

# Powering Through Together

Electricity Leadership on  
Navigating the Pandemic



Canadian  
Electricity  
Association

Association  
canadienne  
de l'électricité

## About Electricity Human Resources Canada

Electricity Human Resources Canada (EHRC) is Canada's most trusted source for objective human resource and market information, with the tools to guide business planning and development for the Canadian electricity industry. We provide a platform for current industry needs, identify ways to make Canadian businesses "best in class," and forecast industry trends and issues. Our work enables the industry to map workforce supply to demand and to foster growth and innovation in employers and employees. This improves the quality of service industry provides and improves the confidence Canadians have in the industry.

Further information on EHRC is available at [electricityhr.ca](http://electricityhr.ca).

## About the Canadian Electricity Association

Canadian Electricity Association (CEA) members generate, transmit and distribute electrical energy to industrial, commercial, residential and institutional customers across Canada every day. From vertically integrated electric utilities, independent power producers, transmission and distribution companies, to power marketers, to the manufacturers and suppliers of materials, technology and services that keep the industry running smoothly -all are represented by this national industry association.

Further information on the CEA is available at [electricity.ca](http://electricity.ca).

Ce rapport est également disponible en français sous le titre: *Surmonter l'adversité, ensemble : Le leadership en électricité pour passer à travers la pandémie*

### Thank you to our contributing sponsors:



### Thank you to our contributing authors:

Michelle Branigan, Mark Chapeskie, Alex Hosselet, and Jenna Moore of EHRC; Josée Larocque-Patton of the HR ICU; and Leah Michalopoulos of the CEA.

Copyright © 2020 Electricity Human Resources Canada

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication, whether it is reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (including electronic, mechanical, photographic, photocopying or recording), without the prior written permission of Electricity Human Resources Canada, is an infringement of copyright law.

# Contents

Introduction / 4

Executive Summary / 6

Research Findings / 7

**Safety / 7**

**Business & Operations / 8**

**Building Connections / 13**

**Returning to the Workplace and Workplace Development / 15**

**Employee Support: Recognition and Benefits / 19**

**External Relations / 20**

**Closing Thoughts / 21**

Recommendations / 24

Methodology / 25



# Introduction

**The electricity industry has a tradition of coming together to face challenges in times of need through partnership and co-operation.**

Through unity of effort and response from across industry, and with other stakeholders, we ensure that Canadians can continue to count on the electricity that underpins our lives and our economy. The pandemic has underscored the nature of the sector as an essential service.

When COVID-19 first emerged, nobody could have predicted that it would be as impactful or long-lasting as it has been. The past nine months have been a truly unprecedented time, and every person and organization has had to adapt rapidly to the new circumstances of life during a pandemic.

Countries around the world went into lockdown, and companies sent employees to work from home when possible. Many people were unemployed in an instant. Initially, many expected that this would be a temporary interruption, over in a month or so. As we now know, that was an overly optimistic view.

While other industries ground to a halt, Canada's electrical utilities had to pivot overnight to finding

ways to keep the lights on across Canada while balancing the safety of their teams. Safety has always been the first priority of Canada's electrical utilities, and the pandemic has required employers to build out new dimensions of safety processes to existing strong foundations.

The pandemic has challenged all business units to adapt. From human resources, to operations, to finance, to security, all teams were essential in responding to the challenges of the pandemic. The pandemic has reinforced the importance of the people at the heart of this sector: those who work to keep the lights on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These people include powerline technicians, cyber security specialists, customer service representatives and many others. Teams, including human resources, have not only had to deal with the pandemic at a professional level, but to also pivot entire organizations quickly to working from home while simultaneously ensuring the safety of those who remain working in the field.

As we adjust to what has been called "the new normal", the Canadian electricity industry is cautiously moving toward a new "business as usual", and continues to adapt and to innovate to find even better ways of doing things as the pandemic evolves.

In this context, Electricity Human Resources Canada (EHRC) and the Canadian Electricity Association (CEA) collaborated on this report to examine the impact of the pandemic on the sector's workforce and operations. The report's objectives are:

- To assess working conditions in the pandemic from the employer perspective.
- To highlight areas of ongoing concern, lessons learned and the return to workplaces.
- To inform a recovery plan that employers across the sector can implement.

What we've discovered is that this sector is resilient, managing to stay operational during one of the

greatest challenges it has ever faced. The findings in this report demonstrate how organizations have responded successfully, which can be emulated by others to achieve a similar success.

While the pandemic is not yet over, we've learned a great deal and are managing well under the ongoing challenges. There is still more to learn, but we have a solid start and have developed networks to mobilize knowledge-sharing rapidly and effectively.

By continuing to communicate and collaborate with each other, we can ensure that we maintain our national power grid with the safety and reliability that Canadians have come to expect.

---

**Michelle Branigan**

Chief Executive Officer  
Electricity Human Resources Canada



**Francis Bradley**

President & Chief Executive Officer  
Canadian Electricity Association





# Executive Summary

This report is informed by in-depth interviews and surveys with senior leaders and management from across Canada's electricity sector. It includes responses from a variety of stakeholders in management roles and various organizational classifications (transmission, generation, distribution, union and supporting services) across geographies, cultures and sizes. The pandemic has been challenging on all fronts, but Canada's electricity sector has responded and adapted well. While a small number of respondents reported that they had a specific plan prepared for a pandemic (based on previous scares with H1N1 and SARS), over 90% of respondents said that despite being equipped with robust generic emergency plans that could account for a variety of scenarios they could not have anticipated or been fully prepared for this pandemic. Yet most indicated that operations were maintained smoothly both in the office and the field.

Following direction from government and public health agencies, companies were forced to change the way they work almost overnight. Operations were moved offsite where possible: staff that could work remotely were sent home, while field personnel had to adapt to a new layer of safety protocols on top of the usual processes. Approximately one third of respondent companies paid some site staff to stay home at the beginning of the pandemic

until safe working processes could be augmented or job sites could be re-opened safely.

All respondents experienced increases in expenses due to an increase in the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as the need to plan additional staffing to allow for separate shifts, or additional infrastructure to support remote work and physical distancing. Some respondents reported an increase in travel expenses due to the need to safely position their remote workers while maintaining physical distance protocols. However, there were some cost savings as organizations cancelled travel, training, meetings, and conference attendance. Very few respondents had customers who closed their businesses and had outstanding bills.

Electricity employers always ensure that safety is the highest priority. In a pandemic, while the risks are different than usual, the commitment remains the same. Safety was at the forefront of every decision made, and nearly all respondents went above and beyond public health requirements to keep their teams safe. This includes the use of PPE, cleaning, office protocols and managing field workers within their environments.

Respondents demonstrated a strong sense of resilience and agility in their work. Many described how proud they have been of their employees' behavior

and work ethic throughout the pandemic. Over 95% of respondents surveyed felt that their pandemic adaptations have strengthened their company culture, building a stronger team overall.

Overwhelmingly, respondents cited communication as fundamental to their success in weathering the initial shocks of the pandemic. Almost all respondents reported increasing their internal communication to engage with employees, union representatives, medical teams, health and safety committees, wellness committees, or newly created pandemic task force teams. External communication partnerships were created with Chief Medical Officers, Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB)/ Workplace Compensation Board (WCB), disease specialists, local businesses, associations and even other companies previously seen as competitors. Not only has the pandemic changed perspectives, but it has also spurred the creation of support networks and collaborations that did not exist previously.

Regarding government communications and directives, half of respondents felt that governments provided direction and suggestions that helped them to operate or adapt. The other half felt that

governments could have been more helpful, and that their own organizations were a few steps ahead of government advice.

By communicating and collaborating with each other, as well as with healthcare authorities, the electricity sector has adapted to the pandemic with relatively few interruptions or unanticipated long-term impacts. The findings of this report are optimistic that sector employers can not only survive the COVID-19 pandemic, but can grow from the lessons learned and the new ways of thinking and collaborating with peers that were explored during this difficult time.

*“The pandemic is a unique type of emergency and people’s experience with this type of loss is unprecedented. Typically, emergencies are localized and acute. The pandemic is widespread and long term. The challenge for all organizations is how to keep people inspired and hopeful in an ever-changing situation where the “new normal”, is an indefinite uncertainty. We expect morale, safety and wellbeing will continue to be the primary focus.”*

# Research Findings

## Safety

“Safety first” is the motto that permeates all work in Canada’s electricity industry. This attitude has served the sector well during this pandemic. Employers have been able to draw on a strong culture of prioritizing physical safety in the workplace, and adapt it to the increased safety considerations of the pandemic.

**“Staying close to employees and listening to their concerns was important. We provided employees with COVID-19 sick leave for those required to isolate according to public health and who could not work from home, as well as provided employees with two weeks of paid child care leave for those who needed time to make arrangements when schools closed at the beginning of the pandemic.”**

According to all respondents interviewed, the safety of employees was the most important aspect of their pandemic responses. Nearly all respondents stated that they have gone above and beyond

public health requirements to protect their teams, and every respondent created some form of a pandemic safety process. Most respondents are measuring their employees’ sense of safety through surveys done on a daily, weekly, or bi-weekly basis. One respondent noted that employee engagement on safety this year has been “the best ever”.

While most respondents needed to purchase additional PPE, a small number had an excess of PPE that they were able to donate to hospitals, medical facilities and local communities. This was especially impactful in the early days of the pandemic when demand for masks and sanitizer exceeded the available supply. Other factors that drove safety plans included government mandates, school board policies, and the comfort level of staff.

**“Risk mitigation plans are in place. We have reviewed the government assumptions/modelling for potential new waves and developed contingency strategies to ensure we are able to sustain operations. This includes dealing with multiple contingencies such as severe weather during a new wave. Field Workers have successfully returned to work using pandemic related safety procedures. Remote Workers will likely remain at home until an effective treatment or vaccine is available. We are supporting employees that want to return to the physical workplace either regularly or periodically.”**



Respondents provided examples of “the multiple barriers for safety and layers of protocols that were put in place in order to operate”. A common trend with essential workers was to divide employees into cohorts that they worked with on a consistent basis. Control centres were adapted to only allow access to specific team members, and backup control centres were established. Companies made changes regarding the use of company vehicles, including installing barriers inside vehicles or procuring additional vehicles so all field personnel travel separately to job sites. Respondents described using temperature checks and pre-screening processes to allow workers to remain at work without putting others at risk.

**“Safety is our organization’s primary priority always and this was our continued focus throughout the pandemic. Our organization’s brand behaviours also remained at the forefront and guided our decision making, approach with employees and provided an opportunity to innovate and be creative on how work was delivered.”**

Offices and worksites required substantial modification, supplies and processes to foster safer working environments, including:

- An ample supply of masks and other forms of PPE.
- Limitations on the number of attendees in on-site meetings.
- Limiting the number of passengers in elevators.
- Signage and other wayfinding to manage the flow of people, including one-way movement.
- Changing the use of cutlery and dishes in kitchens to prevent sharing and the risk of transmission.
- Adapting buffet-style dining to more controlled methods for cafeterias.
- On-site gyms being temporarily closed.
- Limiting the number of interactions between employees on-site and off-site (e.g. “work bubbles”).

- Renting RVs or hotels for control centre workers.
- Plexiglass shields for employees sharing vehicles.
- Creating more handwashing stations throughout buildings.
- Amending HVAC systems to increase airflow and incorporate more air filtering.
- Installing UV lights and infrared cameras.
- Increased cleaning schedule, especially for high-touch surfaces.
- Adopting electronic systems for attendance tracking and contact tracing.

**“Employee safety is and will always be #1. Followed closely by public safety at #2, as we operate assets in communities that trust us and the safe operation of our facilities impacts them as well. Finally, governmental rules at #3.”**

Respondents described taking guidance from, and collaborating with, Chief Medical Officers, local public health authorities and company health and safety committees to ensure safe workplaces and minimize the risk of transmission.

## Business & Operations

Electricity is an essential service in Canada. It underpins and supports much of the Canadian economy. Without electricity, hospitals, airports, gas stations, homes, businesses and essential elements of our communities have very limited capacity to remain operational for very long—in many cases they have no backup plan. As organizations across Canada slowed operations or pivoted to working from home where possible, many electricity sector employees were called to continue working so that the rest of the Canadian economy that needed to stay open could do so.

As an essential service, the electricity sector is no stranger to crisis management plans for operations. Resourcefulness and adaptability are a part of



everyday life on the job, and this mindset has undoubtedly played a key role in the sector's resilience this year. While there were many unknowns in the early days of the pandemic, many respondents reported that they had felt prepared, or at least partially prepared, to meet the challenges due to emergency measures they had already established for a wide range of scenarios.

When reviewing their operations, respondents commented on how quickly they were able to push forward, make decisions and drastically reduce red tape. This agility required an attitude that recognized that acceptable mistakes would happen, and that progress is better than perfection.

**This new way of thinking is well described by Rob Lister, President and CEO of Oakville Enterprises Corporation:** *"The workforce was resilient and unbelievably helpful. We had a lot of operational issues to work through as we were addressing new circumstances. Without asking, everyone just stepped up and helped where they could."*

### **Operational Impacts**

Respondents identified cost as the single biggest item impacting business and operations. Equipping staff to work from home, increased PPE

requirements, the creation of rapid-COVID-response teams (often with external expert contractors) and reduced operational efficiencies by prioritizing safety have all led to higher business costs, such as keeping work crews separated for jobs that require more than one person onsite. Often both main and backup control rooms have been operating simultaneously 24 hours a day, seven days a week. One respondent described maintaining operations by creating new work teams and assigning them mobile offices made of shipping containers, while another took a similar approach with rented RVs as control centres.

***"Sequestration has significantly increased labour costs on projects. We have created a new COVID department to focus on issues with contractors and staff safety. Equipment was and is still required to address staff working from home. Reduction in efficiency is leading to new staff and increased burnout."***

Some organizations were able to continue critical work on infrastructure projects, while maintaining safety protocols to ensure the safety of both contractors and employees. Others had issues with the supply chain and the ability to source material from suppliers, and had to delay work to allow the supply chains and supplies to catch up to their needs. Other organizations reported that key vendors suspended physical work activities, universities slowed down some lab and research work, and some engagement activities in communities were suspended until communities became comfortable interacting.

***"In terms of work program, about 75% of our normal work program continued more or less as planned and about 25% of our normal work program had to be suspended (some of which has now resumed). We quickly pivoted to working from home and most of our staff adjusted well and are quite productive. We do worry about the loss of cross-functional interaction and moving our work on culture forward."***

In addition to ensuring the safety of critical field staff, organizations had to quickly close their offices, sending thousands of workers home for what would turn out to be an extended period of time. HR and other business units acted quickly to minimize business interruption and communicate with employees on an ongoing, if not daily, basis. As one respondent said, "I never thought we could move 65% of our workforce remotely in a few days."

The biggest concern for staff working from home, after productivity, is the importance of cross-functional interaction and the longer-term consequences of this on work culture going forward.

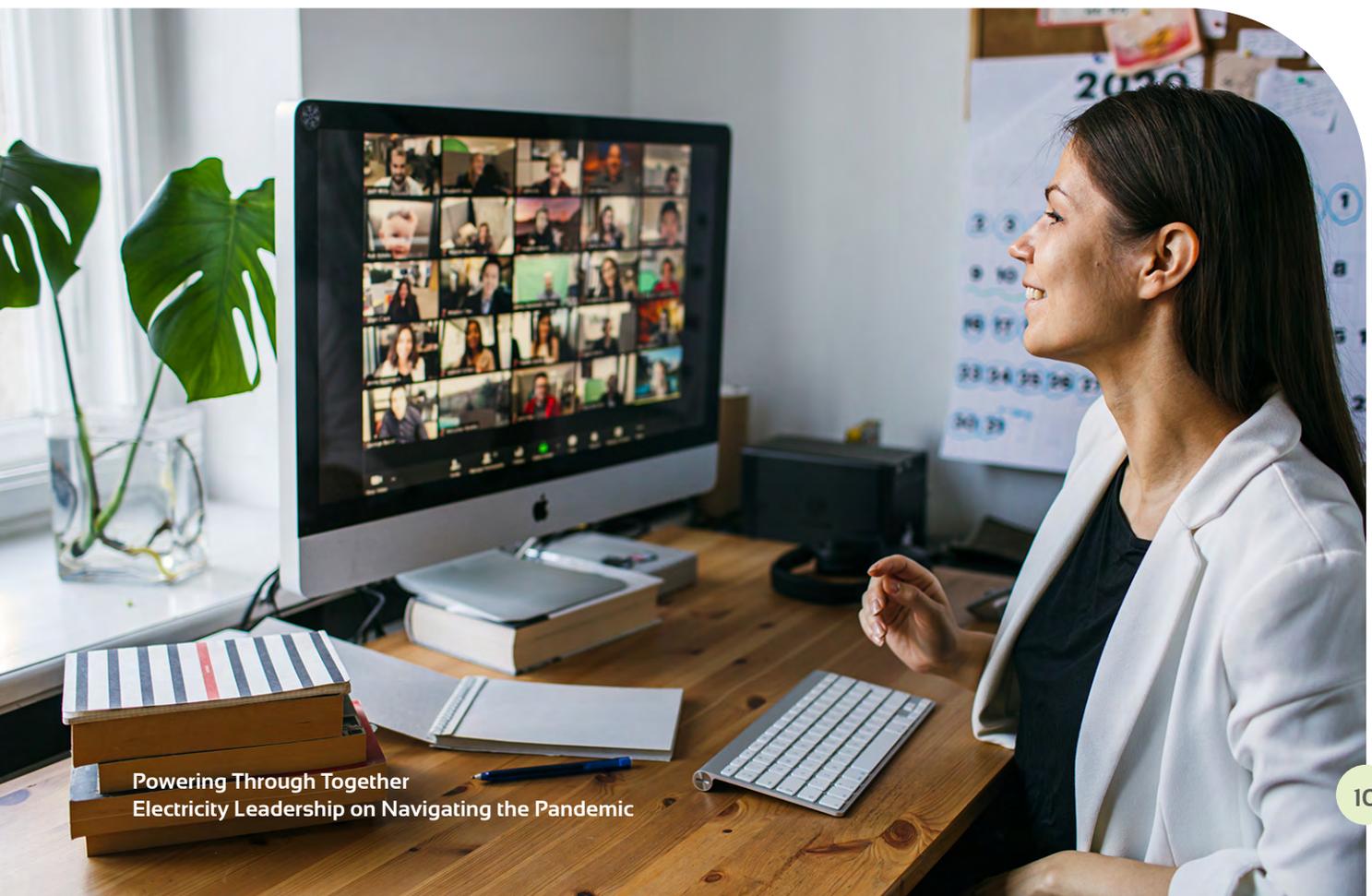
A common response was that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to revisit operational practices and assess what is working and what can be adapted. Many respondents noted that they would like to continue benchmarking market trends and working together as the pandemic progresses. Many organizations have engaged with each other to share learnings and develop industry-informed solutions to the challenges of the pandemic.

**Lyne Parent-Garvey from Hydro Ottawa shared:** *"Our industry is known for sharing best practices, what works well, what doesn't, and that has been so important during these challenging times."*

Most HR functions have needed to be re-visited or entirely changed to respond to the pandemic. This includes recruiting new candidates, onboarding new staff, and training & development with existing staff, often in a strictly virtual environment.

Respondents also identified additional areas being explored for operations both during and after the pandemic, which include:

- Relationships with local suppliers.
- Automating more services through improved IT service delivery.
- Increasing cyber security across business units.
- Changes in office footprint, including expanding the space for more safe work environments or downsizing office space to reflect a more remote workforce.





- Flexible work environments such as hybrid and work-from-home models.
- The need for in-person meetings and conferences.

These topics, while a matter of urgency for business operations in a pandemic environment, will continue to have reverberations post-COVID. There has been much discussion about the future of work and this will be exacerbated by current conditions.

Many companies already had staff working remotely or were in discussion about how they could facilitate remote work with their teams. While these discussions may have been going slowly, with pros and cons being carefully weighed, the pandemic has rapidly accelerated these plans and put them into practice immediately.

For business leaders, the pandemic has created discussions as to long term strategies around facilities. Commentary on the future of the office abounds, with some sounding the death knell for the traditional “office.” However, it is unlikely to be that clear cut. Companies are looking at how future work

models could impact the need for office space, and the impact on cost, culture and employee retention.

Respondents to an earlier EHRC survey this year overwhelmingly favoured working remotely: 95.5% of respondents working remotely would like to continue to work remotely, at least sometimes. On average, those wanting to continue working remotely would like to do so about 3 days per week.

As technology continues to break down barriers organizations in this sector will need to explore the “future of work” quickly, or possibly risk losing critical talent to sectors who are more progressive.

### **Workforce Challenges**

Responses show that there was largely a hiring freeze across the sector from March to June. Respondents were able to keep most employees on payroll, with few layoffs. Some respondents reported that they scaled back on hiring summer students and co-op placements. This is an understandable response to the circumstances, but may have long-term impacts on capacity and talent pipelines. EHRC is now seeing more student work placements, but not yet at the

numbers typical before the pandemic. To support this need, the federal government has loosened restrictions on student worker subsidies to allow for more hiring and greater funding of positions, allowing EHRC's [Empowering Futures Program](#) to have a greater impact on hiring student workers.

A few respondents reported instances where employees were scared, refused to work, or needed some type of accommodation (for medical conditions, or child or elder care).

***“Childcare has been a issue, but has been mostly dealt with via flexibility. It does remain a stressor for employees that is monitored for a wellness and safety impact. We have experienced a few isolated cases of employees who have expressed concerns about returning to physical workplace. We have provided additional communications and support to address these issues.”***

***“Our most common challenge has been flexibility in schedules to allow for child-care, even as schools reopen there is a need to be as understanding as possible for employee’s needs.”***

These types of accommodations were largely new territory, and respondents described working with individuals on a case-by-case basis. Overall, organizations worked through these issues without major interruptions and many commended their teams’ resiliency and agility in handling specific situations. A number of respondents spoke to increased engagement with their local unions, noting that “listening was key” and that everyone wanted the same thing—a safe workforce.

This is not to say that there were not challenges. Common themes were the realization of how integral IT infrastructure is in the workplace, as well as challenges with procurement and supply

chain disruptions for sourcing both PPE and regular equipment and materials. All of this was disruptive to the typical work of employees in all areas. Despite these challenges and many more, respondents consistently described how proud they were of how well their employees were able to become operational outside of the office.

***“Modifying work processes so that work could be done safely in concert with the engagement of employees was the most significant challenge. Close collaboration with the union was very important as well as keeping employees informed and supported.”***

Respondents with operations crossing provincial and national borders faced additional complexity in managing their teams. Travel restrictions and mixed regulations or advisories across geographic jurisdictions impacted how these teams could collaborate and operate.

Some respondents noted that they faced an initial challenge having their employees recognized as essential workers. When lockdowns began, people were sent home—yet the “lights needed to stay on”, and respondents had to connect with regional governments to find a way to remain in operation safely.

While the various levels of government attempted to respond quickly and properly to the pandemic, their policies were not always in line with employer interests or did not take into account the need to maintain and operate electricity infrastructure. While governments provided financial relief programs, many respondents were unable to access any financial supports. While feedback about economic and business supports was mixed, respondents largely found the information from public health authorities invaluable in managing their teams and operations.

For some respondents, the pandemic was a crucible that refined those who performed well and those

who performed poorly. From leadership to frontline positions, some staff demonstrated admirable flexibility, management traits and competencies to continue their work while supporting their teams. In other cases, the increased challenges demonstrated a lack of ability in some staff, even going so far as to require rethinking succession planning.

*“We believe the government provided a lot of different resources, however, **at times the information changed so rapidly it created confusion.** Although it would have been difficult to apply one set of rules to specific industries, it would have been more helpful to be more directive and make exceptions versus having a fluid policy and allowing our own interpretation each time.”*

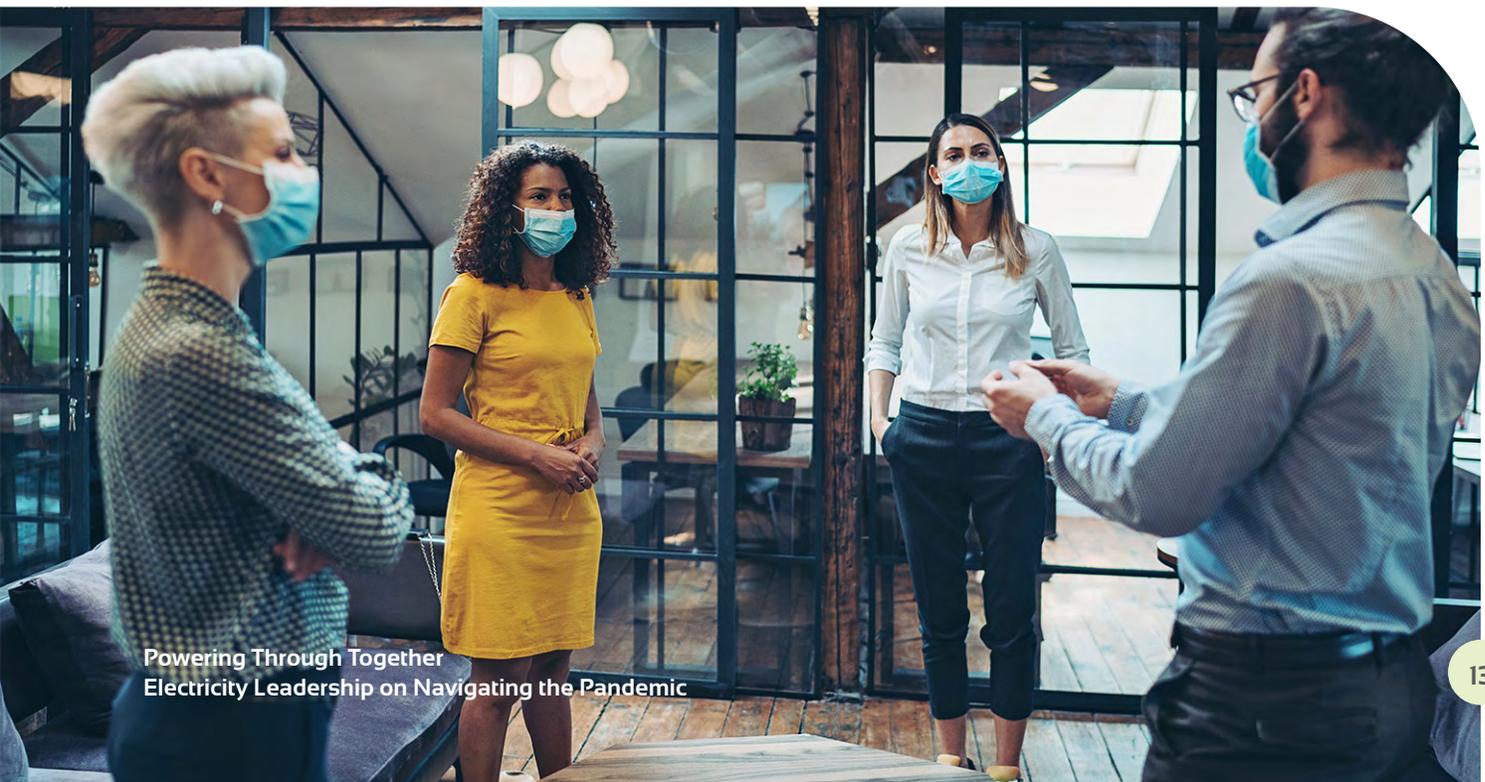
Retirements were impacted both positively and negatively by the pandemic. With an aging workforce, this area of focus is of special importance to the electricity sector. Respondents reported that some workers planning on retiring instead postponed their retirement to be able to stay on and support operations. Other workers that were not intending to retire soon changed their plans due to lifestyle changes and work interruptions. It remains unclear if the pandemic has caused a net

increase or decrease in retirements across the sector at this time. It will be critical to monitor this over the coming months. EHRC’s most recent labour market study *Workforce in Motion* identified retirement as the biggest driver of demand in the sector (86%), with almost 20% of the workforce needing to be replaced by 2022.

Respondent feedback about their workforces was overwhelmingly positive. Overall, teams adapted very quickly and were able to maintain operational efficacy from remote offices, sites with reduced staffing, and across virtual channels. While no respondent was fully prepared for a situation like this pandemic, each was able to successfully operate without major issues thanks to the flexibility of their teams.

## Building Connections

With many teams moved to remote or decentralized offices, the maintenance of internal communication and culture has been more challenging than ever. In addition to maintaining existing supervisory chains and team dynamics, staff also needed to provide timely updates and critical health information, which necessitated more internal communications than ever before. Respondents quickly implemented many new processes and channels with great results.



## Senior Leadership Communications

Clear communication is a critical component of safe workplaces, and the electricity sector's focus on safety meant that existing communication channels and networks could be leveraged in most cases. In the early weeks and months of the pandemic, rumours and misinformation abounded. As such, regular internal communication between employees and leadership was an important way to maintain trust and address anxieties.

Respondents described creative ways to communicate with their teams, including daily calls and memos, townhalls, emails, CEO messages, personal letters from managers, handouts, newsletters, pulse surveys, virtual hangouts with the CEO, daily tool boxes with safety tips, Q&A sessions, intranet resource pages, radio clips, videos and webinars featuring guest speakers such as mental health specialists and disease control specialists. Some respondents explained that they relied on strong models of communication that they had already implemented but increased the frequency of their messaging.

At the same time, leaders needed to be mindful of what was communicated. One respondent explained:

*"We were also aware of **media fatigue and the constant information overload** our staff were receiving and didn't want to contribute unnecessarily to their anxieties. (i.e. Info they needed versus info that was nice to have)."*

Some respondents described involving the broader teams in their decision-making process. In this uncharted territory, being able to collect wider staff input to inform leadership decisions not only achieved better results but also fostered a better sense of buy-in from employees.

Since IT infrastructure is the backbone of all modern workplace communications, approximately 30% of respondents said that they had to fast-forward

plans for better networking and connectivity. With staff shifting to working remotely, IT has been an essential part of adapting to the pandemic and maintaining the link between employees and the business.

## Maintaining Culture

Communication is also a critical part of maintaining and strengthening company culture and belonging. While personal motivation and commitment to common organizational objectives will often drive people to give their best, that motivation will also be influenced by the environment in which people work. That environment is formed by the values, processes and systems within the organization, and the organizational culture which is created by leaders. The quality of leadership throughout the pandemic has had a measurable impact on the success of organizations to respond to the new challenges they face. The visibility of leaders and their regular communication with staff remains critical when measuring the level of trust employees place in their leaders.

Respondents noted concerns around training supervisors and leaders on managing and engaging hybrid or remote workforces. Respondents described reaching out to individuals when possible, and reported that they felt their increased communication strengthened their company culture. While many think first of the frontline staff requiring the most support, we must also acknowledge the impact of the pandemic on management and senior leadership as well: in many cases, those expected to support the mental health and logistical challenges of staff are facing the same, or more severe, issues themselves.

*"It's a challenging time, we don't have the **opportunity for creativity and innovation** if not together in a safe space. The intense pressure on leadership to manage remotely is draining — the calendar is booked every day, all day... and keeping it all together."*



To ensure the continued value of team building and social events that support company culture, many respondents described ways to provide the same benefits through virtual means. Some respondents hosted regular virtual social events, giving teams a chance to connect and interact over topics that are not work related. Such creative initiatives included backyard coffee dates, online get-togethers (“quarantini hour”), and dedicated “fun days” where employees shared pictures of their wackiest home office set ups.

This fostered positive team dynamics and was especially helpful for employees who were quarantined or otherwise isolated. However, some respondents also added the caveat that such initiatives should be undertaken on a voluntary basis, so as not to add any pressure to those who may not want to participate.

With many working from home, respondents shared that their teams have developed a more forgiving attitude towards the kinds of interruptions that happen at a home office. Children, pets and spouses making surprise appearances on video and conference calls have been regular occurrences. In some cases, impromptu introductions and asides add some levity to serious meetings or discussions.

## Returning to the Workplace and Workplace Development

With much of the country finding new ways to live with the pandemic in some form, organizations began to develop plans for returning to the workplace. Electricity is a safety-first industry, and employee safety must be the first priority in this planning.

At the time this research took place, in September and October 2020, many families and communities were adjusting to having students back at school, and the beginnings of a second wave were starting to appear in many areas of the country. Respondents were split in their approaches to returning to the workplace. Approximately half of respondents were still deciding what their plan would look like. One respondent was clear that they would only have a 100% return to the workplace when a vaccine was implemented. At the time of writing this report most cities are experiencing a “second wave” and anecdotally employers are reporting that they have slowed or reversed their return-to-workplace plans as a result of public health advice and employee sentiment.

## Productivity

Most respondents said they had not observed a major loss of productivity. While some respondents recognized a slight decrease in productivity, most commented that under the circumstances they were not overly concerned and were allowing for greater flexibility for employees to balance family concerns during the day.

Because the pandemic has touched every aspect of our regular lives, productivity levels could be attributed to numerous factors. It is important to recognize that there can be many reasons for drops in productivity during the pandemic, which can include:

- Childcare, eldercare and other domestic responsibilities (which tend to disproportionately fall to women).
- Lack of required space, equipment, or systems in a home office setting.
- Disconnection from team members and typical collaborators.
- Anxiety and distractions due to COVID-19 or a remote working environment.
- Decreased motivation or accountability without a supervisor present.

Productivity can be affected by a range of factors, many of which may be beyond an individual's control. As a result, addressing issues of productivity requires diverse responses.

On the positive side, one respondent noted that some work had been reallocated, which allowed them to pursue projects that otherwise would “never see the light of day.” Overall, respondents’ understanding of productivity has changed, with many reporting that they have a more fluid perception of what a workday can look like outside of a typical structure. In this regard, the pandemic has changed some traditional attitudes toward work in a way that can be continued in a post-pandemic workplace.

Lisa Nadeau, from the Alberta Electric System Operator, noted that her company did not measure productivity during this time: *“If someone was not able to produce something by a specific time frame, we would work with the individual and we leaned on our flex work practices. So many people had personal things happening, so they worked during different hours to make things happen. As long as the work got done, that’s all that matters since agility is part of our culture.”*

Some organizations did express concerns about productivity but had not found effective ways to measure it. One employer noted that they are incredibly output-focused rather than input-focused, so the pandemic did not change their approach.

***“The nature of our business allows for the majority of our work to be done remotely. We did miss the collaboration, mentorship and development aspects of our business, however, we were well positioned to adapt as we have always been very output focused and less input focused.”***

Some employers were more flexible, with time worked considered less important than the work assigned being completed. If work orders for the day were done, some found it safer for those employees or contractors to go home for the day to reduce risk to other staff on a jobsite. For remote workers, at least one company created an expectations list for staff to sign off on the work they would be completing on a given day. A common issue reported was the difficulty in mentoring and developing staff in a remote work environment, as well as the opportunity for spontaneous collaboration.

Some employers turned to software to monitor remote-working employees so that supervisors



could verify if people were able to effectively work productively from home. It should be noted here that this practice has been more controversial as an employer response, but the number of employers seeking software to do this has increased during the pandemic.

***“We are unsure of the productivity impact of those working from home. If we were to embark on a working from home program, we will be considering technology which can measure productivity.”***

For employees with childcare, eldercare or other family obligations that were in direct conflict with normal operating hours, some employers instituted a specific timecode to track their time. This was monitored by senior leaders to see what impact this was having on the business and to determine if productivity was being affected. Where gaps were identified, plans are being developed to close them in the coming months.

Other employers are at a loss regarding what to do about drops in productivity. In many cases, they are investigating how to effectively measure it, and are looking at broader return-to-workplace plans as a

means to address the issue. For those employers with these measures in place, productivity didn't drop in many instances. Where it did, they were able to develop processes and plans to address it effectively.

***“Our organization uncovered that we were able to remain as productive and more so in some circumstances. Processes were evolved and changed to suit the new normal. New technological tools were implemented to stay connected, enhance communications and drive engagement.”***

Supporting the logistics of a remote workforce was new territory and an additional cost for many respondents. Many respondent companies already had staff using laptops, while others had to move desktops to staff's homes. A substantial number of respondents had to purchase laptops or other equipment for remote work. Over half of respondents had to increase their IT functionalities by setting up a VPN, changing from Skype to Microsoft Teams, or obtaining Zoom and Google accounts. Close to 25% of respondents had to obtain more cell phones, although most employees already had internet service at home that did not require additional costs. Increasing IT capacity did not come without challenges, and one respondent described how a ransomware attack made it difficult to communicate.

An ergonomic home office is important for health and productivity, and some respondents allowed employees to bring equipment home to facilitate this. Others provided employees with financial support to purchase what was needed, while some companies felt that the cost savings of not having to commute to work offset the additional costs incurred by employees to connect to the internet for example. Ergonomics also prevents injuries, and most respondents provided some sort of education on this topic, such as weekly tips and guides, to all employees working from home.

## Returning to the Workplace

Overall, comments relating to each company's remote and in-person workplace approaches were optimistic. Respondents shared that the uncertainty around the length of time required for remote work made it difficult to make long-term plans. In general, respondents emphasized safety protocols and communication strategies as being essential in planning for the return to workplaces.

About half of the respondents are still developing their return-to-workplace plans, currently using a hybrid approach of both on-site and remote workforces. With a second wave affecting most areas of Canada, planning has to be flexible and account for the local conditions around offices and worksites.

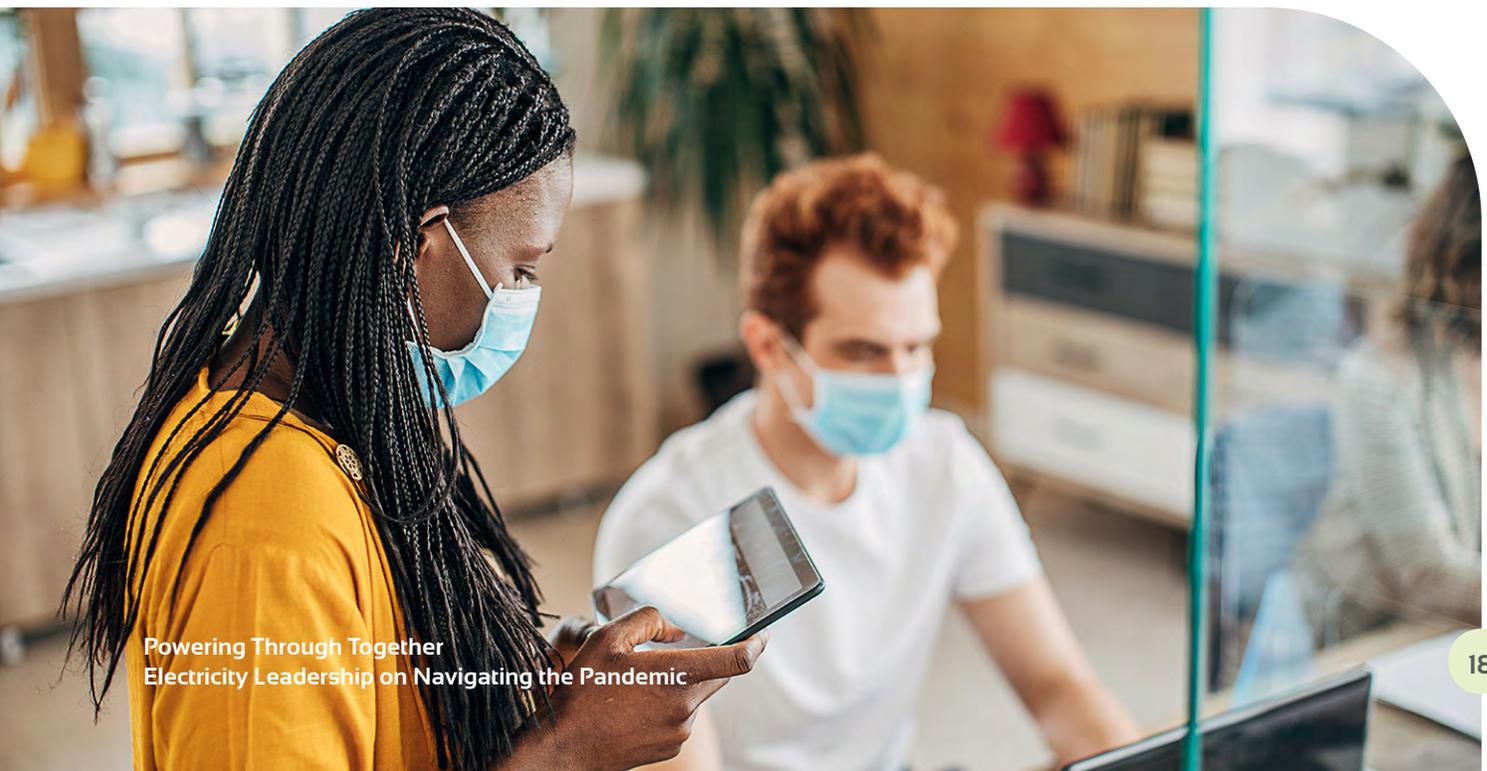
It is important to recognize that field workers have been working largely as usual but with additional safety protocols in place throughout the pandemic. Plans on returning to workplaces mostly affect administrative and on-site staff that have been operating remotely.

Some respondents have been transitioning their staff back to the workplace since the summer. Around one-third are back to work in offices, following local health authorities and government regulations. About one-fifth are planning to keep as many employees working remotely as long as productivity

is maintained. Some workplaces have a rotational schedule, with employees coming in on different days or weeks to grant some time in the office while reducing transmission risk. Some respondents have made decisions based on individual cases, such as for those with spouses working on the front lines.

Employers bringing staff back into their offices are typically combining it with self-assessments, including daily questionnaires and other methods to ensure that a sick employee does not infect other staff. In many cases, companies have surveyed their employees to inform the company's return-to-workplace plans and the practices that need to be involved to foster a safe and comfortable environment. There are some factors beyond an employer's control that can affect the ability to return to workplaces. For example, the prevalence of cases in their region, staff reliance on public transit, weather conditions, and more.

***“Work that can be productively carried out from home is continuing from home (if the employee wishes). Key field work has been modified as needed and is continuing, albeit at a slower pace than planned pre-pandemic. Majority of our staff are located in downtown Toronto and there are concerns about public transit, which is beyond our control.”***





The comfort level of staff is another important factor in returning to the workplace. Some staff, who may be at higher risk of long-term consequences (or have higher risk members of their family), may be more reluctant to return. Some staff also find working from home to be more productive or flexible. When planning a return to the workplace, staff concerns must be balanced against the overall productivity and operations of the organization.

***“Field workers and control station workers continued to work in the field throughout the entire period. The return to the workplace plan for those who worked from home included a phased approach to re-entry, based on internal and external triggers. The implementation of this plan was fluid and influenced by the pandemic status in our communities, public health orders, public health alert levels within the province, employee readiness and varied by location and positions.”***

Some respondents have realized that they do not need their full complement of staff on site, and that a mix of remote workers can be beneficial. In addition to being seen as an employment perk by some, maintaining an ongoing remote workforce enables a broader pool of talent acquisition beyond local geographic restrictions. Many respondents are

evaluating what working hours and remote versus in-house staff will be required in the longer term. Only about one-third of respondents are currently satisfied with their return-to-workplace status, and the vast majority are still discussing what their organization will look like coming into 2021.

## Employee Support: Recognition and Benefits

Even before the pandemic, supporting the mental health of employees was becoming increasingly important to employers in the electricity industry. Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a greater focus and significant acceleration in mental health and well-being supports; not just in workplaces, but across our society in general.

A significant mental health challenge caused by the pandemic has been the general uncertainty we all face around when we will be able to let our guard down. This uncertainty makes it difficult for employers to plan for work, and also makes it difficult for their employees to plan for their lives. One employer indicated that some people were simply paralyzed over what to do. Taking care of mental health can go a long way in maintaining a resilient and adaptable workforce, and many respondents acknowledged this as a paramount consideration.

*“People are paralyzed as there is no light at the end of a tunnel. Usually there is a beginning and an end to a disaster which helps people grieve and move on, however **we are underestimating the impact this will have on everyone’s mental health.**”*

The majority of respondents felt they offered a robust benefits plan, which included an employee assistance plan (EAP) or employee and family assistance plan (EFAP). Those respondents placed a strong focus on communicating these services to all employees to ensure everyone was aware of the available benefits. In at least one case, this was in a daily email from management. One respondent increased their mental health benefits from \$700 to \$2,500 per year per person.

Several respondents reported adopting programs such as Maple, MindBeacon, or the Canadian Mental Health Association’s Not Myself Today. These programs have provided a fast and clinically approved approach to supporting employee mental health.

Employee health and well-being has been at the forefront of every leader’s decisions throughout the pandemic. Respondents described using strategies such as increasing employee paid personal days, contacting those that needed to isolate to check on their mental health, sending care packages with PPE to office workers, and working with unions to provide benefits to those still under probation. While the pandemic has brought on many challenges, respondents have ensured that their employees’ health and wellness is the highest priority. Many employers recognized the emotional toll the pandemic was taking on their teams and made a point of coaching leaders to be more empathetic, as well as helping employees foster connections with each other and their supervisors.

The importance of communicating supports and benefits cannot be reiterated enough. Some employers hosted virtual town halls with invited guests, such as epidemiologists and doctors, to speak and

answer questions specific to mental health and wellness, and personal safety. This was often in conjunction with a broader return-to-workplace initiative.

Some innovative examples of employer benefits and recognition incentives included:

- Employees managing their own schedules for teleworking.
- Relaxed expectations for when employees should be online.
- Confidential one-on-one mental health check-ins with qualified people, such as EAP coordinators.
- Educational materials on health and safety during COVID-19.
- Additional paid personal leave days to address family concerns.
- Delivering PPE to employees along with instructions on how to use it effectively.
- A well-being calendar of events with service providers offering mental health supports.
- Establishing sharing circles, chat channels, weekly fun challenges and virtual coffees to encourage teambuilding and morale.
- Videos on health and wellness including subjects such as ergonomics, stress management, being a parent during COVID-19, travel safety, back-to-school, the importance of sleep, physical distancing, and mindfulness exercises.

## External Relations

Respondents were asked if governments and regulators helped them respond to the pandemic, what supports were helpful and what could have been more helpful?

Not only were internal communications important for keeping employees up-to-date with safety procedures and pandemic response, but regular external communication among the sector at large, with both utilities and stakeholders was also a useful



strategy for many respondents. In many cases, this communication crossed provincial and national borders to garner a wider pool of input as well as output.

While in some cases government direction was helpful and addressed sector needs, half of respondents felt that government direction was unclear or did not address the specific needs of the sector. To ensure that they had the fullest and best input for how to respond, respondents collaborated with Chief Medical Officers, public health officials, union representatives, First Nations Chiefs, WSIB / WCB and others. This collaboration was key to be able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. One respondent illustrated their perspective:

***“Yes. Would have been helpful in early days to have more clarity about balancing individual confidentiality with employee health & safety, and the limits on who was able to be tested in the early days of the pandemic was also an issue.”***

Respondents suggested that that the influx of information early on from government, regulators, and associations was both sometimes overwhelming and useful. Many respondents also noted that they appreciated the collaboration and information sharing on best practices.

Industry associations, including Electricity Human Resources Canada and the Canadian Electricity

Association, have played a unique role in the pandemic. Leaders and communications teams from Canada’s national and provincial electricity associations have participated in regular calls and collaborative work to ensure that all participants in the sector have been supported on both local and national levels. Associations have been able to raise member concerns in national discussions, and inform government policies and relief programs. Industry subsectors spoke to the creation of new working groups and many respondents spoke to engagement not just with peers in Canada but globally, to exchange ideas and support.

***“Overall it’s the communication and collaboration that’s allowed us to get to the point where we are today, which, although not over, we feel has put us in a positive position for the future.”***

***“Benchmarking with the industry is always helpful. This allowed us to learn from others and take advantage of practices that were working in other areas.”***

## Closing Thoughts

A commonality with closing remarks from respondents was the sense that everyone is in this together. Industry was loud and clear as to the value of sharing experiences, lessons learned and collaboration. Electricity in Canada is connected by more than just the power grid: it is a community with common goals and long-standing relationships. As this pandemic continues to challenge us all, Canada’s electricity employers will rise to the challenge and keep the lights on across the country by continuing its history of working together.

***“Collaboration throughout our industry is more important than ever. When it comes to the safety of our society, we need to put some of our challenges aside for the sake of the betterment of all organizations.”***

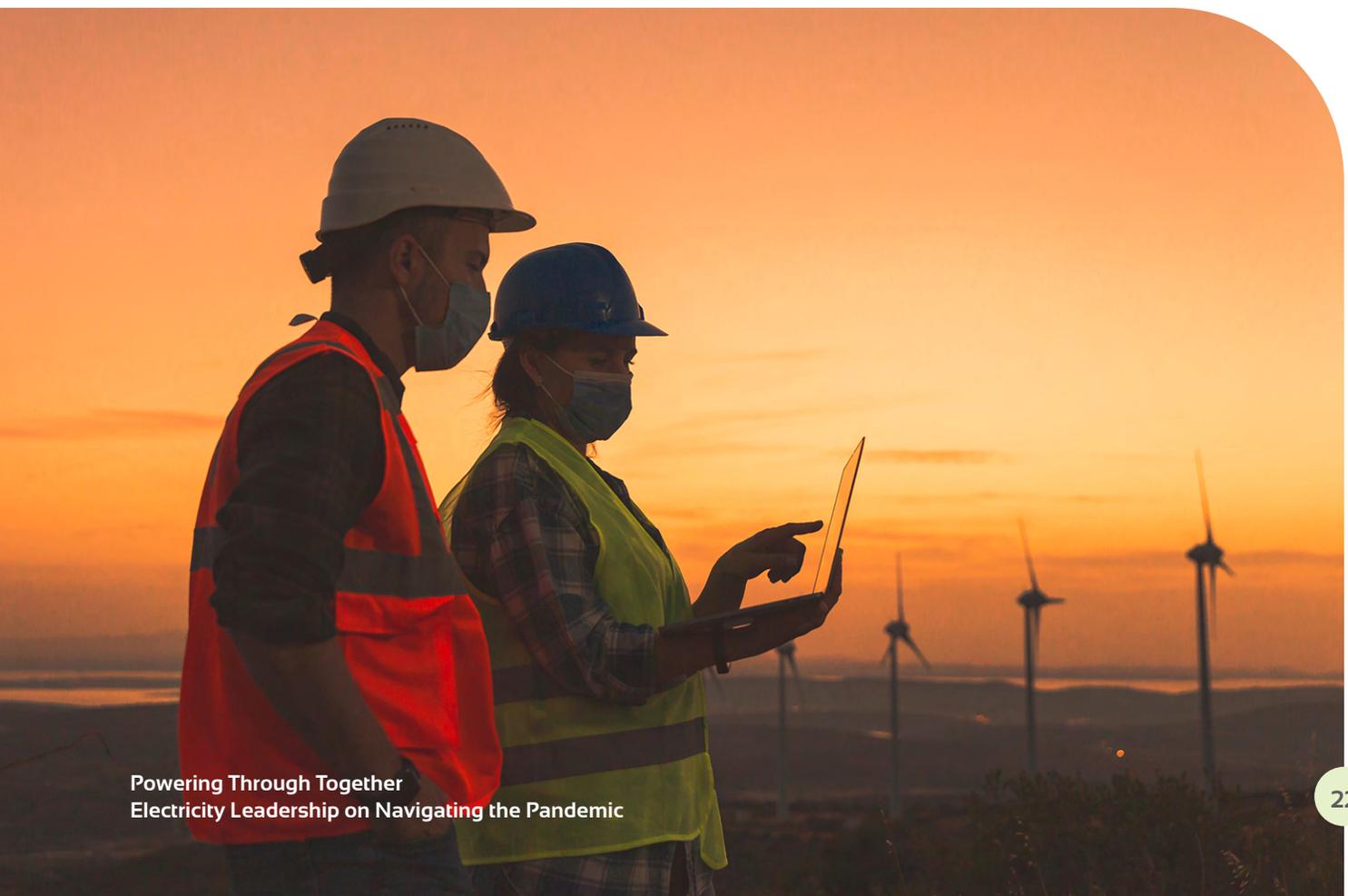
We do not know when the pandemic will be over, and employers across Canada will need to continue being nimble and adapting as new information becomes available. As one respondent noted, “COVID is a marathon, not a sprint”, while another observed that “We are still in the middle of this - much more can happen and it’s hard to predict what may still be needed”.

There were a number of common areas identified by respondents for future collaboration and “fostering an authentic problem-solving mentality, sharing in-depth ideas and solutions to understanding how this will shift our business in the future.”

Respondents spoke to the need to conduct additional one on one surveys early and mid-2021 with a focus on return-to-workplace and lessons learned as well as benchmarking templates for pandemic plans; long term employee engagement; mental health and possible medical accommodations; succession planning, hiring and training opportunities, working from home as it relates to employee

tax benefits; and domestic opportunities for supply chain and general business needs. We must continue providing feedback to all levels of government on what utilities need to be able to continue operations and ensure a critical service.

*“Our business doesn’t sell a product and get paid, like conventional retail. There are both frequent and smaller transactions, like residential and sparse but significant large transactions, like utility projects. We went into considerable detail trying to demonstrate our losses, which were half our projected revenue for 2020. But we were largely unsuccessful, or subsidies came too late. But we did way better than a lot of companies, so we are grateful. The ability for governments and regulators to be flexible would help, but that would probably take a trillion staff. **In the end, our existing client and funder relationships (like Electricity Human Resources Canada) saved us.”***



# Recommendations

---

The electricity sector is fundamental to ensuring all other sectors can operate. Electricity must always be viewed as an essential service, and operations must be supported by provincial and federal policymakers, regulators and industry partners.

**01 Safety should remain the top priority for all organizations across the sector.** Safety processes and protocols should be updated to include documentation around the unique challenges of the pandemic, including mitigating virus transmission, working remotely and mental health, working remotely, and the other unique challenges of the pandemic.

---

**02 Employer health and safety policies should always operate in agreement with the instructions of public health authorities and governments, but this should be considered the bare minimum requirement.** Employer health and safety, remote work, and operational policies should be updated and tailored to reflect unique organizational needs and communicated to teams. Clear communication is critical for a safe and effective workplace.

---

**03 The sector's needs should continue to be communicated to governments of all levels to inform policies and relief programs.** Industry stakeholders can come together to speak with one voice to any emerging challenges brought about by the pandemic, including a strategy for the availability of vaccination for critical workers as a priority once a viable vaccine has been approved. Together, governments and industry should continue to work as partners to solve challenges.

---

**04 Hiring freezes or slow downs should be done with careful consideration for the impact on future capacity and skills development.** Delaying hiring for too long, even for student or internship positions, can cause long-term transition planning issues that will be difficult to remedy.

---

**05 Accommodations for individuals facing pandemic-related challenges should be made on a case-by-case basis** for different employee needs based on factors like home circumstances, geography, and the nature of roles. HR policies should be developed with broad team input and should be understood to be evolving, as the pandemic progresses.

---

**06 Information technology (IT) is more integral than ever in continuing operations.** Hardware and software must allow remote workers to operate and collaborate securely. Communications technology is an essential component to this, including video, teleconferencing, chat, and collaboration programs. Regular reviews of the software (or hardware) selected and how it is performing to achieve business goals and improve labour productivity is essential at this point in the pandemic.

- 
- 07 **Clear communication is the foundation of safe and effective workplaces.** Especially with a remote workforce, communication about work, health, and evolving plans must be shared frequently with employees. Managers and leaders should afford additional time for check-ins, group meetings, and important updates.
- 
- 08 **Employers should solicit input from their broader teams when looking for balanced solutions to HR challenges.** Engagement with employees helps to build buy-in and can support a better decision-making process.
- 
- 09 **Employers should host regular and voluntary social events** focused on team cohesion and non-work interactions in order to help remote employees feel connected, especially those in quarantine or isolation. Many employees are feeling disconnected from workplace culture and their colleagues.
- 
- 10 **Return-to-workplace plans should be unique to each organization** based on the nature of work, internal culture, geography and local health circumstances. There is no one-size fits all solution.
- 
- 11 **Employers concerned about productivity should ensure that their staff have the equipment, processes and supports in place to do their job well.** A non-traditional approach to understanding productivity, and its drivers, can ensure operational efficiency while balancing the challenges that remote staff may be facing.
- 
- 12 **Employers should put programs and policies in place to support mental health,** if they do not have these already. This should be a priority as an HR best practice. Having programs and policies in place to support mental health has already been a best practice. Under the pandemic, it is essential. There are many options and programs, at varying costs and complexities, to suit any organization—one or more can make a massive difference for workforces in these difficult times.
- 
- 13 **Cross-sector collaboration should continue in order to ensure overall resilience.** Multi-stakeholder discussions, roundtable meetings and collaborative work between organizations can help the sector to manage common challenges.



# Methodology

This report collects the responses of surveys completed with leaders of Canada’s electricity sector between September 9 and October 22, 2020. Representatives from every province and territory were invited to participate, and 48 leaders responded from 11 of the 13 provinces and territories. Respondents were representative of all business lines (generation, transmission, distribution, services, and also included labour representation). 21 respondents identified themselves as “middle management,” and the remaining 27 identified as “senior leaders.”

## Research objectives for this project were:

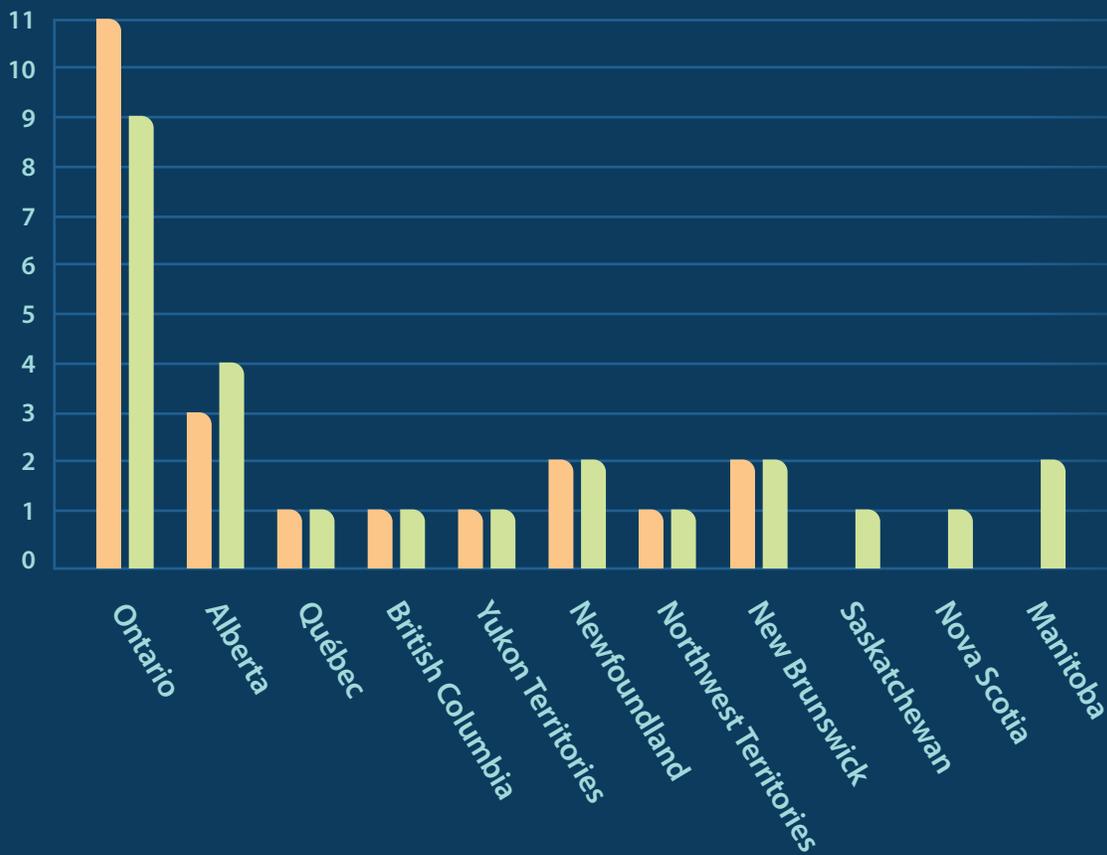
- To assess working conditions in the pandemic from the employer perspective.**
- To highlight areas of ongoing concern, lessons learned and the return to workplaces.**
- To inform a recovery plan that employers across the sector can implement.**

Research included both an online survey, which received 21 responses, and in-depth phone interviews with 27 distinct subjects. The online responses garnered a high representation of smaller utility companies within Canada, while phone interviews reached executives of large utilities. The online surveys and phone interviews asked participants the same questions divided into seven main categories:

- Business
- Building connections
- Return to work and workplace
- Recognition and benefits
- Safety
- External relations
- Open comments

The survey asked participants about the impact the pandemic has had on their business, their operations and their workforce, as well as how they overcame challenges in a rapidly changing environment. The survey was completed six months into the pandemic. At the time of writing, the pandemic is ongoing, and Canada is seeing a second wave of cases in many regions.

- Survey Respondents\*
- Key Informant Interviews\*\*



\*No representatives from PEI or Nunavut chose to participate.

\*\*In 2 cases, interviews included 2 respondents, accounting for a total of 27 respondents.

