



# Navigating the New Normal

Executive and Employee Perspectives  
on the Post-Pandemic Workplace

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# Contents

Introduction	3
Employment and Work Patterns Will Be Permanently Transformed	5
Employees Expect a Different Post-COVID Workplace Culture	9
Uncertainty Remains Around Space Needs of Firms	11
Transit Faces Short-Term Challenges and Long-Term Opportunities	13
Conclusion	16
Acknowledgements	17



# Introduction

**A**s 2022 begins, the “new normal” for the Toronto region’s economy is starting to come into focus. As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Omicron variant, the business community is acknowledging the indefinite presence of the virus and adapting their business operating models and working arrangements accordingly.

With the dust settled after the sudden departure from offices in the downtown core, both employers and employees will have to contend with the learnings of the past two years of working from home and what it means for the future of work. The pandemic proved that workplaces could be fully operational while remaining entirely virtual. But months-long pandemic restrictions highlighted the criticality of human interaction in facilitating workplace cohesion and countering the effects of social isolation. As a result, employers and employees know that yet another round of changes to the way work is done

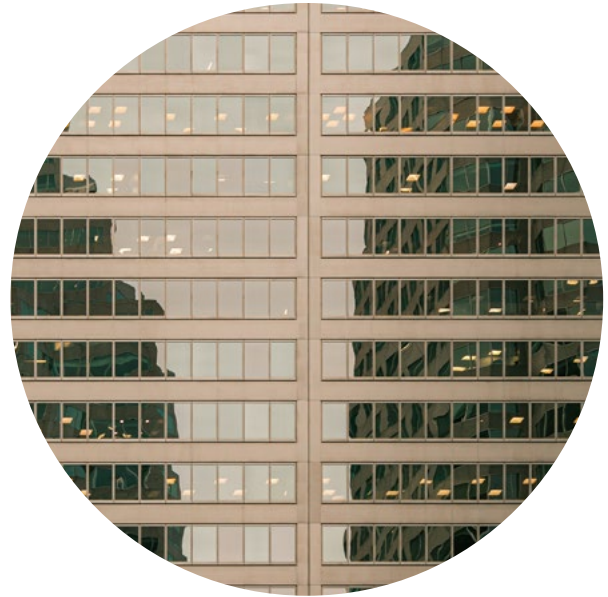
is not far off, and they will have to negotiate and collaborate on what the new reality looks like.

For employees, pressing questions and general uncertainty about the future of work are top of mind. Remote working, not spending time commuting, and flexible work schedules have created many new proponents of a hybrid work model.

For employers, they will have to contend with strategic shifts to working culture and employee expectations around work-life balance, and the impact that will have on operations in the downtown core.

What is clear is that some post-pandemic reinvention of Toronto’s downtown core will need to take place to bring in new and different types of visitors. As the Toronto region moves into the recovery phase of the pandemic, it would do well to heed the words of Jane Jacobs that “to understand cities, we have to deal outright with combinations of uses, not separate uses, as the essential phenomena.”<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION



## APPROACH

This report builds on the work undertaken by the Toronto Region Board of Trade (TRBOT) over the duration of the pandemic to prepare the regional economy for the post-pandemic future. Through convening hundreds of businesses and stakeholders over the past 20 months, TRBOT launched its “We’re Ready Toronto” campaign to share resources, guidelines and practical steps to help ensure a safe and sustainable reopening.

As part of this work, TRBOT convened and interviewed 40 C-suite executives in the summer of 2021 to find out what changes they anticipated for workplace operations and their workforce, and how these factors could impact commercial and residential real estate in Toronto in the years to come. Condensing hours of interviews with executives heading up firms in commercial real estate, finance, public transit, healthcare, technology and more, the resulting takeaways provide insights into executives’ predictions for how the working world may shift. However, the recent emergence of the Omicron variant will delay a larger return to the office and highlights the importance of remaining nimble during the pandemic.

To complement this research, the Toronto Regional Real

Estate Board (TRREB) commissioned Maru Public Opinion to poll approximately 800 workers on their opinions and expectations regarding working from home, changes in their living situation, and attitudes on return-to-work. Unless otherwise noted, polling numbers in this report are drawn from this survey. Reflecting the new environment where talent is in high demand, employee perceptions of workplace safety and value of working in the downtown core will impact return-to-work plans as much as executive perceptions of the optimal time to return to the office.

These insights reveal employee attitudes regarding different workplace arrangements and will help firms navigate their return to work in a way that respects their employees’ perspectives and can assist with talent retention in an increasingly competitive atmosphere. This information, combined with findings from the business leader interviews, provide a well-rounded perspective on what challenges and opportunities may emerge for the new normal. These decisions will also impact the commercial and residential real estate markets, providing important areas to monitor in the months and years to come.



# Employment and Work Patterns Will Be Permanently Transformed

**W**hile the shift to work-from-home occurred within a very short timeframe, bringing employees back in substantial numbers is taking much longer and ramping up gradually. The pace and success of return-to-office planning will depend largely on how flexible firms and executives are willing to be and what accommodations they are willing to make to retain their employees – the majority of whom are not interested in returning to pre-pandemic patterns.

## ADJUSTING TO THE NEW NORMAL

One of the biggest changes impacting the downtown core over the course of the pandemic has been the relocation of its workforce. While five days at the office was the standard for most firms and employees, and many of the downtown core’s related services and amenities relied on this guaranteed foot traffic, the new normal will see workers return with less frequency than prior to the pandemic.

**Workers have largely recognized the permanent changes resulting from this disruption. Our polling shows that nearly 8-in-10 workers think that their work situation will never return to what it was like prior to the pandemic.**

**Two-thirds (65%) of those surveyed reported that their employer has communicated with them about post-COVID working arrangements. Of that number, 78% of workers reported they will either need to come in part-time or will have the flexibility to come in as they choose. A further 10% reported that they would work from home full time. In contrast, just 12% of respondents said that their firms would require them to return to the office full-time.**

79%

I don't think my work situation will ever return to what it was like prior to the pandemic

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION



78%

I will either need to come in **part-time** or will have the **flexibility** to come in as I choose

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

## EMPLOYMENT AND WORK PATTERNS WILL BE PERMANENTLY TRANSFORMED

Nevertheless, nearly two years of social isolation has resulted in pent up demand for in-person interaction and interaction with colleagues, even if it is occurring on a less frequent basis.

Executives who were interviewed recognized that a desire for in-person collaborative work would be an important factor driving the return to the workplace. Many also shared a view that the core will need to diversify its role in the regional economy, creating an environment and work culture where employees are doing more than just working when going to the office. Employees will likely want to leave their homes after a day spent working from home, and the downtown core could make itself an attractive destination for colleagues to meet after hours with the right frequency and mix of cultural programming, events and amenities.

### WORKING FROM HOME WILL CONTINUE

Hybrid work models are here to stay, not simply because employees prefer a mixed work model, but because of the positive externalities that result from no commute time, ability to work alone and the comfort of working from home. Executives interviewed by TRBOT said that while face-to-face interaction will drive the demand to

return to the core, individually driven work will likely continue to be done from home.

Some executives indicated that their firms were having internal conversations on how to better accommodate their employees' work from home experience. **This will be an attractive differentiator for those companies, as polling shows that 43% of employees expect to spend the same amount of time working from home over the next year, and 19% expect to spend even more time working from home.**

Some employees may just need an ergonomic keyboard. Others might need a standing desk and a new monitor. These considerations have led some firms to find ways to make the work-from-home experience more comfortable. Companies in other jurisdictions have experimented with food delivery, grocery vouchers as well as auditing hardware and furniture needs of their employees.

Keeping in mind that technological oversaturation is more likely after nearly two years of a work-from-home orientation, executives also said their firms were having to train managers to develop "digital emotional intelligence" to better support a dispersed workforce and help address some of the pressures their employees could be experiencing.



43%

I expect to spend the **same amount of time** working from home over the next year



SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

19%

I expect to spend **even more time** working from home over the next year

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

EMPLOYMENT AND WORK PATTERNS WILL BE PERMANENTLY TRANSFORMED



81%



I'm happier working from home than going into work

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

48%



I miss going into work

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

**OFFICES WILL BRING WORKERS TOGETHER WHEN NEEDED**

While the home office has been perceived as a good place for individually driven work, the desire for in-person collaborative work means that offices will continue to have an important role to play, including gathering a firm's brain trust in a single location when needed. Workplaces will also be launching off points for employees to benefit from the amenities in the surrounding area, bringing foot traffic back into local businesses. The return to social activities will present opportunities for those informal "collisions" that were taken for granted prior to the pandemic.

Executives interviewed by TRBOT have indicated their belief that the office will become a place to collaborate, foster a workplace culture and hold in-person events. While video conferencing technologies will remain important tools for workplaces, bringing employees into a company culture can be more easily achieved in a physical space.

In our poll, employees were overwhelmingly supportive of the work routine established during the pandemic. The comforts of working from home may help explain why 81% of employees said they were happier working from home. Yet 48% of workers also said they miss going into work. These numbers highlight a central paradox about the emergence of the new normal: the need for a solution that provides a balance between the desire for in-person, collaborative work while also accommodating the benefits of working from home.



Many executives and employees still seem to value a central office location that provides abundant services and activities. Amenities in the area surrounding the downtown core such as restaurants, social spaces, cafes, sports facilities, cultural programming, and more could all help draw more employees to the core and use the area for more than just a place of work.

However, inside the offices, upgrading or adding amenities may be necessary to attract employees who have gotten used to the convenience of working from home or in co-working spaces. Some executives said that they were planning to implement hotelling practices and other methods popularized by co-working spaces to facilitate more casual work like reading, desk check-in system (hotelling), private booths for individual work and video interviews.

Other firms have sought out new office space to accommodate the new expectations around work. Some U.S. companies have been experimenting with opening satellite offices or renting out coworking spaces for employees who do not want to commute to the central office, usually located in the gridlocked core of the city. Companies have had mixed success implementing these new workplace policies, but risks can be mitigated by carefully thinking through and communicating the rationale behind the decision firms and employers make. Communicating the decision firms make and being clear about the work orientation of the firm – be it “office-centric hybrid”, “remote first” or some other arrangement – will help set expectations for employees at a time when companies are experimenting with different forms of work flexibility.

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# Employees Expect a Different Post-COVID Workplace Culture

The pandemic has changed workplace expectations. At no time in living memory has so much of the workforce been physically absent from its workplaces, providing employees with an alternative to the 9-to-5 routine that the Industrial Revolution ushered in over a century ago.

As employees hunkered down in late winter 2020, many focused on making the home environment as comfortable and conducive for work as possible. Now, as employees return to the office, they will want to experience that same balance of productivity with comfort. Many employers are experiencing fierce competition to hire and retain qualified people – and in this era of the “war for talent,” are recognizing that employees have more leverage than they have had in years.

## ADOPTING A “PEOPLE FIRST MENTALITY”

In our interviews, executives said that they understood the criticality to remaining responsive and supportive of employees’ wants and needs. For many managers, this means developing digital emotional intelligence and becoming more mindful of employees’ emotions and personal lives. Employers fear they could lose employees to other firms if they are seen as unresponsive.

**Workers who were surveyed made clear how important the ability to work from home is for them. If faced with the prospect of returning to work in the office full-time, 38% of respondents said that they would start looking for a different job. For employers with a younger workforce, polling showed that the proportion of employees aged 18-34 willing to find a new job rises to 50%. Widespread employee satisfaction with remote work may make it difficult for firms planning on a full-time return-to-work to retain or attract employees going forward.**

**50%**  
Employees  
18-34 years old



**If my employer requires me to go back to the workplace on a full-time basis, I will start looking for another job.**

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

**38%**  
All employees



Video conferencing and other collaborative tools kept critical lines of communication open that allowed employees to not only maintain productivity, but even increase it as the pandemic burned on. For some employees with children, for instance, remote meeting options have allowed them to participate fully in their firm while also being able to devote time to their children.

However, several months of social isolation has also created “Zoom fatigue”<sup>2</sup>, particularly for women and newer employees. Such negative mental health impacts could compound the longer workplaces stay fully virtual, leading to decreasing productivity as a result of fatigue and excessive screen time. Executives have recognized this challenge and stressed the importance of remaining responsive and supportive of their employees’ needs in the new normal.

Executives also indicated that some of their employees have become used to avoiding hour-long commutes, a change they may not want to reverse. Going forward, businesses could consider new methods of accommodating their employees’ needs in light of advances in communications technology and remote workplace management, along with changes in local real estate markets.

These insights from executives and employees help demonstrate that long-established corporate cultures may need to change if organizations truly want to retain their workers by putting “people first”.

### OFFICES WILL SUPPORT THE “SOCIAL RECOVERY”

One of the biggest benefits of working in the downtown core prior to the pandemic was the opportunity for individuals in different firms and industries to informally interact with one another at the coffee shops,

restaurants, conference halls and sports arenas that dot the downtown core. The importance of “collisions” – those informal, spontaneous encounters often cited as one of the benefits of agglomeration economic patterns seen in cities<sup>3</sup> – has become even more important after nearly two years of social distancing and capacity limits.

Executives pointed out that the demand for such interactions has been building since the first lockdown in March 2020 and restarting these interactions will be important for our collective “social recovery.” The return of workers will also be vital for businesses like coffee shops that create the space for these collisions. While many of these businesses have already been forced to close, the rest are counting on a sufficient number of regular returning workers in order to survive – and if that does not happen, these segments of the economy may not fully recover, and the downtown core could become less amenity-rich.

While digital tools have helped bridge some of the social gap, videoconferencing or messaging platforms still lack the spontaneity of bumping into colleagues, neighbours and potential business partners. Digital tools have not moved beyond allowing one person to speak at a time, meaning the quality of group conversations has languished, hampering side conversations that are often opportunities for collaboration and problem solving.

Executives expect that digital collaboration tools will continue to be important but will play a complementary role to in-person meetings, where employees can evaluate each other’s body language and side conversations can produce positive externalities. That said, they also acknowledged that even with a return to some in-person interactions, employees would be spending fewer hours in central offices than prior to the pandemic.

# Uncertainty Remains Around Space Needs of Firms

**A**s the recovery continues into 2022, planning for broader returns presents opportunities for companies to employ new ways of thinking. The pandemic has shown that workforces in certain industries can maintain productivity even after almost two years of working from home.

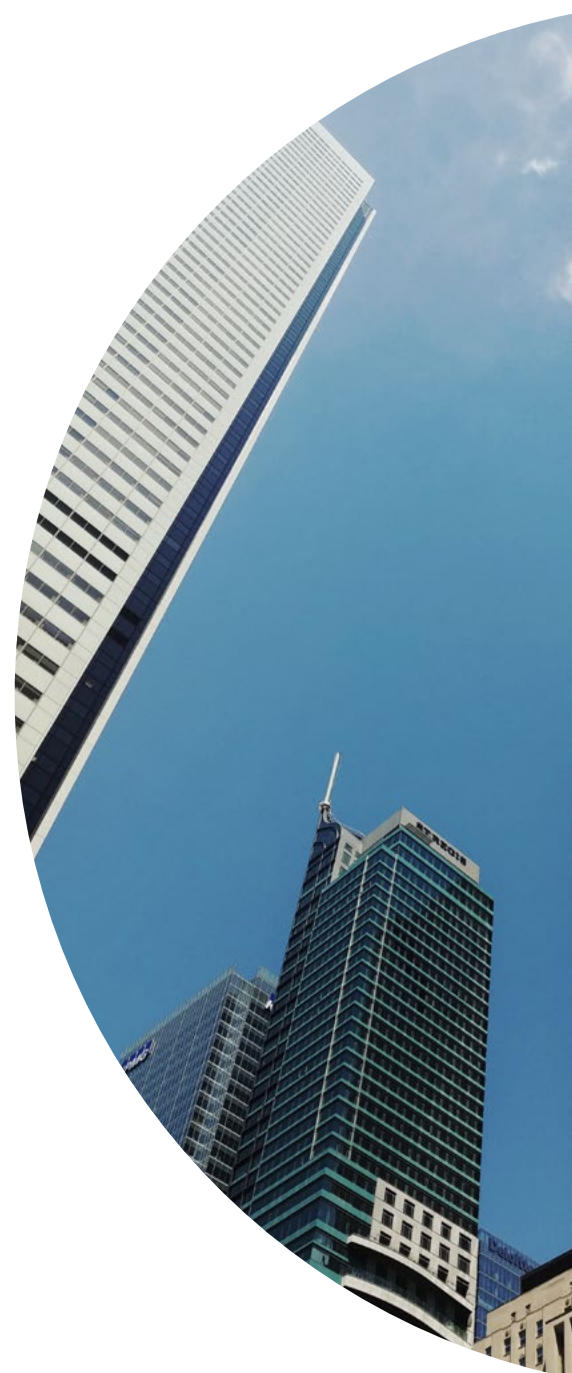
For many employees, working from home is preferable to working in the office, leading to questions about how much office space firms will need once their leases expire. This transition is far from hypothetical: **polling showed that over 1-in-4 employees (26%) expect to continue working from home full-time.**

As business leaders grapple with determining their post-COVID physical footprint, the insights below show that many continue to view the central office as having an important role to play in their future.

## **DOWNTOWN OFFICES WILL REMAIN IMPORTANT, BUT NOT THE ONLY OFFICE WORKERS GO TO**

As the share of knowledge-based industries in Toronto's regional economy continues to grow, the restrictions on where an office is located might not be as influenced by the availability of physical resources as it will be a location's ability to connect with nearby commercial centres and talent pools. While powerful agglomeration effects present in the regional economy will ensure that economic activity remains concentrated in the core, employers could look to spread out the daily operation of their companies.

In anticipation of coming changes to where people could work, some executives interviewed by TRBOT said that they knew some firms were considering subleasing their unused office space. But firms will likely have to do more than that. In other jurisdictions, firms have been transitioning to a "poly-centric" office model, whereby a firm has many regional offices in addition to its central office in a downtown core area.



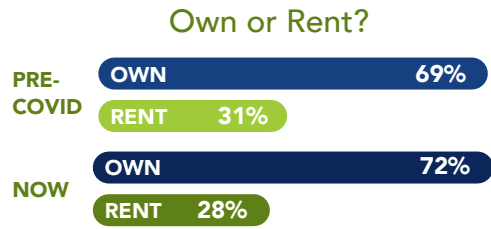
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UNCERTAINTY REMAINS AROUND SPACE NEEDS OF FIRMS

Location decisions will be made individually by firms who have properly assessed opportunities for shifting to regional offices. What works for one firm may not work for another. In the U.S., some firms in the Bay Area found their employees preferred a central office over a series of regional offices.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, a co-working firm in the New York City area actually added a central office in Manhattan as a way of bringing employees together on a weekly basis for socializing and meetings and build a post-COVID work culture,<sup>5</sup> a change from the decentralized office culture it had prior to the pandemic.

While much has been made of a large-scale exodus from cities, our polling found that the vast majority of workers kept the same address. **Nearly 9-in-10 respondents, 87% of employees, said they had not moved since the pandemic started.**

**In addition to workers remaining geographically in place, reported homeownership rates increased slightly during the pandemic. Ownership rates increased slightly, from 69% to 72%, an increase that could be partly attributed to cost savings from working at home and the desire to make the home office experience as comfortable as possible.**



SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION

I needed more space to work from home **28%**

I found a good deal further away from my workplace **18%**

I was able to get a lot of money selling my previous home **14%**

I no longer needed to be close to work **8%**

I needed to be close to work **6%**

**More than one-quarter of respondents who moved (28%) said they did so due to space limitations in their previous home. By comparison, only 18%, less than 1-in-5, said they moved further away because they found a good deal on a home.**

The upshot is that the lack of substantial relocation by the workforce means that employers could be better equipped to implement some return-to-office policies.

Among those who gave a reason for moving, the need for more space to work from home tops the list of considerations.

SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION



# Transit Faces Short-Term Challenges and Long-Term Opportunities

**T**ransit ridership will be a key metric to watch for in the region’s economic recovery given the impact the pandemic has had in eliminating a majority of transit journeys. While Toronto’s transit network will face challenges following the pandemic, its long-term prospects are more positive due to network expansion and new development priorities.

## **CHALLENGES FACING TORONTO REGION’S TRANSIT NETWORK**

Toronto’s transit challenges were well-known even prior to the pandemic. The limited reach of the existing rapid transit network and the limitations of local “last-mile” transit were challenges identified by executives interviewed by TRBOT. With the onset of the pandemic, the pause it provided has given governments and firms the opportunity to assess how and where transit service could be improved to increase ridership and where strategic infrastructure investments could be made to increase employee and visitor numbers to the core.

Some executives pointed out that Toronto has poor rail transit coverage for a city of its size. Regionally, the picture is similarly challenging due to low-density development patterns. Transit-oriented development has been floated as a solution to this particular challenge, and new proposals for projects along transit lines have increased in recent years.

Perceptions around safety have also impacted the attractiveness of transit usage since the start of the pandemic. Executives said that they were concerned that while landlords could control the perceived safety of their buildings, the same perception of cleanliness was lower when it came to public transit, despite information campaigns by the TTC on its increased cleaning standards.

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An additional challenge for transit comes in assessing the impact of the workforce that will be permanently working from home. Polling showed that 26% of employees, 1-in-4, said they expected to continue to work from home post-pandemic. Paired with other office-based workers who are commuting less frequently, this could create a significant and ongoing revenue impact for transit agencies. Some agencies have responded by refocusing on their core riders who kept using transit during the pandemic, including essential workers, people of colour and low-income families.<sup>6</sup> If the reduction in commuting riders becomes permanent, it could also increase the efficiency of transit agencies through better balancing peak and off-peak ridership.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR TORONTO REGION'S TRANSIT NETWORK

Some executives pointed out that despite the current dearth of transit users, transit is central to strengthening both the core and wider region and allowing people to move around it easily and conveniently. Executives also said that alternative modes of transit such as walking and biking, and the infrastructure needed to support those modes of travel, will become increasingly important to support the return of employees and visitors.

There is opportunity to keep transit central to moving people around the region. While transit ridership has plummeted during the pandemic, and concerns about the perceived safety of public transit linger, polling shows that transit's share of commuters may not drop substantially (although the total number of daily commuters might). **While 42% of respondents said they took the train or subway to work prior to the pandemic, 39% of respondents said they will take the train or subway to work following the pandemic.**

A key component of increasing the number of visitors to the core will run through reviving regional transit usage. The Toronto region's network of GO trains and buses, and the TTC's subway and streetcar network run through the downtown core, making it a natural locus for after-hours socialization. Executives have pointed out that there are opportunities to adjust transit service delivery to increase the attractiveness of traveling to the core such as fare integration and increasing service in what were previously considered "off-peak" hours.

The concentration of transit stations near social, recreational and cultural spaces in the downtown core could provide opportunities for programming and cultural events to bring a diverse range of visitors to the core, creating positive network effects for businesses and employers across the region.

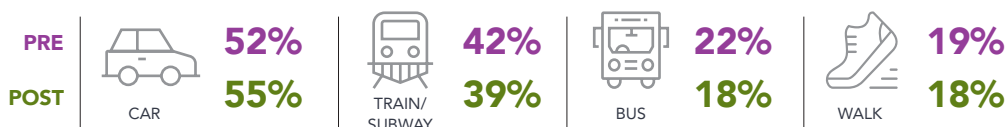
In support of these service changes, Ontario's Minister of Transportation has been meeting with regional chairs and mayors in the GTA to build support for regional fare integration to expand the pool of potential visitors to the downtown core from across the region.



SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION



### Mode of transportation to work pre- and post-pandemic



SOURCE: MARU PUBLIC OPINION



### MORE WELL-LOCATED HOUSING KEY TO SUPPORTING TRANSIT

While housing affordability has been an increasingly challenging problem, new opportunities are emerging for more affordable housing options to be built in the core and near transit stations. The provincial government and its municipal partners have been pursuing transit-oriented development policies that locate both residential and commercial uses along rapid transit lines to maximize the use and land value of transit station areas. In addition, rules on inclusionary zoning recently passed by Toronto's city council indicates that lower levels of government are responding to this challenge by working to require more affordable units to be included in new developments. Executives said that they perceived the housing affordability challenge to be more impacted by supply shortages than current interest rates, and that new housing would need to be built regardless because supply is so low across the region currently.

**Employee responses to housing questions reflect the concerns shared by executives. While 73% of**

**respondents agreed that working from home meant they can live anywhere they wanted, just 31% of respondents said that they could get a good deal on buying a house since proximity to the office matters less than it did prior to the pandemic.**

**Asked specifically about housing affordability, 88% of respondents said that housing was expensive everywhere they looked.**

Therefore, continued residential development, particularly the kind that meets the home office needs of employees, will continue to play an important role in the liveability and viability of the region. A slew of new transit-oriented developments being planned and built across the region could mitigate some of the challenges the regional workforce faces and increase the number of workers moving into new homes. Furthermore, transit-oriented development could potentially result in relocating or renting out co-working spaces in cities as far away as Niagara and London and still have direct transit links to the downtown core via GO Transit.



## Conclusion

**T**he sudden appearance of COVID-19 in early 2020 disrupted the regional economy in ways we are only beginning to understand now. Working from home was just the first part of many changes that have transformed the way we work. As we adapt to living with the virus, employers and employees will need to start looking ahead to what the new normal will usher in.

This will involve navigating new work patterns, including determining the balance and rhythm between remote work and in-office work and how to manage workforces in a hybrid setting. The work culture will also need to adapt, with employees' needs taking greater priority and businesses placing more emphasis on surrounding amenities to make returning to the workplace more appealing. Businesses' space needs may also shift as they adapt to these new patterns – with options including maintaining, reducing, or dispersing their office space in the region. And finally, even as ridership levels and patterns shift, transit network will remain a vital connecting force across the region.

The regional workforce has proven to be a resilient and adaptive collective that continued to perform throughout the hardships of the pandemic. While the next steps to emerge from this crisis will entail a process of negotiation between employers and workers, our interviews and polling show that there is much common ground between them. Working together, the Toronto region can navigate the new normal and emerge stronger on the other side.

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# Acknowledgements

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## ENDNOTES

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The Toronto Region Board of Trade is one of the largest and most influential chambers of commerce in North America and is a catalyst for the region's economic growth agenda. Backed by more than 13,500 members, we pursue policy change to drive the growth and competitiveness of the Toronto region, and facilitate market opportunities with programs, partnerships and connections to help our members succeed – domestically and internationally.

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