



Sustainable Employment in Niagara:
Skills, Challenges, and Opportunities for Stable
Employment



Introduction

In an effort to better understand the skills, challenges, and opportunities that exist within the current state of Niagara's retail trade labour force, we distributed two workforce-focused surveys which resulted in a total of 244 respondents. The first survey was distributed to a wide audience in Niagara and resulted in a total of 191 responses. The second survey was distributed to clients in EO funded organizations and resulted in a total of 53 responses.

The first section of this report identifies respondents' demographics. Following this, we outline the current skills respondents indicated that they have, and whether they are willing and interested in developing their skills further. The third section focuses on respondents' employment challenges in an effort to identify barriers to employment and skills development.

The survey data show that respondents are generally interested in pursuing skills training opportunities, though they are more interested if they believe that this training will lead to a promotion or job opportunity. Barriers to employment include a lack of job postings that are within their field of employment, geographically accessible, and pay an acceptable wage, as well as a lack of viable transportation access and job security. Key barriers to seeking training include a lack of time outside of respondents' working hours and a lack of knowledge on which skills they should be focused on developing.

Throughout this report we supplement this workforce survey data with insights from consultations with local retail employers and economic development officers. These consultations identified that businesses are asking employees to handle greater responsibility during the pandemic (i.e., roles are moving away from being strictly a cashier or customer support and into a more all-encompassing comprehensive *brand ambassador*-style role). At the same time, employers are facing many of the same struggles that they did prior to the pandemic; most notably, a lack of available labour supply and the impression that the current pool of available candidates do not have the requisite skills needed to succeed in the workforce.

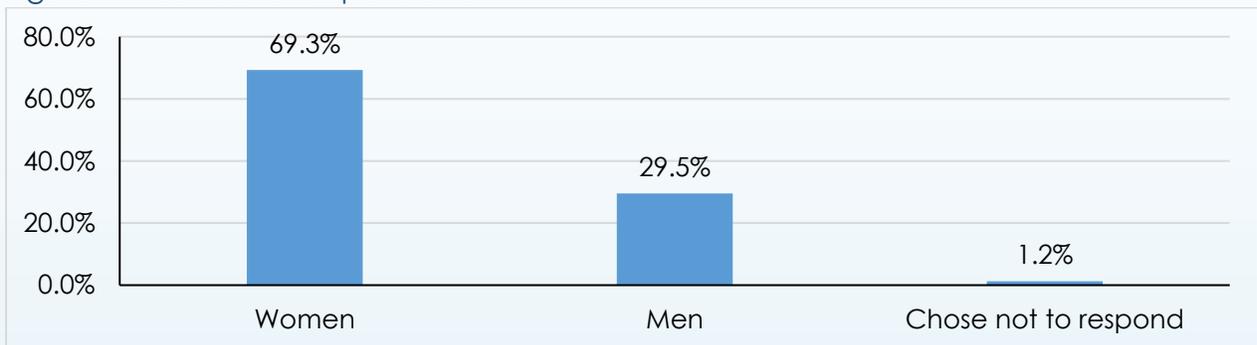
Considering these challenges, this report suggests that employees and employers may benefit from transitioning the employee-employer relationship away from a transactional nature to a more robust long-term partnership. It is argued that if the current transactional relationship remains then the current barriers will continue to exist for Niagara's workforce.

Section 1. Survey Demographics

To assess the current state of Niagara's labour market and barriers to participation, two separate surveys were undertaken. Survey 1 was distributed widely to a range of Niagara residents and received 191 responses. Survey 2 was distributed to clients within the Employment Ontario (EO) network and received 53 responses.

Fifteen of the total 244 respondents identified their industry of employment as retail trade; complete industry data are presented in Appendix A. Respondents to each survey were able to skip questions they did not feel comfortable responding to and, as such, the number of respondents per question vary. Of the 244 respondents, 169 (69.3% of all respondents) were women, 72 (29.5%) were men, and 3 (1.2%) chose not to disclose their gender (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Gender of respondents



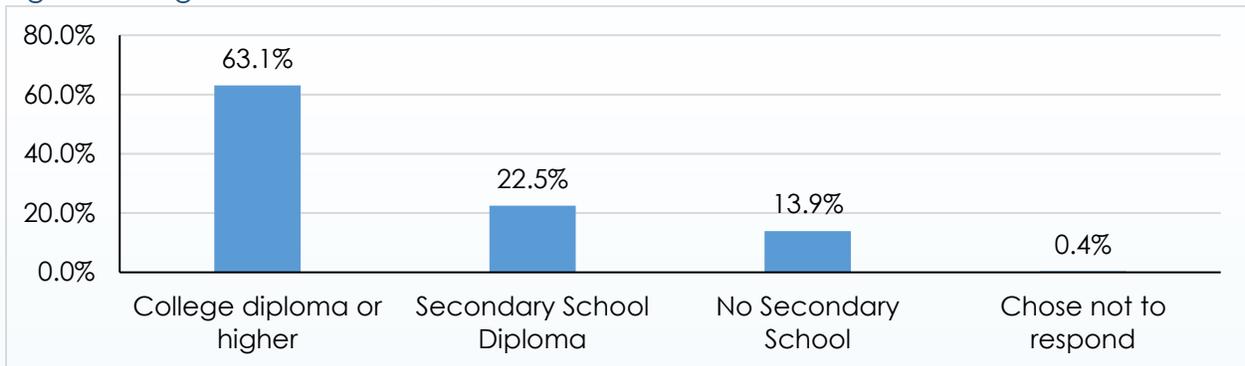
The most common age group for respondents was 60+ years of age (12.7% of respondents). This was followed by individuals under 18 (11.5%) and individuals age 40-44 (11.5%). Complete age data is presented in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Percentage age breakdown of survey respondents



A majority of respondents (63.1%) had obtained a college diploma or higher level of education, 55 (22.5%) had completed high school, while 34 (13.9%) had not completed high school (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 Highest level of educational attainment



Approximately 63.5% of survey respondents were currently employed (155 individuals) compared to 89 (36.5%) respondents who were not employed. Of the 89 individuals who were not employed at the time of the survey, 77.5% clarified that they were looking for work, while 3.4% stated they were not currently looking for work.

We also assessed several questions to address barriers that may be experienced by varying demographic groups. Seven respondents (9.3%) noted that they have a disability while 67 (89.3%) do not, and one (1.3%) chose not to disclose this information.

Seventy-five respondents were asked about their status as a visible minority. Of those respondents, 12.0% identified as a visible minority. Additionally, 53 respondents were asked whether they were a newcomer to Canada (i.e., had come to Canada during or after 2015); 5.7% responded that they were newcomers to Canada.

Section 2. Workforce opportunities and skills development

Survey 2, distributed to EO clients, asked respondents a number of questions on workplace opportunities including:

- Whether they believed there were promotion opportunities at their current employer,
- Their interest in potential promotions, and
- Their comfort level with the tasks assigned to them in their current roles.

Further developing these findings, we asked about training opportunities including:

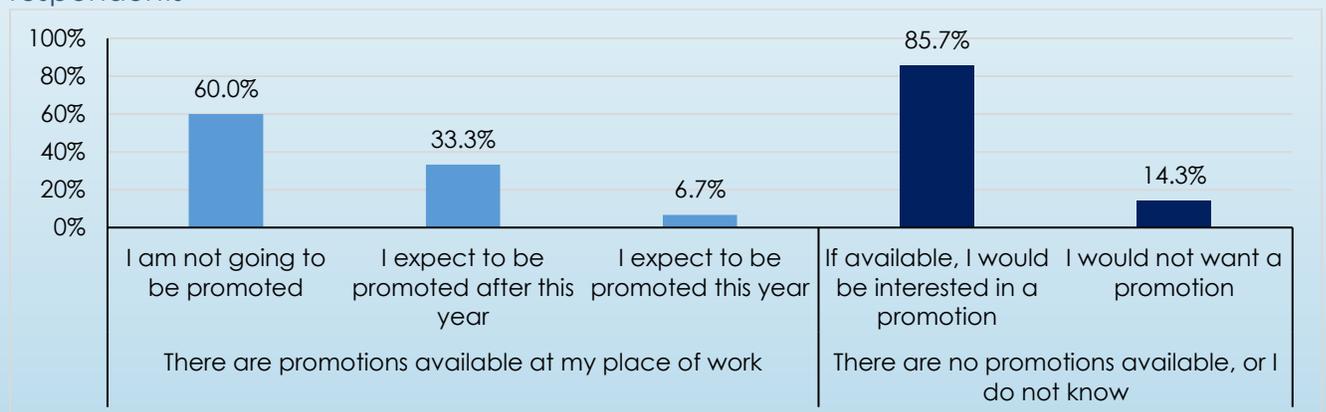
- Their willingness and interest to undertake skills development training,
- Which skills they would be interested in improving, and
- What barriers exist that hinder them from undertaking training.

Employee skills and promotion opportunities

Thirty-six respondents were employed and willing to speak to their perceptions of promotion opportunities at their current place of work. Responses were split regarding potential promotion opportunities at their current place of employment, as 15 (41.7%) respondents said “yes, there are opportunities”, 16 (44.4%) responded “no, there are no opportunities”, and 5 responded that they did not know.

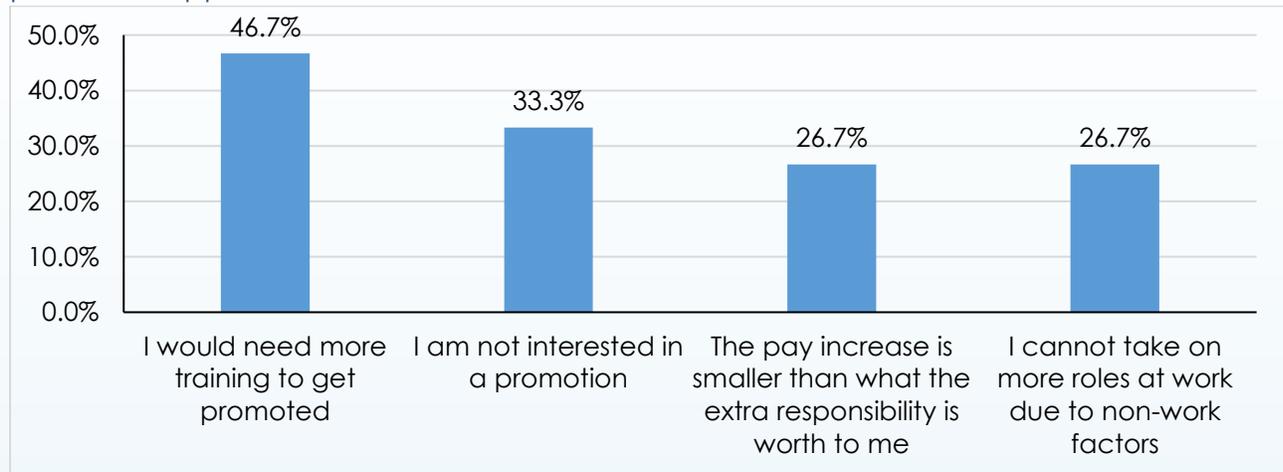
Figure 2.1 presents the complete data regarding promotion opportunities. Of the 21 respondents who either believed no promotion opportunities were available or did not know, only three (14.3%) were uninterested in a promotion. Of the 15 respondents who believed that their place of employment offers opportunities for promotion, nine (60.0%) did not believe that they would be eligible for promotion, five (33.3%) believed that they would be offered a promotion after this year, and one (6.67%) believed they would receive a promotion offer within one year.

Figure 2.1 Interest and expectation for promotion opportunities of employed respondents



In addition to the above sentiments, other barriers may exist that preclude a person from applying for or accepting a promotion offer. The 15 individuals that indicated their employers offer promotions were asked to provide insight on what **personal barriers** there are to getting a promotion. The most common barrier was that individuals felt they needed more training to get promoted (see Figure 2.2).

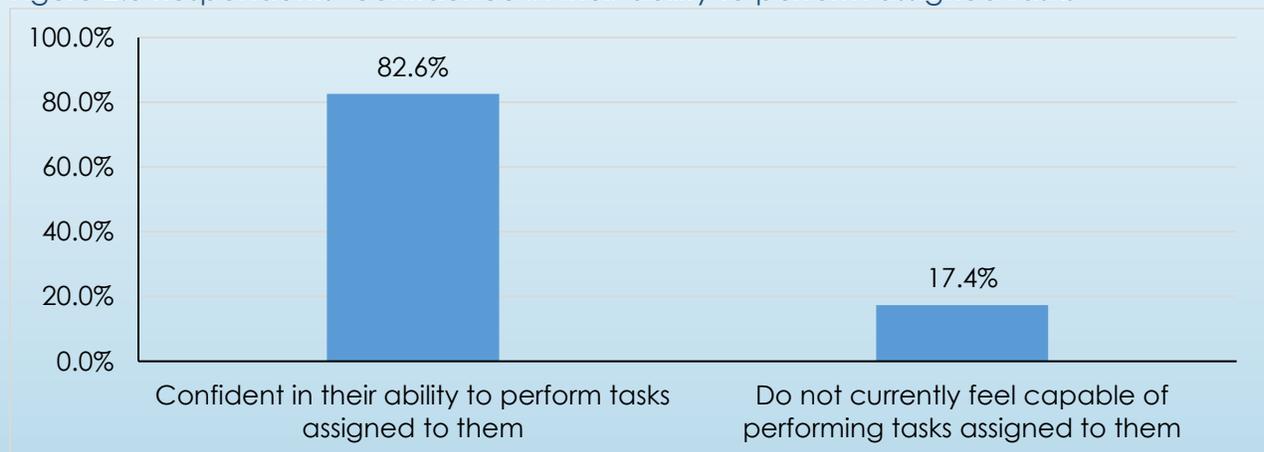
Figure 2.2 Barriers to promotion among respondents whose current employer offered promotion opportunities



Of the respondents who felt they would need more training to be qualified for promotion opportunities, five (71.4%) felt they were capable of doing all the tasks assigned to them in their current role; the other two respondents chose not to respond to the question.

This confidence in their ability to perform the tasks assigned to them was consistent with the overall sample. In total, 82.6% of all survey respondents felt confident they could perform all the tasks at their job or in previous jobs they have held (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Respondents' confidence in their ability to perform assigned tasks



Interest in training opportunities

A majority of respondents were interested in undertaking training opportunities; in total, 27 of 46 (58.7%) respondents were interested in training at least one skill while 19 (41.3%) respondents did not want to undertake additional training. Six respondents did not answer the question. We sought to further understand whether interest in training opportunities was influenced by the respondents' belief in their ability to benefit from the training, whether through employment or a new employment opportunity.

We found that approximately 54.2% of Individuals who were **employed but did not believe there were promotions available (or were unaware of any potential opportunities)** were not interested in training opportunities. This contrasts the 27.3% of respondents who were **employed with available workplace promotions or were unemployed** that were not interested in training (see Figure 2.4).

These data suggest that if employers hope to encourage a more skilled workforce and/or want to invest in training for their employees, they may be well served by publicizing and making available promotion opportunities.

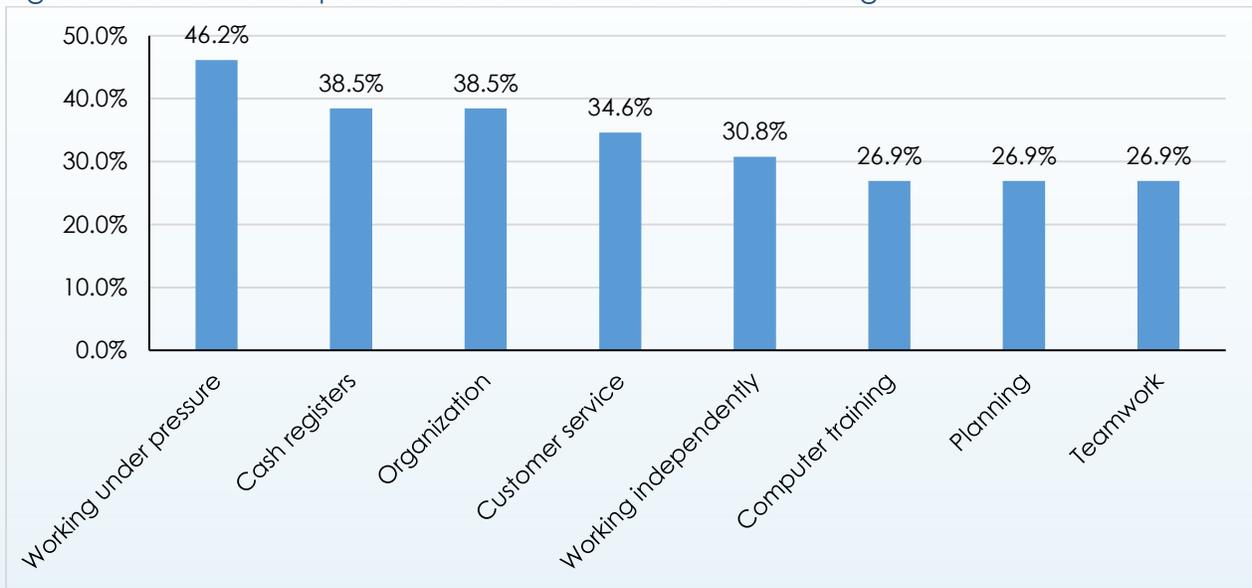
Figure 2.4 Interest in training opportunities by employment status and possibility for promotion



Skills training

Of the 27 respondents who noted they were interested in training at least one skill, responses varied widely in terms of what skills were of interest. The most commonly desired training was for *working under pressure* (46.2% of respondents). As can be seen in Figure 2.5, each skill was selected by at least 7 survey respondents (note that respondents could select multiple skills they were interested in training).

Figure 2.5 Skills that respondents are most interested in training



Together these data suggest that although many employees are confident in their skillset relative to their current role, they are also interested in additional training for a variety of other skills. Further, skills training interest was focused on interpersonal skills rather than technical skills. However, there are a number of reasons that prevent employees from seeking out training; these challenges are explored in Section 3.

Employer outlook regarding labour force skills

While the above data provide insights from an employee perspective, NWPB also undertook consultations with local employers and economic development offices to gain insight on skills from employers. These consultations made clear that the responsibilities businesses ask employees to handle are growing during the pandemic (i.e., roles are moving away from being strictly a cashier or customer support and into a more all-encompassing comprehensive *brand ambassador*-style role).

Given the other constraints employers are facing during the pandemic (e.g., restrictions on the number of staff allowed in stores and reduced store hours), businesses have tended to employ fewer staff, relying on their best employees to fill larger roles. However, this changing dynamic regarding job responsibilities during the pandemic begs the question of what retail sector jobs will entail when the pandemic is over. In the event that roles within the retail sector maintain this increased level of responsibility after the pandemic, it may be that additional staff training is needed.

The above survey and consultation data show that employees often believe that they do not have the appropriate level of introductory soft skill development to warrant a promotion. Prior employer consultations also indicate that some of the top reasons that jobs are hard-to-fill are due to lack of qualifications; and lack of motivation, attitude, or interpersonal abilities of applicants.

Given these findings, there appears to be an appetite and opportunity for training services that focus on strengthening interpersonal skills (e.g., *teamwork, organizational skills, or planning*). The data above further suggest that this training would help employees feel more confident in their ability to warrant a promotion.¹ Moreover, employees appear to be significantly more likely to be interested in developing their skills if they feel it will lead to a better working opportunity.

¹ For a list of training resources please see Appendix B.

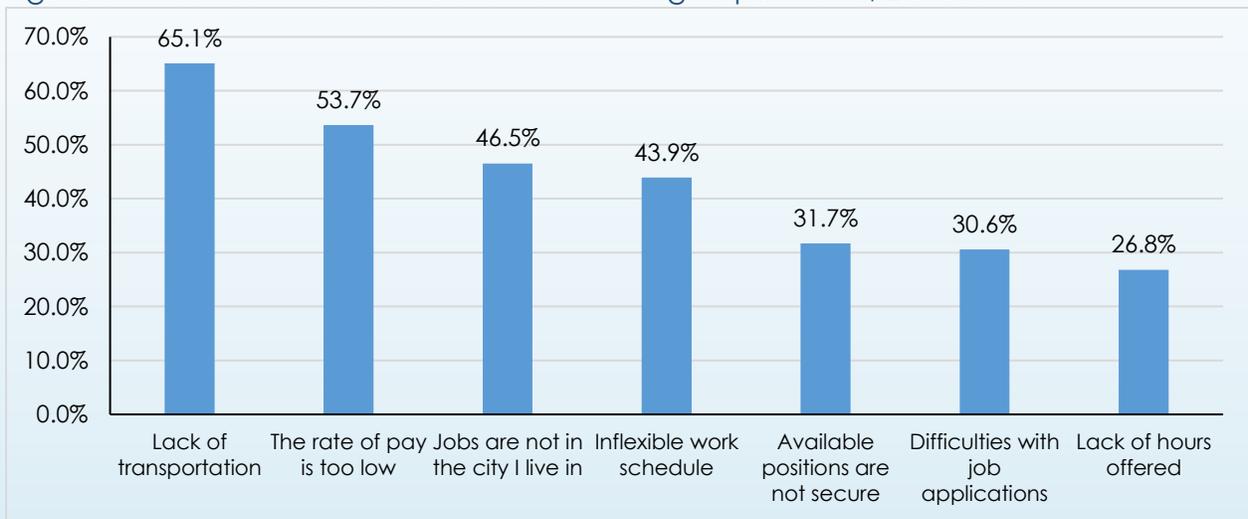
Section 3. Barriers to sustained employment in Niagara

In assessing the realities of employment in Niagara, we asked respondents to both workforce surveys what barriers there are to finding more stable, long-term, gainful employment. This section presents these data through the lens of barriers preventing respondents from 1) securing suitable employment and 2) pursuing skills development.

Barriers to work

For those respondents who were looking for work, the majority felt there was at least one significant barrier to finding meaningful employment. Specifically, among EO clients, over half (65.1%) of respondents noted that a lack of transportation was a major barrier. Approximately 53.7% indicated that the rate of pay is too low among jobs to which they are applying. Respondents also indicated challenges related to the rigidity and uncertainty of scheduled shifts, job security and the long-term stability of employment opportunities. Figure 3.1 presents the seven barriers selected by more than 20% of survey respondents.²

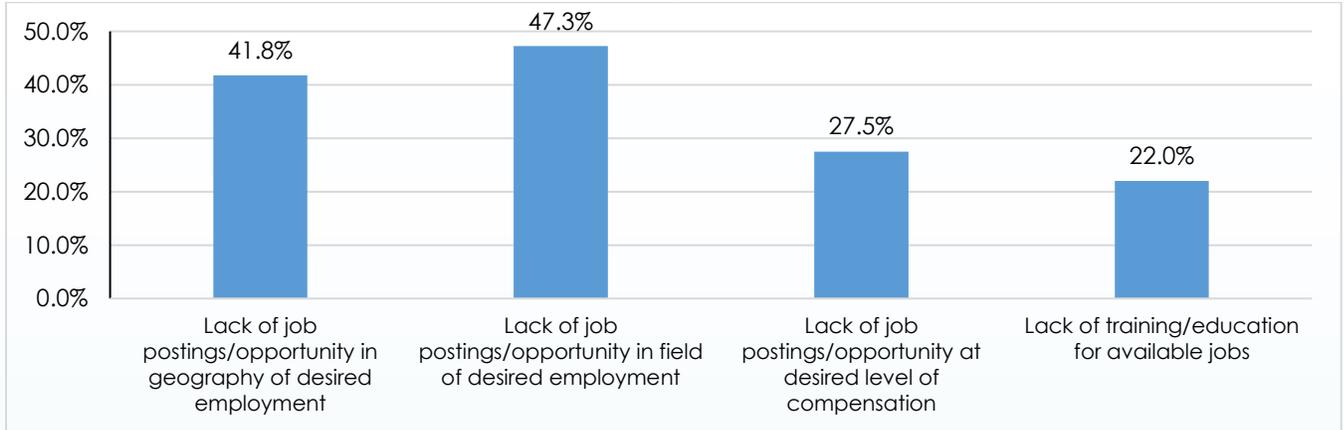
Figure 3.1 Most common barriers to work among respondents, EO Clients



Respondents to Survey 1 (general workforce) shared many of the same insights on barriers to employment. Specifically, 47.3% of respondents noted challenges related to a lack of job postings/opportunities within their field of desired employment, 41.8% noted a lack of jobs within the city they live in, and 27.5% noted that the rate of pay offered is too low. Figure 3.2 on the following page presents the four barriers selected by more than one respondent.

² Respondents were able to select more than one response, which is why totals equal more than 100%.

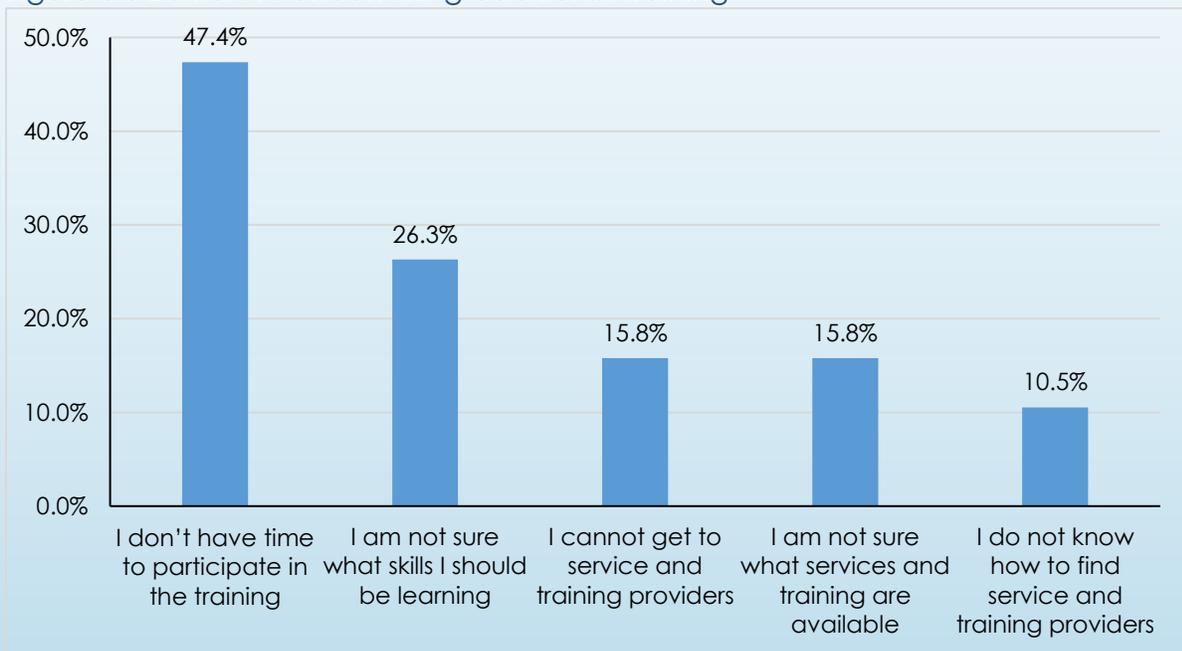
Figure 3.2 Most common barriers to work among respondents, LMI respondents



Barriers to training

As noted in Section 2, a majority of participants from the EO sample were interested in training opportunities. In total, 27 of 46 respondents (58.7%) were interested in skills development. We followed up with the 19 respondents who were not currently looking for or participating in training opportunities to better understand why they were not interested. Nearly half (47.4% of respondents) noted that they did not have time to participate in the training, while just over one in four (26.3%) stated that it was because they were unsure what skills they should be learning (see Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3 Barriers to undertaking additional training





These data suggest that respondents who were not currently participating in or looking for training opportunities were unable to do so due mostly to logistical concerns. Each of the five responses noted in Figure 3.3 speak to a level of uncertainty as to how to access training and/or what training should be undertaken. Of note, each of these barriers could be mitigated by establishing training opportunities through an employee's current employer. As will be discussed in the concluding section of this paper, a more robust employee-employer relationship that allows for training to be oriented through an employer would help lower many of these barriers.

Conclusion – lowering barriers to sustainable employment

Lowering barriers related to employment

The findings from the survey data presented in Section 3 show that respondents feel there are a lack of desirable jobs available in Niagara. These findings, however, contrast findings from employer consultations, where business owners have repeatedly stressed that they have open positions they are unable to fill. These disparate findings have been a consistent challenge in Niagara, though the barriers to employment noted within this section may provide insight on these contrasting experiences. While employers undoubtedly have open positions they hope to fill, it is likely that external barriers including challenges regarding transportation, work flexibility, and geographic proximity all prevent potential employees from applying.

Though employers are somewhat unable to mitigate external barriers such as their industry of employment, there are potential opportunities to lower barriers regarding job security and schedule flexibility given they present as challenges to members of the local workforce. For those employers who are struggling to fill vacant positions, offering more stable positions that work around non-work barriers (including child care and bus schedules) may help broaden the available labour pool.

Additionally, as discussed in our employer toolkit, retail businesses would be well-served by noting that retail jobs are perhaps more secure than applicants realize. Specifically, data from Statistics Canada show that the average employee in the *wholesale and retail trade* industry remained in their position for 7.6 years.³ Highlighting this job stability would likely allow potential applicants to view these positions as sustainable long-term, encouraging them to apply. Figure 1.2 presents the percentage of *wholesale and retail trade employees* by length of tenure.

Figure 1-2. Length of tenure, wholesale and retail trade employees, Ontario 2020



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0055-01

³ Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0055-01 Job tenure by industry, annual.

Lowering barriers to training

Section 2 of this paper noted that many respondents considering developing their training further did not have the time to pursue training or the knowledge regarding what skills need to be trained or how to access possible training programs. Though many respondents were interested in training, their uncertainty regarding the benefits of developing these skills further acts as a barrier to seeking out training opportunities. Considering these challenges, lowering the barriers to training could be spearheaded in two concrete ways.

First, a renewed focus on training related specifically to soft-skills would be valuable given that these skills were highlighted by clients in EO programs. In supporting skills development programs, it is imperative to not overlook skills development that focuses on introductory soft-skills needed to pursue careers in many retail trade positions. Instead, survey data in this report makes clear that a significant percentage of potential workers feel they would benefit from soft skills development.

Second, given that many of the survey respondents indicated time constraints, partnering with employers to help devote time during traditional work hours to offer skills development may help to mitigate most of the major barriers to training. Specifically, this would help overcome time constraints, respondents' relative uncertainty regarding what skills to train (as their employer could help guide them) as well as how to access training. It is likely, however, that skill development opportunities would only be sought in the event that employees saw a corresponding opportunity to progress their career, and these data therein suggest that if employers hope to encourage a more skilled workforce and/or want to invest in training for their employees, they may be well served by publicizing and making available promotion opportunities.

The added benefit to employers through an increasingly skilled workforce would need to be impressed upon businesses. Previous consultations have made clear that Niagara employers remain troubled by what they perceive to be a skills shortage among applicants. These employers consistently note that many applicants they receive are not capable of performing the duties assigned to them. At the same time, though employers maintain that too many employees do not have the necessary skills, they are understandably also hesitant to invest in training employees when they are uncertain of an employee's desire to remain with their business following this investment.

These realities, paired with the survey data above, place the employee-employer relationship at a crossroad. Employers expect a higher level of skill than applicants have but are also hesitant to invest in training. At the same time, pursuing training outside of work is difficult for individuals in Niagara's labour force, so if they do not develop skills through training at work, it is unlikely that they develop them at all.

Lowering barriers to stable employment: employer-employee relationship

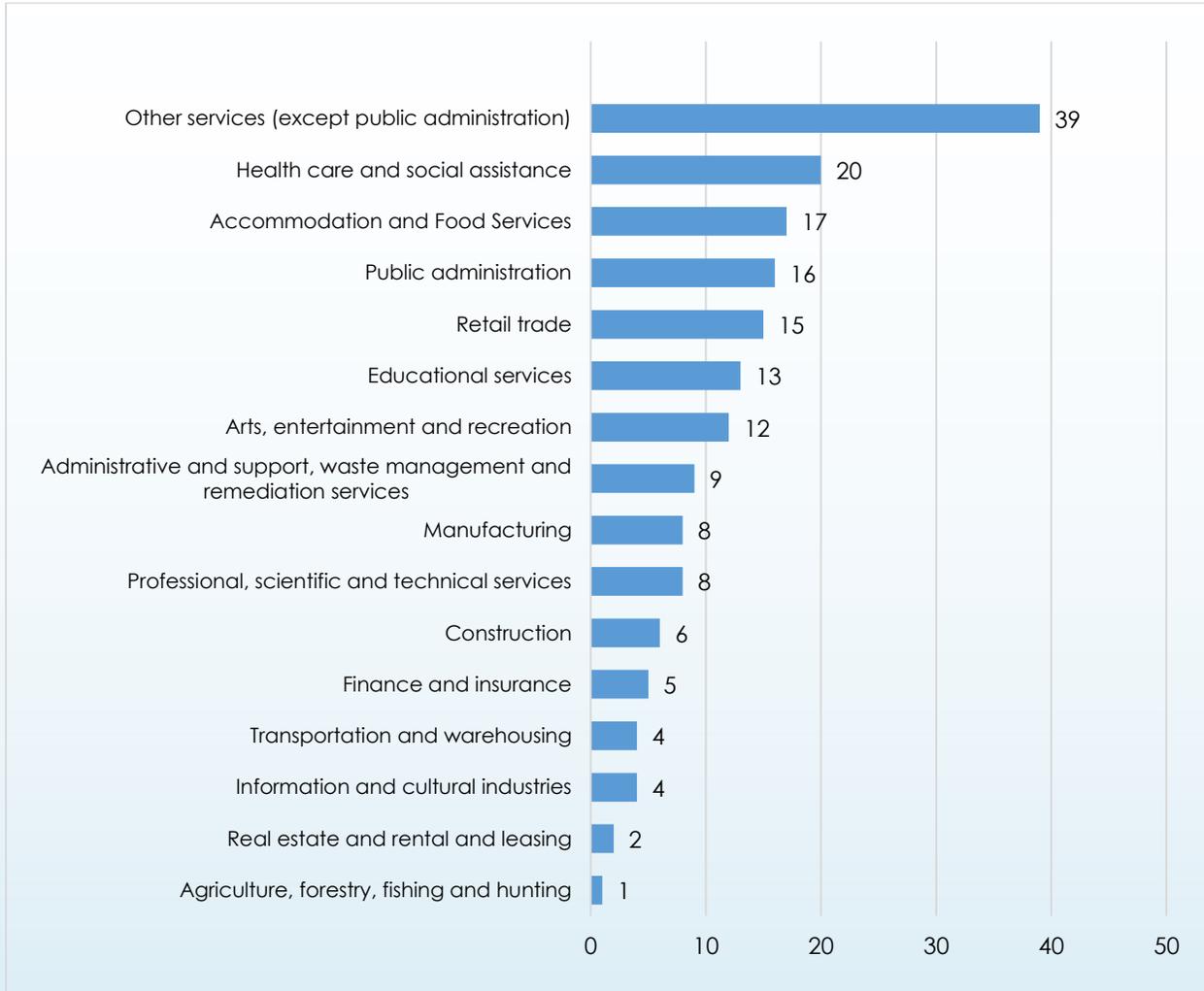
The previous two suggestions regarding how to lower barriers place a large burden on employers, suggesting that they work to mitigate barriers by potentially offering greater job security, creating flexible schedules, and offer training while paying employees during an employee's shift.

As noted above, employers may be hesitant to invest in their employees when they are uncertain about how long employees may remain at the place of work. While some employers in Niagara offer opportunities for skills development, many still avoid offering consistent professional development. Employers across industries have voiced frustration in previous consultations about the perceived lack of long-term commitment shown by employees, and these businesses suggest that this reality makes them reluctant to mitigate these barriers through training opportunities. Considering these consultation findings, employees need to simultaneously show a willingness to establish and seek out a long-term employee-employer relationship.

However, referencing the job tenure data presented above, employees within the *wholesale and retail trade* industry, on average, remain with the same employer for 7.6 years. For those stakeholders seeking to encourage employers to spearhead training initiatives, it is perhaps worth bringing attention to the longevity of this relationship.

Without this mutual understanding and willingness to seek out a more long-term relationship, it is likely that the current nature of transactional relationships will continue. The survey findings, paired with employer consultations, clearly identify why the current transactional nature of retail trade employment often leads to the labour pool feeling that there is a lack of available opportunities, while simultaneously having employers feel as though there are a lack of available employees. Therefore, it becomes self-evident that if the barriers noted in this report are to be lowered, a more durable employer-employee relationship must be sought.

Appendix A: Industries of employment among respondents



Appendix B: Local *introductory skills* training opportunities

District School Board of Niagara Lifetime Learning Services

- [Literacy and Basic Skills](#) development,
- These skills courses include:
 - o Cashier & customer service training
 - o Employment prep classes
 - o Life & social skills training
 - o Budgeting and time management

Niagara College Community Employment Services

- [Customer Service](#) training
- [Resilience](#) training
- Past workshops
 - o Teamwork
 - o Empathy in the workplace
 - o Customer service and communication
 - o Workplace expectations
 - o Professionalism in the workplace

Job Gym

- Virtual hub [training resources](#)

Employment Solutions

- [Applying for jobs online](#) workshop
- [Job retention workshop](#)

Port Cares

- [Workshops and events](#)
- Past events
 - o [Effective Communication](#) workshop
 - o [Resilience](#) workshop
 - o [Additional](#) workshops (stress management, career cruising, goal setting, etc.)
 - o [Email etiquette](#) workshop

Literacy and Basic Skills providers – all offer computer training

Niagara Regional Learning Centre – Bridging the Employment Gap – Retail