

Workforce Survey Results of Merrimack Valley Employers



Conducted and Assembled by:

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Introduction

As workforce recruitment and retention has emerged as a top challenge for employers across Massachusetts and the country, regional partners in the Merrimack Valley sought to learn more about specific issues employers are facing and how these issues can be addressed. Although workforce was a top challenge prior to COVID-19, the pandemic has significantly magnified this challenge. In conversations with employers across the region, MVPC repeatedly received feedback that employers need additional assistance in solving this worker shortage. From December 20th through January 7th, the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, MassHire Merrimack Valley, and their partners surveyed employers on their workforce recruitment and retention challenges. The survey received 47 respondents from businesses across the region of 15 cities and towns in northeastern Massachusetts.¹

Respondents were able to answer the survey anonymously, and at the end of the survey they had the option to leave contact information for follow-up conversations with MVPC or MassHire staff. A number of employers offered this information, and further meetings will be had with these businesses. The following is a summary of the answers and data collected from the workforce survey. Additional and more detailed breakdowns of the data are available on request—contact MVPC for more information.

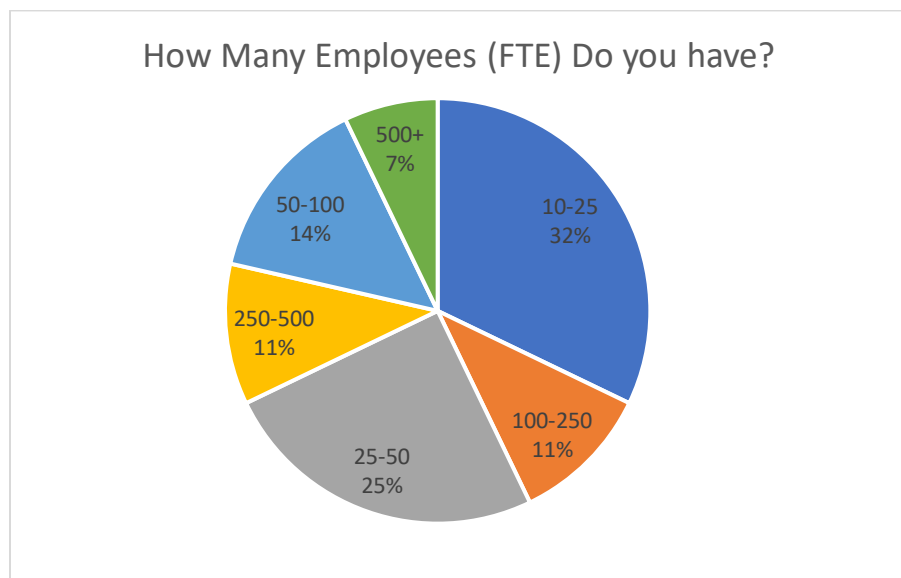
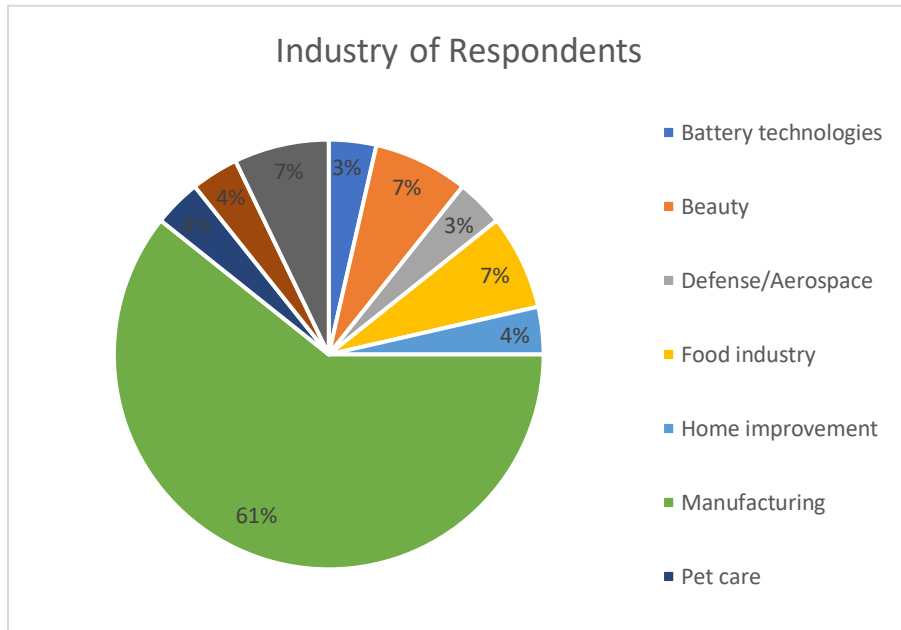
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¹ 17 of these respondents represented businesses with less than 10 employees, which were not the intended target of the survey and whose responses have been omitted from the data. Their responses are still valuable and will be used to understand the needs of our small business community, but for the purposes of this report we focus on businesses with more than 10 employees. Data on these small business responses are available on request.

I: Business Response Statistics

The survey took in 30 total respondents. The majority of those were from the manufacturing industry, with social services, food services, and beauty rounding out the top 4. Respondents represented a wide variety of staffing levels, the most common being 10-25 FTE staff, in addition to strong response rates from businesses with 25-50 and 500-100 employees.

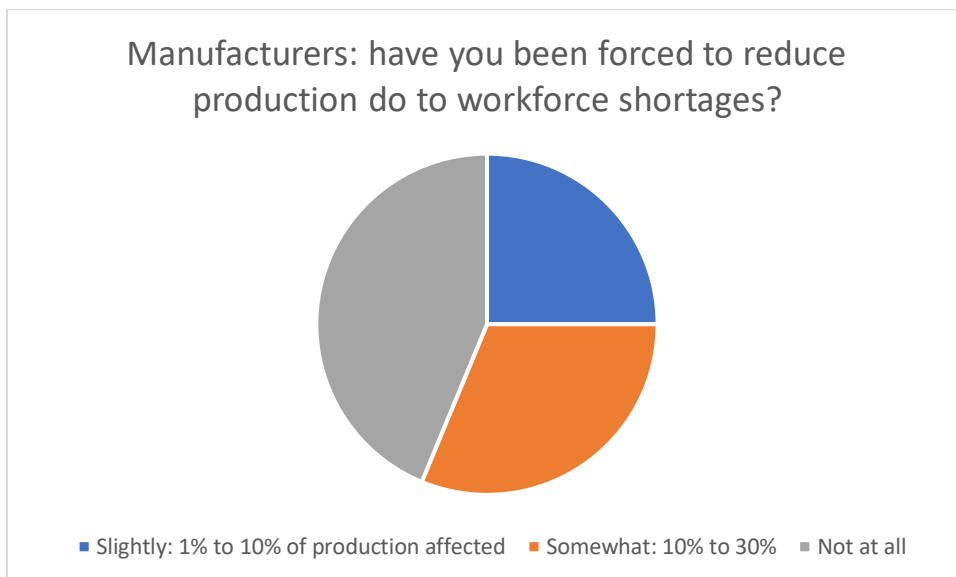


II: Magnitude of the Workforce Challenge

As was expected, workforce recruitment and retention ranked as the number one challenge for the majority of respondents at 52%. 41% stated it ranked as one of a few top challenges, while a small amount said it was either not the biggest issue or not a challenge at all.

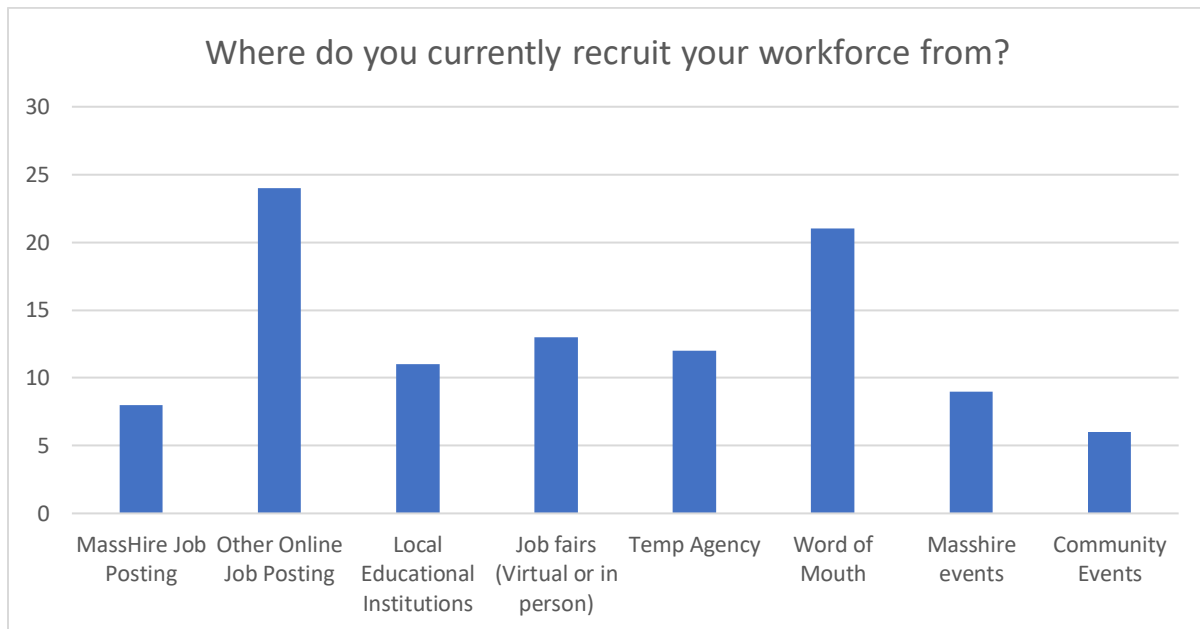


Wanting to see how the workforce shortage is affecting production, we then asked employers if they have been forced to reduce operations due to workforce challenges. Pulling out the data specifically for the manufacturing industry, we see that the majority have been forced to reduce production in some capacity, while 44% have had no impact on their production. Although it is concerning that 56% of manufacturers are reducing their production, in a follow up question we found that all of these employers are experiencing this issue in their other locations across the country. This suggests that our region may not be at a distinct disadvantage when compared to the rest of the country.

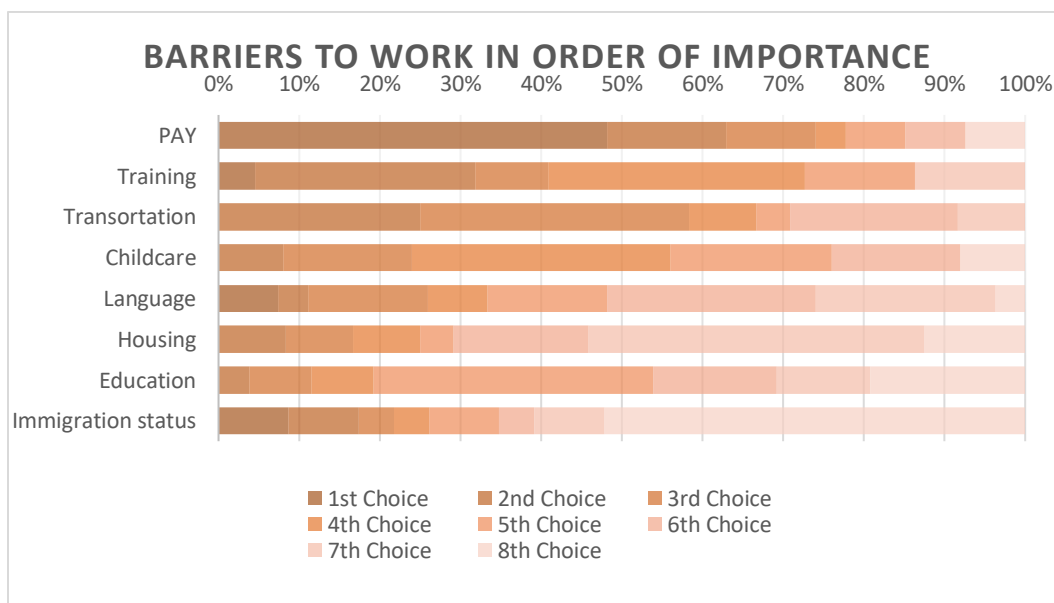


III: Recruiting challenges and needs

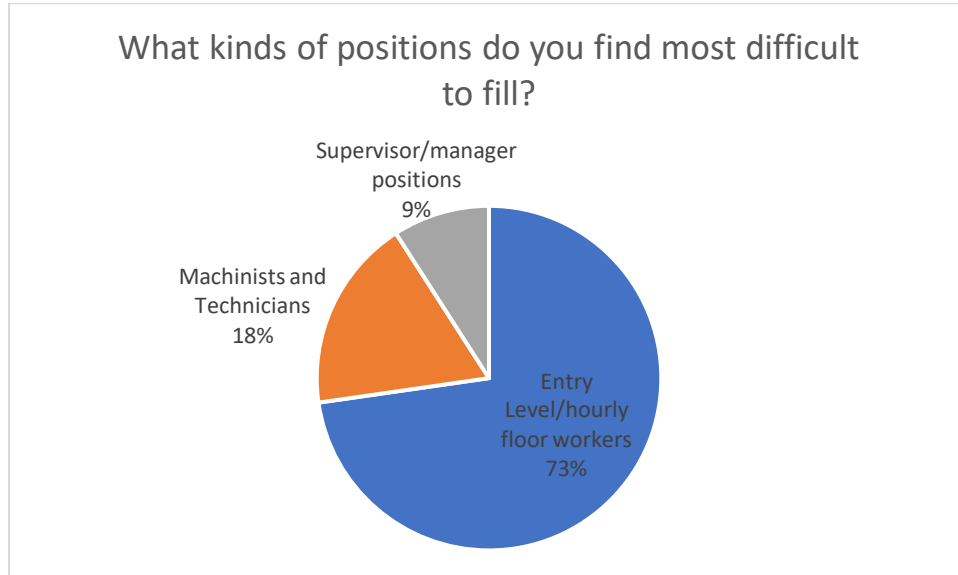
Given that businesses employ a variety of tactics for recruitment, we wanted to find the most common strategies while identifying underused strategies. Almost all employers use some form of an online job posting, with the second most common response being word of mouth. Few employers reported using MassHire for employee searches.



Digging a bit more into what is contributing to the workforce challenges, we asked employers “When talking with your employees or when recruiting new employees, what do you find are the greatest barriers to work?” In ranking their options, pay was the highest barrier, while training, transportation, childcare, and housing rounded out the top 5 in that order.



Looking at which positions are most difficult to fill, we find that almost ¾ of employers need entry level or hourly floor workers. Machinists and technicians are the second highest need, which in some cases could also be considered entry level.

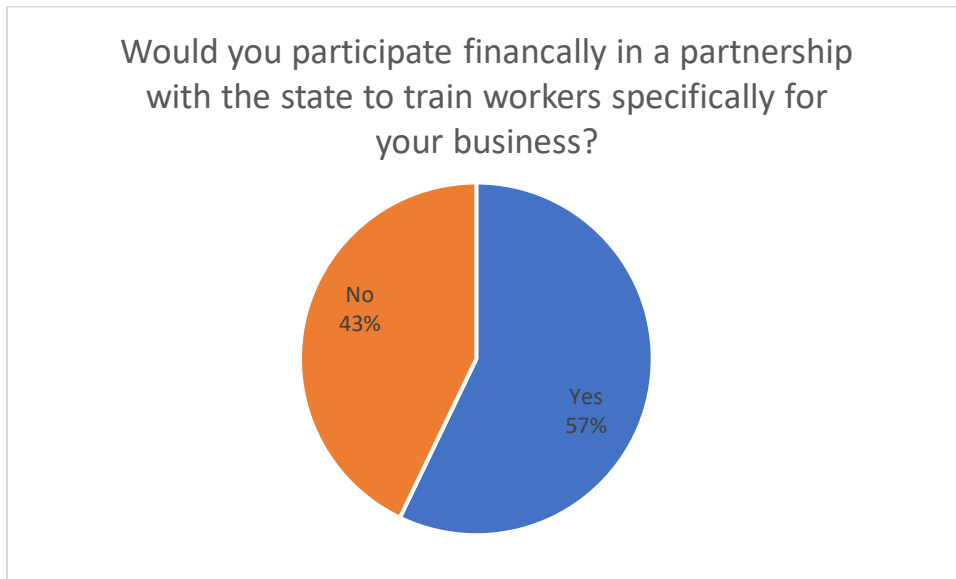


In asking what would be most helpful for employers to learn, the majority are looking for new ways to reach out to employees, while there is significant interest in additional data on benefits across industries and state programs available for assistance.

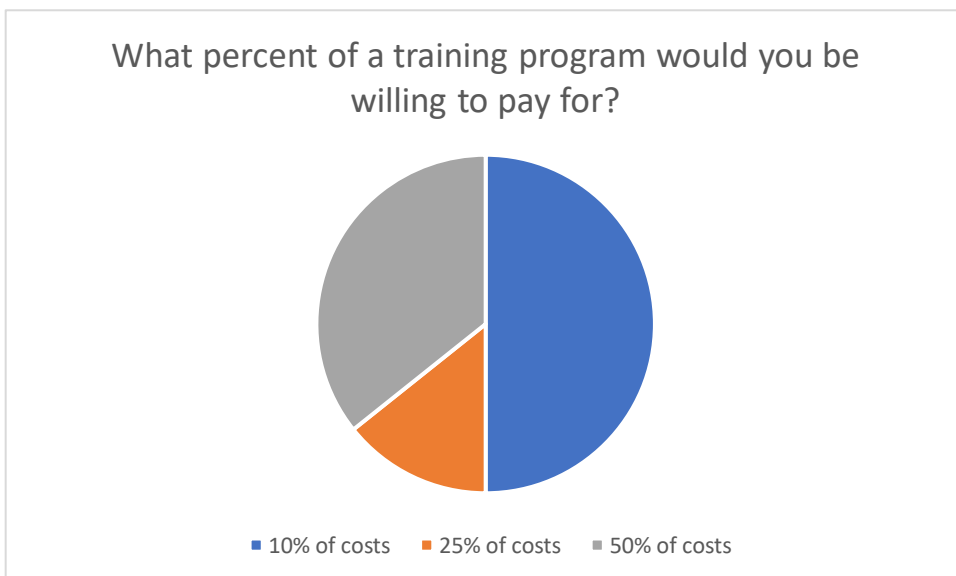


III. Opportunities for State Training Programs

64% of survey respondents reported having a formal training program in place. Almost all of these training programs are reported as being self-funded, with only one respondent using the state’s workforce training grant and one using a registered apprenticeship program. A majority of all respondents—regardless of if they currently have a training program or not—stated they would financially contribute to a state training program.



Of the respondents who stated they would be willing to financially contribute to a training program, half stated they would only contribute 10%, while a third are willing to pay 50% of the costs.



IV Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the survey results and responses, MVPC finds the following suggestions for future work and study. These recommendations are meant to be quick and actionable, rather than slow moving and systemic in nature. While issues like childcare costs, housing scarcity, and wages all dictate the contours of the current workforce topography the purpose of this report is to recommend immediate actionable steps regional stakeholder can take.

1. Increase knowledge and awareness of MassHire recruitment programs, both for job fairs and online job board postings.

Employers seem to not use the services offered through MassHire—not through a fault of the programs, but through a lack of knowledge of the offerings. Additional outreach and connections between MassHire and local businesses could be key. MVPC can assist with these connections as we build relationships with businesses across the region.

2. Offer training programs in partnership with the state and increase knowledge of current training grants.

Employers reported an interest in partnering with the state on a training program to build a pipeline of workers for their businesses. Many also reported a willingness to financially contribute to this program. MassHire and its partners could build programs around this need and interest. Additionally, expanded awareness of current programs like the Workforce Training Fund may be an essential step in connecting employers with training options.

3. Connect employers with local educational institutions for job recruitment

A surprisingly small number of employers reported recruiting through local educational institutions for job openings. These institutions could include community colleges, vocational schools, and public high schools. Connecting employers with these institutions could prove valuable for their recruitment efforts.

4. Offer job fairs at community centered locations—libraries, community centers, places of worship, fairs and festivals.

Few employers reported recruiting through community organizations or events. This could be an untapped resource for job recruitment, as often these organizations are the most trusted by community members and may be frequented by prospective employees who do not go online or attend typical job fairs. Anecdotally, we've heard businesses have found success recruiting in these areas. Given that 60% of respondents reported a desire for new ways to reach out to potential employees, the opportunity for recruitment at community organizations or at community events should be explored.

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5. Work with the MV TMA and MVRTA to identify transportation gaps and areas for improvement

Transportation was ranked as the third highest barrier to work behind pay and training. MVPC should reach out to the employers who ranked transportation high in their list of barriers to work and identify common transportation challenges with these employers. MVPC can then facilitate introductions with the MV Transportation Management Association and work with the MVRTA to identify possible public transportation options.

6. Compile local, regional, or state data on benefits and pay employers are offering in our region

Only half of respondents reported having a strong understanding of what other employers in their industry offer for benefits and pay, while 30% stated specifically that a better understanding of benefits and pay their competitors are offering would be the most helpful information to improve their workforce recruitment and retention. Given the lack of easily accessible data available on the state and regional level, it may be beneficial to study and compile a report on this information in the Merrimack Valley.