



**SKILLSNEXT**

# Small and Medium-sized Employers (SMEs): Skills Gaps and Future Skills

OCTOBER 2020

Ontario Chamber of Commerce,  
Fédération des chambres de  
commerce du Québec,  
Tania Saba &  
Simon Blanchette





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The word "Canada" in a serif font, with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter 'a'.

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# ABOUT THE PROJECT

Canadians' needs for skills training are changing rapidly. Through Skills Next, the Public Policy Forum and the Diversity Institute—in its role as a research lead for the Future Skills Centre—are publishing a series of reports that explore a number of the most important issues currently impacting the skills ecosystem in Canada. Each report focuses on one issue, reviews the existing state of knowledge on this topic, and identifies areas in need of additional research. This strong foundation is intended to help support further research and strengthen policymaking. A diverse set of authors who are engaged in the skills ecosystem through various roles, including through research, activism and policymaking, have been carefully selected to provide a broad range of perspectives while also foregrounding the Canadian context. Their varied backgrounds, experiences and expertise have shaped their individual perspectives, their analyses of the current skills ecosystem, and the reports they have authored.

## MAJOR THEMES EXPLORED IN SKILLS NEXT INCLUDE

- Digital skills and training;
- Barriers to employment for specific groups and demographics;
- Alternative approaches to skills & training; and
- Offering readers a primer on what we know, what we don't know, and how we can dig deeper on skills training & the future of work.
- Indigenous skills and employment training;
- Competency frameworks and essential skills;
- Technology-enabled innovations in the skills and employment ecosystem;
- Understanding gig work and the experience of gig work in Canada;
- Barriers to employment based on gender; and
- Skills in small and medium-sized enterprises.

## RELEASES JANUARY 2020

- See the [eight Skills Next papers](#) from the winter 2020 release and the [full series](#).



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



A respected voice among government decision makers for more than a century, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce is the indispensable partner of business. The OCC undertakes important research on Ontario's most pressing policy issues, advocating for solutions that will foster the growth of Ontario businesses and lead to the creation of jobs in the province. Through focused programs and services, OCC supports businesses of all sizes and encourage inclusive economic growth. This work is based on the belief that strong businesses are the foundation of a prosperous Ontario. The OCC's mission is to convene, align, and advance the interests of our members through principled policy work, value-added business services, and broad engagement to build prosperity for all Ontarians. From innovative SMEs to established multinational corporations and industry associations, the OCC is committed to working with our network's diverse 60,000 members to improve business competitiveness across all industries. OCC represents local chambers of commerce and boards of trade in over 135 communities across Ontario, steering public policy conversations provincially and within local communities.



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With its extensive network of more than 130 chambers of commerce and 1,100 corporate members, the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ) represents over 50,000 businesses involved in all sectors of the economy throughout Québec. As the province's premier business network, the FCCQ serves as both a federation and a provincial chamber of commerce. Its members share a common goal: to foster an innovative and competitive business environment.



## TANIA SABA

Tania Saba is a full professor at the School of Industrial Relations at the Université de Montréal. She holds the BMO Chair in Diversity and Governance at the Université de Montréal. Tania Saba is an expert on issues of diversity management, workforce aging, intergenerational value differences and knowledge transfer. Over the course of her career, she has contributed to more than sixty book chapters and scientific articles. She collaborates on major research projects with public and private organizations on issues of integration and adaptation in employment of disadvantaged groups. In addition to her academic career, Tania Saba has held important executive and officer positions at the Université de Montréal. From 2008 to 2010, she became the first female director of the School of Industrial Relations. She was Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies from 2010 to 2012 and then Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and External Affairs in the Faculty of Arts and Science at the Université de Montréal from 2012 to 2015. From 2015 to 2017, she was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. Tania Saba is a researcher affiliated with the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la mondialisation et le travail (CRIMT) and the Centre d'études et de recherches internationales de l'Université de Montréal (CÉRIUM). She is also a member of the Centre d'études ethniques des universités montréalaises (CEETUM).



## SIMON BLANCHETTE

Simon Blanchette has been a research associate with the Diversity Institute for several years working on the organization's seminal DiversityLeads project, the Diversity Assessment of the Superclusters (for ISED) as well as a range of projects for the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub and the Future Skills Centre. He has presented his work in prestigious international conferences, such as the Academy of Management Annual Meeting and the European Group on Organization Studies Annual International Colloquium. Simon is a lecturer in management in the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University. He is the coauthor of several recent studies on women and work as well as training gaps and skills gaps in SMEs, and also has previous experience as a consultant. He holds a Bachelor of Commerce from McGill University and Master of Science in Management (specialized in Strategy) from HEC Montreal, where his thesis focused on creative ideation and innovation.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which typically employ fewer than 500 employees, are the backbone of the Canadian economy, accounting for more than 90% of jobs in the private sector. Yet they face critical labour shortages and skill gaps that threaten their competitiveness—both with larger organizations and other businesses globally.**

For many years, and across the country, SMEs have identified talent shortages. Surveys by various organizations repeatedly show SMEs reporting access to talent as a critical competitive issue. At the same time, there is limited data on the specific skills needed which vary across sectors and regions of the country.

There is also evidence that SMEs face challenges in the processes that they employ to hire, retain and train talent. They often lack the HR professionals and resources needed to support recruitment of highly skilled workers or for training, retraining and upskilling existing employees. Some research also suggests they face challenges in retaining talent. In addition, there is evidence that SMEs often present more barriers to women and diverse employees in part because of their heavy dependence on informal processes for recruitment. SMEs are ill-equipped to comply with growing regulatory requirement such as Bill C-25, *An Act to amend the Canada Business Corporations Act, the Canada Cooperatives Act, the*

*Canada Not-for-profit Corporations Act, and the Competition Act*, which requires additional reporting regarding diversity on boards and in leadership roles as well as strategies to improve representation.

Finally, SMEs have been hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis, especially smaller businesses and those in the services sectors. While some are cautiously optimistic about recovery, the impact this crisis will have on skills and employment is not at all clear.

This report explores the current knowledge concerning approaches to skills among Canadian SMEs as well as areas for further research.



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# BACKGROUND

## Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) drive economic development and innovation in Canada and account for the lion's share of jobs. Yet discussions of Canada's skills and employment system and the preparations needed for the future of work are often dominated by large employers. The purpose of this paper is to review the existing research on skills and employment in SMEs and to define priorities for further research. Specifically, the paper provides:

- **Background on the role of SMEs in the Canadian economy and their labour and skills shortage issues**
- **A review of human resources practices in SMEs**
- **An examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment and skills in SMEs**
- **Areas for additional research.**

## The Role of SMEs in the Canadian Economy

In Canada, SMEs represent the primary source of employment and are vital drivers of innovation and growth. For many years, SMEs have been vocal that talent is paramount to their ability to grow. They need the right people with the right skills to be agile and competitive in today's market. However, the discussion of the future of work and skills in Canada tends to focus more on larger businesses and there is limited research addressing the specific skills needed by SMEs or the most effective strategies to address them particularly post-COVID-19. Yet compared to large corporations, SMEs typically lack the dedicated human resources professionals and resources needed to recruit, train and upskill talent. Innovative approaches are needed.

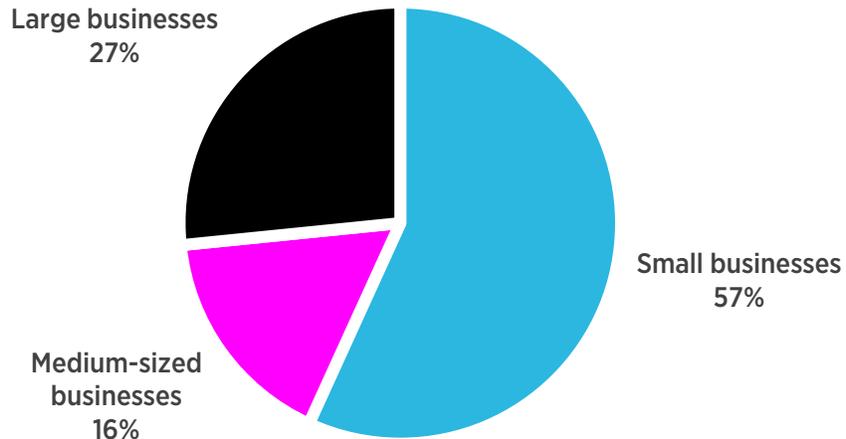
SMEs are companies with fewer than 500 employees, and they account for most jobs in Canada. In 2018, of 1.2 million employer businesses, 97.9% were small businesses (under 100 employees), 1.9% were medium-sized businesses, and only 0.2% were large corporations.<sup>1</sup> Among working Canadians, 69.9% are employed by small businesses, 19.6% by medium-sized businesses and only 10.5% work for large businesses. Small companies also account for the majority of job growth in Canada. Between 2013 and 2018, the majority of job growth in the private sector came from small businesses (56.8% or 590,800 jobs)

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<sup>1</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. (2019). [Key small business statistics](#).

while 16.6% (172,663 jobs) came from medium-sized and 26.6% (276,677 jobs) from large businesses (see Figure 1 below).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Net employment growth in the private sector between 2013 and 2018**



Source: Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. (2019). [Key small business statistics](#).

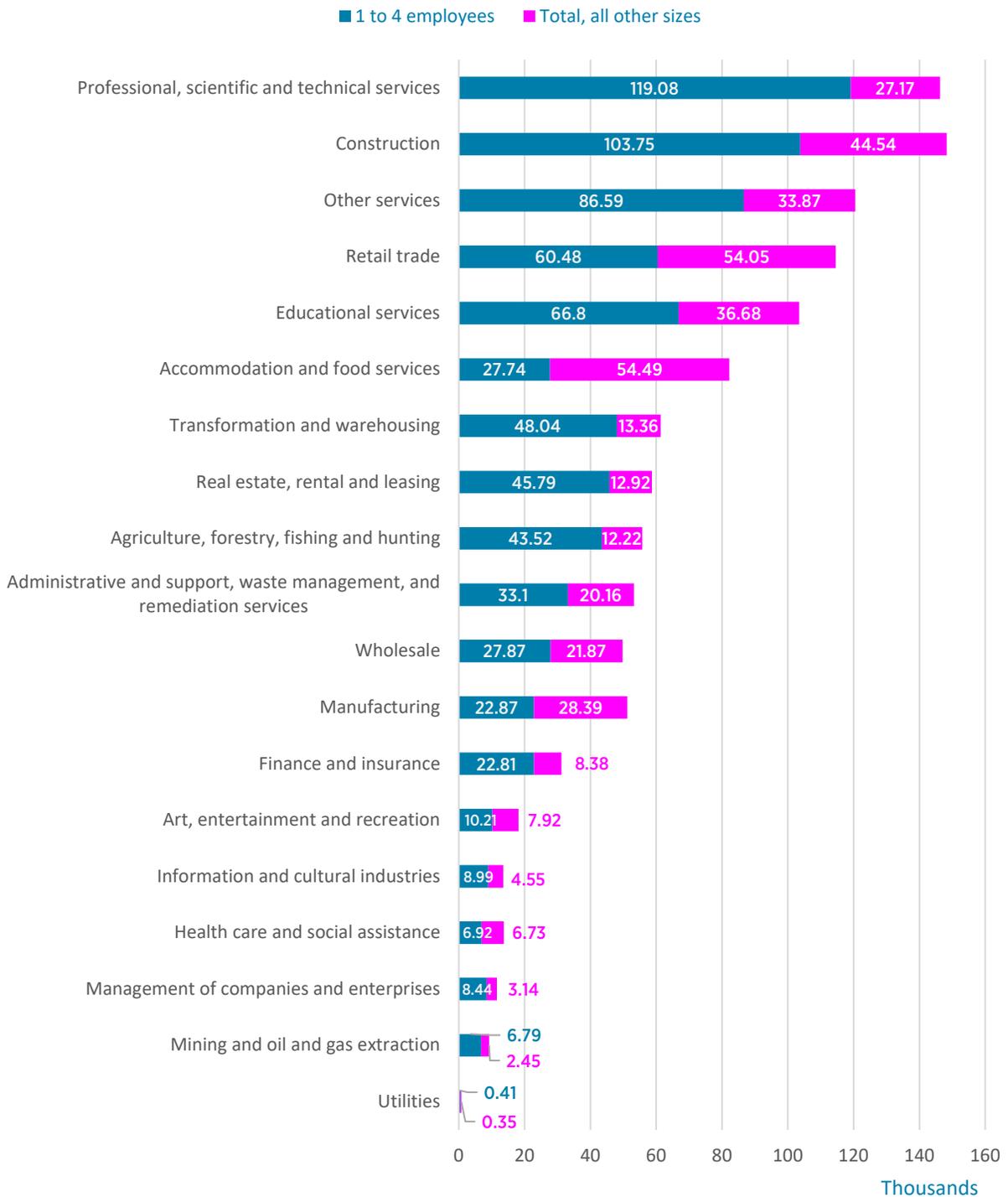
SMEs are critical in all sectors of the Canadian economy: nearly 1.1 million (two-thirds) of the companies operating in the private sector have fewer than five employees.<sup>3</sup> These micro businesses dominate most sectors including construction, professional services, personal services, retail, health care, finance and insurance and more (see Figure 2 below).

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<sup>2</sup> Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. (2019). [Key small business statistics](#).

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB). (2018b). [Small business profile: A look at small business and the self-employed in Canada](#).

Figure 2: Number of active enterprises, by industry and size, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada. (2020c). [Table 33-10-0136-01 Active enterprises with one or more employees.](#)

## SME Labour and Skills Challenges

For decades, issues related to the “skills gap” have dominated policy discussions. An aging population, increasing global competition and rapid technological change are among the factors creating skills and employment challenges. Due to demographic shifts, most of the growth in the workforce will be driven by immigration—a trend that is forecasted to continue<sup>4</sup>—and the ability to attract and retain skilled immigrants is critical. While the extent of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis will emerge over time, the demand for highly skilled workers as well as for some lower-skilled workers is expected to continue.<sup>5</sup>

Multiple research studies suggest that SMEs view the ability to attract and retain talent as a critical competitive issue. A 2019 Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) study of 1,000 businesses indicated that 40% of SMEs identified skills shortages as a major competitive challenge, up 4% from the previous year.<sup>6</sup> These skills shortages vary across regions and sectors, with Atlantic Canada, British Columbia and Ontario being more severely affected, and manufacturing, retail trade and construction representing the hardest hit industries. In Northern Ontario, meanwhile, over 98% of employers have fewer than 100 employees and the region relies heavily on the growth and development of SMEs. However, research indicates that Northern Ontario SMEs are not reaching their full potential, especially when compared with similar SMEs in Southern Ontario.

A 2020 Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) report found that 65% of SMEs believe that their ability to recruit and retain talent is one of the top three factors contributing to an organization’s competitiveness.<sup>7</sup> It reported that 62% of SMEs tried to recruit employees in the last six months, and among those, 82% experienced at least one challenge. The top challenge—cited by 60% of respondents—was finding someone who possessed adequate qualifications. This result is consistent with the OCC findings from previous years. This was particularly true of those with more than five employees (see Figure 3 below).

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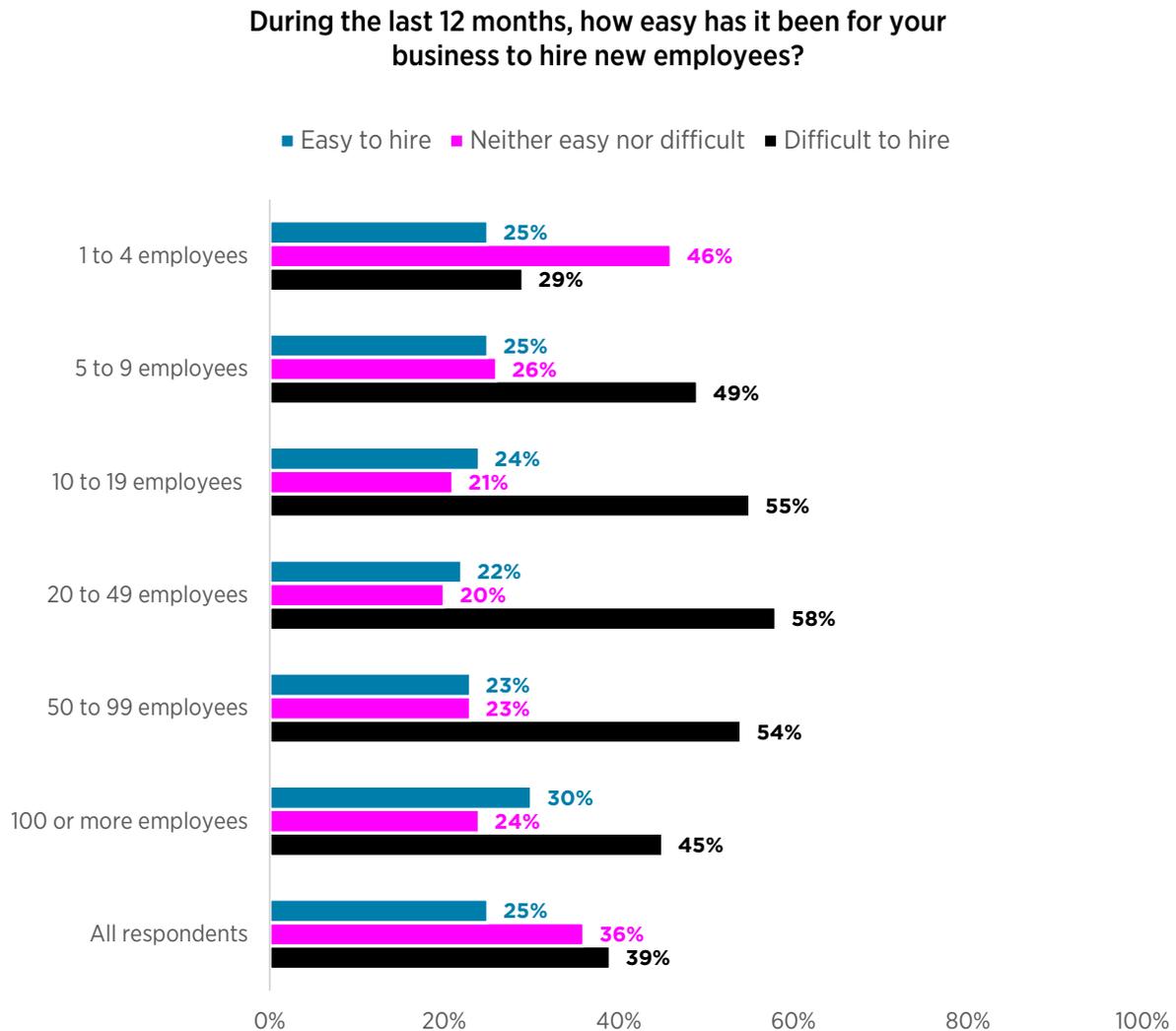
<sup>4</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2018b). [Labor shortage: Here to stay](#).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Safayeni, D. (2020). [Ontario economic report 2020](#).

**Figure 3: Hiring difficulty by size of firm**



Source: Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2018b). [Labor shortage: Here to stay](#).

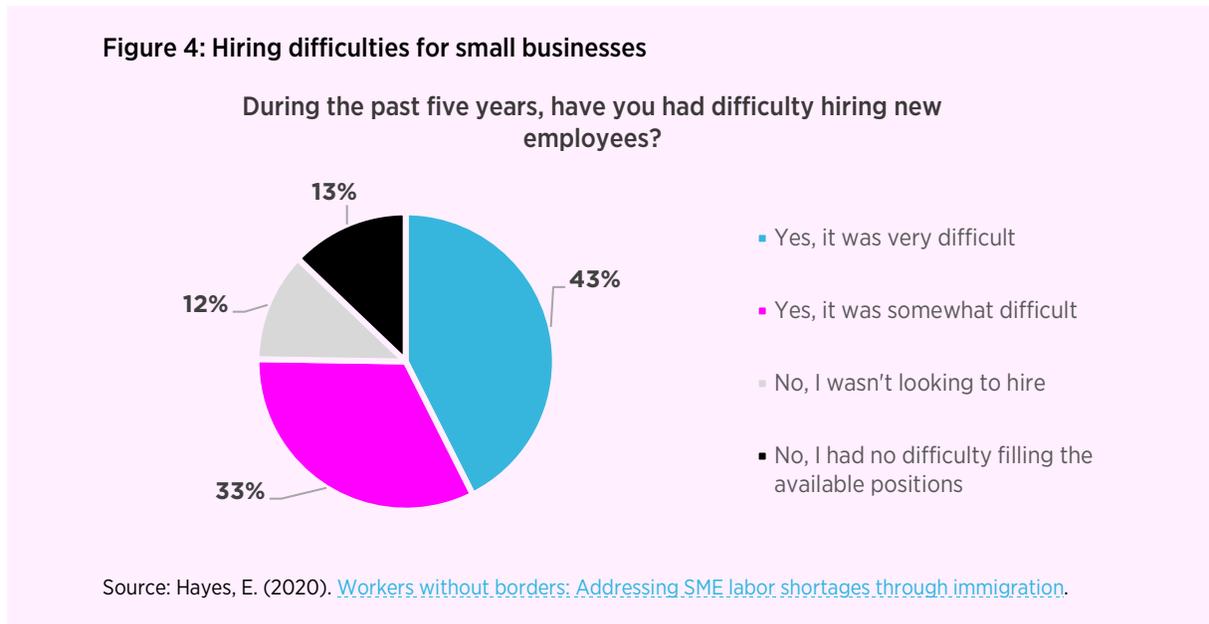
Studies in Quebec show a similar pattern. A study by the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ) between 2018 and 2019 based on a sample of 854 enterprises—the majority (60%) from the professional, scientific and technical services, manufacturing and retail sectors—revealed that nearly 60% expected to be recruiting over the next year, and of these, 65.8% anticipated facing challenges.<sup>8</sup>

While the percentages vary slightly, the patterns persist: a Manpower Group Employment Outlook Survey (2019) of 1,924 Canadian employers reported that 60% of small business owners said it was difficult to

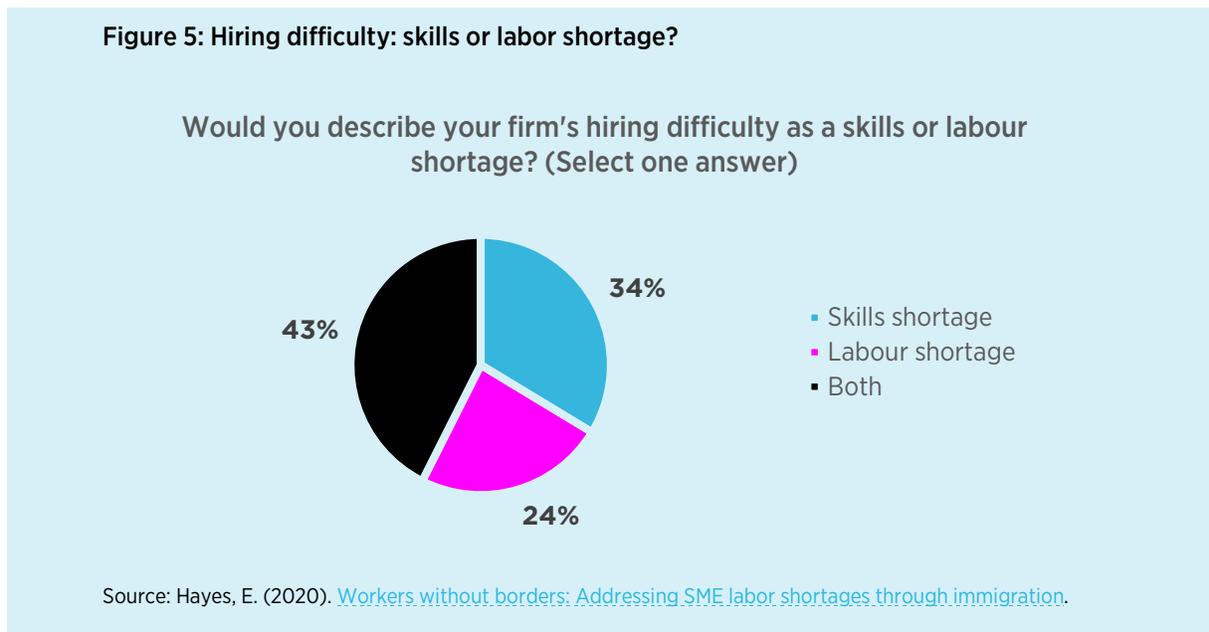
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<sup>8</sup> Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ). (2019). *Accompagnement aux entreprises pour favoriser l'accueil de stagiaires* « [Accueillez un stagiaire](#) ».

find the right employee.<sup>9</sup> Small companies also believe that bigger organizations have the edge in recruiting top talent, which could be explained by their ability to invest more into human resources. Another study from the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses confirmed a similar pattern, indicating that 76% of businesses reported problems hiring over the past five years (Figure 4).



The survey distinguished between labour and skills shortages, and found that the majority of employers who reported difficulties hiring new employees said both were problems (figure 5).<sup>10</sup>



<sup>9</sup> Indeed. (2019). [Blog - Report: Challenges facing SMBs and how one Canadian entrepreneur is overcoming them.](#)

<sup>10</sup> Hayes, E. (2020). [Workers without borders: Addressing SME labor shortages through immigration.](#)

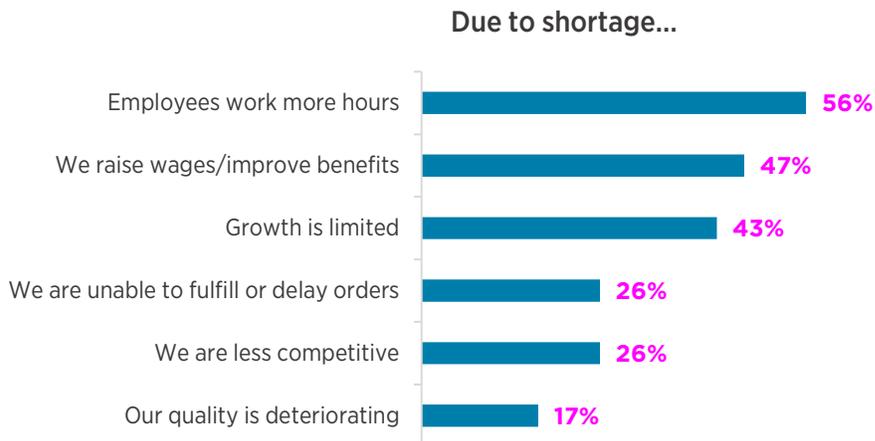
The BDC study suggests the pattern is persistent: 40% of the respondents did not think it was any easier to hire now than it was five years ago. Even more concerning, 29% said it was harder. More than half (57%) reported that finding good people with the right skills was a challenge, and 20% of small business owners mentioned that retention was difficult.<sup>11</sup>

Explanations for the skills and labour shortages differ. In some instances, the problem is an overall labour shortage. In others, the problem is that specific types of skills are not available.

In an Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ) study, some respondents (9%) said they had concerns about the competitiveness of wages and benefits, and 12.7% cited other reasons such as the lack of qualification of candidates, working conditions and environment, or seasonal or irregular work.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of skills and labour shortages is clear and affects the bottom line. SMEs facing labour shortages are 43% more likely to experience low growth and, as shown in Figure 6 below, require their employees to work longer hours and incur delays in services rendered. Their ability to fulfill orders in a timely manner, continue to output quality product and retain a competitive position in their industry may be diminished. For employees, however, the impact could be positive in some respects, potentially resulting in higher wages and improved benefits.

**Figure 6: Impact of labour shortages on SMEs**



Source: Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2018b). [Labor shortage: Here to stay](#).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed. (2019). [Blog - Report: Challenges facing SMBs and how one Canadian entrepreneur is overcoming them](#).

<sup>12</sup> Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ). (2019). Accompagnement aux entreprises pour favoriser l'accueil de stagiaires « [Accueillez un stagiaire](#) »

At the same time, in spite of claims about talent and skills shortages, there is evidence that SMEs do not do a very good job in recruiting, retaining and advancing women and diverse groups.



Historically, SMEs are seen as being at a disadvantage in attracting highly skilled workers relative to larger corporations but there is growing evidence that younger job seekers have different priorities than previous generations. Even with more limited human resource support, SMEs offer benefits to job seekers. In a 2015 survey from the BDC, 85% of respondents mentioned an SME's ability to provide more stimulating work to employees as a significant benefit. Indeed, SMEs give employees opportunities for advancement that are sometimes harder to come by in larger organizations. 72% of the respondents also mentioned that while working at a SME that is experiencing growth, they have an opportunity to tackle larger projects, which can be a motivating factor for employees. A SME that is stable and has interesting projects can position itself to generate interest in prospective candidates, especially skilled ones, due to benefits they may be able to provide more easily than larger organizations.<sup>13</sup> However, more work is needed to communicate these messages to prospective employees. Because they are more likely to rely on informal communications, SMEs often have less visibility and brand awareness in the labour market.

At the same time, in spite of claims about talent and skills shortages, there is evidence that SMEs do not do a very good job in recruiting, retaining and advancing women and diverse groups. They are less likely to have strong equity policies, to track or assess diversity and inclusion, to have strong and inclusive HR practices or strategies that embed diversity and inclusion through their processes. One study, for example showed that candidates with “foreign sounding names” were 20% less likely to be

<sup>13</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2015a). [BDC Study – SMEs and growth: Challenges and winning strategies](#).

called for interviews in large organizations (500 employees or more) and 40% less likely in smaller organizations.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the focus on shortages of highly skilled talent, 40% of newcomer engineers are underemployed.<sup>15</sup> University graduates with severe disabilities have worse employment outcomes than people who hadn't completed high school, and in general, SMEs are less well equipped to accommodate differences than larger organizations. Larger organizations are most likely to have more infrastructure, resources and developed processes for recruitment (e.g. anonymized resume reviewing) and training.<sup>16</sup> Those superior human resources practices could contribute to reducing the discrimination in the hiring process. An inclusive recruitment pipeline translates into more talent and more skills.

## Defining the Skills Needed

Across the skills and employment ecosystem, there are challenges associated with defining skills and competencies, measuring them, developing and applying them. This is particularly true among SMEs which are exceedingly diverse in terms of size, sector and region. While they express difficulties finding employees and especially finding employees with the right skills, there is little consistency in the way in which they define the skills that they need. Some studies and surveys have focused on the skills needed for specific roles:

- Skills for founders and senior management teams
- Skilled trades
- Deep technical skills (engineering, computer science, etc.)
- Sales and marketing skills

One BDC report stated that leaders in those SMEs with more than five employees and who reported experiencing strong growth seemed to attach particular importance (63% to 76%, compared to 55% as an average across all the respondents) to having experienced managers on their team.<sup>17</sup> Skills gaps at the senior level are tied to the performance of SMEs and the prospects for start-ups.

A survey by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) suggested a need for workers who have the skills to learn on the job (see Figure 7).

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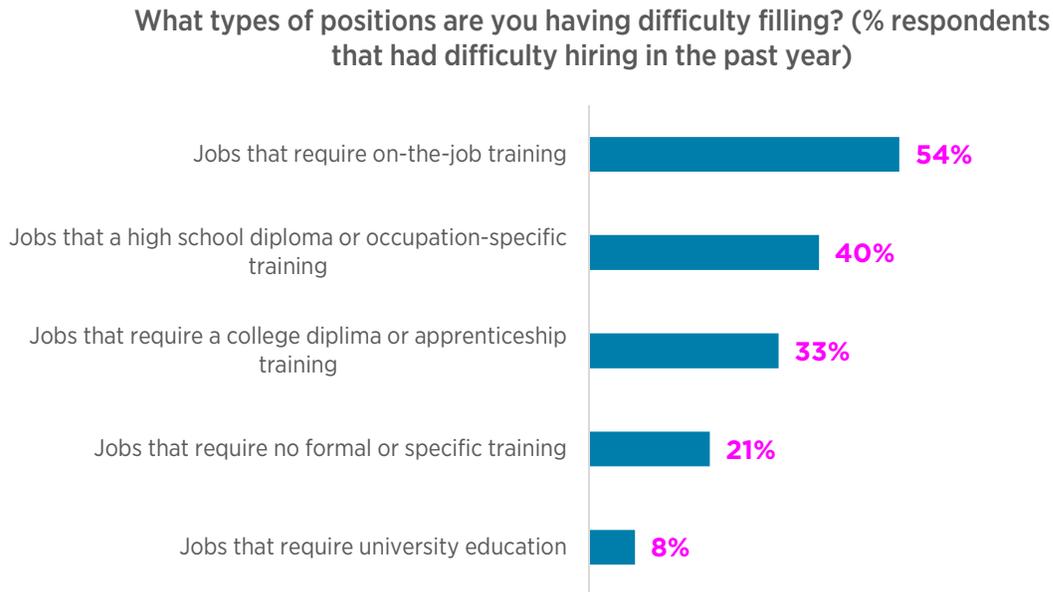
<sup>14</sup> Banerjee, R., Reitz, J. G., and Oreopoulos, P. (2017). [Do large employers treat racial minorities more fairly? A new analysis of Canadian field experiment data.](#)

<sup>15</sup> Canadian Newcomer Magazine. (2017). [Careers: How many engineers are necessary for Canada?](#)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2015a). [BDC study – SMEs and growth: Challenges and winning strategies.](#)

**Figure 7: Hiring difficulties by position type**



Source: Sims et al. (2015). [Small business, big investment: Improving training for tomorrow's workplace.](#)

Somewhat differently, an FCCQ study found that 33.6% of companies admitted that the most difficult positions to fill are those requiring professional qualifications, including skilled workers. Finally, among all the positions that are difficult to fill, 37.9% require vocational training, 19.8% college training, 18.1% no training, 13.6% university training and 5.7% a high school diploma.<sup>18</sup>

Others have attempted to define specific skills and competencies but the definitions vary considerably. For example, a 2019 survey reported that 62% of respondents thought it was most difficult to find candidates with critical thinking skills, followed by leadership skills (61%) and problem-solving skills (59%).<sup>19</sup>

A more recent study from IDC (forthcoming) indicated that SMEs have considerable difficulty in attracting talent with technical skills.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the shop floor of many large manufacturing companies has begun to shift, and Industry 4.0 technology and methods have the power to alter how SMEs conduct their day-to-day operations, changing the skills needed in new hires as well as the demand to train and upskill

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<sup>18</sup> Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ). (2019). *Accompagnement aux entreprises pour favoriser l'accueil de stagiaires* « [Accueillez un stagiaire](#) »

<sup>19</sup> Indeed. (2019). [Blog - Report: Challenges facing SMBs and how one Canadian entrepreneur is overcoming them.](#)

<sup>20</sup> Bouchard, J. P. (2020). *Outlook of Technology Adoption and its Impact in the Canadian Workplace.*

existing employees.<sup>21</sup> COVID-19 has accelerated digitization and the use of technology and increased this demand.<sup>22</sup>

## HIRING AND HUMAN RESOURCES PRACTICES IN SMES

Strong human resources practices are often tied to performance. For example, a BDC study found that organizations with superior HR policies are 66% more likely to generate annual sales growth of 10% or more.<sup>23, 24</sup> SMEs often lack the human resources systems and resources that large companies have, increasing the challenges in recruiting, retaining, developing and applying skills. Often lacking in management sophistication and infrastructure, SMEs human resources practices may be more informal. Human resource challenges reported by SMEs extend beyond recruitment. According to this BDC survey, virtually every aspect of HR is a challenge including compensation, engagement, hiring processes, and performance management. The survey also indicated that upskilling existing employees is a challenge.

For example, a survey by Indeed shows that 59% of SME owners find new employees through word of mouth.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, BDC reports that many entrepreneurs resort to using less qualified and younger workers to address the labour shortage. They also try to improve efficiency by streamlining processes and having employees work longer hours. SMEs typically also lack resources to invest in training and upskilling.<sup>26</sup> A FCCQ study for example revealed that more than half (57.1%) of businesses relied on the managers or owner to recruit, just over one third (36.9%) had a human resources manager.<sup>27</sup> It also confirmed that informal processes dominated. Relying on referrals from other employees, job search websites and social networks are the resources most used by companies to search for new staff.

### Informal vs. formal training and upskilling

The need for training is undeniable as discussed previously, and 91% of business owners believe a skilled workforce is important to grow their business. Globally, 95% of SMEs offer training, referring either to

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<sup>21</sup> Gualtieri et al. (2018). [Advanced automation for SMEs in the I4.0 revolution: Engineering education and employees training in the smart mini factory laboratory](#), p. 1111-1115.

<sup>22</sup> Canadian Chamber of Commerce. (2017). [Canadian business speaks up: An analysis of the adoption of internet-based technology](#).

<sup>23</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2015b). [SME Challenges: BDC viewpoints study - September 2015](#).

<sup>24</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2018b). [Labor shortage: Here to stay](#).

<sup>25</sup> Indeed. (2019). [Blog - Report: Challenges facing SMBs and how one Canadian entrepreneur is overcoming them](#).

<sup>26</sup> Uskov, V.L., Howlett, R.J. and Lakhmi, J. C. (2015). Smart education and smart e-learning.

<sup>27</sup> Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec (FCCQ). (2019). [Accompagnement aux entreprises pour favoriser l'accueil de stagiaires « Accueillez un stagiaire »](#)

formal, informal, or a combination of both.<sup>28</sup> While informal training represents \$9 billion when combined with formal training, the total spend on training reached \$14 billion in 2014. On average, entrepreneurs invested \$1,907 and 75 hours per employee for training, which represents two full work weeks.<sup>29</sup> Looking at the overall SME sector, that is 750 million hours of training. Proportionally, the smallest businesses—those with fewer than 20 employees—often dedicate more hours and resources towards training their employees than larger businesses.

The OECD's Leveraging Training and Skills Development in SMEs project studied the metropolitan Montreal area in Québec (75 companies), and the Winnipeg urban area (62 companies) in Manitoba.<sup>30</sup> Defined areas of training currently supported by SMEs are shown in Figure 8. Topping the list was occupational health and safety (88% and 75.8%) followed by professional or technical training related to work (42.7% and 58.1%) information technology (32.0% and 43.5%) and accounting and finance (32.0% and 38.7%).

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<sup>28</sup> Sims et al. (2015). [Small business, big investment: Improving training for tomorrow's workplace.](#)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED). (2012). [Leveraging training and skills development in SMEs: An analysis of two Canadian urban regions – Montreal and Winnipeg.](#)

Figure 8: Areas in which businesses undertook or supported training in the 12 months preceding the survey (proportion of respondents)

	Montreal	Winnipeg
Occupational health and safety	88.0	75.8
Professional or technical training related to work	42.7	58.1
Information technologies	32.0	43.5
Accounting and finances	32.0	38.7
Management and human resources	30.7	37.1
Social networking	13.3	35.5
Marketing and promotion	9.3	33.9
Event/activity planning, management, leadership	21.3	27.4
Second languages	18.7	14.5
Research and Development (market studies, etc.)	2.7	12.9
Electronic trade	4.0	9.7
Entrepreneurship	4.0	9.7
Law training (patents, etc.)	0.0	8.1
Environment	4.0	8.1
Others	2.7	1.6
<b>Total (businesses)</b>	<b>N = 75</b>	<b>N = 62</b>

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED). (2012). [Leveraging training and skills development in SMEs: An analysis of two Canadian urban regions--Montreal and Winnipeg.](#)

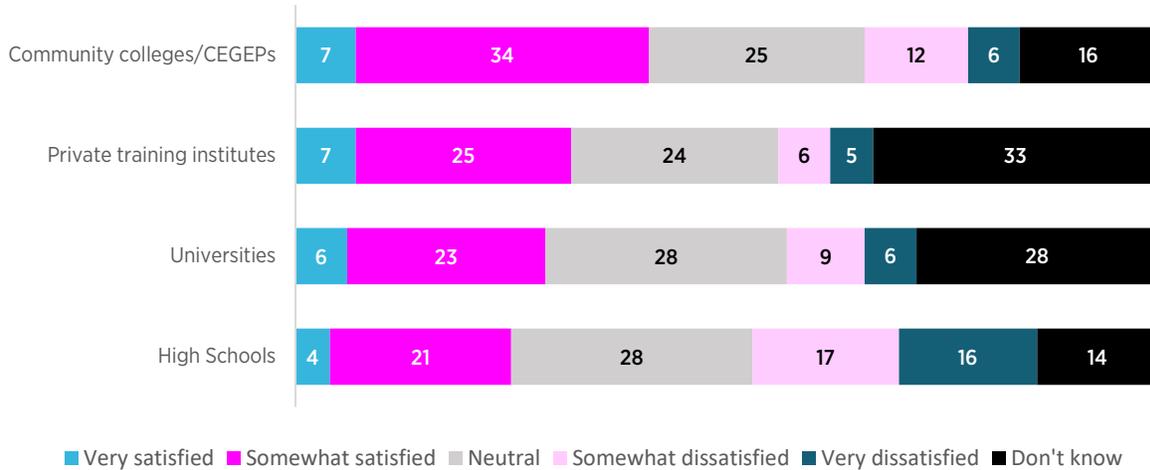
A survey by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business<sup>31</sup> (CFIB) indicated that informal training was found to be the primary training method for SMEs, representing 64% of total training costs (\$9 billion).<sup>32</sup> For example, for many positions such as entry-level roles in the service or hospitality sector, formal training may not be available, or a business owner may prefer to create their own program to cater to their specific needs and culture. Formal training is normally delivered through courses in educational institutions and/or from instructors, while informal training is provided on-the-job through mentoring by

<sup>31</sup> Sims et al. (2015). [Small business, big investment: Improving training for tomorrow's workplace.](#)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

a manager, co-worker or the business owner. Figure 9 below reflects the sources of training reported in the study.

**Figure 9: SME satisfaction with educational institutions by type**



Source: Sims et al. (2015). [Small business, big investment: Improving training for tomorrow's workplace.](#)

Another area that has been a challenge for SMEs has been their ability to attract, retain and utilize the skills of women and other diverse groups. As noted above, SMEs are less likely to have formal and objective processes in place and are more likely to rely on informal networks which tends to result in homogeneity in the workforce as people will mostly hire people like themselves. With a lack of formal support, entrepreneurs are not in a position to take full advantage of the diverse pool of potential candidates, including newcomers to Canada.<sup>33, 34, 35</sup> SMEs are also less likely to hire and accommodate persons with disabilities, although targeted programs such as Discover Ability by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce have sought to remedy that. Diversity practices have not been well studied in SMEs but the available evidence suggests that they are not as advanced as in larger corporations.

## Innovation

### Increased awareness of training and upskilling as a competitive advantage

In an effort to improve the current training shortfall, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce has begun providing training toolkits for Canadian SMEs to help them gain awareness of the various training

<sup>33</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2018a). [Investment intentions of Canadian entrepreneurs: An outlook for 2018.](#)

<sup>34</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2018b). [Labor shortage: Here to stay.](#)

<sup>35</sup> Banerjee, R., Reitz, J. and Oreopoulos, P. (2018). [Do large employers treat racial minorities more fairly? An analysis of Canadian field experiment data](#), p. 1-12.

resources at their disposal.<sup>36</sup> The Government of Canada has also created resources for SMEs to obtain more information about training. They have created an employer resources webpage containing information ranging from employee orientation, apprenticeship, health and safety, mentoring and coaching, and even a training checklist.<sup>37</sup>

### Shared human resources platforms

There are a growing number of services aimed at providing SMEs with a host of functions normally reserved for large organizations with established HR departments. For example, software solutions are available to help automate administrative tasks, record-keeping, and compliance, to coordinate HR in a more professional way. While initially these systems focused on administrative functions—benefits administration, attendance tracking, and performance management, for example—they are being enhanced to provide training tools, employee engagement tools, collaboration tools, as well as decisions support tools.<sup>38</sup>

### Defining and measuring skills

One of the most important innovations in the skills and employment sector in recent years is a growing focus on attempting to define and measure skills and competencies. Work in this area is dominated by large organizations that have the capacity and resources needed to undertake detailed analyses of roles, to identify the skills required to complete the roles, and to implement various testing and assessment tools to determine whether or not individuals have the skills required and then to provide opportunities to meet those benchmarks using a variety of training techniques and platforms. Increasingly, large organizations are using structured processes both for recruiting new employees and for retraining or upskilling existing employees.<sup>39</sup>

When we scan the SME market, we see examples of this in niche areas—notably information and communication technology companies, manufacturing, telemarketing, and specialized service providers. Of course, use of competency frameworks is also common in the skilled trades and regulated professions such as accounting. Increasingly, post-secondary institutions are moving towards competency frameworks with their training programs, but implementation and assessments are uneven. Private sector, general service providers such as HRSG provide libraries of competency tool kits.<sup>40</sup> Niche service

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<sup>36</sup> Canadian Chamber of Commerce (OCC). (2013c). [Toolkit of training resources for small- and medium-sized businesses](#).

<sup>37</sup> Government of Canada. (n.d.). [Train employees](#).

<sup>38</sup> Grones, G. (2020). [HRIS systems: What you need to know](#).

<sup>39</sup> Harrington, S., Cukier, W., Patterson, M., and McCallum, K.E. (2020, forthcoming). Technology-enabled innovations in the skills and employment ecosystem.

<sup>40</sup> Group, H.R.S. (n.d.). [About HRSG | Competency management vendor/supplier](#).

providers such as U-SME offer end-to-end competency framework definitions, assessment and training, targeted at the manufacturing sector with successful case studies reported.<sup>41</sup> For most part, however, smaller companies rely on traditional and informal approaches to defining job requirements. They may talk about skills but without standardized definitions or ways of assessing them.

### New approaches to training

New approaches to training, ranging from online learning, to AR/VR tools, AI-enabled adaptive learning and micro learning approaches are gaining traction across sectors. While most SMEs lack the capacity to develop custom systems, many are taking advantage of new services and approaches. For example, the Workplace Digital Essential Skills, a national pilot project aimed at developing a flexible training model that would be suitable for low literacy workers administered by the Restigouche Canada Business Development Corporation (CBDC) in Rural Small Businesses, was piloted to increase access to basic workplace digital skills training in small rural businesses.<sup>42</sup> Those employees are known to lack digital skills and, at the same time, have little access to training that would improve their digital literacy. The Restigouche CBDC created an online digital skills training platform in partnership with a private learning software developer, Ellicom, to bridge this gap and enable learners to participate more fully in an economy that is increasingly technology based. CFIB has encouraged the government to invest more in training for SMEs generally and to recognize the importance of informal training.<sup>43</sup> A new approach to training should also include deployment of shared platforms, tools and techniques.

### New tools for recruitment

To compensate for hiring challenges faced by SMEs, some groups are coming together to create innovative hiring solutions that benefit job seekers and SMEs alike. There is a growing range of online recruitment platforms that offers a range of features. One example is that provided by Magnet, a not-for-profit social initiative co-founded by Ryerson University and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, which matches job seekers and employers based on specific skills. The two organizations are also partners in innovative approaches to work-integrated learning to help build pathways for young people to SME opportunities, as well as a range of assessment tools and supports for diversity and inclusion.

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<sup>41</sup> ToolingU. (n.d.). [Success stories I.Tooling U-SME.](#)

<sup>42</sup> Leckie, N., Rodier, J. and Gyarmati, D. (2016). [Workplace digital essential skills in rural small businesses – Final research report.](#)

<sup>43</sup> Sims et al. (2015). [Small business, big investment: Improving training for tomorrow's workplace.](#)

## Work-integrated learning

Work-integrated learning—where students are placed in companies—is considered a good strategy for developing work-ready graduates while also giving companies opportunities to develop the talent pipeline. The Government of Canada has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to support work-integrated learning, and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce is helping to administer the program and has recommended the investment of additional targeted resources to support businesses in developing capacity to use digital technologies.<sup>44</sup> In a study from 2017, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce recommended leveraging a range of modalities to engage students in SMEs (see Figure 10).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rossi, R. (2020, May 12). [RE: Retraining Ontario's workforce to recover from COVID-19](#).

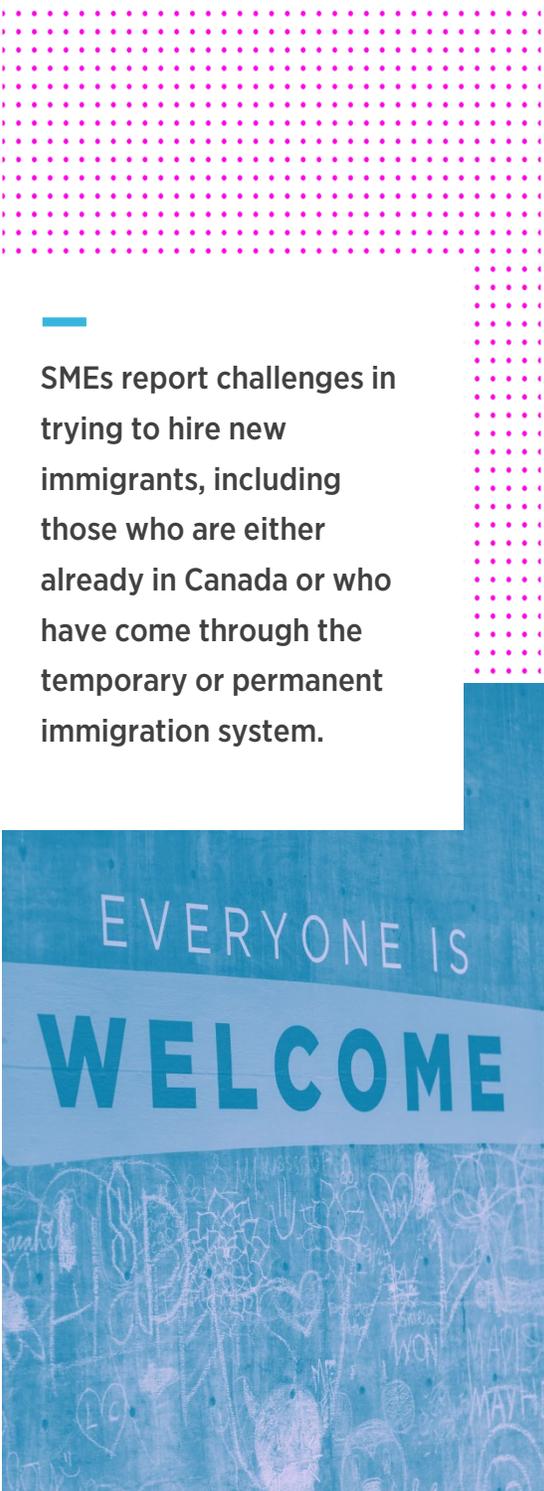
<sup>45</sup> Sullivan, K. (2017). [Talent in transition: Addressing the skills mismatch in Ontario](#).



**Figure 10: Ontario Chamber of Commerce recommendations to ensure a skilled workforce**

Source: Sullivan, K. (2017). [Talent in transition: Addressing the skills mismatch in Ontario.](#)

-  Participation in incubators, accelerators and innovations hubs
-  Co-op education
-  Internship
-  Work-placement programs
-  Summer jobs/experience programs
-  Mentorship
-  Volunteer positions
-  Industry-recognized in-class projects
-  Apprenticeships
-  Academic, club and industry competitions



**SMEs report challenges in trying to hire new immigrants, including those who are either already in Canada or who have come through the temporary or permanent immigration system.**

EVERYONE IS  
**WELCOME**

### New approaches to retention

BDC's study highlights several human resources management needs across SMEs, with retention and performance management at the top of that list.<sup>46</sup> Innovative approaches to compensation as well as working conditions, such as profit sharing and flexible work, appeal to job seekers but are not common among SMEs.<sup>47, 48</sup> However, as the workforce demographic changes, SMEs will be forced to adapt accordingly to be competitive and retain top talent.

### Outreach to diverse populations

On one hand, SMEs are trying and finding it difficult to recruit candidates equipped with those specific skills. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that some job candidates are overlooked or even driven away, particularly those from underrepresented groups. In order to foster this more strategic perspective on talent, new programs are being created and introduced in numerous fields such as entrepreneurship education, management advice and consultancy, and workforce skills development. There are also great efforts targeted towards increasing diversity and inclusion, such as by prioritizing women entrepreneurship.<sup>49</sup> For example, OCC launched its Discover Ability program to help bring Ontario businesses, particularly SMEs, into compliance

<sup>46</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2013). [Human resources: BDC viewpoints study – Research and market intelligence at BDC.](#)

<sup>47</sup> Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC). (2015b). [SME challenges: BDC viewpoints study – September 2015.](#)

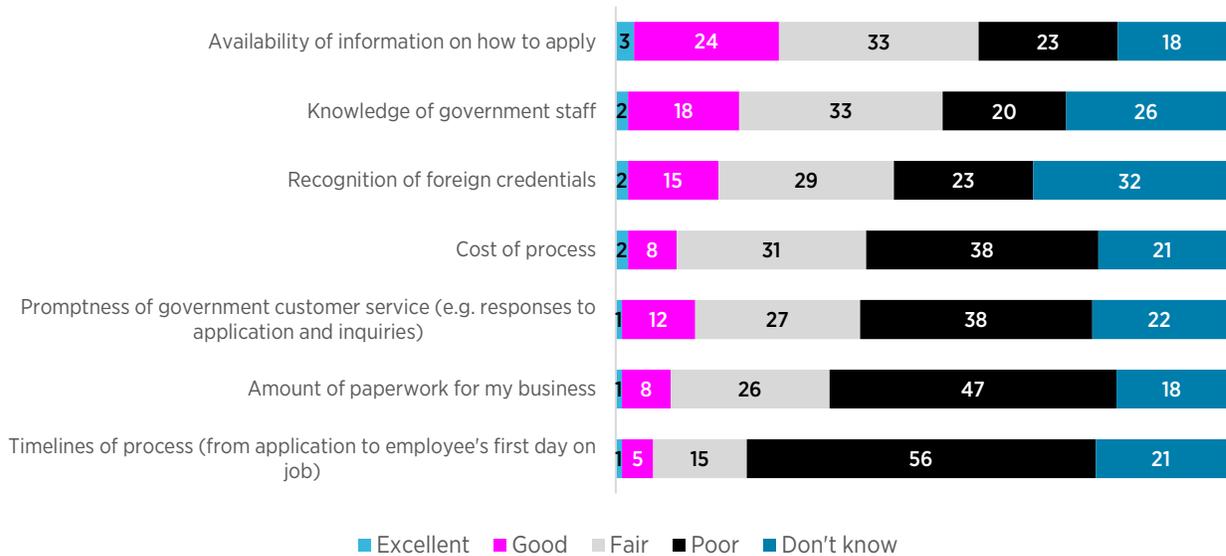
<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2017). [SME and entrepreneurship policy in Canada.](#)

with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and to help Ontario businesses access a new talent pool.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, SMEs report challenges in trying to hire new immigrants, including those who are either already in Canada or who have come through the temporary or permanent immigration system.<sup>51</sup> The paperwork can be challenging without an HR department and with reportedly little help from the government. In agriculture, respondents mentioned that their growth would be severely restricted without skilled immigrants, but the process of hiring them remains challenging. Figure 11 below shows how employers who hired new immigrants rated their experience; the issues identified suggest the need for additional supports.<sup>52</sup>

**Figure 11: Rating of experience hiring new immigrant**



Source: Hayes, E. (2020). [Workers without borders: Addressing SME labor shortages through immigration.](#)

In spite of the need for improvement in the strategies and supports for SMEs in attracting, retaining, advancing and applying diverse talent, there are innovative approaches that have been implemented to make better use of the talent. OCC for example, is collaborating with the Diversity Institute on rolling out tools to support SMEs in complying with Bill C-25, including supports like the Diversity Assessment Tool (DAT) for measuring representation but also mainstreaming diversity through strategy, policies and processes.

<sup>50</sup> Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC). (n.d.) [Discover ability network.](#)

<sup>51</sup> Hayes, E. (2020). [Workers without borders: Addressing SME labor shortages through immigration.](#)

<sup>52</sup> Note: Results are from CFIB, Labour Shortages and Immigration Survey, June 2019 (n = 537).

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SMES: EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS AND THE “NEW NORMAL”

The dramatically rapid shift to remote work due to the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted some of the skills that are paramount to the innovation and digital transformation in Canada’s SMEs.<sup>53,54</sup> In parallel, Industry 4.0<sup>55</sup> is creating seismic shifts in how business is done.

In March 2020, the Canadian economy, like most economies in the world, was radically and unexpectedly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing a crisis that has had a profound impact on the ability of Canadian businesses to operate. Those impacts will undoubtedly be felt for quite some time.

In Canada, as in all OECD countries, SMEs account for the vast majority of businesses, value added and employment. Economic and social indicators show that all Canadian businesses have been impacted by the pandemic. However, small businesses are even more acutely affected and those owned by women and diverse entrepreneurs—which tend to be smaller, newer, under-financed and concentrated in sectors like services most affected by COVID-19—are being crushed.

The new challenges and realities of work are emergent and uncertain, but it is clear that new skills are required.

## COVID-19’s Impact on SMEs as Employers

Businesses, including SMEs, are most affected by a reduction in global demand for their products and services. In some regions and sectors that have been particularly affected, the prevalence of SMEs is even higher. This impact may be particularly felt in specific sectors where SMEs are strongly represented such as tourism, transport, fashion and food, but also among SMEs serving local markets where containment measures have been introduced.<sup>56</sup> The International Labor Organization (ILO) monitor on COVID-19 and the world of work<sup>57</sup> shows that global employment in the most at-risk sectors is highly concentrated in firms with fewer than 10 employees.

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<sup>53</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2018). [Strengthening SMEs and entrepreneurship for productivity and inclusive growth](#).

<sup>54</sup> Leckie, N., Rodier, J. and Gyarmati, D. (2016). [Workplace digital essential skills in rural small businesses - Final research report](#).

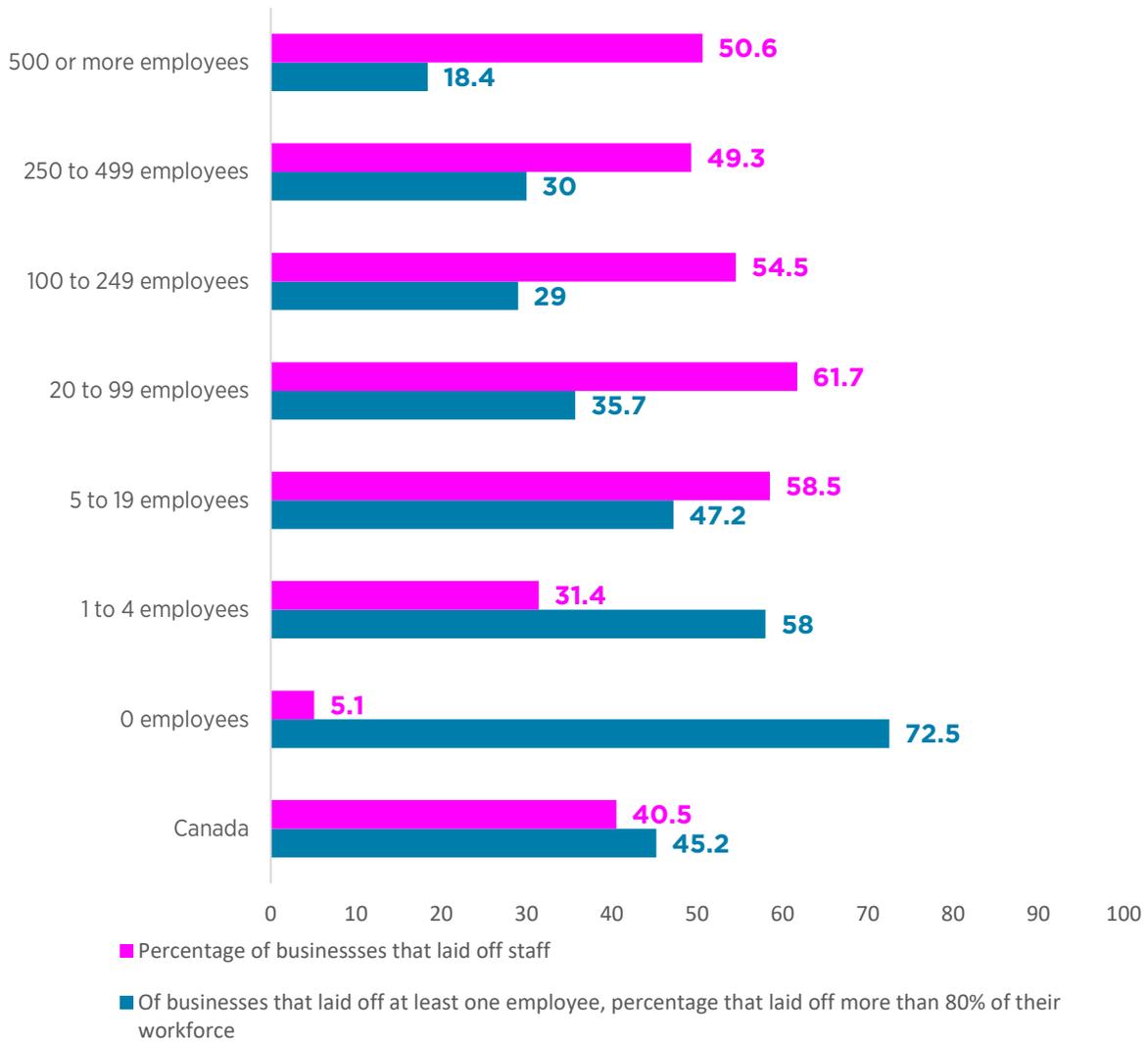
<sup>55</sup> Industry 4.0 refers to the use of advanced digital technologies in industrial production and service delivery processes to enable new and more efficient processes for the production of goods and services combining traditional and digital technologies. Industry 4.0 encompasses several technologies, including 3D printing, the Internet of Things (IoT) robotics, artificial intelligence and big data.

<sup>56</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2020). [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): SME policy responses](#).

<sup>57</sup> International Labor Organization. (2020). [COVID-19 and the world of work](#).

According to a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on business, conducted by Statistics Canada<sup>58</sup> in collaboration with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, a higher proportion (80% or more) of layoffs occurred in small businesses, particularly those with between 5 and 19 employees (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Staffing changes and staff layoffs greater than 80%**



Source: Statistics Canada. (2020b). [Canadian Survey on Business Conditions: Impact of COVID-19 on businesses in Canada, March 2020](#).

<sup>58</sup> Statistics Canada. (2020a). [Canadian survey on business conditions \(CSBC\)](#).

## Challenges Resulting from COVID-19: A Risk of Worsening Skills Gaps

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing a sudden and dramatic loss of income for SMEs and is leading to severe liquidity shortages. In addition, consumers suffer a loss of income, fear contagion and face increased uncertainty, which reduces their spending and consumption.

Among the effects, the dismissal of workers and the inability of firms to pay wages aggravate the situation of SMEs. Some sectors, such as tourism and transport, are particularly affected, which also contributes to reducing business and consumer confidence. More generally, SMEs are likely to be more vulnerable to "social distancing" than other enterprises.<sup>59</sup>

Businesses are experiencing a reduction in the supply of labour because workers are sick or must care for their children who are at home instead of at school and/or other dependents. Measures to contain illness through closures and quarantines make it more difficult to get the full contribution of employees.

The crisis may also affect employees' incomes depending on the size of the company. A drop in income is anticipated and could be considerably greater for employees in small companies than for those in large ones, making it more difficult to retain skilled staff in such a context. Worse still, SMEs—in order to develop and attract skilled employees—risk finding themselves in unfair competition with larger companies as larger companies can offer a wage premium to attract and retain talent. Bell et al. (2020) note that young employees are likely to be the biggest losers.<sup>60</sup>

Women-led businesses operate in many of the sectors most immediately affected by the crisis, such as lodging, catering and retail. Even if the gender distribution in different sectors is considered, differences persist, as more women than men who run SMEs report that their business activities are strongly affected by the crisis. Youth-led businesses reported a high risk of foreclosure. According to the International Trade Center report, they are more likely to close permanently within three months.<sup>61</sup>

Given the limited resources of SMEs and the existing barriers to accessing capital, the period during which SMEs can survive the crises is more limited than for large firms. SMEs find it more difficult to obtain information on measures to stop the spread of the virus, on possible business strategies to mitigate the crises impact, and also on government initiatives available to provide support. At the same time, many SMEs—including those run by self-employed entrepreneurs—are not registered with national authorities.

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<sup>59</sup> Gopinath, G. (2020). [Limiting the economic fallout of the Coronavirus with large targeted policies](#).

<sup>60</sup> Bell, B. et al. (2020). [Prepare for large wage cuts if you are younger and work in a small firm](#).

<sup>61</sup> International Trade Centre. (2020). [SME competitiveness outlook 2020: COVID-19: The great lockdown and its impact on small business](#).

As a result, they can find it more difficult to qualify for government programs and subsidies to help them train their employees, adapt their products or services, and maintain jobs to get through cash shortfalls.<sup>62</sup>

For SMEs, the use of suppliers to provide external expertise and capacity is essential to their performance. However, once supply chains are disrupted, difficulties in re-establishing connections with old networks may lead to significant skill shortages that would affect the survival and adaptability of SMEs.

SMEs may also have less resilience and flexibility to cope with the costs that the crisis brings. The changes required in work processes, such as the shift to teleworking, may be relatively higher for SMEs, given their small size.

## New Skills to Adapt SMEs to a “New Normal”

SMEs experience a lower level of digitization and difficulties in accessing and adopting technologies.<sup>63</sup> A survey conducted in May 2020 by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business<sup>64</sup> (CFIB) reveals that 26% of SMEs owners have been able to go digital. Of those who have done business online, 30% have seen an increase in sales and 25% say that sales have remained the same compared to pre COVID-19. The survey also found that the number of online transactions has increased by more than 30%.

The pandemic has made some businesses more agile and flexible: a third of SMEs believe that digitization has become more important and was accelerated as a result of the pandemic.<sup>65</sup>

Four priority themes are highlighted as enabling SMEs to move towards a new normality.<sup>66</sup> They relate to the acquisition of new skills to develop the ability to go digital, adapt products and services, and strengthen and develop new business expertise. Importantly, the four themes include the need to strengthen the resilience of SMEs so that they can withstand future shocks; the need to step up efforts to help SMEs go digital; the need for open and integrated supply chains; and the opportunity to use the crisis to ensure that businesses around the world become more sustainable and climate-friendly.

Among the promising avenues, an approach that advocates creating a network for collaboration led by SMEs leaders provides a more equal distribution of expertise, risks, and costs in times of crisis. Within the network, national and international collaboration should allow for skills sharing to help SMEs to adapt to the new standards and regulations that are bound to emerge because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These

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<sup>62</sup> Statistics Canada. (2020a). [Canadian survey on business conditions \(CSBC\)](#).

<sup>63</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2020). [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): SME policy responses](#).

<sup>64</sup> Fédération canadienne de l'entreprise indépendante. (2020). [COVID-19 et PME : état de situation](#).

<sup>65</sup> McKinsey & Company. (2020). [How German « Mittelstand » copes with COVID-19 challenged](#).

<sup>66</sup> International Trade Centre. (2020). [SME competitiveness outlook 2020: COVID-19: The great lockdown and its impact on small business](#).

include new market requirements, such as quality, food safety or health and safety requirements, but also standards and regulations covering safety, resilience and risk management. According to the International Trade Center report<sup>67</sup>, this would not only ensure greater mutual trust, but would also enable SMEs to withstand and respond to future crises.

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<sup>67</sup> International Trade Centre. (2020). [SME competitiveness outlook 2020: COVID-19: The great lockdown and its impact on small business](#).



## AREAS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

There is a clear need to further analyze skills shortages for SMEs in Canada. It is paramount to clarify which skills are needed by organizations in order to be more agile and competitive. Furthermore, it is also crucial to develop better HR practices that will allow for better recruitment, better training (formal and informal) and better retention of talent. Better recruitment also means looking outside of one's own network in order to harness the value of diverse individuals to expand the pool of skilled talent. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated many of the challenges discussed in this report, and will hopefully force a reckoning that will stimulate collaboration, changes and the development of new approaches and processes to foster the growth of SMEs through fostering the talent pipeline. Important areas for additional research include:

- While there is much discussion among SMEs regarding labour and skills shortages, the specific dimensions of these shortages require further examination in terms of regions, sectors, occupations and skills;
- A more detailed understanding of the links between investment in skills development, innovation and growth is required;
- A further exploration of ways to focus attention on SMEs in discussions about future skills and incentives to encourage investments in innovative practices, recruitment of diverse employees, training and reskilling is required;

- Common definitions and a more granular analysis of the skills needed, ways to assess them, effective techniques for developing them and ways to best utilize them is critical;
- A better understanding of what works and what does not work: current policies, practices and best practice sharing among SMEs in terms of recruitment, retention and upskilling is needed to reduce friction in the highly competitive labour market, particularly with respect to the hiring of diverse talent;
- More understanding concerning the attitudes and experiences of job seekers (particularly recent graduates) with SMEs needs to be explored further, including how to make SMEs employers of choice;
- A better understanding of skills and capacity needs in SMEs is required, including the evolving needs of founders and managers with respect to their own skills (business, finance, technology, marketing) as well as knowledge of and attitudes towards HR processes;
- Strategies for improving SMEs' approaches to hiring, retaining and promoting women and diverse employees as well as promoting compliance with current and upcoming regulatory requires are needed; and
- Innovative approaches to developing shared platforms, tools and techniques and developing capacity in SMEs to fill their talent gaps in effective ways.

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