

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.

Onslow County Focus Group Summary

- Three employers, representing education and local government
- 16 workforce support providers including representation from educational services, social services, workforce board, and the nonprofit sector
- Three youth, either working, attending school, or both, or unemployed

Employers

Employee Recruitment

Participants said there is labor shortage for essential public sector jobs, such as public school teachers

According to one participant,

"I'd say about 8% to 10% have emergency licenses. And that's something that obviously we're not proud of, but we have to fill these positions and there's a lot of positions that still go unfilled. I know at [one] High School, there was a position that we could never find a teacher for, so they just had to close the class and [it was a] required class for graduation. It's an issue that we're feeling dramatically as well. It's not just the business sector."

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

It was stated,

"but even if we can hire you, you ain't got no place to live, which has nothing to do with COVID though, so it's not going to give you a lot."

Employee Training

Some participants said their organization offered some sort of program for training and career development and progress.

A participant described their organization's career development support as,

"so every position that we have has a career development step plan. So it's like you'll start out as a trainee, within a year you'll be a telecommunicator one. The next year you'll be a telecommunicator two. There's three, and every year you get a raise."

Another participant stated,

"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."

Other participants were hesitant about the idea of training employees, believing that employees would leave in the short term.

According to an employer,

"they're qualified for the job but it's just I don't want to train them if you're not going to stay. They're not worried about what they did tomorrow. They're not worried about what they did today. They would drop and tell you, "I quit," and walk out the door. No questions. I just find they're privileged. They're the younger crowd who are not sticking around till retirement level."

Workforce Support Providers

Impact of COVID-19

Participants said they had difficulty placing students in jobs and internships as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to an employment support provider,

“for a while we were having a lot of trouble placing students in internships because of COVID regulations and so forth. We have a very strong health-science program in our district. So we have a lot of students that are actually CNAs, they’re going through and beginning the certified nursing assistant credential. And trying to get into a hospital has been very, very difficult.”

Current Candidate Profile

Participants felt current candidates lacked necessary softs skills and maturity, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to an employment support provider,

“they don’t develop those soft skills, teamwork, leadership, integrity, being places on time. They don’t even know what that means. And it’s you got to coach them a little bit, but that’s something that is ingrained into you, and you’re born with it, and you grow into it. But these kids are not like that anymore.”

Another employment support provider stated,

“your ninth and 10th graders are more like middle school, that social-emotional thing.”

A participant stated,

“I think my expectations haven’t changed, because with our program we’re a hand up, not a handout. It’s their expectations that have changed. They’re still looking for the handouts. They’re still looking for all the freebies and they’re just not wanting to do for themselves.”

Youth

Workplace Culture and Support

Participants wanted a job where they are respected and given support to succeed.

According to a participant,

“for me it is so important – respect. If I give you respect, I need respect. They take advantage of you. In case of experiences, if someone disrespects me, I give it back.”

It was also said in the focus group that an employer was valued if they were

“somebody who can give you ideas. I’m the person who feels like I have to do it by myself. My mom showed me when I was a kid. She never let me be dependent on other people. She showed me that if that is what I want to do, I will have to do it, and I will have to fight for it. It helps (to have someone) but I have to make it.”

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/>