via their web site or social media.

Table 2. COVID-19 impacts on businesses/organizations.

	2020				2021	
COVID-19 Impacts on Businesses/Organizations	**May (%)**	**August (%)**	**September (%)**	**November (%)**	**January (%)**	**April (%)**
Reduced hours	48	35	30	42	50	41
Operating online	35	23	27	29	38	33
Closed our business/organization temporarily	35	15	17	4	30	33
Reduced staff	43	29	25	36	41	28
Working remotely but continuing operations	35	12	24	16	27	28
Accepting telephone orders	24	22	14	16	33	26
We're having trouble recalling staff	N/A	15	27	22	21	26
Delivering new services	19	28	18	22	21	22
Developed new partnerships with businesses, non-profits or charities	4	6	9	11	8	13
Re-tooled to manufacture in-demand supplies	4	8	6	6	8	2
Increased staff	3	5	11	9	3	2
Closed our business/organization permanently	1	0	0	0	3	0
Increased hours	3	0	4	0	0	0
Other business innovations/changes:	14	18	20	9	17	15
No impact	1	11	4	15	9	4

Thunder Bay businesses were asked "If you have now returned to in-person operations, what have you had to go through to physically re-open?" Many respondents stated that they have followed COVID-19 protocols – frequently cleaning high touch areas, using hand sanitizer, purchasing PPE for their staff, administering screening questions and adhering to physical distancing.

They were also asked "If you had to deliver new services, please elaborate on the new services you had to deliver?" Many respondents mentioned that they are now providing services online through platforms like Zoom and Teams in order to provide services to customers while the business is required to be closed to the public. Groups that would previously meet in person are now meeting online. Some businesses also changed the products and services they provide to customers as a way to adapt to changes in demand and stay afloat throughout the pandemic.

Out of the businesses that responded to the question "What additional impacts from COVID-19 has your business/organization experienced?", the percentage that agreed with the provided reasons are below (Table 3). The results from this question have been relatively consistent over the past months. The additional impacts that received the highest percentage of respondents have mostly remained the same. Most businesses (72 per cent in April) have increased their cleaning measures in their offices. 65 per cent of businesses are having to restrict spending because of uncertainty, and 51 per cent have experienced a decrease in sales. This trend will likely continue until the public has been vaccinated and physical distancing protocols have been removed.

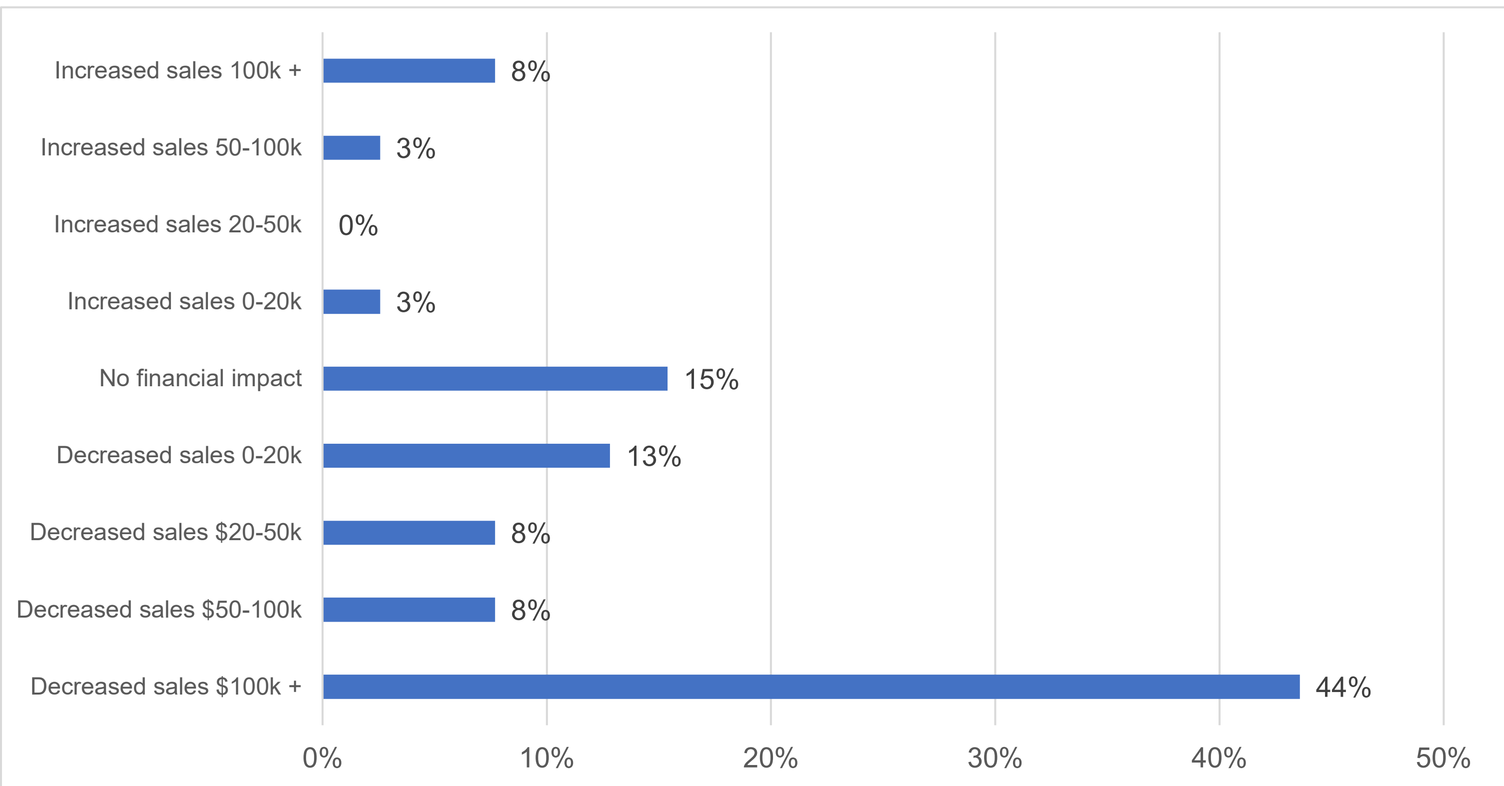
Table 3. Additional Impacts on Business/Organization

	2020				2021	
What additional impacts have you experienced (check all that apply)	**May (%)**	**August (%)**	**September (%)**	**November (%)**	**January (%)**	**April (%)**
We've increased cleaning, sanitation and/or protective measures in our offices/facilities	66	79	67	75	80	72
We are having to restrict spending because of the uncertainty	51	57	57	56	69	65
We are experiencing decreases in sales (or donations if non-profit)	68	56	48	42	71	51
Our business equity/value has fallen	43	44	48	40	47	47
Our supply chain is interrupted	24	39	33	33	22	30
Our debt load has increased	46	41	33	31	53	37
Our supply chain is experiencing bottlenecks	25	30	30	27	31	42
We've had contracts cancelled	35	23	23	25	25	30
We've had to cancel fundraising events (for non-profits)	22	15	10	21	32	23
We've had to cancel contracts	19	15	13	21	22	21
We are experiencing significant increase in consumer demand for certain items	11	13	10	17	5	14
Our business equity/value has increased	5	8	8	17	5	7
We are experiencing increases in sales	5	13	11	14	10	9
We've signed new contracts with other businesses	6	3	5	4	12	12
We've signed new contracts with government	0	0	2	2	2	5
We have excess perishable supplies	6	5	2	0	14	2
Other	6	15	8	0	10	12

A large majority of businesses that responded to this survey have been negatively financially impacted since the beginning of the pandemic (Figure 4). Out of the 39 employers that responded to the question, 44 per cent estimated that their sales/ income decreased by more than $100k. Eight per cent believe that their sales/income decreased by $50-100k, eight per cent said that their sales/income decreased by $20-50k and 13 per cent stated that their sales/income decreased by $0-20k. As shown by the results, the vast majority of businesses that were surveyed have been financially impacted by COVID-19 and have incurred significant losses in sales/income since the beginning of the pandemic.

Compared to the previous results, the employers that reported a decrease in sales by more than $100k has increased since the last survey in April 2020. This is likely due to the cumulative impact of the various lockdowns and stay-at-home orders that have been put into place since the beginning of the pandemic.

Figure 4. Percentage of employers stating an estimated financial impact that COVID-19 has on their business since the **beginning of the pandemic**.



As a follow up question, businesses were also asked to estimate the financial impact of the crisis since October 2020 (Figure 7). In the fall we entered the second wave of the pandemic and businesses were required to close once again to the public and have mostly remained closed since that time. Out of the 33 employers that responded to the question, 21 per cent estimated that their sales/ income decreased by more than $100k. 18 per cent believed that their sales/income decreased by $50-100k, six per cent said that their sales/income decreased by $20-50k and 21 per cent stated that their sales/income decreased by $0-20k. The results show that many of these businesses have suffered financially due to the increase in restrictions put in place over the past year. The results are also comparable to previous survey results. The percentage of employers that stated that their business has decreased sales by more than $100,000 have remained relatively constant since May of last year and few businesses have increased their sales over the past year.

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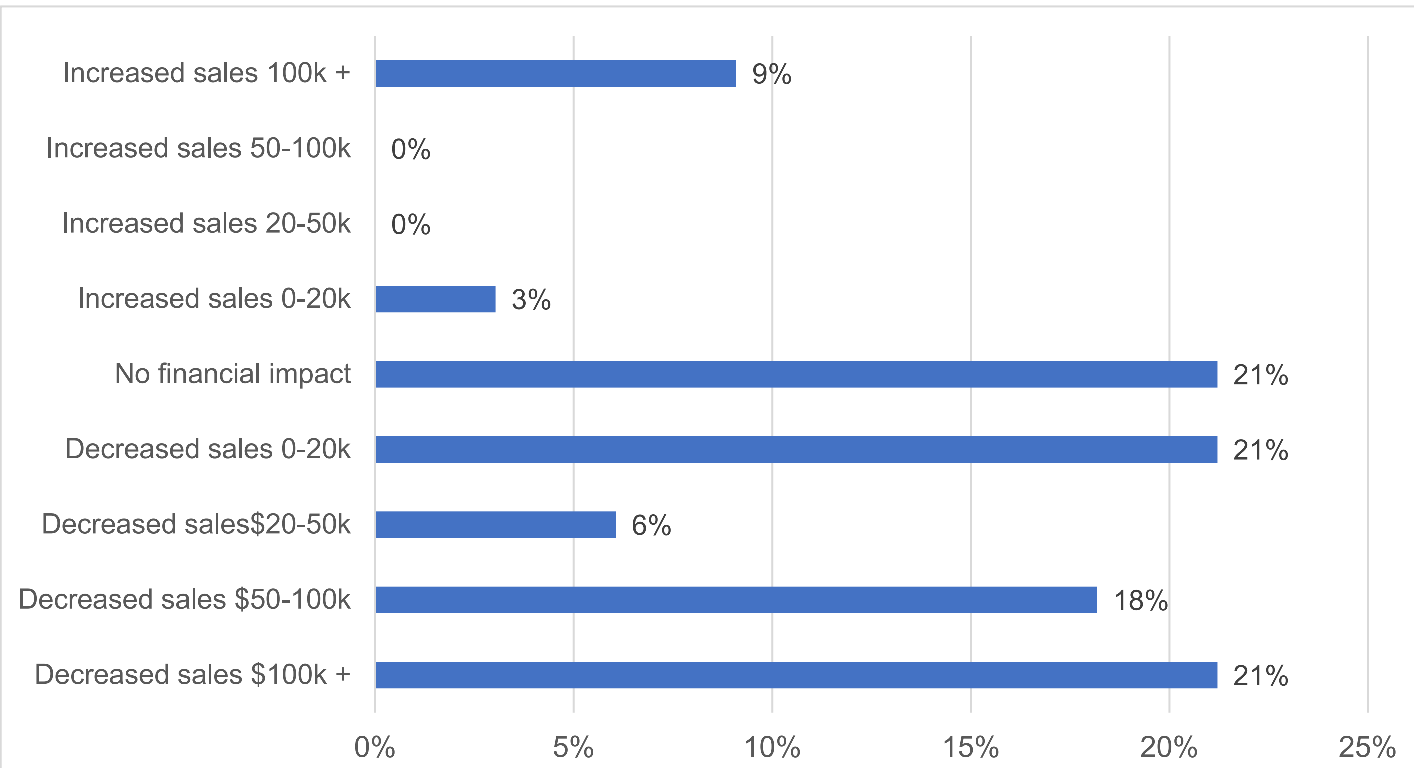
Figure 5. Percentage of employers stating an estimated financial impact that COVID-19 has had on their business **since October.**



The percentage of businesses that stated they have or are going to use the following federal and provincial programs are stated below (Table 4). The most widely used programs for April were the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (58 per cent), the Canada Emergency Business Account (41 per cent), the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (32 per cent), and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (32 per cent), These results are very similar to those from the January survey. The Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy remained the most widely used government benefit by businesses in Thunder Bay.

It is also important to note that many businesses who responded are not eligible for a range of benefits. Businesses that responded to this question noted that small businesses are often not eligible and have fallen through the cracks. For example, 54 per cent of businesses are not eligible for the Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program. The majority of businesses that have answered this survey (including past surveys) are small businesses.

Most of these programs are provided by the Federal Government except for the Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit which is funded by the Provincial Government and the Sales Tax Remittance Deferral Program which encompasses both provincial and federal programs.

Table 3. Percentage of businesses that stated they have or are going to access one of the following Federal and Provincial programs.

Have you or are you going to access the federal programs? If so which programs? Check all that apply	Yes	No	Not eligible
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	58.3%	13.9%	27.8%
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	14.7%	35.3%	50.0%
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	5.9%	44.1%	50.0%
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	32.4%	20.6%	47.1%
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	20.6%	52.9%	26.5%
Tax/Remittances Deferral Program	8.8%	58.8%	32.4%
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	5.9%	52.9%	41.2%
Business Credit Availability Program	14.7%	52.9%	32.4%
Canada Emergency Business Account	41.2%	35.3%	23.5%
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	32.4%	35.3%	32.4%
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	9.4%	43.8%	43.8%
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	29.0%	48.4%	35.5%
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	3.2%	58.1%	38.7%
Industrial Research Assistance Program	0.0%	54.8%	45.2%
Lowering Electricity Rates	21.2%	42.4%	36.4%
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	0.0%	45.5%	54.5%

The level of satisfaction that surveyed employers in the Thunder Bay District have for the Federal and Provincial governments' COVID-19 programs is shown in Table 5. 52 per cent of respondents that answered this question said that they are very or somewhat satisfied with the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), 33 per cent satisfied with the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and 33 per cent are satisfied with the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA). On the other hand, the benefit with the highest dissatisfaction is CERB. 34 per cent of businesses stated they are either somewhat or very dissatisfied with the federal benefit.

Overall, the results are consistent with those from the January survey. CEWS continues to have the highest level of satisfaction across the different federal and provincial assistance programs. Also, the majority of businesses stated they have a neutral level of satisfaction with the various government programs for employers. This may be in part due to not having accessed the particular program or potentially from survey fatigue.

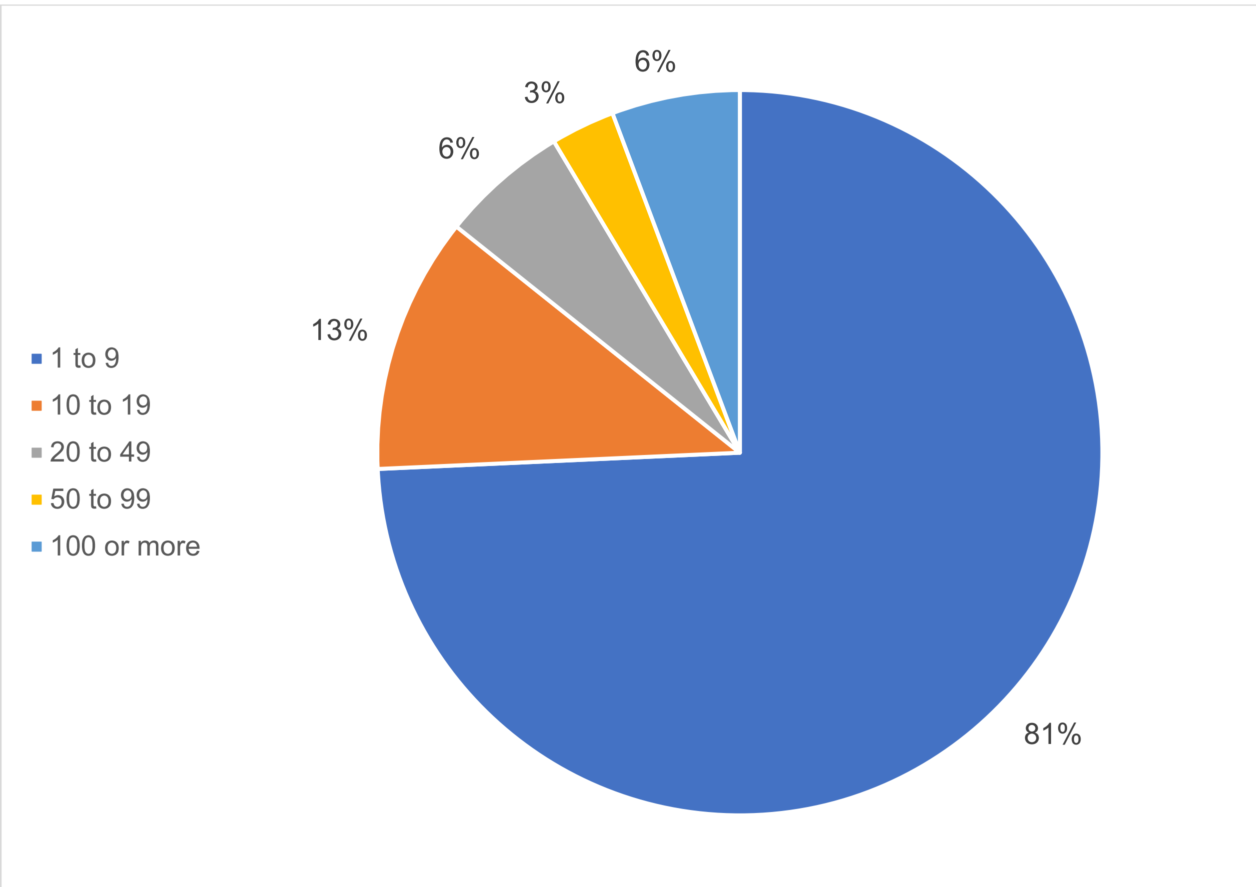
Table 4. Employer's level of satisfaction with the Federal and Provincial COVID-19 programs for employers

Federal COVID-19 Programs for Employers	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy	40.0%	20.0%	20.0%	5.7%	14.3%
10% Temporary Wage Subsidy	9.1%	15.2%	45.5%	18.2%	12.1%
Extending the Work-Sharing Program	0.0%	6.3%	81.3%	9.4%	3.1%
Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance	12.1%	21.2%	48.5%	9.1%	9.1%
Changes to the Canada Summer Jobs Program	6.1%	12.1%	66.7%	9.1%	6.1%
Tax/Remittances Deferral Programs	6.1%	9.1%	69.7%	6.1%	9.1%
Sales Tax Remittance and Customs Duty Payment Deferral	3.0%	6.1%	75.8%	3.0%	12.1%
Business Credit Availability Program	6.1%	6.1%	63.6%	9.1%	15.2%
Canada Emergency Business Account	15.2%	15.2%	45.5%	12.1%	12.1%
Insured Mortgage Purchase Program	0.0%	0.0%	81.3%	9.4%	9.4%
Canada Emergency Response Benefit	18.2%	15.2%	39.4%	15.2%	12.1%
Entrepreneurial Support Programs	0.0%	6.1%	69.7%	12.1%	12.1%
Regional Relief and Recovery Fund	3.1%	6.3%	56.3%	18.8%	15.6%
Industrial Research Assistance Program	6.5%	6.5%	74.2%	9.7%	3.2%
Employer Health Tax Relief	0.0%	0.0%	80.6%	9.7%	9.7%
Regional Opportunities Investment Tax Credit	3.2%	16.1%	51.6%	9.7%	19.4%
Lowering electricity rates	3.2%	0.0%	87.1%	3.2%	6.5%
Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility Program	3.2%	0.0%	87.1%	3.2%	6.5%

BUSINESS HUMAN RESOURCE IMPACT

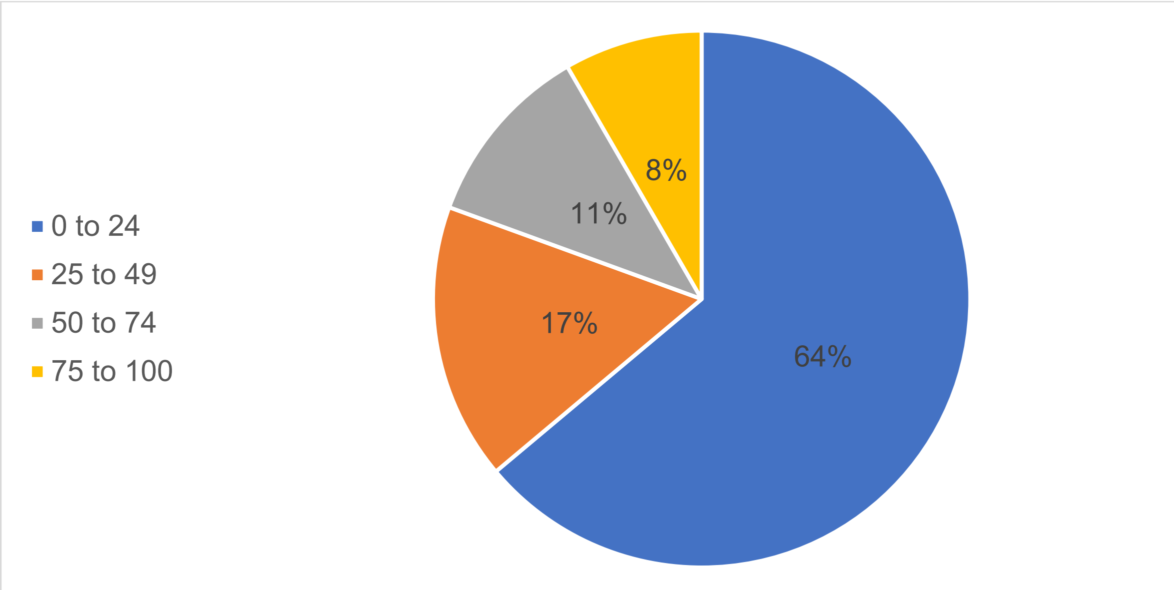
The percentage of businesses that stated having the following workforce sizes are found in Figure 6. In April 2021, the majority were employers with a very small workforce (1-9 employees). This includes businesses that have only one employee – the proprietor. 13 per cent of businesses that answered the survey have 10-19 employees, six per cent have 20-49 employees, three per cent have 50-99 employees and six per cent have more than 100 employees. This recent survey has a greater proportion of employers with 1-9 employees. Small business owners have consistently been the largest proportion of respondents.

Figure 6. Percentage of businesses that stated having one of the following workforce sizes.



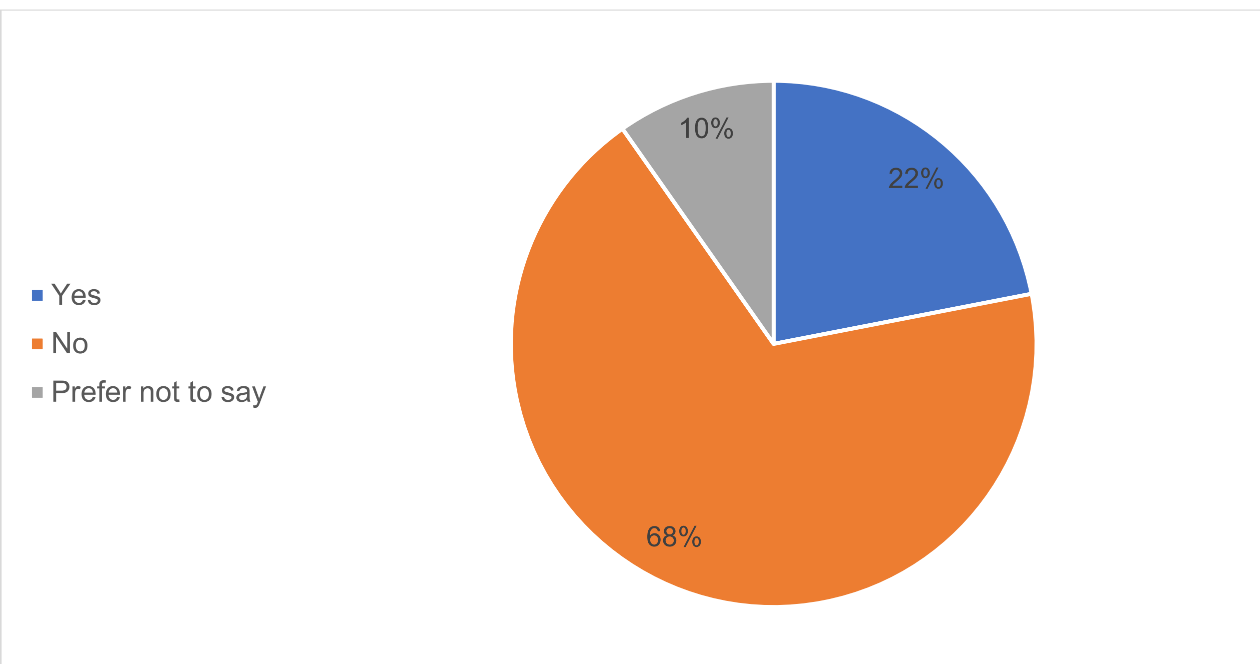
In the April survey, two new questions were added regarding vaccination. The first, businesses were asked "What percentage of your workforce is vaccinated? ". This was an open-ended question, but responses were grouped for analysis. Based on the results, the majority (64 per cent) of businesses that answered this question stated that zero to twenty-five per cent of their workforce are vaccinated. At the time of the survey, people 50 and older were eligible to book their vaccine along with people with high-risk health conditions and certain people who cannot work from home (Government of Ontario, 2021c). Now that the vaccine rollout has surpassed the planned timeline and all adults over the age of 18 can now register for the vaccine, the percentage of workers that are vaccinated should increase.

Figure 7. Percentage of Workforce that is currently vaccinated.



The second question was: “Do you have policies in place on how to address a blend of vaccinated and unvaccinated employees and customers?”. The majority (68 per cent) of businesses stated that they do not have these policies in place. This proportion will likely change as more people become vaccinated and the province starts to reopen. Once businesses can open again to the public, having policies in place to address a blend of vaccinated and unvaccinated employees and customers will become more pressing.

Figure 8. Proportion of businesses that have policies in place on how to address a blend of vaccinated and unvaccinated employees and customers.



Most businesses implemented measures to support/protect their employees during the COVID-19 crisis. The percentage of employers that stated implementing one or more measures to support/protect their employees during this crisis is found in Table 7. Based on the results from this question, 86 per cent educated their employees as to the risks and symptoms associated with COVID-19, and 78 per cent of employers implemented physical distancing measures in their business. Also, Table 7 shows a comparison of the of the April 2021 survey results to the results from first survey in April 2020. Based on these results, a higher proportion of businesses who responded to the survey have implemented the majority of the listed measures to support and protect employees during the crisis. With a full year of experience operating during a pandemic, these businesses have adapted and made changes where possible in order to support their business and their staff.

It is important to note that many surveyed businesses were forced to lay off staff because of the ongoing restrictions. Some have laid off staff because they cannot operate or are only at a limited capacity due to the province-wide stay-at-home order. Another employer mentioned that they have decreased staff hours and are not hiring any new staff despite a need because they do not want to risk new staff not following protocols.

Table 5. Percentage of employers that implemented the following measures to support/protect employees during the COVID-19 crisis.

Measures Implemented to support/protect employees	April 2020 (%)	April 2021 (%)
We've educated our employees as to the symptoms and risks associated with the virus, as well as prevention measures	48	86
We've staggered work hours for employees	13	44
We've implemented physical distancing measures in our business	41	78
We've required employees to work from home	25	42
We are asking employees to use vacation, sick or personal days during the crisis, and deferring layoffs	5	8
We continue to pay wages to employees that are off work for quarantine or illness.	7	25
We've closed our business/organization temporarily and not paying employees during closure	36	22
We've informed employees of the government assistance programs	34	56
We've hired or made employees aware of mental health and well-being resources	7	19
Other (please specify)	13	11

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE GOVERNMENT CAN DO TO ASSIST YOU RIGHT NOW?

For the open-ended question "What do you think the government can do to assist you right now?", the most common answers at the local level were to end the province-wide lockdown and return to the regional colour coded system. Some respondents explained that it is unfair to have to remain in a lockdown because of the number of cases in the Toronto area. Other common answers included tax relief, continuing the vaccination efforts, and providing continued support.

At the provincial level, employers stated similar answers to the local level. Businesses would like vaccines to be distributed in a timely manner, and the re-introduction of the colour coded system in Ontario. Other suggestions provided were to reduce hydro cost and taxes, and to provide further assistance in the form of grants, tax incentives, and wage subsidies. Some respondents stated they would like to see a change in leadership.

At the federal level, employers stated that the government should assist businesses by continuing to provide programs and support to businesses. Most of the comments provided were very similar across all levels of government. There are many responses that mentioned the importance of receiving and distributing more vaccines.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE GOVERNMENT CAN DO TO ASSIST AFTER THE CRISIS RECEDES AND THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY BEGINS?

Businesses in the Thunder Bay District were also asked what the government can do to assist after the crisis to help with economic recovery. Based on the responses, businesses would like continued support after the crisis in the form of grants and tax relief. They would also like the government to invest more in small businesses. Some respondents also noted that the provincial government needs to remember that Southeastern Ontario is not representative of all of Ontario. Businesses in Northwestern Ontario have different needs and challenges than Toronto.

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Conclusion

Overall, most businesses remain closed to the public for the third province-wide lockdown while this survey was out in the field. Employers have worked hard to adapt to this new reality by making changes to their business in order to continue operating while closed to the public. For instance, employers have adapted their business to provide new goods and/or services, or continue delivering the same services in new ways, such as operating online or installing a takeout window. However, due to closure of non-essential businesses, it is almost impossible for businesses to operate at full capacity. As a result, there is a high percentage of employers that view their level of long-term risk as highly negative and have either already, or are at risk of, closing their business.

Business have relied on the continued support from the provincial and federal governments and other organizations. The survey respondents would like the government to continue providing support to businesses and would like a return to the regional colour coded system instead of being lumped together with Southern Ontario. The employers who responded to this survey have indicated that governments should continue vaccine rollout efforts to get as many Canadians vaccinated as soon as possible. The vaccine will be a key component for enabling businesses to re-open to the public at full capacity. As of May 18th, 2021 all adults over the age of 18 register for the vaccines. Hopefully with the continued rollout of vaccine and the warmer weather ahead, businesses will be able to re-open and people will be able to safely get together once again.

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