

COVID-19 Adaptation and Recovery in Whistler: Employer and Employee Experiences

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Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	3
<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Significance of Study</i>	4
<i>Methodology and Method</i>	5
<i>Participant Selection and Recruitment</i>	5
<i>Thematic Analysis</i>	6
<i>Literature Review</i>	6
<i>Recovery Strategies</i>	6
<i>Lessons Learned</i>	7
<i>Phase 1 Findings</i>	7
<i>Phase 2 Findings</i>	12
<i>Discussion</i>	20
<i>Conclusion</i>	22
<i>References</i>	24
<i>Appendix 1 – Focus Group Questions</i>	26
<i>Appendix 2 – Focus Group Questions</i>	28

Executive Summary

This report documents a qualitative research project conducted between May and November 2020 by two researchers from Royal Roads University. The focus of the project was to describe the employer and employee experiences regarding the changing work environment and related training needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences were explored in the following sectors: food and beverage, retail, accommodation, not-for-profit, and other related sectors. While the research focussed on the community of Whistler, it is expected that the research will assist organizations in other sectors and geographic locations as they adapt and respond to the changing pandemic environment.

The research was conducted in two Phases. In Phase 1, four virtual focus groups were held with representatives from each of the sectors identified above; these representatives were primarily managers and owners of Whistler-based organizations. In Phase 2, three virtual focus groups were held with employees working in Whistler. A qualitative analysis software program was used to aid in the identification of themes. The resulting themes were further analyzed to develop the findings and recommendations presented in this report. In addition, a literature review explored several major catastrophes with an emphasis on recovery strategies. Ten recovery strategies were identified in the literature, as well as seven lessons learned.

Throughout the discussions with the research participants in Phase 1, there were several consistent themes. The focus group questions and the findings are organized into two areas: (1) employer experiences as organizations began to open operations, and (2) professional development and training needs. With respect to employer experiences, the following five areas were identified as common issues: *staffing, adaptability, uncertainty, communication, and strategies* for working in the COVID-19 pandemic. The report lists the training and development needs by sector for managers and owners, and staff and volunteers. Phase 2 findings were organized in the two areas of (1) employee experiences during the pandemic, and (2) training experiences and needs. With respect to employee experiences, the areas of *challenges, changes, communication, decision making, future employment and support* were explored. Regarding training experiences and needs, participant identified areas for which they had received training: *communication, health and safety, leadership, and information on COVID-19*. In addition, they noted further training in the areas of: *mental health, wilderness first aid, and communications would be helpful*. The research culminated in the development of the 4C model which focuses on workplace adaptation and recovery.

The study provides insights into the multiple ways that employers and employees were affected during the pandemic in Whistler, BC. The research findings offer perspectives on the employer and employee experiences that can guide the development of support structures for organizations to create an appropriate employment strategies amid the COVID-19 pandemic environment. It is expected that the research will have relevance not only to Whistler, but also to other resort communities that have an economy that is reliant on tourism and hospitality.

Acknowledgement

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

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

Introduction

This report provides an overview of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of a qualitative research project conducted between June and November 2020. The project was undertaken with the assistance of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce and Zero Ceiling. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the goal of the project was to understand the human resource and training needs of Whistler employers, as well as the experiences of Whistler employees. The study will inform how organizations can support and train employees in this new and changing environment.

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

Significance of Study

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

Phase 2 identified the employees' perspectives on support structures and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study provides insights into the multiple ways that employees were affected during the pandemic with a focus on factors in the workplace that were found to be supportive. Questions that were asked in the focus groups included experiences to date, looking to the future, support needs, and training needs. The research findings offer perspectives on the employee experience that can guide the development of support structures for employees to create a supportive work environment.

The findings from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 offer additional information for employers and employees to consider as they continue to adapt to the COVID-19 environment, and into future recovery.

Methodology and Method

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

For Phase 1, data was collected between June 22 and June 26, 2020 in four focus groups. For Phase 2, data was collected on November 23 and November 24 in three focus groups. The seven focus groups were conducted using web-conferencing software.

The focus groups for Phase 1 were organized by sector as follows: food and beverage, retail, accommodation, and not-for-profit sectors. Focus groups for Phase 2 included participants from a variety of sectors. The focus groups were each between 45 and 90 minutes in length. The data was audio-recorded and transcribed. One of the researchers took notes to aid in clarifying questions arising in the transcription, and the chat function in Zoom was also used to capture comments. The transcription and the chat box data comprised the data set. The ethical review process was completed by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy for Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. All participants provided email consent to participate in the study.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

In Phase 1, the researchers anticipated that business sectors would experience and address the HR-related impacts of COVID-19 differently, and focus groups were therefore organized by sector. This decision also ensured participants had similar backgrounds, experiences, and discussion focus (Cohen et al., 2007). Recruitment for the four focus groups by sector was arranged and completed by Whistler Chamber of Commerce and Zero Ceiling.

Phase 1 focus group participant recruitment for the food and beverage, retail and accommodation sectors was undertaken by Whistler Chamber of Commerce using two sampling approaches. Some participants were recruited through direct invitation by email, following a purposeful sampling approach (Robson & McCartan, 2016), and some focus group participants responded to a general call. The general call for participants was distributed as follows: (1) Invitation

in ENews Update distributed to all Whistler Chamber of Commerce members; and (2) Facebook post on Save Small Business Whistler. Zero Ceiling recruited participants for the not-for-profit sector through direct invitation at a not-for-profit network fortnightly Zoom call. Agreement to participate was given by email, Facebook Messenger or phone call. Of the 37 who expressed interest in taking part in the research, 9 did not attend, leaving the total number of focus group participants at 28.

In Phase 2, focus group participants were from a variety of sectors due to the nature of the participants' introductory level positions. It was decided that the sector-based segmentation was not significant in Phase 2, as a result the focus groups were from mixed sectors. Recruitment for these three focus groups was arranged by Zero Ceiling. Following a purposeful sampling approach, Zero Ceiling recruited participants through direct invitation by email (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Agreement to participate was given by email. Of the 12 who expressed interest in taking part in the research, 2 did not attend, leaving the total number of focus group participants at 10.

Thematic Analysis

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

Literature Review

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

Recovery Strategies

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

When discussing the fire in Colorado, Cartier and Taylor (2020) noted that for a community to remain resilient, there needed to be good communication, a collective community, preparation for future events, and relationship building. Also discussing community, but with a focus on connection, de Vries and Hamilton (2016) found that having a sense of responsibility for staff members and feeling bound to the community had value; the authors also noted the urgent necessity of changing the way

the business operated. In line with the need to remain open to change, Hystad and Keller (2006) discussed how the lack of coordinated recovery planning resulted in an ad hoc approach by businesses. In addition, when discussing the 2003 fires in Kelowna, the same authors commented on the negative impact the fires had on local businesses, as well as the role Tourism Kelowna played in countering some of the harmful media coverage and responding to the marketing needs of some local businesses. In research on SARS and norovirus, physical safety was highlighted, with references to hygiene, temperature checks, cleanliness, and masks (Lo et al., 2006; Koss-Feder, 2020). Lo et al. (2006) focussed on employment issues, with particular reference to layoffs, dismissals, pay cuts, and unpaid leaves. In addition, Hystad and Keller (2008) examined a top-down approach that looked at how tourism businesses viewed the responsibilities and necessary contributions of regional bodies and other major stakeholders when disasters occur.

Lessons Learned

Under lessons learned from the literature, seven themes emerged: *good communication, collective communities, relationship building, stakeholder collaboration, physical protection, disaster and emergency planning, and crisis management planning and implementation*. The significance of communication was highlighted in different situations; in the context of wildfires, Cartier and Taylor (2020) discussed how critical clear communication is to resilience and noted that constant communication provides feelings of stability for community members. Also, when discussing norovirus, Fisher et al. (2018) noted that healthy behaviours could be promoted through effective communication messages. When discussing communities, Cartier and Taylor (2020) highlighted the value of collective responses and efforts by the community as significant contributors to resilience. The authors also identified relationship building as aiding in continuous resilience after the disaster. While Nordin et al. (2019) were discussing Whistler in general terms, pre COVID-19, they did identify key challenges in the community with effective corporate-community relationships declining. Stakeholder collaboration featured in several contexts, Filimonau and Coteau (2020) commented on the need for collaboration and shared information networks when planning and recovering from disasters. When discussing Kaikoura earthquake, Fountain and Cradock-Henry (2020) identified the need for tourism businesses and local communities to collaborate with disaster management officials, and Hystad and Keller (2008) referred to the need for pre-emergency collaboration between all stakeholders, and Tew et al. (2008) discussed the importance of collaboration within the organization when responding to SARS. Physical protection measures, such as handwashing and physical distancing, played a role in recovery strategies noted by Fisher et al. (2018) and specific plans, such as masks, temperature checks for staff and crew, as well as removal of buffets, were discussed in The Maritime Executive (2020). Disaster and emergency planning, as well as crisis management planning and implementation were noted as effective strategies to support community resilience in dealing with, and recovery from, major catastrophes (Cartier & Taylor, 2020; Lo et al., 2006; Tew, Zhen et al., 2008).

Findings

The research findings are presented in two phases, one for each round of data collection.

Phase 1 Findings

The findings for Phase 1 are organized under the two research foci identified earlier, with an emphasis on the themes that emerged from the data. The first group of questions focussed on employer experiences, as organizations began to re-open their operations. In response to this question, five themes were identified: *staffing, adaptability, uncertainty, communication, and strategies.*

Focus 1: Employer Experiences

Staffing

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

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

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

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

Adaptability

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

“Opportunity for creativity, for innovation, for being aggressive during this time as opposed to, you

know, riding out or just waiting.”¹

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

Uncertainty

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

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

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

Communication

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

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

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

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

Strategies

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

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

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

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

Focus 2: Professional Development and Training

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

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

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

Table 1

By Sector: For Manager and Owners

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

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

Table 2

By Sector: For Staff and Volunteers

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

Phase 2 Findings

The Phase 2 findings are organized under the two research foci identified earlier, with an emphasis on the themes that emerged from the data. The first group of questions focussed on the general experiences of the employees. In response to these questions, the discussion below is organized under six categories: *challenges, changes, communication, decision-making, future employment, and support*. A summary of the emergent themes is explored under each category.

Focus 1: Employee Experiences

Challenges

Participants shared multiple challenges related to employment in the COVID-19 pandemic context that related broadly to a general and deep-seated experience of uncertainty. For the challenges there were four themes of uncertainty: *financial uncertainty, work schedule, workplace restrictions and social life*. Comments that reflected the overarching theme of general uncertainty are noted below.

“It's such a hard dynamic moving system that it's not perfect”³

“Embracing the change and just one day at a time and hoping that business doesn't decrease drastically so we can continue working”¹

Financial Uncertainty

For the first theme, *financial uncertainty*, this challenge reflected the fear participants associated with the possibility their jobs might be cut or hours reduced. Some participants shared that their employers gave them support to work out both eligibility and application process for wage subsidies.

“I'm starting with something new, but it could get shut down really quick because COVID cases can rise and will I be able to pay rent”²

“...she ensured that we got wage subsidies for the company and that sort of thing so then we can eat you know, so that we can keep our core staff working”¹

Work Schedules

Several participants discussed *work schedules* that were challenging for multiple reasons; for example, positions were put on hold and work hours ceased, work hours were reduced, or work hours increased.

“I've definitely taken on more than I was hired to do”³

“...everything’s just kind of up in the air so it’s like, it’s hard to make solid decisions right now”³

Workplace Restrictions

Workplace restrictions were identified as challenging as these restrictions changed the nature of social interaction and the job tasks. The workplace restrictions were also associated with uncertainty because the restrictions changed frequently and these changes affected plans and procedures for re-opening.

“... all the procedures have affected us a lot...work is not as enjoyable”¹

“... the job looked very different than what it was supposed to look like...it was completely different than what we’ve done in previous years”²

“You make a plan and then, then you find out that okay actually that's not what we're going to be able to do because of restrictions ...So it was like pushing back a lot of like deadlines ...it felt like sometimes you were doing work that didn't go anywhere”³

Social Life

Associated with *workplace restrictions* was the changing nature of *social life*. Several participants noted that they missed social connection at work with their customers and co-workers, and at home, as well as missing the connection in their free time.

“... it’s kind of weird for me because I don’t really thrive in this virtual world we are living in right now”²

“...when you’re 20 years old, away from home, you came here to party and go on adventures and now you’re stuck at home away from your family”²

Changes

The changes discussed by the participants can be placed under two broad themes. The first is *location of work*, the second is *working conditions*.

Location of Work

Under the theme *location of work*, several participants discussed the shift from working with clients and customers in person to working remotely. These discussions focussed on identifying the physical space within the home that would support an effective work environment, boundaries and distractions, as well as lack of physical contact with co-workers. Quotations are included below to illustrate participants’ observations about the location of their work:

“Not having that boundary ... I am having challenges into like separating my personal and then my work time already and because of the number of factors like you would also be distracted from time to time working from home, like, ‘Oh, I need to do something [with] my laundry’”¹

“Now that I can do some of that work online it's almost created a little bit more time.”¹

“I like don't really thrive in this like virtual world that we're kind of living in right now.”²

“I haven't seen any of my coworkers in person for a very long time.”³

Working Conditions

Under the theme *working conditions*, participants discussed their teams and coworkers, working together as a community, physical considerations, team member differences, pollution, working longer hours, as well as the volume and pace of changes in the workplace. Included below are quotes from focus group participants showing the variety of perspectives:

“I have a great team to kind of help me navigate how things are supposed to look, or how things usually are versus kind of how they are now and what we have to limit, or change, or just adapt.”¹

“People love to socialize, but I'm very cautious because you know I have asthma so I'm at risk for some of those more respiratory issues. And I was wearing masks... but like not all my coworkers felt the same.”²

“These anti mask protesters and so you have a specific guideline for that protocol to follow... it would still be useful for people in the community not just in one employer or organization to ... just identify it as black or white. So it would be easier for the community to be able to have a common understanding of everything.”¹

“Going from you know working in a super relaxed cafe to to working in a just a sanitized bubble.”²

“How much more pollution are we going to put out there on top of what we're already doing?”²

“My days were full because I would go and spend an hour and a half, with one family then half an hour, travel, and then sanitation time. And then another family would come in.”³

Communication

Communication was discussed by all participants, with a variety of examples provided. The themes that are discussed below include: the *types of communication* used, *participant preferences*, and the experience of *working in an online environment*.

Types of Communication

When talking about the types of communication used in their workplaces, participants provided information on emails, synchronous chat, phone calls, and team meetings. The quotations below provide examples:

“Facetime meetings, emails, phone calls.”¹

“Now we have to do an internal communication newsletter.”¹

“We were meeting, physically distant, the senior management team there's about seven of us so we were meeting in our large circle outside.”¹

“Emails, if it's an emergency phone call if it's a text message, any anything, any way we can be reach each other because things change quickly. So, it's, it's mostly that lots of meetings.”²

Participant Preferences

In the discussions focussed on preferred communication strategies, participants expressed a variety of technologies and techniques that were used:

“A meeting every time before we started work was really useful ... I really value emails like some people don't prefer them personally, but I like them, you just give me the information, let me read, let me analyze it myself.”²

“The moral support, and the team meetings every week do help they're kind of like a little bit of an inconvenience and stuff like that but it does help like see people's faces and be like, oh, we're not just like text on a screen.”²

“I've used different apps like Slack, and that's the one I've used where everything when you're communicating it's very it's in a specific channel so you can go back and look at what was there, where with email and with text, it's so lost ... so many emails I don't know where it is. I would say just specifically for my organization like adopting a tool like that would make communication a lot better”³

Experiences of Working Online

Individuals in the first focus group provided examples of a variety of experiences as they moved to working online. Experiences included reassurance, zoom fatigue, volume of emails, and information distribution methods:

“I don't think I've ever participated in so many meetings in my life ... I think a lot of us had zoom fatigue ... I had to get new glasses actually.”¹

“I think she felt that it was like really inundating to go through the emails. And so she have done like an over the phone conversation one on one.”¹

“It was interesting for me to see how different employers would. For example, one would maybe just forward all the new health regulations and I would be just like see this here's this attach this is attached, take a look at that has acknowledge that you've read this and then another employer would send it but then also kind of summarize it and distill it and how it directly relates to the work.”¹

Decision-making

The unprecedented changes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic affected decision-making. Many decisions in organizations related to new operating circumstances that had never been considered before, moreover, there was typically a need to make quick decisions to respond to these

new circumstances. Management involvement of employees in decision-making was described in positive terms and was associated with teamwork and responsiveness.

[Decisions were about] "...how to keep the safe place, how to keep customers safe, how to make you know make sure that everyone is respecting the rules, things like disinfecting the entire cafe, every hour right, customer side, our side. So this is all decision-making and. And, yeah, a lot, a lot of weird things that we've never had to do before"²

"Our manager will come to us and ask, how do you guys feel about this like how do you think that will work - and really values our input so I really respect that. COVID or not I think that's a really great thing and I'm happy to be a part of a space like this"¹

"I'm definitely involved [in the decision-making process] we're like right in the mix together, for sure"²

"As the pandemic was going on we were creating our return to sport plan and creating the protocols and policies that we would need to use when we wanted to return to sport and they really really used the frontline staff who are going to be the ones, implementing these protocols and policies with athletes and volunteers...It was very much a team effort and felt very included in that"³

Future Employment

The future employment category included two themes: *precariousness of employment* and *new opportunities*. Future employment plans were affected by COVID-19 and the ensuing impact of the pandemic on sectors such as tourism, leisure, and entertainment.

Precarious Employment

Some participants in Focus Group 2 shared their concern about the precariousness of their employment. There was discussion related to the precarious nature of jobs considered 'not essential', namely tourism and tourism-related employment. Tourism employment in a COVID-19 pandemic was also viewed as dangerous.

"Now, a lot more dangerous and just with like, you know COVID being a factor, and it's not essential"²

"It made me realize how precarious my employment situation was, and then the biggest thing that came out of it... I need to find a change...it's just not sustainable for the life I want to live"²

"I am going back to school to just completely change careers"²

New Opportunities

Other participants were affected more positively by their employment during COVID-19 and shared that they had received more training and growth opportunities in their employment.

“I definitely think a lot of the skills that I’ve used over the last few months are super transferable to other organizations”²

“I’ve expanded what my position actually is so I’m into different courses now”³

Support

Participants in all the focus groups discussed their experiences with support, and in some cases lack of support, offered by their employer. The discussions that related to supports that were offered by employers covered four themes: *financial support, flexibility, mental health, and relationships*. A fifth theme, *lack of support*, was identified. The following quotations show the variety of situations the participants experienced:

Financial Support

Participants in the first focus group provided many examples of how their employer provided financial supports:

“Funding was given for online conferences.”¹

“Small monetary support like that and just like reimbursing what they have used up on their personal equipment.”¹

“She’s the research knowledge powerhouse so she would make sure that we all fully understood sort of what we had access [to].”¹

“Making sure they know about our EAP program and using their benefits.”¹

Flexibility

Individuals in the first focus group also discussed how much they valued having a flexible workplace:

“I’m a single parent so when the schools were closed, I was able to adjust my schedule to help my son with his online schooling, extra sick/mental health days.”¹

“It is such a drastic difference in regards to the reaction from employers/managers in the daily navigating of the pandemic. For example, not feeling guilty or ashamed if you are potentially experiencing symptoms or unsure if you should come in to work or not. It has been very positive for me here - they care and are supportive rather than penalize you for things beyond your control. Good management makes a huge difference in the workplace especially during these uncharted times.”¹

Mental Health

In the first two focus groups, the topic of supporting mental health was raised, and participants provided examples of their experiences:

“The clinical supervision that we do our team gets to meet with like a counselor and just kind of go over things either related to COVID or how we’re feeling or how we’re feeling in relation to our roles

and things that come up ... having that support and understanding all around unconditionally has been really welcoming and just makes it a positive experience.”¹

“We provided clinical counseling for our parents that worked for us, and we provided an opportunity to speak with a clinical counselor for the rest of our team.”¹

“I'm just supporting them that way and again as well with mental health days and 100% there's more of those going around.”¹

“When you're 20 years old, away from home, you came here to party and go on adventures and now you stuck at home away from your family in during a pandemic right so lots of mental health support.”²

Relationships

Several participants explained why building supportive relationships with employees and expressing empathy were fundamental to having a positive working environment:

“[The employer is] aware of these things and where everyone's coming from and everyone's experiencing this, but it's through a different lens it's very very clear that you don't know what has happened to someone else earlier in the day ... just approaching everyone with empathy and compassion.”¹

“Lots of presence, you know if there's any questions I know that all the time I can talk to my manager and she'll be there for me and lots of support, and she's just very available which is really nice.”²

“[It] was very important for us to use the staff recognition and appreciation line in our budget was something that was something that was, you know, just buying doughnuts and coffee like I'm telling you these little things we can't go out for drinks anymore after work and all these little things and giving them grocery gift certificates.”¹

Lack of Support

While there were many areas where employees appeared appreciative of the support provided by their employer, there were also some participants who noted areas for improvement:

“Extra sick mental health aides.”¹

“My sister has so much anxiety ... our experiences during this whole thing have been so drastically different ... it's really not in her control or not her fault but she's having really a much harder time with it. So I just think that shows the difference of having a supportive team and having people on your side rather than literally being penalized or being, you know, taken off the schedule or something if you have had to isolate”¹

“I didn't really receive a lot of support from any of my employers.”²

“I was working about 16-17 kilometers north of where I lived. And, and to get to work, I would have to catch a bus and then walk three kilometers along the highway. And originally there was transportation in place but then they like, stop doing that, so it took me like I almost got to work like an hour early because that was when the last bus.”²

Focus 2: Professional Development and Training

The timing of the Phase 2 focus groups was later in 2020, as a result participants commented on the variety of training opportunities that were available since the start of the pandemic. While some training was face-to-face, more often participants discussed online, voluntary workshops. A variety of skill-developing topics were covered, such as communication, health and safety, and leadership, and some training information on COVID-19 was incorporated:

“Like the social media aspect of our position.”²

“It's mostly in-store training, how to keep everything safe.”²

“Leading in a time of crisis or, you know, revisiting your strategic plan.”¹

Participants also noted the value of training as it related to relationship-building and mental health. In addition, some participants noted that they took advantages of free, career enhancing training sessions. Representative quotations are found below:

“We haven't done any official training as a team, but there have been many opportunities presented for staff attend workshops voluntarily.”¹

“Our employer is open to us accessing opportunities to take training if we want to attend a course to enhance our skills”¹

“All online all like zoom workshops and stuff ... adding the COVID-19 stuff on top of it”¹

“I've expanded what my position actually is so I'm going into different courses for now.”²

“There was some in person training socially distanced through.”³

“Informal training because it was part of our meetings or brainstorming”³

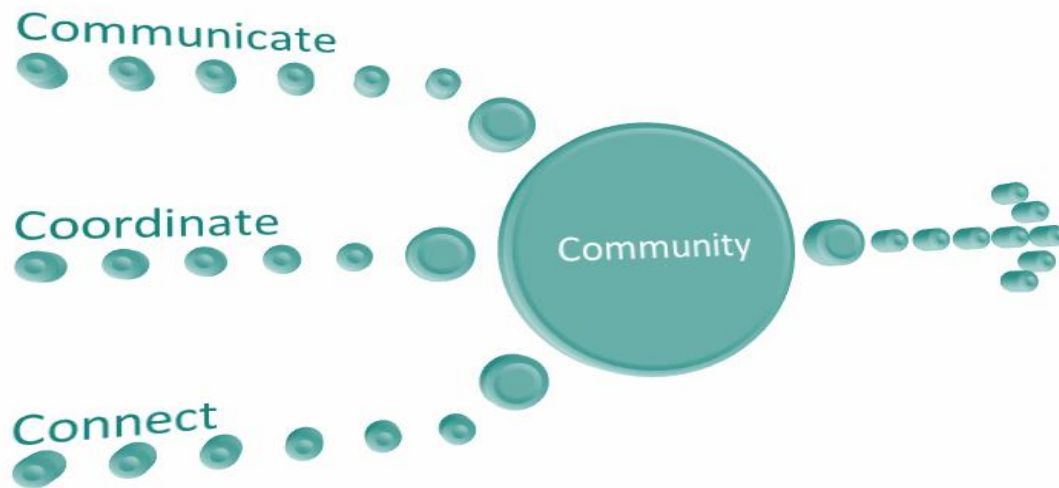
In the employee focus groups, when asked about their training needs, most participants noted that they had plenty of opportunities for training, and overall they had very limited suggestions for new opportunities beyond those already provided. Suggestions for new training included how to recognize mental health issues, wilderness first aid, and enhanced communication techniques.

Discussion

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

Figure 1

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



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Communicate

Phase 1 participants in each focus group discussed the significance of communication as an approach that supported COVID-19 workplace adaptation and recovery. Internal and external communications were discussed as essential and ongoing. Across sectors there were many operational changes related to health and safety directives that needed to be communicated internally, and employee engagement was a pressing need. Internal communication with employees was also related to employee retention including the implications of CEWS and CERB wage subsidies and the continuance of them, reduced hours and temporary layoffs. In the retail sector and not-for-profit sector, internal communication with employees extended to supporting employees and volunteers to work from home. Regular communication regarding job security, mental health, isolation, anxiety, and stress was helpful for all employees. The approach to internal communication included the

appropriate sharing of information, supporting individuals and teams to navigate towards positive outcomes, and exploring issues from multiple perspectives.

Phase 2 participants discussed communication in multiple ways with a particular focus on the types of communication that they were engaging in, their preferences, and the shift to working in an online environment. Traditional email communication was discussed and characterised by some as hard to manage. New communication channels such as Slack were viewed as channels with the potential to improve communication flow and workflow. Text messages, emails, web-conferencing and phone calls were all examples of communication channels that were common in the participants' employment. Participants shared that communication had been typically either daily or 'frequent' and the content of communication related to information sharing, discussion, updates, and planning. The participants shared that their communications throughout the pandemic were primarily online.

Coordinate

Phase 1 focus group participants discussed the need to coordinate with other organizations to build capacity and minimize costs. They also noted that round tables to help sectors share information and work with one another were valuable. The research participants commented that the conversations in the focus groups were information-sharing opportunities, leading to possibilities for improved coordination between sectors and organizations. Phase 2 participants commented on the significance of having intra-organizational coordination to support decision-making. Taking an open approach to exploring and sharing information was viewed as a way to grow existing communities and to learn in a period of uncertainty and constant change.

While the discussion in Phase 2 focus group lacked some of the detail provided in the Phase 1 focus groups with regards to the *Coordinate* approach, the Phase 2 focus groups did place an emphasis on micro-level coordination with their co-workers and in work-place teams. Managers and supervisors were perceived as holding a coordinating role by distributing information and facilitating the sharing of ideas and decision making. Coordination through supervisors and managers also had a relational component by offering support for mental health, safety in the workplace, interpretations of public health guidance, and support to apply for wage subsidies.

Connect

The theme *connect* was evident across the Phase 1 focus groups. Some focus groups were particularly interested in how connection encouraged knowledge sharing and resource pooling, thereby allowing for efficiencies across organizations. Some participants introduced the idea of establishing support structures to facilitate connections between organizations and the wider community. These participants also noted the positive impact of holding regular meetings to establish the feeling of connection with others on the team, linking the role of meetings and keeping busy to the mental health of team members. In addition, it was noted that the ability to connect in a virtual environment during the pandemic had a positive impact on retired members of the Whistler

community. A flexible approach and the connection between managers and their team members was paramount.

Phase 2 participants appreciated the support they received from their managers and co-workers. Connection was associated with shared decision making, supportive and caring relationships, involvement, and frequent and consistent communication. The participants shared that they missed connection through social interaction with customers and co-workers face to face and this had contributed to a sense of unease working in a 'virtual world' rather than a physical one.

Community

Through examination of the data, it was clear that *communicate*, *coordinate* and *connect* were building blocks for the *community*. Shared perspectives were offered on the role of various aspects of the community during the pandemic. References to community showed the multi-faceted nature of the concept, with the term community sometimes referring to the individuals who make up an organization. At other times, community referenced what could be experienced when individuals from different organizations collaborated with each other to learn and share knowledge. In a broader sense, it was used to describe Whistler, with the perceived resiliency and support structures that enabled residents to feel encouraged and comfortable. But, whatever the individual interpretation, it was evident that the community played a significant role in the adjustments needed during the pandemic, and it was anticipated that the community would have a place in adaptation and recovery from the pandemic.

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

Conclusion

Phase 1 identified the HR support and training needs of Whistler employers in multiple sectors amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Phase 2 identified the employees' perspectives on support structures and work experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to a literature review examining major catastrophes, Phase 1 explored insights from owners and managers working in four sectors and Phase 2 explored the employee perspective. The pandemic has affected Whistler employers in five broad areas related to their employer experiences; these areas are *staffing*, *adaptability*, *uncertainty*, *communication*, and *strategies* for working in the COVID-19 pandemic. Phase 1 participants discussed shared training needs relating to conflict resolution and difficult conversations, and they identified sector-specific training needs. Whistler employees in Phase 2 related their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic in six broad areas. These areas are *challenges*, *changes*, *communication*, *decision making*, *future employment* and *support*.

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

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Appendix 1 – Focus Group Questions

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

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

A few reminders before we begin:

Your focus group will be recorded to aid transcription.

If you choose to withdraw prior to the completion of the interview or focus group, it is accepted that any data collected from you can be used in the final paper/presentation, unless expressly prohibited.

While it is understood that every attempt will be made to retain anonymity, it is also understood that, by nature, it is not possible to guarantee anonymity in a focus group setting.

Focus Group Guidelines:

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

Have you any questions before we begin?

Experiences to Date

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

Looking to the Future

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

Hiring and Training Needs

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

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

Appendix 2 – Focus Group Questions

Thank you very much for taking time to be part of this focus group with us. As you are aware, the goal of this project is to understand the human resource support and training needs of Whistler employees in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. As you are all employees in a key sector in Whistler, it is important for us to hear your perspectives.

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

A few reminders before we begin:

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- If you would like to use the chat box to discuss the questions, please do so – I'll read through them as we go over each question. This is particularly useful for short answers.
- If connection is lost, please try to log on again.
- I will post each question into the chat when we switch topic.

All these questions are within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic context.

Have you any questions before we begin?

Experiences to Date

1. Considering your employment, in what ways has COVID-19 affected you? (prompts: layoffs, reduced hours, move job, childcare)
 - a. Has COVID affected you differently over time? If so, how?
2. In what ways did your employer communicate with you? (prompts: emails, texts, meetings, social media)

-
- a. What worked, what didn't work?
 - b. How would you have liked them to have communicated with you?
3. In considering your job, how would you describe your involvement in decision making?
(hours, job description, behaviour of customers, health and safety regulations)

Looking to the Future

4. Are there any decisions about your job you would like to be consulted about? (prompts: tasks, hours, working with customers)
5. How do you think COVID-19 will affect your employment plans for the near future?
(prompts: retraining, apprenticeship, leaving/staying in Whistler, returning to or starting college/university)

Support Needs

6. What kind of supports have you received from your employer since the start of COVID?
(prompt: relationship building, coaching, mentoring, supervision, meeting frequency, communication, information sharing)
7. What supports do you need from your employer that you're not currently receiving?

Training Needs

8. What training have you received to date from your employer since the start of COVID?
(health and safety, communication, job-specific skills).
9. What training would you like your employer to provide?
10. Currently, as you think about your job, do you have any concerns or suggestions?
(prompts: health and safety, mental health, number and unpredictability hours, childcare/home schooling, extended family, housing, layoff)
11. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?