

Electricity Sector Pandemic Status Report

Employee Perspectives on Remote Working Arrangements

July 2020



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in hundreds of thousands of employees suddenly having to work from home. While some employees had already been working remotely, many found themselves operating in a new situation without any time to plan, negotiate, organize or set up correctly.

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 survey, circulated over a six-week timeframe between June and July 2020, focused on the perspectives of individual workers. The objective of this survey was to understand how remote working is impacting individuals in the electricity workforce.

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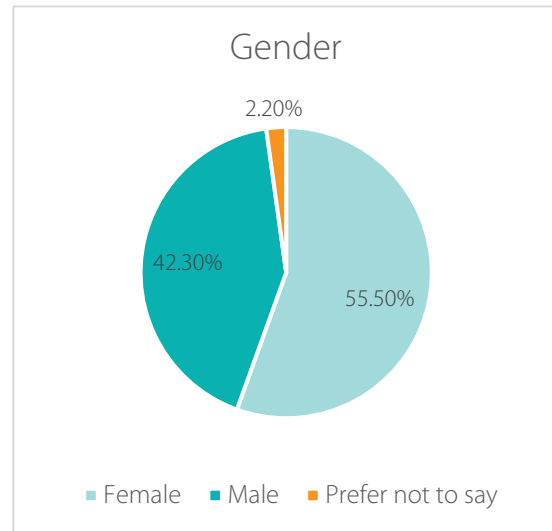
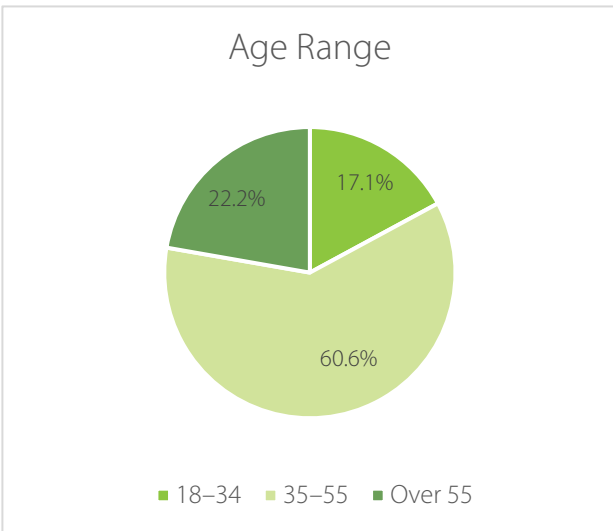
Major Takeaways

- Before the pandemic, 44.3% of respondents would sometimes work remotely. Currently, 76.6% of respondents are working remotely.
- Respondents overwhelmingly favour 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.
- 44.9% of respondents said there were no disadvantages at all to working remotely, while 2.2% said there were no advantages to working remotely.
- Many respondents identified that working remotely is not inherently a challenge. They noted that working under the pandemic, with the added stresses and lack of childcare, is what is difficult. Working remotely without the pandemic would be even more favourable.
- 6.7% of respondents say they are less productive working remotely. 45.2% have the same level of productivity, and 48.1% have an increased level of productivity.
- Respondents are generally having more meetings with internal colleagues and less meetings with external partners.
- 10.5% of respondents find it difficult to work with new clients, customers or colleagues.
- 81.5% of respondents are somewhat to very concerned about contracting COVID-19 when returning to work. The top concern is that safety protocols (like masks and handwashing) will not be observed.
- Most respondents feel that their company is providing the right supports. 15.7% of respondents say their manager has not been as supportive as they would like, and 16.1% say they are frustrated with their organizations.
- 29.1% of respondents say their employer has communicated dates for returning to the office. 40.2% say their employer expects them to return but have not yet provided a date.

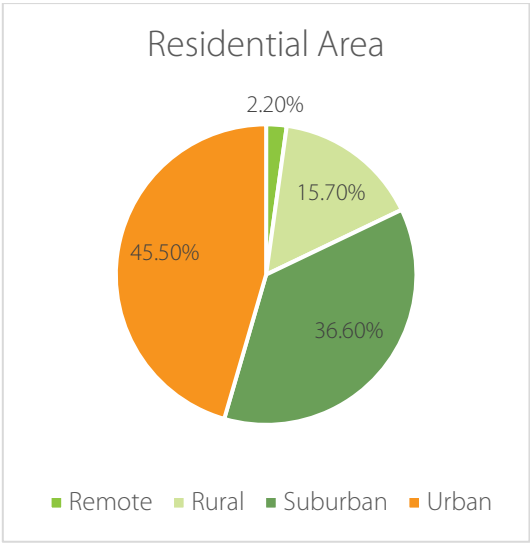
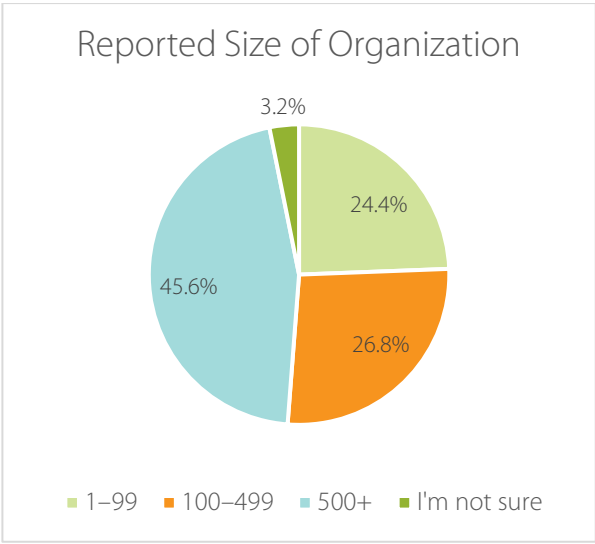
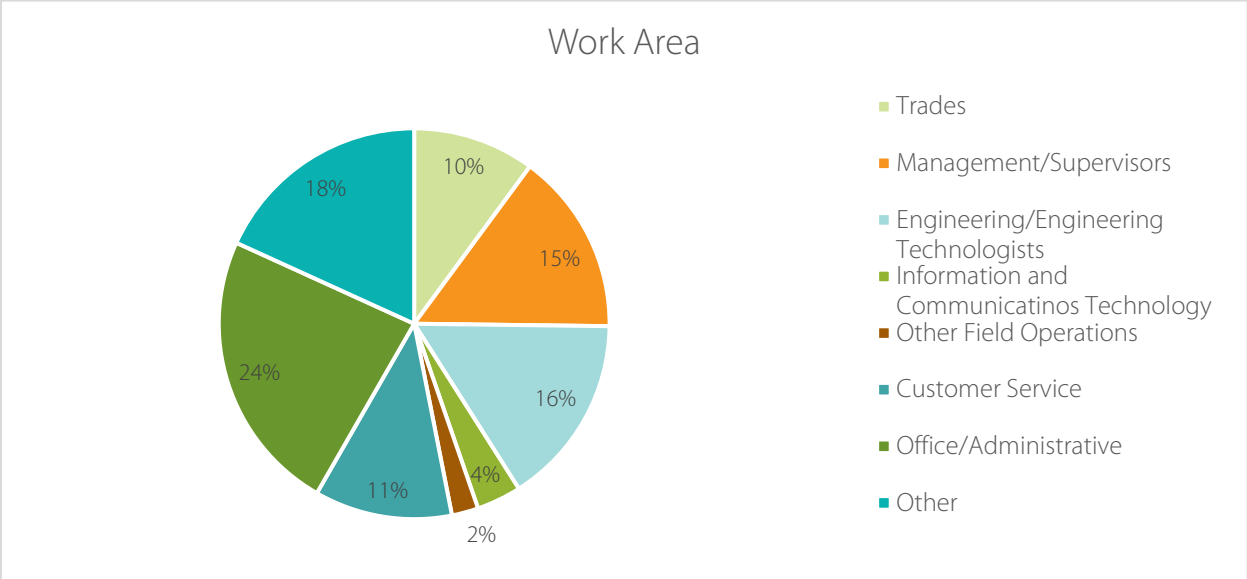
Survey Results

Respondents

The survey informing this report was distributed from June 11 to July 24. It received 410 completed responses. Respondents represent a variety of roles, organization sizes, geographies, and identities.

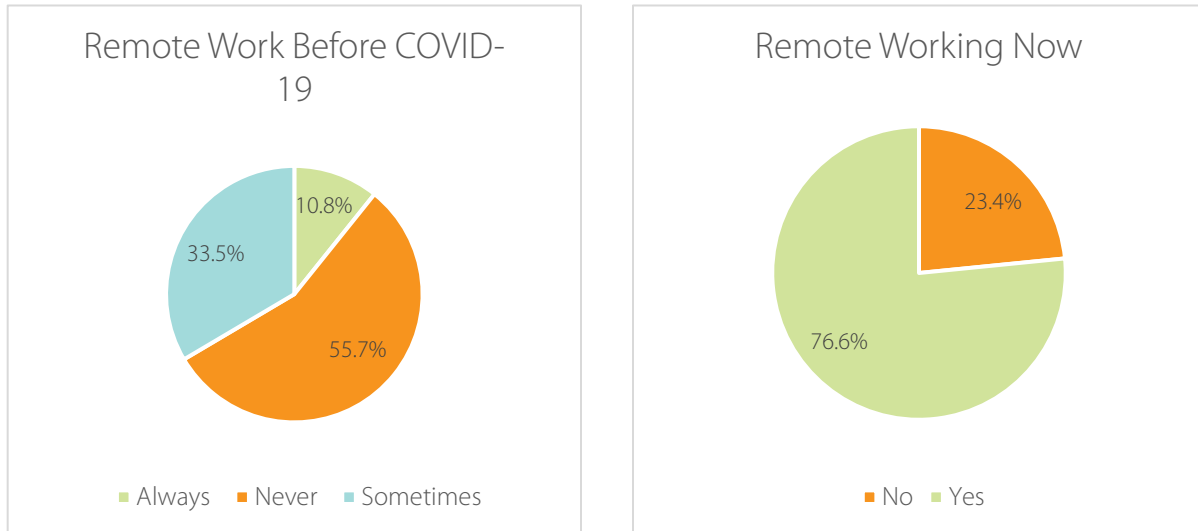


| Province | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Alberta | 11.2% |
| British Columbia | 3.2% |
| Manitoba | 0.5% |
| New Brunswick | 6.1% |
| Newfoundland & Labrador | 7.1% |
| Northwest Territories | 0.2% |
| Nova Scotia | 2.2% |
| Nunavut | 0.5% |
| Ontario | 66.8% |
| Quebec | 0.2% |
| Saskatchewan | 1.5% |
| Yukon | 0.5% |



Remote Working Status

While a sizeable number of respondents were working remotely (at least sometimes) before the pandemic, the vast majority is working remotely now.



Commuting

Respondents were asked about their daily commute. The average commute (to and from work) for respondents is **62 kilometers**, taking **65 minutes** to commute each day.

Working Remotely

Much of the survey focused on how those working remotely were coping. These questions were asked of respondents that identified they were currently working remotely.

Challenges

When asked about the biggest challenges with working remotely, **44.9% of remote working respondents said, “there are no challenges to working remotely”**. However almost a quarter of respondents identified the top challenge as the loss of collaboration with their colleagues.

The top challenges faced by employees working remotely are:

1. Loss of collaboration (23.2%)
2. Workspace (23.2%)
3. IT challenges (internet, Wi-Fi, etc.) (22.9%)
4. Childcare (15.9%)
5. Interruptions (15.3%)
6. Loneliness (15%)
7. Productivity (7.6%)

Advantages

When asked about the biggest advantages with working remotely, **only 2.2% of remote working respondents said, “there are no advantages to working remotely”.**

The top advantages to working remotely are:

1. No commuting (83.1%)
2. More productive working remotely (60.1%)
3. Better work-life balance (57.2%)
4. Time flexibility (43.1%)
5. More time outside of work (30%)
6. Prefer working on my own (12.5%)

Employer or Managerial Support

We asked respondents what their manager or employer could be doing to help, and the most common responses were:

- Flexible work hours
- Better communication
- Providing equipment or a budget for work-from-home needs
- Mental health supports
- Socialization opportunities

Statements about Organizations

We asked respondents working remotely to rate their level of agreement with the following statements.

| | Strongly agree | Somewhat Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Somewhat disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| My organization is regularly communicating with me | 68% | 24% | 3% | 4% | 2% |
| I feel informed by my organization | 64% | 25% | 4% | 5% | 2% |
| I feel supported by my organization | 53% | 28% | 8% | 5% | 6% |
| I feel part of the team | 50% | 32% | 9% | 4% | 4% |
| My organization is doing its best in the circumstances | 59% | 24% | 7% | 5% | 5% |
| My organization is providing me with well-being supports | 49% | 29% | 12% | 5% | 5% |
| My organization is providing me with ergonomic and health & safety advice for working remotely | 34% | 26% | 19% | 10% | 10% |

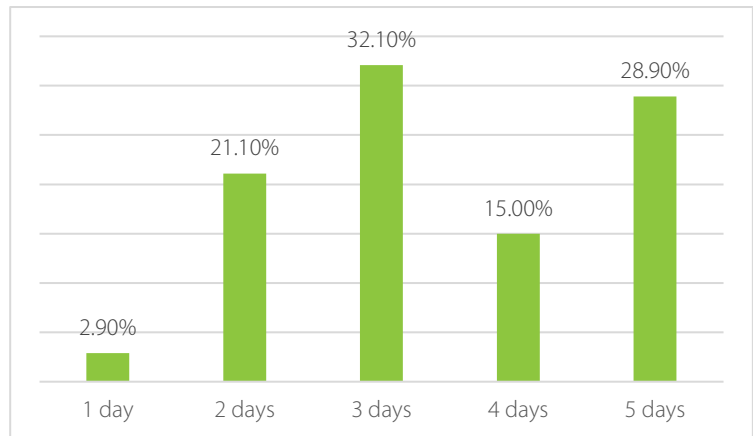
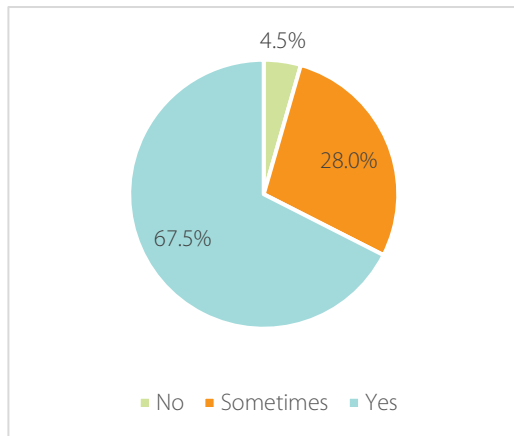
Personal Investment

We asked respondents how much personal investment (example: acquisition of office equipment) they had to make to be able to work remotely. They responded:

- A little, which I paid for myself (33.1%)
- A lot (2.2%)
- My employer partly provided what I needed, but I paid for the rest (9.2%)
- My employer provided everything I needed (24.8%)
- None, I had what I needed already (30.6%)

Continuing Remote Work

We asked respondents currently working remotely if they would prefer to continue working remotely. For those that responded “yes” or “sometimes”, we asked how many days per week would be ideal. Nearly one-third of respondents would like to work remotely 3 days per week, while nearly another third of respondents would like to work fully remotely.



Productivity

When asked, respondents working remotely reported they are:

- More productive than before the pandemic, 48.1%
- As productive as before the pandemic, 45.2%
- Less productive than before the pandemic, 6.7%

Meetings

We asked respondents working remotely if they had more, less or the same number of meetings.

| | More meetings | Same number | Less meetings |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| Internally with colleagues | 40.9% | 39% | 20.1% |
| Externally with partners | 17.4% | 55.5% | 27.1% |

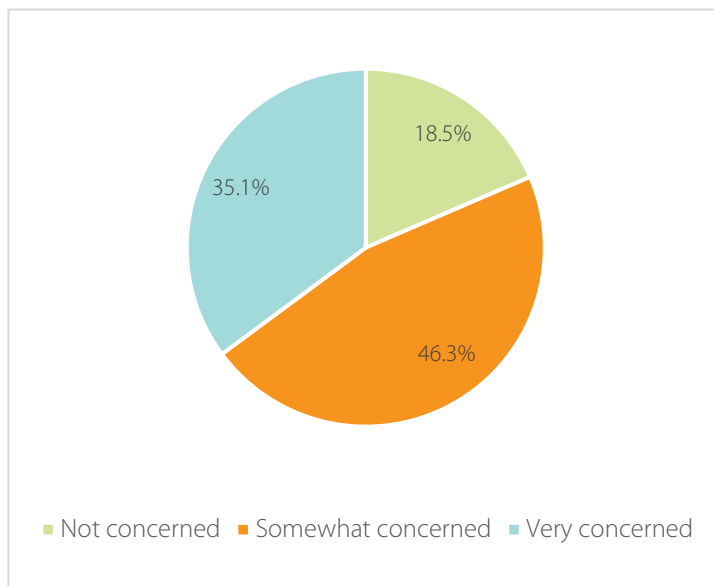
Working with New People

Respondents were asked if working with new clients, customers or colleagues was difficult

- It's easy to work with new people I haven't worked with before, 15.9%
- It's hard to work with new people I haven't worked with before, 10.5%
- It hasn't changed how I work with people I haven't worked with before, 38.9%
- I've only been working with people from before, so there's no real difference, 34.7%

COVID-19 Concerns

For those who have been working remotely, we asked how concerned they were about contracting COVID-19 when returning to the office. We also asked what their top concerns were.



Top concerns:

1. Concerns that safety guidelines (social distancing, hand washing, etc.) won't be adhered to, 71.2%
2. Having particularly vulnerable or immunocompromised people in my immediate network, 36.4%
3. Working with others who take public transit, 32.5%
4. Protocols for sanitizing the work environment, 29.5%
5. Taking public transit, 13.9%
6. Lack of PPE, 10.9%

Note that respondents were **twice as likely to be concerned about colleagues taking public transit** than those **taking transit themselves**.

When asked if they had other comments or concerns about working remotely, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Most respondents are enjoying working remotely and hope to continue doing so. Many said that the challenges they were experiencing were due to the pandemic and less about remote working: childcare, elderly care, stress and mental health challenges, etc. Many said that moving to remote work was overdue, and the pandemic has shown that they and their teams can work off-site. Many also said that they hope to see a balance between working remotely and from the office in the future.

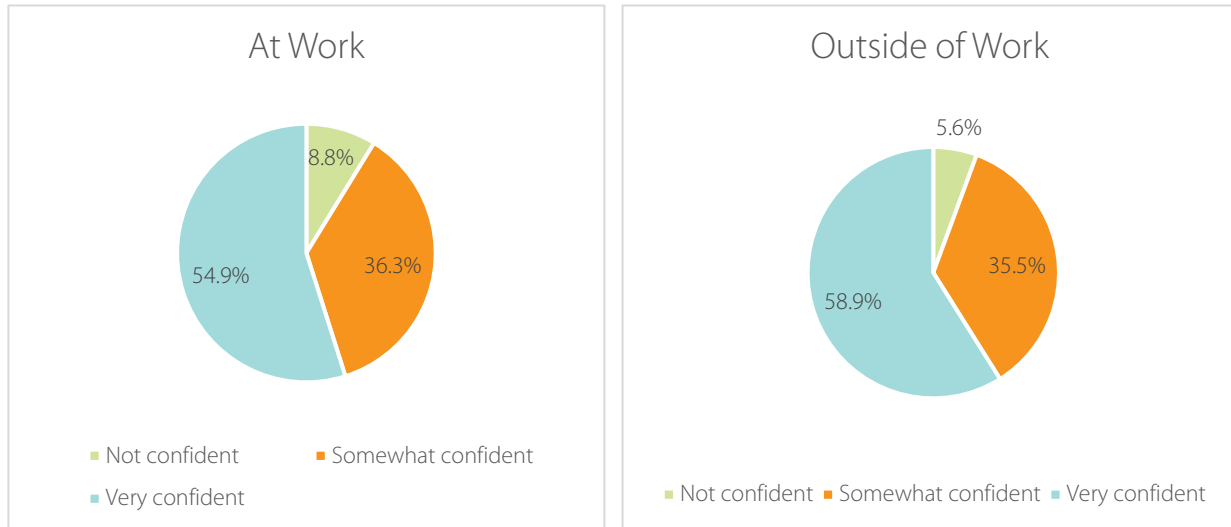
A Snap Shot: What We Heard

- *A good balance between home and office work will benefit staff well being and company culture and productivity long term and will have significant impacts on reducing real estate and transit infrastructure costs (highways and public transit)*
- *Greatest challenge is the lack of childcare and school. If these are available then productivity working at home would be much higher. With the current situation, productivity is maintained only by working flexible hours and late into the night*
- *As a manager I feel it's harder to create and maintain open lines of communication with my team*

- *I appreciate being afforded the opportunity to work remotely at least some of the time, the flexibility to complete my duties on my own time in whatever way I can. And being trusted to fulfill my role from home.*
- *I HATE it!!! I miss interacting with people. Communication is much more difficult as we miss body language cues to tell us what people actually mean.*
- *I have appreciated working from home and we have worked to find innovative ways to ensure the work flow continuity without compromising on standards. Most of the changes will continue after the pandemic is over and has led to positive changes.*
- *I think there should be an official policy allowing people to work remotely on a permanent basis. It will reduce the traffic, pollution from the traffic, improve people's work/life balance, lower the cost of office space rent for the organizations (and the freed up space can be used to address housing crises in big cities), allow to expand the workforce the organizations can hire, and the list goes on.*
- *It is extremely isolating and tough on my mental health*
- *Increased scheduling of meetings via video conferencing as a result of working remotely, which becomes a challenge with scheduling everyone's calendars that are involved in attending the meetings.*
- *Remember that we are at home during a pandemic trying to work. It is not a fair comparison to 'working from home' without emotional or psychological strain. People are going to be facing additional stresses and may not be as productive due to those circumstances.*
- *It is really good if implemented correctly. Everybody wins including less pollution for the environment, time saving by not having to commute, more productivity given the worker will have a better balance life and will be more rested every day.*
- *Working remotely during a pandemic is not the baseline for working remotely during normal times. Take away things like kids being at home, worry about elderly relatives, etc. and the entire experience changes for the better.*
- *Although I understand the uncertainty of the situation and appreciate my managers navigating this the best they can, I have felt unsupported in general during this crisis, which has added significantly to my stress and anxiety about the whole situation.*
- *My days are much longer and more busy than when I was at work. Working remotely has advantages but lots of disadvantages as well - the phone/emails/video meetings are non-stop which can make my daily task list get pushed off to later in the day than I hoped. I find I have to work more hours to keep up, skip breaks/lunches. As the supervisor I also hear a lot of the issues that people have - as much as working remotely is nice because you don't have to commute and you're around the house/family, a lot of my staff are suffering mental health effects from this. They're lonely (want to see others outside of their families), they've admitted they have less motivation and are less productive, they're booking more time off for mental health reasons. I also think that covid is giving a false sense of being able to work remotely - currently there's not much else to do and not many things open. I'm not convinced that once things return to "normal" that people would stay working for their full days and be available. I think there'd be a lot of temptation to go out in the day. Companies will need to have checks in place to ensure accountability in my opinion.*
- *Working remotely is tied to innovating for the future and works out to the benefit of the employer as well as the employees. It is a cost savings initiative for the employer and promotes work/life balance for employees. Mental health issues are on the rise and if a healthy balance between working from the office and working from home can be adapted by the organization, everyone wins.*
- *My experience has been excellent, I am very productive but would love to see people in person again!*

Employer Supports

We asked all respondents, regardless if they were working remotely or not, how confident they were about receiving the right support both at work and outside of work.



When asked about what supports were being provided by employers, popular responses were:

- EAPs and similar programs
- Flexibility in work hours
- Check-ins

When asked what managers or employers could do to help employee well-being, top responses were:

1. Ensure that employees are given clear and accurate information in a timely manner, 23.8%
2. Implement flexible schedules for workers who are caring for dependents (children, elderly parents, or others), 20.7%
3. Regular check-in meetings with manager or supervisor, 17.8%
4. Build in time during the workday for colleagues to provide social support to each other, 12.4%
5. Set clear expectations and deadlines in regard to workload, 9.8%
6. Ensure that employees are aware of where how they can access mental health and psychological support services and facilitate access to such services, 6.7%

Virtual Communications

Respondents were asked which communications tools they preferred, and interestingly there was an almost equal distribution between those who preferred video conference and those who preferred audio-only, perhaps indicating some level of fatigue with Zoom and other video conference platforms.

1. Video conferencing, 47.8%
2. Audio-only conference, 47.8%
3. Email, 43.1%
4. Phone call, 36.9%
5. Chat programs, 24.9%
6. Project management software, 3.9%

Manager Response

We asked respondents how they managers have responded during the pandemic.

- My manager is demonstrating increased empathy and support, 52.2%
- My manager has not responded any differently, 32.1%
- My manager has not been as supportive, available or in-touch as I would like, 15.7%

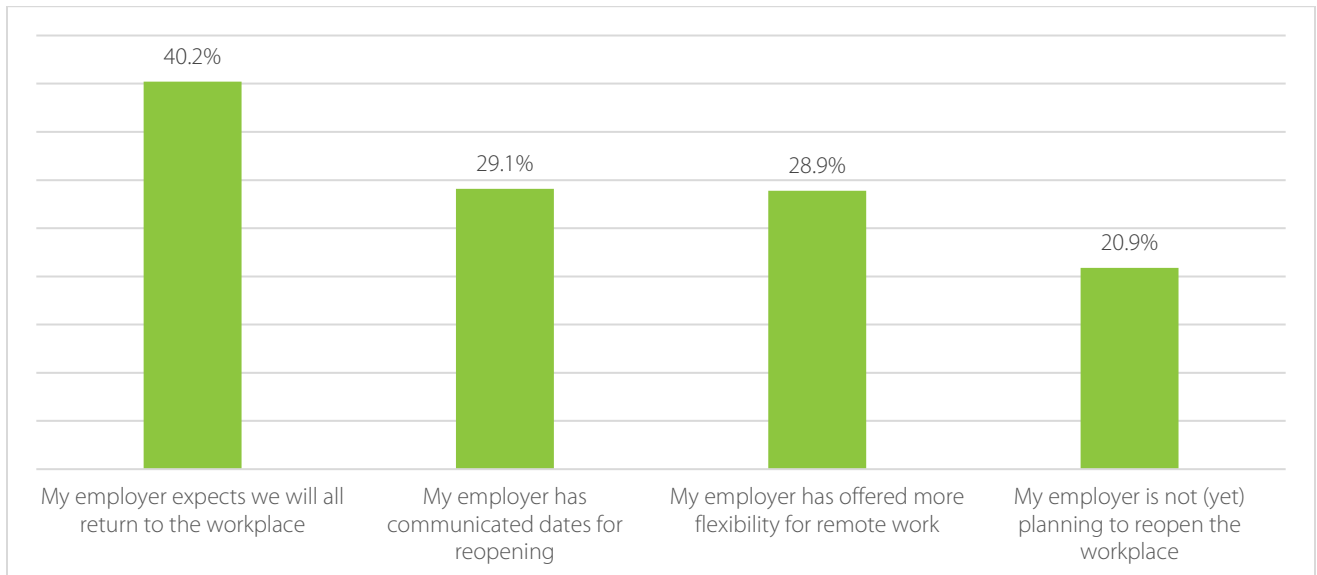
Impact on Views

We asked respondents how COVID-19 has impacted their view of their organization.

- Leadership is supportive and I feel more loyal to my organization, 40.1%
- Leadership has not changed and I feel the same as before the pandemic, 43.8%
- Leadership is poor and I feel frustrated with my organization, 16.1%

Re-Opening Plans

We asked respondents how their employer is preparing to reopen the workplace.



Summary

Despite the overwhelming challenges of the pandemic, the electricity sector has adapted quickly and continued keeping the lights on across Canada. A large part of this was shifting workers from the office to home or remote stations. The vast majority of workers have responded well to this shift and would like to continue working remotely at least sometimes.

Positives (as reported within this survey) have included the lack of commuting time, increased productivity and improved work/life balance. At the same time, a number of respondents reported feelings of isolation, difficulty with peer communications and/or an increased or extended workload.

Until a vaccine is developed, physical and social distance requirements likely remain in place, impacting the numbers of workers who can return to the workplace. Employers need to identify any challenges that

currently exist and ensure that the “solution” does not become part of the problem. In the early days of the pandemic, some companies initiated virtual social events for employees, many outside of regular working hours. While for many these were a welcome means to engage and stay in touch with colleagues, for others they became an additional pressure. Other employees report the sheer volume of video conference meetings as exhausting—indicating that while this technology can be a valuable tool, it can also be overused.

Compulsory “remote working” over the last few months has challenged both employees and employers to adapt. As employers look at the future of work beyond COVID-19, much more extensive analysis will be required to inform future policies. As one respondent noted “It is not a fair comparison” when working from home during a pandemic, and productivity can be affected by additional stressors such as child or eldercare. There will be no-one-size-fits-all approach—collaboration, communications and productivity are all elements that must be considered by individual employers, as well as culture and employee morale.

As employers continue to navigate a balance between working on site and remotely, Electricity Human Resources Canada will continue to engage the industry to share learnings and best practices to support the discussion.