

Electricity Sector Pandemic Status Report

April 2020



Electricity Human Resources Canada
info@electricityhr.ca

Introduction

COVID-19 has had an immense impact on industries across the Canadian economy. The electricity sector has not been immune to these disruptions. Yet, as an essential industry, our workers continue to show up at jobsites every day. The electricity sector plays a fundamental role in providing security and comfort to Canadians by powering our healthcare facilities and keeping the lights on at home.

As the national organization for the electricity sector’s human resources needs, Electricity Human Resources Canada (EHRC) has issued sector-wide pulse surveys to determine the state of the sector’s workforce and operations. Organizing a critical workforce that operates 24/7 without compromising health, safety or operational regulations is a tremendous undertaking. The Canadian electricity sector has again shown resiliency by maintaining uninterrupted operations in the midst of a challenging and rapidly-changing situation.

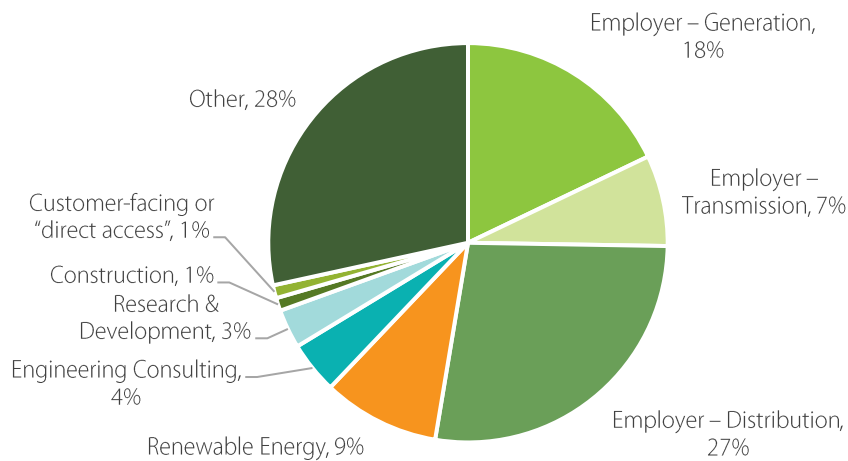
This information is being shared with the Government of Canada to help to inform federal response and supports for the sector’s needs.

Survey Results

Respondents

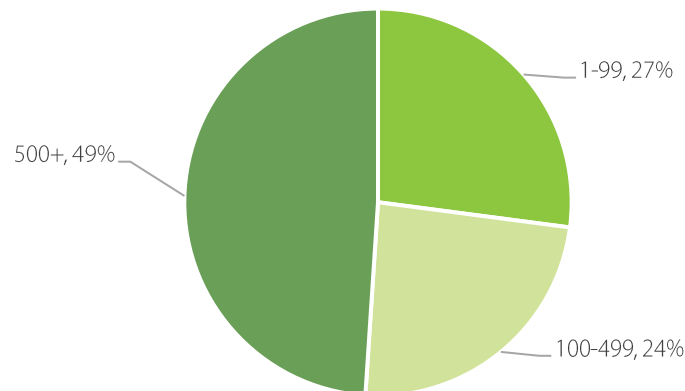
The survey informing this report was distributed from April 9 until April 19. It received 57 completed responses. Respondents represent a variety of organization types, geographies, and sizes.

Respondents by Organization Type



Province	Count	Percentage
Alberta	15	15.96%
British Columbia	6	6.38%
Manitoba	2	2.13%
New Brunswick	3	3.19%
Newfoundland and Labrador	0	0%
Nova Scotia	3	3.19%
Ontario	55	58.51%
Prince Edward Island	1	1.06%
Quebec	3	3.19%
Saskatchewan	3	3.19%
Northwest Territories	1	1.06%
Nunavut	1	1.06%

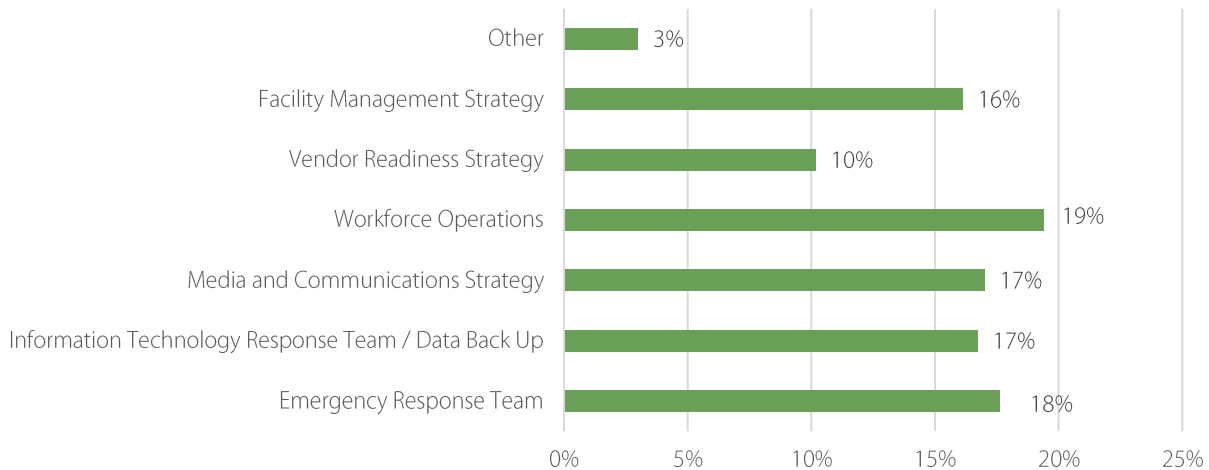
Respondents by Number of Employees



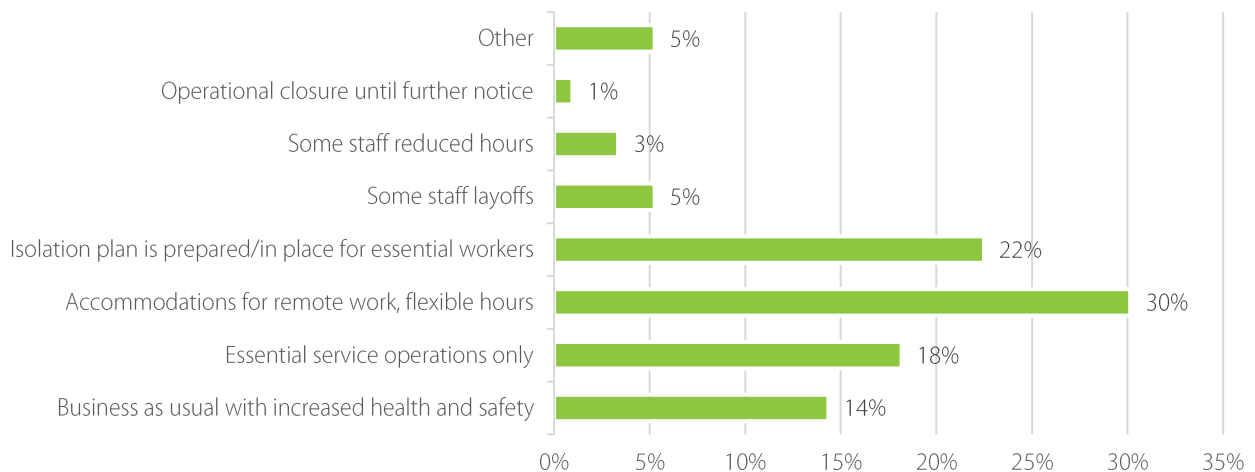
Response to the Pandemic

Most respondents (81%) have a business continuity plan in place, or partially in place (9%). Only 10% do not have a plan in place. However, business continuity plan and operational plan approaches vary greatly across organizations.

Different Business Continuity Plan Approaches



Operational Plan Approaches



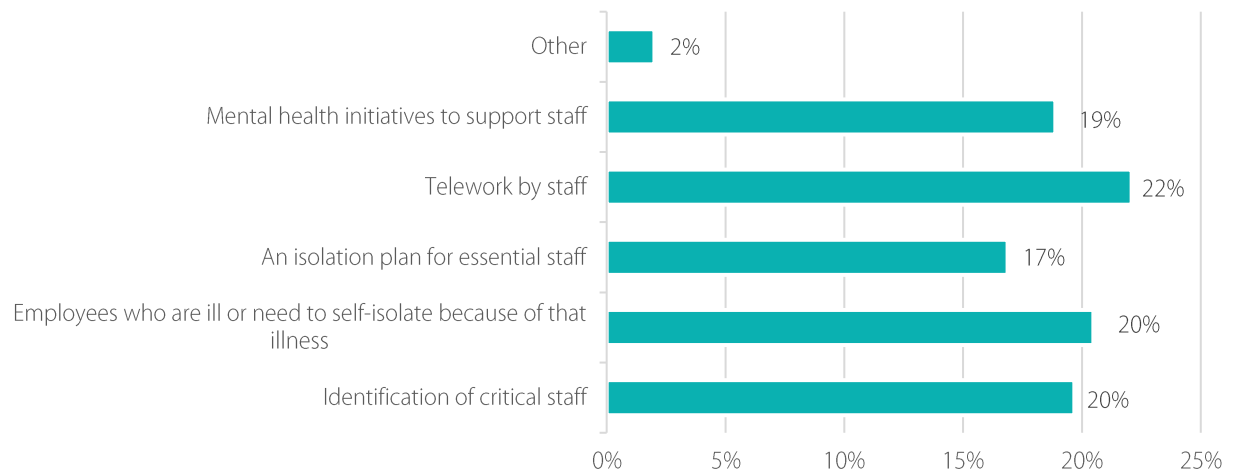
If the pandemic continues beyond 2–3 months, **35% of respondents anticipate staff reductions**, and 65% do not. For those anticipating staff reductions, 56% expect reductions of 1–10%, 30% expect reductions of 11–30% , 11% expect reductions of 31–50%, and only 4% expect reductions of 51–75%.

Of the respondents, only 6% are concerned about electricity supply, 76% are unconcerned, and 18% are unsure.

Employee Health and Wellness

The health and safety of employees has always been a priority for employers in the electricity sector. Employers are responding to the pandemic by updating policies and practices to ensure the physical and mental health and safety of all staff, addressing the unique challenges of the pandemic. We asked respondents to identify which policies and practices they were putting in place to support employees.

Employer Policy and Practice Responses

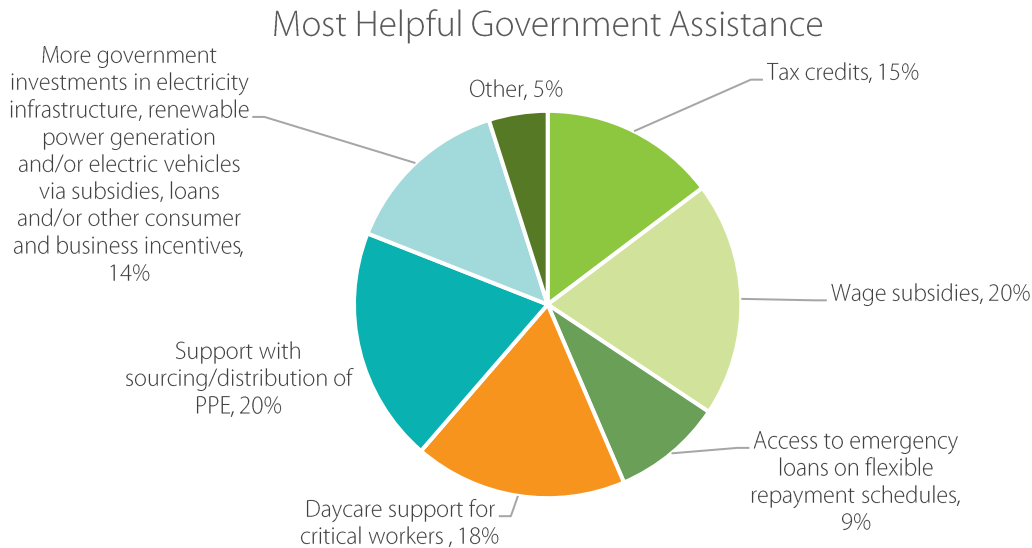


In terms of the challenges to supporting both the continuity of the organization and the productivity and well-being of employees, employers ranked the following from most challenging to least challenging:

1. Ability to protect employees (COVID transmission)
2. Organizing a critical workforce that operates 24-7 without compromising health, safety or operational regulations.
3. Supply chain challenges may impact production
4. Lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) may impact operations if current situation is extended by 1–3 months
5. Projects and or work orders have been reduced/cancelled
6. Lack of technology to facilitate telework.
7. Financial ability to meet payroll.
8. We don't have a formal Pandemic or Continuity Plan
9. In some instances, front line staff are facing harassment by the public

Assistance Required

The federal and provincial governments are actively providing various relief programs and benefits to ensure the continuity of our economy and employment. The needs of the electricity sector are unique, and respondents identified a large diversity of supports needed.



Even though much work the electricity sector is essential, it doesn't mean that operations and revenues are continuing normally. When asked, **50% of respondents are concerned about their organization's financial health**, 27% are unsure, and only 23% are not concerned. This is an alarming response for a utility that is necessary for the country to function.

As mentioned above: some government measures are already available. 10% of respondents are currently benefitting from these measures, 32% aren't benefitting *but intend to*, 31% aren't benefitting *and don't intend to*, and **27% are unable to access government benefits**. Those unable to access the benefits don't meet the current parameters of the aid, which suggests that sector would benefit from reduced restrictions on this aid.

Trades

A substantial amount of work in the electricity sector is done by tradespeople, and the pandemic may be affecting them disproportionately. **27% of respondents said the pandemic would affect their ability to hire Red Seal tradespeople or apprentices this year**, while 36% expected to be unaffected and 37% are unsure. For those who are unsure, both direct causes from the pandemic (such as hiring freezes, relocation needs, orientation process, etc.) and indirect causes (cash flow challenges, etc.) make the trades hiring situation uncertain.

A large variety of labour market measures were suggested to improve this, including wage subsidies, financial incentives/supports for hiring and investments in infrastructure and other projects.

Student Workers

Electricity employers employ a significant number of students each year, through co-op placements, internships and capstone projects. This provides students with an opportunity to gain real life work experience and allows employers to develop and engage their future talent pool. The pandemic will have a significant impact on hiring plans for student workers for work-integrated learning positions. **Only 13% of respondents will hire students as planned**, 22% will not be placing students for the summer, 28% will reduce the number of students, and 15% are unsure. None of the respondents anticipate hiring more students than previously planned.

Changes to Empowering Futures, our Student Work Placement Program (SWPP) for the electricity sector, allow for increased flexibility with funded placements. One increased flexibility is **allowing students to work from home**. 33% of respondents said this would be helpful, 56% said it would have no impact and 11% were unsure.

Another flexibility measure is the opportunity to access student **wage subsidies up-front**, rather than on a reimbursement basis. 22% of respondents said this would enable them to hire more students, 49% said it wouldn't have an impact, and 29% are unsure.

One SWPP requirement that is currently still in place is the need to hire more students than the previous year to access program funding. If this requirement was waived, 22% of respondents would be able to hire additional students, 55% would hire the same amount, and 24% are unsure.

While the current flexibility measures indicate that hiring students will be somewhat easier, it remains to be seen how many students will be placed in the coming months with the many factors affecting that process.

Summary

The electricity sector has not been hit as hard as many other sectors as a result of the COVID19 crisis. This is due in part to the planning and risk mitigation policies and processes that are an inherent component of industry operations. However, as employers look to balance operational reliability and workforce safety the implications on the workforce cannot be underestimated—and the above responses have shown that many companies are concerned about financial stability, their ability to hire and retain staff, and the health and safety concerns during a period of heightened precautions. Should these restrictions continue over the long term—an unknown at present—there will be further implications for how companies operate, raise revenue and manage a largely “remote” workforce. EHRC will continue to engage with stakeholders to understand how the evolving situation will affect them, share those concerns and best practices, and put forth recommendations to support those needs.

Not only is the electricity sector ensuring that essential operations continue by powering Canada, [many organizations have gone above-and-beyond](#) with donations of PPE, food, funding, and other goods to support the communities they operate in. This pandemic has demonstrated not only the sector's effectiveness and resiliency, but also its compassion and dedication to the people most in need in our society.