

Where Are the Workers?: Understanding the Post-COVID Labor Shortage

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Overview

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 turned the labor market upside down. Job losses shot up and many businesses, especially small ones, saw significant drops in revenue. As we continue to assess the ongoing impacts and adjustments brought on by COVID, data suggest that there has been a relatively quick and strong recovery in North Carolina when it comes to job growth. In fact, recent data from the US Chamber of Commerce show that North Carolina has more jobs than workers - 61 workers available for every 100 job openings.

To better understand the challenges, changes, and opportunities that COVID-19 created for the workforce, nclIMPACT Initiative and NCGrowth partnered to conduct a series of focus groups with workers, employers, and workforce support providers throughout North Carolina to dig beneath the numbers and hear individual perspectives. Because young workers aged 16-24 suffered the highest rates of unemployment compared to other age groups, the research focused on these workers in particular. Otherwise, the research sought to maximize variation across the employers and employment support providers to gain a diversity of perspectives and to illuminate cross-cutting

themes and/or areas of potential divergence depending on employment sector and geographic location across the state.

Focus Group Methodology

From January to March of 2023 the research team hosted 21 60-minute focus group sessions with over 130 employers, employment support providers, and young adults. Conversations took place in communities located in each of North Carolina's eight prosperity zones. The research team worked closely with local partners to recruit participants to these discussions. While each focus group explored similar themes, questions varied slightly depending on the focus group population.

Bertie County Focus Group Summary

- Four employers representing correctional institutions, hospitality, and educational services
- 10 workforce support providers including representation from community colleges, social services, workforce board, and the nonprofit sector
- One young adult currently unemployed

Employers

Impact of COVID-19

Participants said that a labor shortage existed pre-pandemic, but conditions exacerbated as a result of the pandemic.

According to a participant,

“prior to COVID, we may have been short, maybe 50, something like that. Now, it’s just cutting it in half, and we’re 150 short employees”

Some participants felt that an apparent housing shortage affected the hiring of employees.

According to a participant,

“but even if we can hire you, you ain’t got no place to live, which has nothing to do with COVID though.”

Workforce Support Providers

Difficulties in Hiring

Participants said that the labor market is tight for hiring and the retention rate is low.

According to one participant,

“What I hear, out and about, there are jobs. There are not people to fill the jobs, and when people do fulfill jobs, they don’t stay. For whatever reason, they don’t stay”

Participants said that applicants lacked the necessary qualifications and needed to be trained.

A participant said,

“we advertised positions all over, and when they did apply, there were no qualifications at all. So then when we hired, we had to train 100% from the ground floor.”

Youth

Impact of COVID-19

Youth interviewed felt that COVID-19 limited coming of age and life experiences.

According to a youth participant,

“we’re supposed to have adventures, but everything was shut down. We couldn’t do anything. I feel like we kind of missed that part of our life, that experience that we were supposed to have.”

Workplace Culture

The ideal workplace culture for the youth participant interviewed was one that is caring and collaborative and offered the ability to connect.

The participant said,

“my ideal work environment is not just the environment of the workplace, but the people you’re around. My ideal work environment is to work with people that are loving, respectful, caring, who are also doing their jobs. Yes, we’re here to make money, but we also respect each other and care about each other.”

For more information about the project and complete study findings and recommendations visit the Where are the Workers project website:

<https://ncimpact.sog.unc.edu/2022/01/where-are-the-workers/>