

Brooks Region



Summary of Survey and Interview Findings

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A. Introduction and Methodology

Labour force is one of the most important variables in economic development as it forms a basis for economic development strategy. Recognizing the linkage between labour capacity and economic development, the Brooks Region, along with project partners, commissioned a Workforce Development Strategy. Step one of the Workforce Development Strategy includes conducting and compiling research findings.

The Brooks Region includes eight hamlets within the County of Newell, the City of Brooks, the Town of Bassano, and the Villages of Duchess and Rosemary. Project partners include:

- The Brooks Region economic development team
- Ministry of Labour
- Medicine Hat College
- Community Futures Entre-Corp
- Grasslands School Division
- Brooks & District Chamber of Commerce

Key industries operating in the Brooks Region include:

- Agriculture
- Energy
- Manufacturing
- Tourism

Additionally, three new developments in emerging industries consisting of renewable energy (solar) and cannabis production and processing have been announced for the Region.

To accomplish the objectives of this study with regard to labour force supply, the main method involved an online survey of job seekers in the region, along with targeted interviews with organizations and agencies that work with specific groups of job seekers. Additionally, findings are supplemented by secondary research.

The Job Seeker survey was promoted through the Brooks Region social media outlets, plus post cards were provided to agencies and organizations that worked with job seekers. 112 responses were received. An incentive of a \$500 VISA gift card was provided. The draw was made on January 31, 2020 and presented to the winner. The survey opened in early January and closed February 5, 2020.

One of the main limitations associated with the Job Seeker Survey is that job seekers were asked to self-select themselves. The sampling was not random, therefore results cannot be projected onto the greater population within a margin of error.

To analyse labour force demand, the main method consisted of a 10-minute telephone or in-person interview and a web based survey targeting a small group of Brooks Region's employers in key industries which were suggested by the Project Leadership Group. Again, employers were asked to self-select themselves for the online survey. The Employer survey was completed by approximately 30 local employers. A few more employers started the survey, but dropped off because they only had 1 staff.

The person interviewed was either the owner, general manager, or individual in charge of human resources. Respondent participation with the personal interviews was quite successful.

Demand estimations for this research are largely based on the interviews with businesses. As such positions in some sectors such as may not be reported even though there may be positions in high demand in these areas. A second limitation of the study is that demand forecasts are based on the opinions of the respondents and are subject to their assumptions regarding business growth and development. These demand projections will be influenced by unforeseen economic events that change the current business environment.

Because the sample was small, and not completely representative of the overall marketplace, results were not cross-tabulated to look for patterns by organization size or industry. Rather, we looked for common themes. To mitigate the limitations associated with the research, we looked at provincial and industry trends, and where applicable corroborated the feedback with this research.

Lastly, we also interviewed education and service providers in the Brooks region to better understand the services they provide, the challenges they face, and the challenges and barriers faced by their clientele. Ten organizations were interviewed.

B. Supply: Job Seeker Survey Findings

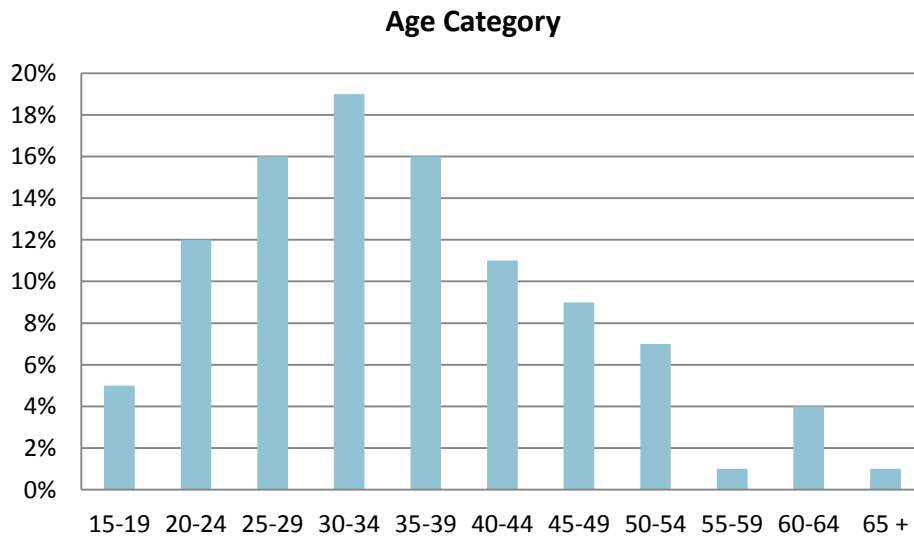
B.1 About Respondents:

112 responses were received. More females than males completed the survey, but a reasonable balance was still achieved. Female participation is typically higher on surveys.

41% male	59% female
39% employed	48% employed
54% unemployed	33% unemployed
7% other	18% other

The majority of respondents were in the 20-44 age groups.

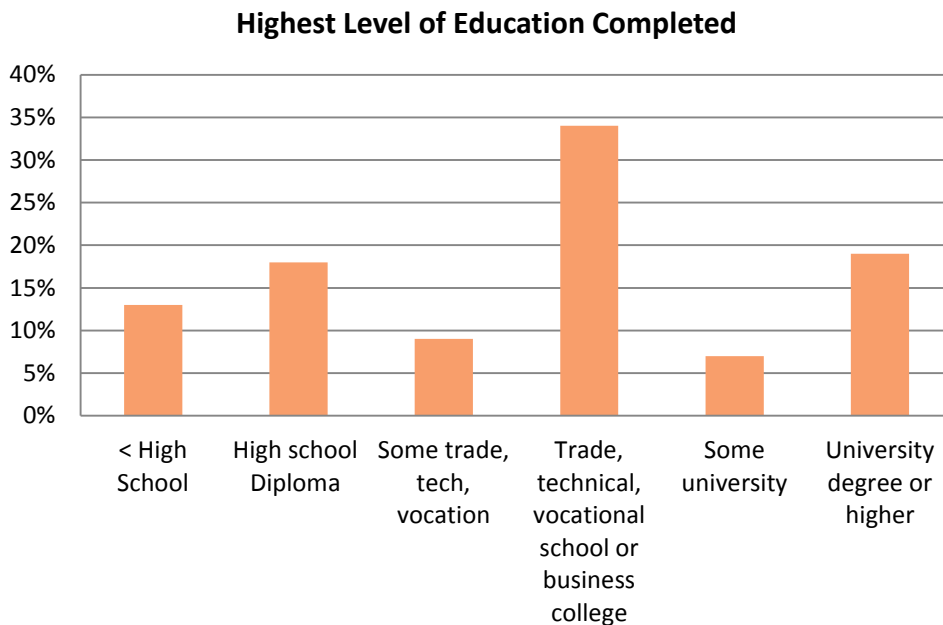
Figure B 1: Job Seeker Respondents by Age Category



46% of respondents are employed and 41% are unemployed; the remainder were students, or returning to work from a leave (e.g. sick, parental).

Respondents' education levels varied from less than high school to a university degree or higher.

Figure B 2 Job Seeker Respondents by Highest Level of Education Completed



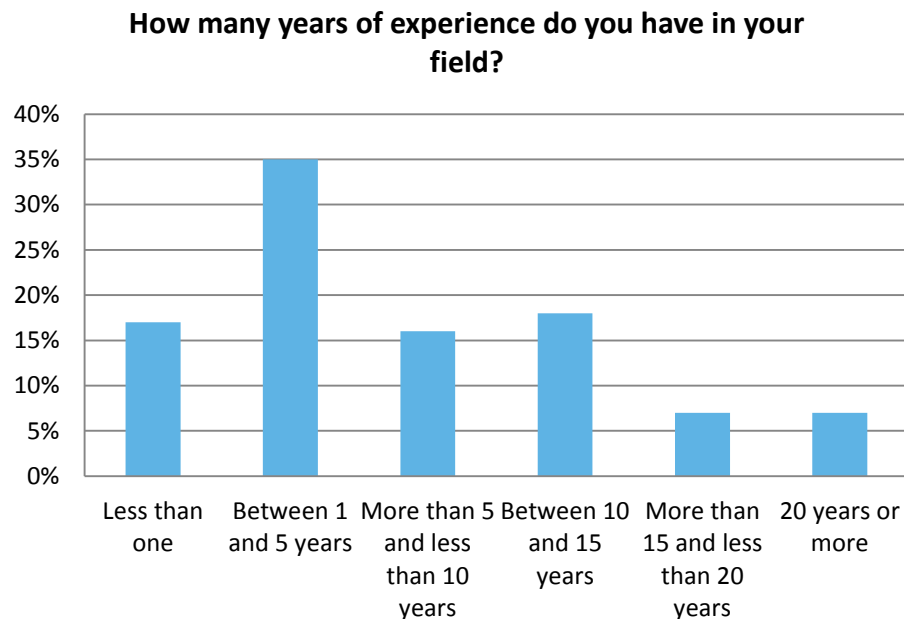
Two respondents (17%) in the 15-19 age category had less than a high school education. The remaining 83% were between the ages 25 and 44.

30% of respondents indicated that they have a trade certification, professional designation, or other related credential.

10 individuals indicated that their certification or designation was obtained outside of Canada, and 8 of these respondents noted that their credentials were not recognized in Canada.

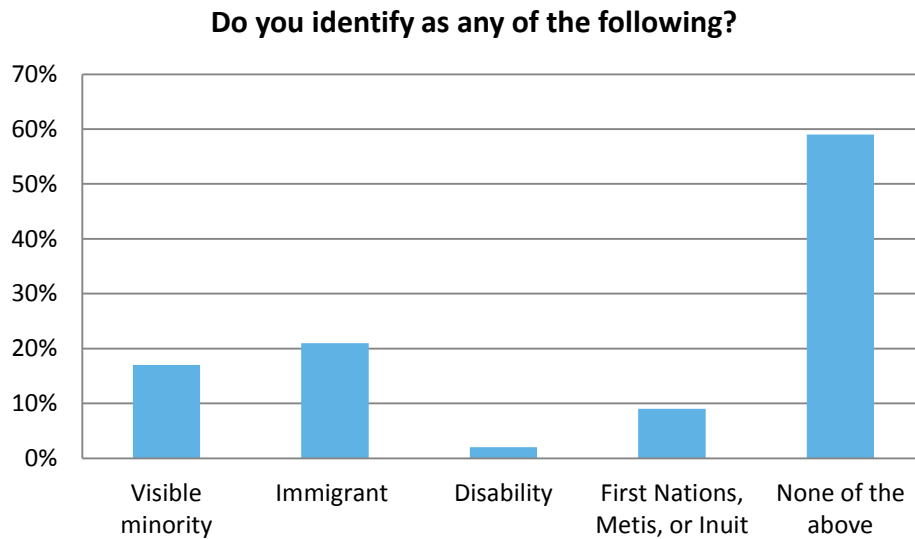
Just under half of respondents have more than 5 years of experience in their field of work. 52% have less than 5 years of experience. The majority of respondents (89%) indicated that the majority of their experience was obtained in Canada.

Figure B 3: Job Seeker Respondents by Work Experience



About 40% of respondents identified as a visible minority, immigrant (permanent resident, temporary foreign worker, refugee, or international student), indigenous person, and/or person with a disability. 59% were none of the above.

Figure B 4: Job Seeker Respondents by Self-Identification Minority



B.2 Job Search Experience:

The average length of time individuals have been looking for employment is 20.21 weeks.

Figure B 5: Job Seeker Respondents by Weeks of Job Search



75% of respondents are looking for full-time employment.

26% of respondents are looking for “anything that pays a liveable wage;” 25% are looking to re-enter the workforce; 19% are looking for a job that better matches their skills/qualifications; 16% are looking to advance their career.

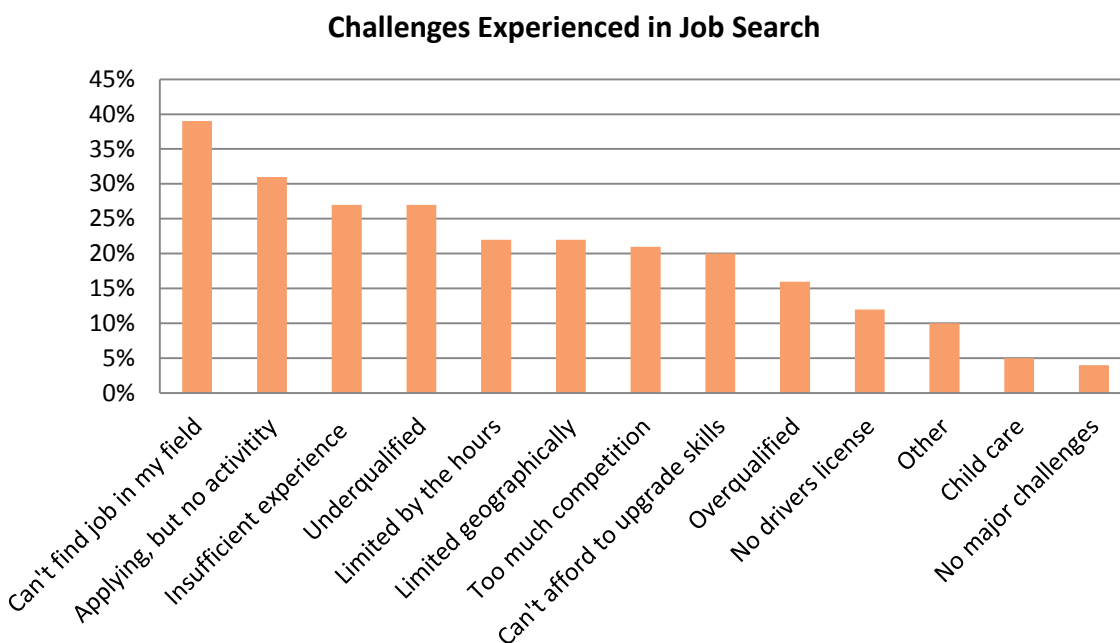
Figure B 6: Job Seeker Respondents by Primary Motivation in Job Search

Are you primarily seeking:	Number of Responses	%
Anything that pays a livable wage?	28	26%
To enter or re-enter the workforce?	27	25%
A job to better match your skills/qualifications?	20	19%
To advance your career?	17	16%
A lateral transfer (basically keep on doing what you are doing for a different organization)?	7	7%
Other (please specify)	7	7%
Total	106	100%

There are jobs here - just sometimes job seekers lack the skill set, work ethic, or other.

Major challenges being experienced by respondents include:

Figure B 7: Job Seeker Respondents by Challenges Experienced in Job Search



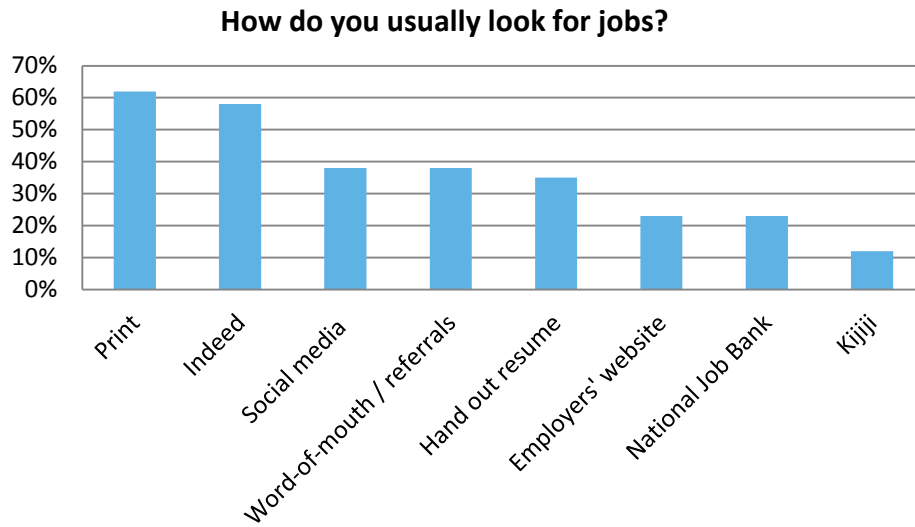
The biggest barrier indicated by respondents that are currently employed is that they cannot find job openings in their preferred field. These respondents are also individuals with a higher education.

For those who are unemployed, they indicate their biggest barriers are “I don’t have the right skills or qualifications for the positions that are available” plus they are applying for jobs, but not getting any interviews and/or job offers.

For those with high school or less, they indicate that they are limited by the hours that they can or want to work.

The top methods used by job seekers to look for jobs include:

Figure B 8: Job Seeker Respondents by Top Job Search Methods



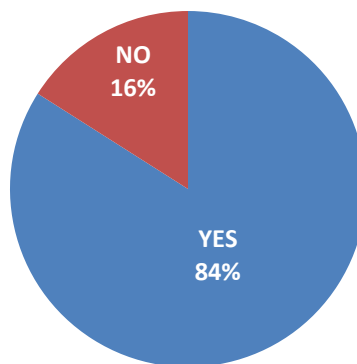
Note: only 26 respondents answered question

B.3 Job Seeker Mobility

The majority of respondents are willing to commute within a 50 km radius for employment.

Figure B 9: Job Seeker Respondents by Mobility within a 50 km Radius

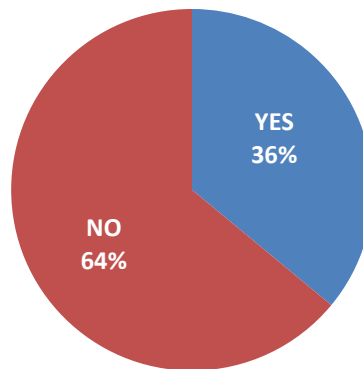
Are you willing to commute within a 50 km radius for employment?



Fewer respondents are willing to commute beyond 50 km for employment.

Figure B 10: Job Seeker Respondents by Mobility beyond a 50 km Radius

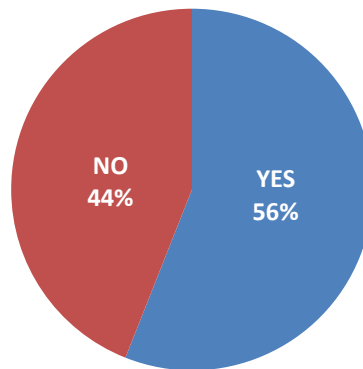
Are you willing to commute beyond a 50 km radius for employment?



Minority groups are more willing to commute beyond a 50km radius for employment compared to individuals who identified as none of the above (42% minority; 33% no-minority).

Figure B 11: Job Seeker Respondents by Willingness to Relocate

Are you willing to to move or relocate for the right employment opportunity?



69% of minorities are willing to relocate or move for the right opportunity compared to 45% of those who identified as none of the above.

This is reinforced by agencies and organizations that work with immigrant groups. One of the themes heard from interviews with these groups is that people, specifically immigrants and younger males, are leaving the community and going to bigger cities to pursue job opportunities.

B.4 Themes from Interviews with Service Providers

Themes heard from agencies and organizations that work with newcomers and individuals seeking employment include:

- English is a major barrier for many immigrants. There are certainly programs and supports in place, but there are the typical government challenges with program restrictions. Fee for service programs also exist, but many times these individuals are challenged financially to be able to pay for the service. If they do have some employment income, then putting in extra time for English classes on top of employment is an additional burden.
- Not unique to Brooks is the recognition of foreign credentials and work experience.
- Many, but not all, migrants / immigrants in the Brooks Region have low levels of literacy. This may be a result of the education and social system from where they came, they may have come as a refugee / from a refugee camp where they did not have access to regular education, and/or this may be related to their tradition of leaving high school early e.g. Low German-speaking Mennonites.
- Additionally, computer and digital literacy is typically low with these groups plus some older workers. Basic computer knowledge is needed to look for employment, apply for employment, and many jobs require at least basic computer skills (to fill out employee timesheets). The process of applying for employment is way more online now
- As stated previously under accessing fee for service English language program, finances can be a major barrier for investing in further skills and education. Many immigrants are doing their best to sustain themselves here and often help family back home therefore have little disposable income. Additionally, there can be some cultural issues around finances and loans as well. For example, in Islam taking loans can be a compromise of beliefs.
- One of the biggest gaps seems to be funded services (contracts) for youth/young adults – especially those who are newcomers to Canada and do not have good English language proficiency and/or literacy. In many cases, these individuals are caught in-between various ministry’s mandates and programs – Children’s Services, Education, Labour & Immigration. Work experience programs would be helpful.
- There can be a gap in the social and cultural norms of working and living in Canada compared to the country/location from which immigrants came. For example, letting your employer know that you not be at work ahead of time.
- Essential life skills is a major gap for many young workers, hard to employ, and some immigrant workers (some are coming from a refugee camp). These include general coping mechanisms (how to deal with someone yelling at you), how to interview, do a resume, and more. Some criticism was put onto school system.
- There is a gap with the demise of the “Volunteer Resource Centre.” Networking and volunteer opportunities are important especially for newcomers to help connect them.
- Many comments that it would be nice if employers could provide some more mentorship, work experience, and job shadow opportunities.

- Some concerns regarding private colleges in the community - the training they are providing is not adequate nor a match for needs.
- There's a feeling a lots of employers in the Brooks region could be doing more to diversify – to have more of a willingness and/or attitude to hire newcomers and people with a disability. There is a recognition that there is a fear of the unknown for employers, an increased risk, and the fact that some employers have been burnt in past. Employers could also use some training to understand the different generations. Additionally, there are lots of small businesses and personally run businesses in Brooks that don't hire a lot of external people.
- The job seeker needs to take some responsibility as well.
- There is a limited availability and diversity of jobs in the community. There are not a lot of employers beyond JBS, PSSI, and housekeeping employers that able to employ low language people. Professional and office jobs are limited. The overall economic climate means that it is hard to find a job right now. There are not a lot of people starting new business in Brooks.
- Mental health and addictions are a societal issue that overlaps into the workplace. People have depression and anxiety; people are self-medicating.
- Housing – affordable housing is an issue.
- Brooks has lots of good resources and many of the programs were cited as being very good – for example the Adult Basic Literacy Education (A.B.L.E) and Brooks Community Adult Learning Council (BCALC) are highly regarded. Overall, the community works hard to collaborate and work with each other. There's maybe been a little a little less collaboration as people/organizations are more protective about their jobs/contracts.

These findings are confirmed via research completed by The Rural Development Institute at Brandon University. For example, the community report for Brooks, which is part of a larger study “Immigration Settlement Services and Gaps in CIC’s Western Region” notes that:

- Brooks has a well-developed and diverse service provider partnership network.
- English language proficiency was identified as the primary barrier for newcomer settlement in Brooks.
- Limited employment options, specifically the lack of available high skilled jobs, was also cited as a concern.

C. Demand: Employer Survey Findings

C.1 About Respondents:

The Employer survey was completed by approximately 30 local employers. A few more employers started the survey, but dropped off because they only had 1 staff or other reasons. This data was supplemented with the personal interviews conducted to bring the quantity to 50.

About two-thirds of respondents were primarily located in Brooks, but responses were received from Newell County, the Town of Bassano, and the Villages of Duchess and Rosemary.

22% of respondents have over 50 employees; 78% have fewer than 50 employees. 18% of respondents had fewer than 5 employees.

In terms of NAICS code, respondents fit into the categories below.

Figure C 1: Employer Respondent by NAICS Code

Which category best describes the primary sector your business or organization operates in?	Number of Responses	%
Mining, Quarrying and Oil & Gas Extraction	5	13%
Healthcare and Social Assistance	5	13%
Manufacturing	4	10%
Construction	2	5%
Retail Trade	4	10%
Agriculture	3	8%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	3	8%
Educational Services	3	8%
Accommodation and Food Services	3	8%
Public Administration	2	5%
Utilities	2	5%
Wholesale Trade	1	3%
Transportation and Warehousing	1	3%
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	1	3%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1	3%
Total	40	100%

C.2 Employer Hiring Needs:

About half of employers said there were looking for people to fill positions. 64% of employers noted that there were positions that they have had difficulty filling either now or in the past. In most cases the employers are looking for specific skills and experience:

- *Challenge to find the skill set needed locally. Often have to go outside the community.*
- *Lack of truly qualified technicians in the area.*
- *Not looking to hire anyone right now, but if an experienced person walked in, I would probably hire them. It's hard to hire someone green.*
- *The more technical the training, the more challenging the find.*
- *Backhoe and excavator operators –it's been tricky to find the right experience.*
- *Industrial meat cutters/Butchers are getting to be a more skilled role as the industry moves into more value-added versus primal cuts.*
- *Ag technicians – there are lots of folks who are mechanically inclined, but you need to be more than just mechanically inclined anymore.*
- *All positions are challenging due to limited education or training.*
- *Engineering is tough to recruit. We have to go outside the city.*
- *Sales is tough. Need the right people who are trained and understand the business.*
- *Sales due to lack of experience.*
- *Technician – difficulty filling with qualified people and good work ethic.*
- *Middle management positions.*
- *Even labour. We have quite a few applicants, they even come from out of country, but they need to have those certifications (safety, first aid, etc.)*

As noted in some of the comments above, the challenge seems to be higher when trying to recruit someone from outside the region to move to the region to take a position. For example, when asked if they have had difficulty, one group stated:

*No, but it will be tough if/when we need to. People don't like to stay in Brooks.
It's hard to attract people to Brooks. We recruit from our other offices and let individuals know they can transfer to our bigger centres when a position opens there.*

Another employer indicated that they have tried hiring people from Medicine Hat and having them commute, but it generally doesn't last.

Only a handful of employers (n=9) have reduced their workforce in the past six months. Most employers that have had reductions, experienced the reductions more than six months ago. Positions that had been reduced in the past six months mainly included administration / reception positions, and labourers. Consequently, it does not appear that there has been a flood of skills to enter the market in the past six months.

With the exception of health care, provincial government employers (i.e. Dinosaur Provincial Park, Alberta, Income & Employment Services, Crop Development Centre) and several organizations funded by the provincial government (i.e. Education) are currently seeing hiring freezes and/or cuts. Additionally, approval to hire is being made at the ministry level rather than at the local level.

In terms of growth plans, about two-thirds of employers expect that they will need to increase their hiring (or number of new hires) due to business growth, expansions, replacing retirees or other reasons. Most organizations are hoping to grow, but their growth is dependent on being awarded contracts, expanding their customer base, and/or waiting for the economy to pick up.

According to [Alberta's Occupational Outlook 2019-2028](#) retirement is expected to grow by 50% and by 2028 retirements are expected to account for the highest share of job openings at around 32% up from 24% in 2019. By 2028, nearly all the baby boomers, who made up approximately 20% of the workforce in 2017, will have exited the labour market.

Just under half of employers indicated that their organization has been affected negatively because of labour force shortages. Negative effects include:

- Can cause more overtime, more workload for current staff.
- Owners and managers required to pick up extra work within business.
- End up overworking the one qualified technician on staff.
- Lack of service. Reduced services. For example, Alberta Health Services might have to remove a service from a community therefore people will have to travel to a larger centre to access that service.
- “We need to turn down jobs due to lack of competent and reliable personnel.”
- “It would be challenging to manage our good performance.”
- “It is difficult to maintain status quo let alone grow without good, qualified people within the business.”
- Need to provide more training in-house.
- Not enough trained professionals costs the company more money to train the individuals hired.
- “Certain roles/shortages can be show stoppers - can shut our whole facility down.”
- “I end up overpaying someone who is under-qualified.”

C.3 Recruiting Experience

Word-of-mouth and social media are the top recruiting methods used by employers. Most indicated that they found these methods relatively effective. Many noted that they use print, but don't necessarily find it effective. Various online platforms were also used, with Indeed leading the charge – although there were mixed reactions with respect to Indeed.

Indeed has changed our world. We started using it two years ago. The old days it was detailed cover letters. You can't judge with Indeed. It's good for how quick people are to see it. Volume of candidates to pick from is great. The trade-off is that the candidate can't sell themselves.

Indeed is frustrating – it recognizes certain pieces from your uploaded resume. We ask people to see their actual resume. Have to sift through a lot.

Figure C 2: Employer Respondent by Recruitment Methods Used



Some employers identified that there is a good pool of candidates to recruit from.

There's no shortage of people looking for work.

I find that more people are looking for jobs here, compared to the other two restaurants.

Brooks' postings get four times more hits.

There's a good supply of quality candidates.

Staffing is the least of our concerns right now. JBS has allowed Brooks to have a labour force to choose from. The oilfield used to do the same.

The fact that JBS is here helps us. Good pool of people here.

Other employers noted that Brooks is a small community and it is challenging to hire especially for those niche skilled and experienced positions.

Limited workforce. People dried up with the jobs.

Finding qualified applicants within this region is a challenge.

The oil downturn hurt the workforce.

Smaller workforce to draw from.

Both JBS and MCF Feedyards/Nilssons indicated that they have to go overseas for some of their positions. In the case of JBS, they acknowledge that there are very few places across Canada that they can recruit from (with respect to industry experience and/or training).

We pretty much have to train our industry.

We cannot find the skill in Canada, so often we recruit from our own plants in other countries.

Likewise, MCF Feedyards has found the pen riders for their Herd Health a challenge to recruit and retain locally. While there is some local talent, these individuals inevitably leave to work for one of the numerous Grazing Associations in the region. Additionally, there are enough of these types of positions “along the front range in the Calgary area” which makes Brooks is just a bit too far out. Consequently, MCF Feedyards has had their best success in recruiting this specific position internationally.

Alberta Health Services notes that attracting and retaining specialized talent to rural areas is a challenge. They are trying to re-shift and re-purpose positions. For example, combining two part-time positions into one full-time or in the case of a position like an Occupational Therapist, they will give them a .4 position so they have can their desired combination of private practice and public service (where they get the benefits).

C.4 Retention

Most employers didn't feel as though they had any major employee retention concerns. 70% said they generally had no difficulty and 30% said they had some difficulty. Many employers stated that they had lots of long-term employees.

Workers are hanging onto their jobs for dear life.

*The only upside to the downturn is access to labour
- no one wants to leave their position.*

Everyone is keeping the job they've got.

Even employers in accommodations and food services – industries that tend to have higher turnover rates – noted that their current turnover rates were reasonable compared to the industry standard and what they had been in the past.

JBS is proud that they've reduced the annual turnover rate from 47% when they first took over the plant to 12% which is the lowest turnover rate in the industry in Canada and as well the lowest in JBS North America!

Both JBS and MCF Feedyards make efforts to provide their foreign workers with English language learning and integration and involvement in the community as they recognize that it is in their organizations' best interests for these workers to stay and become permanent residents.

C.5 Workforce Readiness

Employers were asked to identify what they thought some of the top training needs were for the work force in Brooks region. Some of the most commonly mentioned themes are listed below:

- Safety training and certificates. “It’s often one of the first things I look for. The company can’t afford to pay for it anymore. If the candidate does not have their certifications, then it usually takes 1-2 weeks for them to get it and this delays everything. I wish they’d teach stuff like first aid in school.”
- Class 1 (and 3) driver training, mentorship, and tests.
- Trades training, apprenticeships, and pre-employment trades training continue to be important for the region.
- Basic customer service skills.
- Language training.
- Work ethic, attitude, and skills along with life skills (cleanliness and hygiene).
- Oilfield training so young / new people can understand what they are getting into.
- Mental health resources.
- More job placements or work experience opportunities so workers can gain experience.

C.6 Other Themes

Other themes heard from employers include:

- Jobs increasingly more technical / automated. Especially in agriculture – agriculture technician, pivots, GPS, etc.
- Lots of employers do internal training due to challenges of finding the right skill set.
- Brooks is often a “stepping stone” to a position in a larger centre.

While we don’t like to think of our company [Construction] as a “stepping stone” to a better career it does tend to open doors to higher paying jobs elsewhere in the industry. It’s really disheartening to see employees go through the ranks in four years and transition into other less skilled, higher paying jobs like oilfield operations and not utilize their skills any longer... Leaving a pool of less experienced workers to keep doing the work.

- There are challenges with respect to the Mandatory Entry-Level Training (MELT) for class 1 truck drivers and bus drivers. In the case of bus drivers, Alberta is the only government that puts school bus drivers in that category. These requirements result in a lot of time to obtain to have a job that isn't full-time. We can't offer a full-time route. Mostly need for the spare list.

Additionally, it was noted that there are not a lot of new start-ups in Brooks. Despite the high proportion of immigrants, many are not business ready in terms of finances, overall market awareness and understanding, and Canadian industry / market standards.

D. Provincial Forecast

Despite the current economic downturn, Alberta expects a labour shortage of 49,000 in the next 10 years.¹ Between 2015 and 2025, the quality of labour supply in Alberta is expected to improve further based on the forecasted overall level of educational attainment. The share of College, Trade, and University graduates will increase in 2025 compared to those seen in 2015.

Figure D1 outlines the examples of occupations expected to be in demand in the short-term, although these occupations did not really come in the Employer Research.

Figure D 1: Short-Term Occupations in Demand in Alberta

Occupation Title
2234 Construction estimators
6211 Retail sales supervisors
6311 Food service supervisors
7272 Cabinetmakers
7283 Tilesetters
7292 Glaziers
7335 Other small engine and small equipment repairers
9231 Central control and process operators, mineral and metal processing
0113 Purchasing managers
0114 Other administrative services managers
0311 Managers in health care
0421 Administrators - post-secondary education and vocational training
0621 Retail and wholesale trade managers
0822 Managers in horticulture
1243 Medical administrative assistants
1313 Insurance underwriters
2121 Biologists and related scientists
2171 Information systems analysts and consultants
2173 Software engineers and designers
2174 Computer programmers and interactive media developers
2232 Mechanical engineering technologists and technicians
2251 Architectural technologists and technicians
2262 Engineering inspectors and regulatory officers

Data Source: Alberta's Short-Term Employment Forecast (STEF), 2019-2021

Alberta's Short-Term Employment Forecast, 2019-2021 forecasts that trades and health occupations comprise most of the High Demand and Moderately High Demand occupations. Most of the High Demand occupations are in the skill category trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations; and sales and service occupations.

The majority of the Moderately High Demand occupations are in the health occupations; and trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations.

¹ Alberta Government. Alberta's Labour Market Highlights, 2017.