

COVID-19 Adaptation and Recovery: Human Resource and Training Needs in Whistler, BC

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Executive Summary

This report documents a qualitative research project conducted between May and July 2020 by two researchers from Royal Roads University. The focus of the project was to understand more fully the Human Resource (HR) and training needs of Whistler employers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. These needs were explored in the following sectors: food and beverage, retail, accommodation, and not-for-profit. The research will assist organizations in these four sectors in Whistler as they adapt and respond to the changing pandemic environment.

A literature review explored several major catastrophes with an emphasis on recovery strategies. Ten recovery strategies were identified in the literature, as well as seven lessons learned. Four virtual focus groups were held with representatives from each of the four sectors; these representatives were primarily managers and owners of Whistler-based organizations. A qualitative analysis software program was used to aid in the identification of themes. The resulting themes were further analyzed to develop the findings and recommendations presented in this report.

Throughout the discussions with the research participants, there were several consistent findings. The questions and findings are organized into two areas: (1) HR needs, as organizations began to open operations, and (2) professional development and training needs. With respect to HR needs, the following five needs were identified as common issues: *staffing*, *adaptability*, *uncertainty*, *communication*, and *strategies* for working in the COVID-19 pandemic. With regard to professional development and training needs, all sectors identified conflict resolution and difficult conversations as priorities. The report lists the training and development needs by sector for managers and owners, and staff and volunteers. The research culminated in the development of the 4C model which focusses on workplace adaptation and recovery.

The research will have relevance not only to Whistler, but also to other resort communities that have an economy that is reliant on tourism and hospitality.

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to express their gratitude to the Squamish and Lílwat First Nations upon whose ancestral lands the village of Whistler is located, and the Xwsepsum and Lekwungen families upon whose lands Royal Roads University campus is situated.

The researchers would like to thank the Whistler Chamber of Commerce and Zero Ceiling Society of Canada for their support in connecting the researchers with the Whistler community, and the research participants who each gave 90 minutes of time for focus group discussions. In addition, we are thankful to research assistants Karen Charlebois and Charlotte Gorley for their expertise.

Introduction

This report provides an overview of Phase 1 of a qualitative research project completed in June 2020. The project was conducted with the assistance of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce and Zero Ceiling. The goal of this project is to understand the human resource needs of Whistler organizations in relation to reopening amid COVID-19. The study will inform how tourism and hospitality employers can support and train employees in this new and changing environment.

Building on what is known about recovery strategies explored in major catastrophe literature, and other sources such as the Pulse Survey Check (Pulse Check #4 Results: Bold Plan Needed to Help Businesses Recover, 2020), Phase 1 of the research contributes to a growing body of knowledge about pandemic-related adaptation and recovery strategies. By conducting focus groups with key sectors in Whistler, the researchers were able to explore the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants as they moved through the various early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus group questions related to employer perceptions and experiences of (1) HR needs, as organizations were re-opening or operating; and (2) professional development and training needs. This report presents preliminary data from Phase 1, recognizing that the situation due to COVID-19 is constantly changing.

Significance of Study

Phase 1 identified the HR needs of Whistler employers in multiple sectors amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The study provides insights for improving workplace relationships through time-appropriate professional development and training. The questions asked of participants focussed on the employers' experiences to date, the prediction of future needs, with a specific focus on their hiring and training requirements. The research findings provide insights to guide the development of HR strategies and training programs. The findings offer additional information for employers to consider as they continue to adapt to the COVID-19 environment.

Methodology and Method

The focus group method is suitable for encouraging participants to compare experiences, develop and generate ideas, and explore issues of importance by sharing and interacting with each other (Breen, 2006). The moderator encouraged participants to: (1) explore experiences to date; (2) share their impression of anticipated futures; (3) identify hiring and training needs; and (4) consider the support required when adapting their businesses. The prompts were practice-based in focus, seeking to explore different HR practices and training needs, related to re-opening businesses in Whistler. The participants shared their personal experiences and reflected on the impact of COVID-19 in their organizations. The researchers followed a semi-structured approach, and the data collection was characterized and conducted as a focus group interview (Lichtman, 2013). The interview questions and prompts are presented in Appendix 1.

Between June 22 and June 26, 2020, the researchers conducted four different focus groups using Zoom web-conferencing software. This channel was selected as the research participants were generally familiar with Zoom.

The focus groups were organized by sector as follows: food and beverage, retail, accommodation, and not-for-profit sectors. The focus groups were each 90 minutes in length. The data was audio-recorded and transcribed. One of the researchers took notes to aid in clarifying questions arising in the transcription, and the chat function in Zoom was also used to capture comments. The transcription and the chat box data comprised the data set. The ethical review process was completed by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy for Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. All participants provided email consent to participate in the study.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The researchers anticipated that business sectors would experience and address the HR-related impacts of COVID-19 differently, focus groups were therefore organized by sector. This decision also ensured participants had similar backgrounds, experiences, and discussion focus (Cohen et al., 2007). Recruitment for the four focus groups by sector was arranged and completed by Whistler Chamber of Commerce and Zero Ceiling.

Focus group participant recruitment for the food and beverage, retail and accommodation sectors was undertaken by Whistler Chamber of Commerce using two sampling approaches. Some participants were recruited through direct invitation by email, following a purposeful sampling approach (Robson & McCartan, 2016), and some focus group participants responded to a general call. The general call for participants was distributed as follows: (1) Invitation in ENews Update distributed to all Whistler Chamber of Commerce members; and (2) Facebook post on Save Small Business Whistler. Zero Ceiling recruited participants for the not-for-profit sector through direct invitation at a not-for-profit network fortnightly Zoom call.

Agreement to participate was given by email, Facebook Messenger or phone call. Of the 37 who expressed interest in taking part in the research, 9 did not attend, leaving the total number of focus group participants at 28.

Thematic Analysis

The researchers completed a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach (2012) to identify shared experiences that were significant to the research questions. In exploring and describing different experiences in these groups, the intention was to develop a deeper understanding of the HR and training needs of Whistler employers in relation to adaptation and recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, the analysis method honed in on the most meaningful patterns in the data. The thematic analysis was completed using NVivo for coding and theming.

Literature Review

With an overarching focus on COVID-19 and the major catastrophe best practice implications for Whistler, the main emphasis of the literature review was on recovery strategies and lessons learned. The researchers examined studies from several recent major catastrophes including the earthquakes in New Zealand, fires in Colorado and British Columbia, hurricanes and storms in Grenada, norovirus outbreaks on cruise ships, and the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong.

Recovery Strategies

Ten recovery strategies emerged from the literature: *community resilience, ties to community, responsibility for staff, changes in business operations, flexible recovery planning, combating negative media, physical safety, marketing, employment, and top-down approaches in stages of disaster.*

When discussing the fire in Colorado, Cartier and Taylor (2020) noted that for a community to remain resilient, there needed to be good communication, a collective community, preparation for future events, and relationship building. Also discussing community, but with a focus on connection, de Vries and Hamilton (2016) found that having a sense of responsibility for staff members and feeling bound to the community had value; the authors also noted the urgent necessity of changing the way the business operated. In line with the need to remain open to change, Hystad and Keller (2006) discussed how the lack of coordinated recovery planning resulted in an ad hoc approach by businesses. In addition, when discussing the 2003 fires in Kelowna, the same authors commented on the negative impact the fires had on local businesses, as well as the role Tourism Kelowna played in countering some of the harmful media coverage and responding to the marketing needs of some local businesses. In research on SARS and norovirus, physical safety was highlighted, with references to hygiene, temperature checks, cleanliness, and masks (Lo et al., 2006; Koss-Feder, 2020). Lo et al. (2006) focussed on employment issues, with particular reference to layoffs, dismissals, pay cuts, and unpaid leaves. In addition, Hystad and Keller (2008) examined a top-down approach that looked at how tourism businesses viewed the responsibilities and necessary contributions of regional bodies and other major stakeholders when disasters occur.

Lessons Learned

Under lessons learned from the literature, seven themes emerged: *good communication, collective communities, relationship building, stakeholder collaboration, physical protection, disaster and emergency planning, and crisis management planning and implementation.* The significance of communication was highlighted in different situations; in the context of wildfires, Cartier and Taylor (2020) discussed how critical clear communication is to resilience, and noted that constant communication provides feelings of stability for community members. Also, when discussing norovirus, Fisher et al. (2018) noted that healthy behaviours could be promoted through effective communication messages. When discussing communities, Cartier and Taylor (2020) highlighted the value of collective responses and efforts by the community as significant contributors to resilience. The authors also identified relationship building as aiding in continuous resilience after the disaster. While Nordin et al. (2019) were discussing Whistler in general terms, pre COVID-19, they did identify key challenges in the community with effective corporate-community relationships declining. Stakeholder collaboration featured in several contexts, Filimonau and Coteau (2020) commented on

the need for collaboration and shared information networks when planning and recovering from disasters. When discussing Kaikoura earthquake, Fountain and Cradock-Henry (2020) identified the need for tourism businesses and local communities to collaborate with disaster management officials, and Hystad and Keller (2008) referred to the need for pre-emergency collaboration between all stakeholders, and Tew et al. (2008) discussed the importance of collaboration within the organization when responding to SARS. Physical protection measures, such as handwashing and physical distancing, played a role in recovery strategies noted by Fisher et al. (2018) and specific plans, such as masks, temperature checks for staff and crew, as well as removal of buffets, were discussed in The Maritime Executive (2020). Disaster and emergency planning, as well as crisis management planning and implementation were noted as effective strategies to support community resilience in dealing with, and recovery from, major catastrophes (Cartier & Taylor, 2020; Lo et al., 2006; Tew, Zhen et al., 2008).

Findings

The findings are organized under the two research foci identified earlier, with an emphasis on the themes that emerged from the data. The first group of questions focussed on HR needs, as organizations began to re-open their operations. In response to this question, five themes were identified: *staffing, adaptability, uncertainly, communication, and strategies*.

Findings Focus 1: HR Need

Staffing

Staffing was a pressing concern as COVID-19 brought multiple new staffing considerations for employers. For example, employee health and well-being were considered a primary focus along with the necessity of following public health protocols. Finding and retaining staff continued to be a challenge in Whistler with a smaller, domestic recruitment pool to draw from, staffing issues associated with the Canadian Emergency Work Subsidy (CEWS) and the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), and uncertain business forecasting. There was also considerable concern related to parents balancing parenting and work commitments. Some staff had resigned or taken leave to focus on parenting children at home and others were juggling work and parenting. Representative quotes from focus group participants included:

“There's a lot of extra work that I can't spend three months doing just to hire one server, because I can't get a working holiday visa ... somebody said the pipeline is getting tighter and tighter and tighter, and as much as you're going to need less employees just to stay afloat, you can't go below a certain level, you need X number of employees just to function day to day.” 1

“We have to look a little differently in terms of where we get our workers ... not as many local workers willing to do those entry-level positions ... we have to adapt... add a little bit of incentive for people to do jobs that they wouldn't traditionally do or be willing to do.”3

“I think is important to just get a feel kind of around all of this how stressful it is, it's something that I'm dealing with right now is employee burnout.”4

Adaptability

Participants discussed the common experience of adapting to a fluid “new normal”. Key issues included keeping individuals and teams engaged, working online, safeguarding mental and physical health, managing expectations, and recognizing and adapting to different comfort levels from staff and customers. Some participants discussed the opportunity for creativity and innovation and the need to keep forward-focused and open to change. The following quotes draw on discussions related to adaptability:

“Opportunity for creativity, for innovation, for being aggressive during this time as opposed to, you know, riding out or just waiting.”¹

“So we're struggling as well, to just manage the expectations of the staff, manage the expectations of the store's ability to help customers in terms of the protective equipment [that] we need to have in place.”²

Uncertainty

Uncertainty was a shared experience that participants identified as elevated and persistent. The HR uncertainties included the continuance of employment subsidies, in particular, CEWS. Legal questions related to sick time, layoffs, insurance coverage, and others. Employee expectations and health needs were identified as uncertain as COVID-19 affected each employee in different ways. There were also uncertainties related to protocols and safety plans for returning to safe operations. There was agreement that uncertainty was a prevalent undercurrent in HR. The quotes share some of the concerns voiced in the focus groups as follows:

“Things out of our control...borders, lack of skilled staff, high staff turnover, cost of living, work, earning expectations from unskilled staff, cost of business increasing, minimum wage increases.”¹

“How do we keep our employees safe, mentally, physically, emotionally? And how do we not get a fine? And how do we make sure that we have insurance coverage? And how do we make sure that every one of our partners is following exactly the same rules and regulations that we do?”⁴

Communication

When discussing issues related to communication, participants noted the importance of presenting a consistent message to employees, customers, and guests. Participants also stated that it could be challenging finding an appropriate balance when deciding how much information to communicate; this meant not leaving the recipient with information overload. Participants were pleased when the community communicated their encouragement and support, finding that it kept staff engaged and reduced stress. Also of note were the multitude of necessary stakeholder communication levels, including staff and landlords, as well as federal and provincial bodies. Below are several representative quotes from focus group participants that illustrate the depth of the conversations:

“We communicated to the staff all the way through, that we wouldn't be able to open all the restaurants up at the same time, so they may have to work in different ones.”¹

“The community has been very supportive, the community has really rallied in... thank you for being open, thanks for being here, oh it's good to see you, isn't it nice to be open again. So that's been very encouraging and that actually makes the staff feel more comfortable.”²

“But it's difficult to find that balance between communicating enough that people understand what's going on and that they feel secure and safe, and communicating too much to the point where people aren't listening anymore”³

Strategies

Strategies for working in the COVID-19 pandemic were varied. Some participants focussed on the immediate concerns, attempting to be responsive to present needs. There was concern over trying to find a balance between being proactive and being reactive. Research participants discussed challenges such as changing business operations due to emerging protocols for health and safety, new equipment, service designs, and room cleaning. Some noted their capacity to adapt by providing opportunities for flexible employment, such as allowing employees to work from home and having different work schedules. There were also other strategies discussed; for example how to monitor guest behaviour and how to establish sustainable financial models. Participant quotes that provide insights into the theme of strategies are included below:

“So, so far I'm just trying to focus on each day. Because when I project into September when the subsidies are supposed to be over that's when my anxiety rises.”²

“I really want to make sure that I'm aware of the situation, responsive to the needs, completely on point when it comes to safety protocols and even our own policies, so that I make sure that I'm not part of the problem but I'm actually helping.”³

“And so I’m trying to get our board to think... down the line, how do we departmentalize the organization, have department heads and things like that, once we have funding because it... is not sustainable. It’s not a sustainable model at all.”⁴

Findings Focus 2: Professional Development and Training

The second area of focus in the research was on staff and management training. For the four sectors represented in the focus groups, there were two training and professional development needs that were consistently discussed across the sectors. The first was conflict resolution and the second was difficult conversations. Conflict resolution related to addressing disagreements or misunderstandings on how to adapt existing processes and adopt new processes in traditional work patterns. An example of conflict resolution related to discussions with employees on the implementation of health and safety guidelines and directives. Difficult conversations included interpersonal interactions across the organization and with customers. One customer-related example for difficult conversations was the need for training to diffuse, communicate, and handle issues with guests who do not follow public health protocols.

The other findings for manager, owner, staff and volunteer training are sector-specific and are organized in two categories in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 presents the training and professional development needs for managers and owners.

Table 1
By Sector: For Manager and Owners

Training and Professional Development Needs	Sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adjusting to new pandemic environment ● Restart training 	Food and Beverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trust building and adjusting to the changing needs of employees 	Retail
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication Re: COVID-19 protocols ● Professional development ● Navigating COVID-19 information ● Mental health awareness & support 	Accommodation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adapting to an online environment ● Best practices in HR, legal, and accounting ● Best practices in communications ● Accounting practices 	Not-for-Profit

Table 2 presents the training and professional development needs for staff and volunteers.

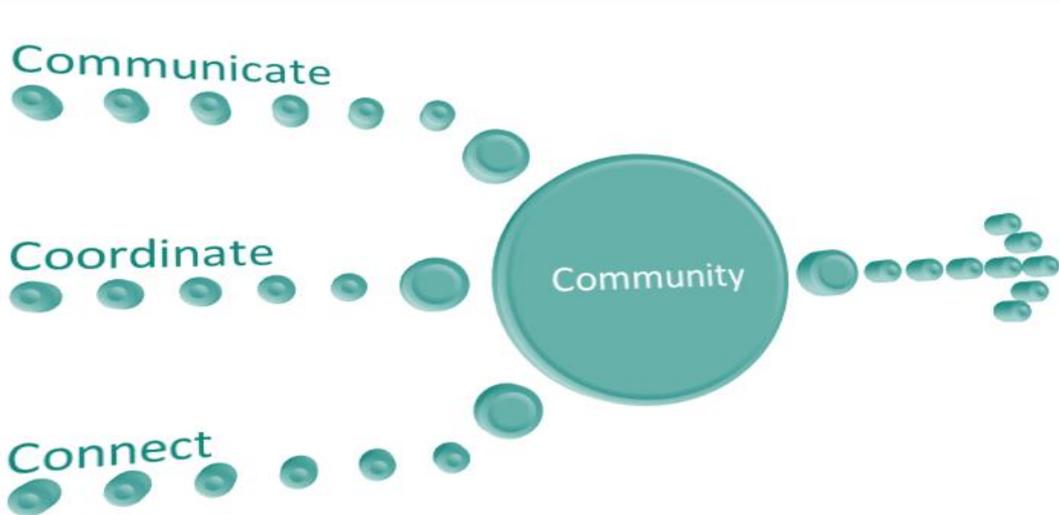
Table 2
By Sector: For Staff and Volunteers

Training and Professional Development Needs	Sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools to explore empathy, communication, problem solving, and self-compassion 	Food and Beverage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to be comfortable with change • Social distancing at work, including self-monitoring 	Retail
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of provincial health guidelines and protocols 	Accommodation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs to support mental health • Emergency response training • Adapting to an online environment • Sector-specific education and information 	Not-for-Profit

Discussion

In considering the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions and the literature, the researchers developed the 4C Model. The 4C Model is captured in Figure 1: Supporting COVID-19 Workplace Adaptation and Recovery: 4C Model. The 4C Model approaches include: *Communicate*, *Coordinate*, *Connect*. These three approaches meet through the catalyst of *Community*. The model is presented below, and further details are provided on the 4C’s to explore each approach.

Figure 1
Supporting COVID-19 Workplace Adaptation and Recovery: 4 C Model



Communicate

The research participants in each focus group discussed the significance of communication as an approach that supported COVID-19 workplace adaptation and recovery. Internal and external communications were discussed as essential and ongoing. Across sectors there were many operational changes related to health and safety directives that needed to be communicated internally, and employee engagement was a pressing need. Internal communication with employees was also related to employee retention including the implications of CEWS and CERB wage subsidies and the continuance of them, reduced hours and temporary layoffs. In the retail sector and not-for-profit sector, internal communication with employees extended to supporting employees and volunteers to work from home. Regular communication on job security, mental health, isolation, anxiety, and stress was helpful for all employees. The approach to internal communication included the appropriate sharing of information, supporting individuals and teams to navigate towards positive outcomes, and exploring issues from multiple perspectives.

Coordinate

Focus group participants discussed the need to coordinate with other organizations to build capacity and minimize costs. They also noted that round tables to help sectors share information and work with one another were valuable. The research participants commented that the conversations in the focus groups were information-sharing opportunities, leading to possibilities for improved coordination between sectors and organizations. Taking an open approach to exploring and sharing was viewed as a way to grow existing communities and to learn in a period of uncertainty and constant change.

Connect

The theme *connect* was evident across the focus groups. Some focus groups were particularly interested in how connection encouraged knowledge sharing and resource pooling, thereby allowing for efficiencies across organizations. Some participants introduced the idea of establishing support structures to facilitate connections between organizations and the wider community. These participants also noted the positive impact of holding regular meetings to establish the feeling of connection with others on the team, linking the role of meetings and keeping busy to the mental health of team members. In addition, it was noted that the ability to connect in a virtual environment during the pandemic had a positive impact on retired members of the Whistler community. A flexible approach and the connection between managers and their team members was paramount.

Community

In a variety of ways, *communicate*, *coordinate* and *connect* all have strong links with *community*, with members of each focus group sharing perspectives on the role of the community during the pandemic. References to community showed the multi-faceted nature of the concept, with the term community sometimes referring to the individuals who make up an organization. At other times, it was used in reference to the community that could be experienced when individuals from

different organizations collaborated with each other to learn and share knowledge. In a broader sense, it was used to describe Whistler, with the perceived resiliency and support structures that enabled residents to feel encouraged and comfortable. But, whatever the individual interpretation, it was evident that community played a significant role in survival during the pandemic, and it was expected to have a place in adaptation and recovery from the pandemic.

The role of the community was far reaching, and was seen in comments about normalizing a collective approach to safety guidelines in Whistler, rebuilding organizations and livelihoods, training to re-establish values, supporting a collective resilience, and making sure the mental health of the community was considered when adopting strategies for the physical safety of its members. The overarching consideration, when reflecting on the community, was that of remaining flexible to the demands of the changing physical, social, and emotional environment, and doing things differently.

Conclusion

This research explored HR and training needs in Whistler during early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to a literature review examining major catastrophes, insights from owners and managers working in four sectors were obtained. The pandemic has affected Whistler employers in five broad areas related to their HR needs; these areas are staffing, adaptability, uncertainty, communication, and strategies for working in the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants discussed shared training needs relating to conflict resolution and difficult conversations, and they identified sector-specific training needs.

By focussing on *communicate*, *coordinate*, and *connect*, resort communities such as Whistler can build resilient *communities* as they work on adaptation and recovery in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 4C model offers a focal point by highlighting the significant role of the community in adaptation and recovery process. This model is relevant not only to Whistler, but also to other resort communities that have an economy reliant on tourism and hospitality.

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Appendix 1 – Focus Group Questions

Thank you very much for taking time to be part of this focus group with us. As you are aware, the goal of this project is to understand the human resource needs of Whistler employers in the coming weeks and months in relation to reopening amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the hiring and training of employees as they return to the workplace. As you are all representatives from a key sector in Whistler, it is important for us to hear your perspectives.

We want to thank you for acknowledging your consent to take part in this Focus Group by providing your email signature.

A few reminders before we begin:

Your focus group will be recorded to aid transcription.

If you choose to withdraw prior to the completion of the interview or focus group, it is accepted that any data collected from you can be used in the final paper/presentation, unless expressly prohibited. While it is understood that every attempt will be made to retain anonymity, it is also understood that, by nature, it is not possible to guarantee anonymity in a focus group setting.

Focus Group Guidelines:

- Please turn mic's off when you are not speaking.
- You can have your video on or off, but please turn it off if you are having connectivity issues.
- If you would like to use the chat box to discuss the questions, please do so – I'll read through them as we go over each question. This is particularly useful for short answers.
- Feel free to agree, disagree, or ask questions of each other that relate to the subjects being discussed – this interaction will help bring the discussion to life (<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5c71/eb07bfb90087d50f67336d706ccb62d362b7.pdf>)
- If connection is lost, please try to log on again.
- I will post each question into the chat when we switch topic.

Have you any questions before we begin?

Experiences to Date

1. What was the number of full-time employees (FTE) that you had prior to the COVID-19 related challenges, and what type of business do you operate?
2. Can you share your experience to date as it relates to your staff and HR-related impacts on your business?
3. Have you laid off any employees? What influenced your decision? (prompts: revenues, complying with social distancing requirements, retraining needs, lack of customers)
 - a. What was the percentage of your workforce that you laid off?
 - b. Are they furloughed?

Looking to the Future

4. From an HR perspective, what will support or inhibit your ability to restart your business?
 - a. What circumstances are within your control, what is out of your control?
5. What ongoing employee-related impacts from COVID-19 do you expect to see in your organization? What is the time horizon for each of these impacts?

-
6. From an HR perspective, what do you perceive will be the impact of the foreseeable shift from an International worker focus to a domestic worker focus?

Hiring and Training Needs

7. What challenges do you expect as you consider hiring/re-hiring people? (prompts: finding new employees, training, communication, retention, shift from international to domestic)
 - a. What mitigation strategies do you have to counter the challenges? How will you handle these challenges?
8. As you think about the employees who will be returning to work, what are your concerns:
 - a. What are your plans regarding health and safety protocols for employees and guests?
 - b. Do you have employee retention plans?
 - c. How will you support mental health in the workplace?
 - d. What employee communication strategies do you plan to use?
 - e. How will you support the individual needs of your employees? (prompts: anxiety regarding re-entry to the workplace, children/home schooling, extended family needs, limited hours at work, demographic shift, finding housing)
9. What training or other needs do you have as you restart your business? (prompts: communication, technology, WorkSafe BC occupational standards or safety standards, social distancing, other skills)
 - a. Management
 - b. Employee
 - c. Customers
 - d. Other stakeholders
10. How can the Chamber help with your HR needs?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Thank you all so much for the time you've given to us and your thoughtful approaches to the questions we posed. We hope to report out on our findings from this series of focus groups in August. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.