



ECONOMIC IMPACTS, OUTCOMES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR
SOUTHEAST ALBERTA IN A POST COVID ECONOMY

PREPARED FOR
THE MEDICINE HAT & DISTRICT
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

INTRODUCTION

Many organizations have experienced the effects of Covid-19 on their businesses, with varying impacts, dependent on the industry, perceptions and adaptations. These effects have negatively impacted some businesses while positively influencing others.

The economic downturn pre-pandemic, further augmented by COVID-19 and the various levels of restrictions, has negatively affected several businesses. In turn, Governments have implemented funding mechanisms and resources to try to assist businesses through those difficult times. There is no doubt that some organizations have thrived. Still, for others, despite the supports, it has proved to be both financially challenging and mentally exhausting, causing difficulties in ways the business owners never expected.

Through this experience, we need to identify the practices that have most negatively impacted businesses and the overall economy to mitigate these effects in the future. We also need to identify strategies and policies that can be implemented to improve business outcomes and our economic prosperity in our roadmap to recovery.

The results of the study will be used by the Chamber of Commerce and other partner organizations to inform and direct the strategic priorities and business supports moving forward.

The Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce would also like to thank all those that participated in this research. The input provides valuable insights from the business community, informing current and future needs. Any ongoing input into economic issues and opportunities is welcomed to further the region's economic prosperity and vitality.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to identify the major impacts of Covid-19 on our business community and the overall economy in the Medicine Hat region. In addition, the project evaluated existing data collected prior to the pandemic from the Business Retention Expansion and Workforce Development Survey conducted in 2019-2020 to determine if there were any significant changes or priorities that emerged. This analysis evaluated various data points to better understand the methods required to regenerate economic growth and promote business survival in a post-pandemic economy.

SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study will benefit three primary groups:

1. Business owners: The report will provide potential new strategies and skills to promote and scale businesses.
2. Business support organizations: The study will enable organizations to build strategies and policies that focus on the needs identified.
3. Government: The study will inform municipal, provincial and federal governments looking to assess economic impacts and implement strategies to increase economic activity.

The study will assist all target audiences assess the information and implement impact reduction programs and strategies that will further promote economic growth

* This study is limited to the perceptions of the business owner's that participated in the research project and limited to the Medicine Hat region. However, it could be repeated in other areas with some adjustments. The Medicine Hat area is the census division no. 1. This area includes Medicine Hat, Redcliff, Bow Island and Dunmore. The data was collected from September 2020 to December 2020.

SECTION 1: THE ECONOMY PRIOR TO COVID-19

Understanding the economy allows us to compare what was and what is now and what areas have been impacted by the pandemic the most. Evaluating these insights will assist our region in building our economic prosperity and regional vitality for the future.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION

Medicine Hat falls into census division 1 in Alberta, with a land mass of 20,559 square kilometers. The population as of 2019 was 65,441, with 195 new permanent residents. Births in 2018 were 619, and deaths were 640.

LABOUR FORCE

Medicine Hat had 29,550 people employed in 2016, declining 9.67% from 32,715 in 2011. The agriculture, forestry and hunting segment had the largest increase over the last five years, increasing 39%. The working population of Medicine Hat had a participation rate of 64.6% in 2016, declining 4.42% from 67.9% in 2011. The unemployment rate in the area was 10.0% in 2016, increasing 37.0% from 73.0% in 2011. The employment rate in Medicine Hat was 58.40% in 2016. The employment rate in Medicine Hat greatly declined by 73.0% in the last five years. 1,270 people in the Medicine Hat received employment insurance in 2019, greatly increasing 54.9% from 820 in 2018.

INCOME

The median income for all families in 2019 was \$91,960. This was a 2.51% increase from the previous year. The couple family's income median came in at \$101,340, with an increase of 2.80% year over year. Lone-parent income was \$47,480 with a 2.48% increase. Bankruptcy rates increased by 10.8%, totalling 113.

EDUCATION

The education sector is split into three main categories. Those that have no certificate, diploma, or degree; those that have a postsecondary certificate; diploma or degree and those that have apprenticeships or trades certificates or diplomas:

- 22% of the population have no certificate, diploma, or degree
- 31% have a secondary (high) school diploma or equivalency certificate
- 47% have a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree
- 3% have a trades certificate or diploma other than a certificate of apprenticeship or certificate of qualification
- 8% have a certificate of apprenticeship or certificate of qualification.

The major areas of study for degrees and certificates were architecture, engineering, and related technologies at 12.5%; Business Management and public administration was 9.4%, with health and related fields at 8.9%.

HOUSING AND REAL ESTATE

In 2019 the Medicine Hat region had \$461.5M land title transfers with 1,365 total transfers, a decrease of 12.1% in the annual change in the number of land transfers. In 2019 the total dwelling units were 29,955, with an annual increase of 0.21%.

CONSTRUCTION

In 2019, the construction sector of the city faced a general decrease in services across the board, with 790 building permits issued. The major projects budget was 184.0M, a 17.3% decrease in the annual change. The city building permits were valued at \$96.6M, a reduction of 31.6% from last year.

FINANCE AND BUSINESS ACTIVITY

In 2019, the municipal mill rate was calculated to be 15.1, a decrease of 1.27%. Property assessments came in at 8.9 billion dollars. In 2019, 95.9% of businesses were small businesses. The percentage of small businesses in Medicine Hat increased 0.06% year-over-year and decreased 0.53% in the last five years. There were 2,320 businesses in the area in 2019.

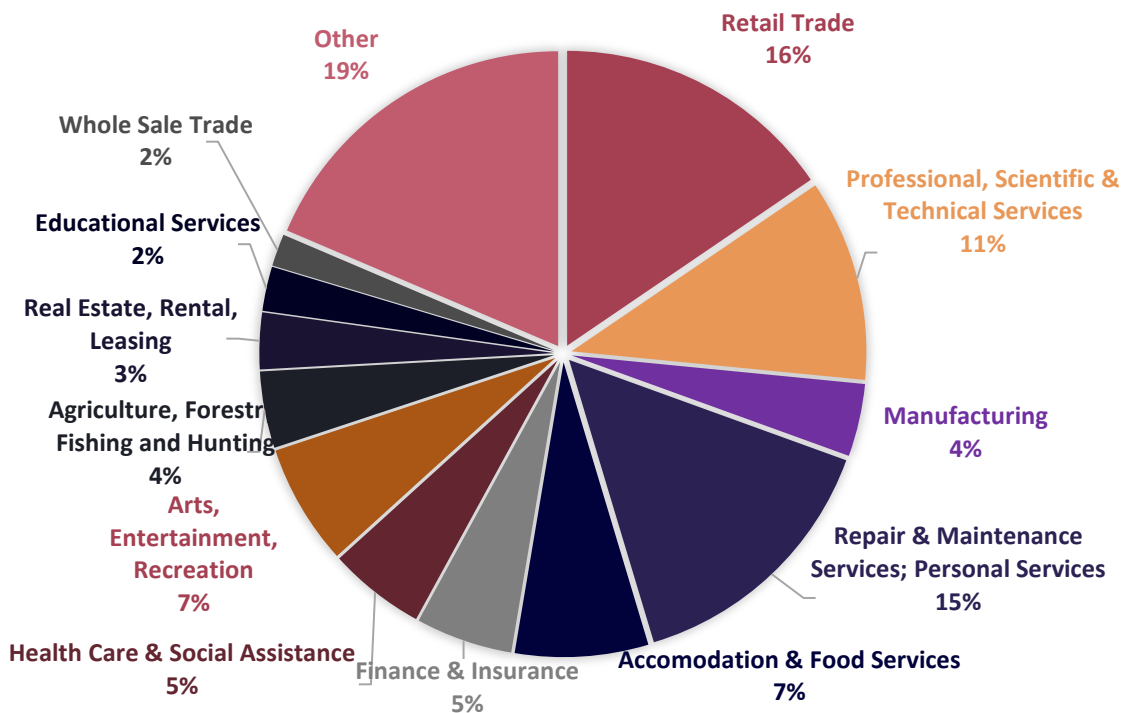
SECTION 2: THE RESEARCH

The Medicine Hat Chamber began this survey in September 2020 and continued to collect data until December 18th, 2020. Of these businesses that participated in the survey, 13.94% were retail services, 13.59% were services such as personal services and repair and maintenance, and 9.96% were construction companies. Others that participated include professional and scientific services, accommodation, fast-food services, finance and insurance, healthcare and social assistance, arts, entertainment and recreation and various others.

The first priority for the business research survey conducted by the Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce was to evaluate the impacts of the pandemic. Respondents were asked about financial impacts, ongoing impacts, funding and business supports, closures, implications to the workforce and technology needs.

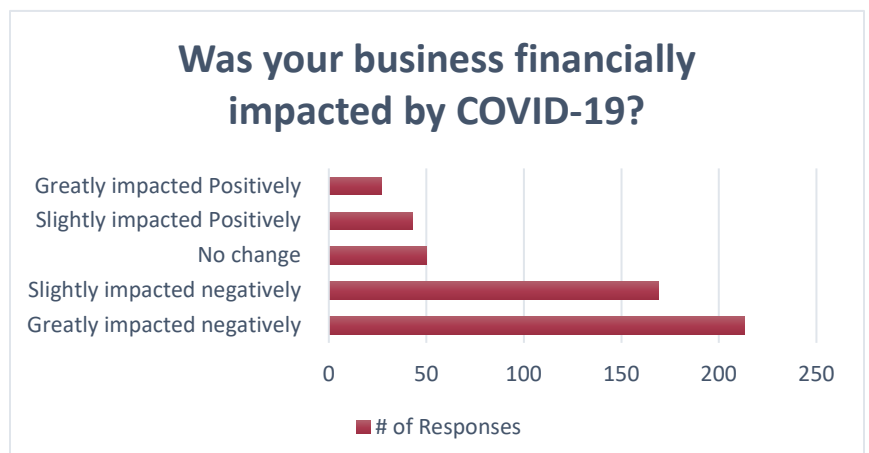
The graph below demonstrates the category that best describes the product or service of organizations participating in the survey (in percentages). The 'Other' category includes administrative support, waste management and remedies, transportation and warehousing, oil and gas extraction and more.

ORGANIZATION TYPE BY PERCENTAGE



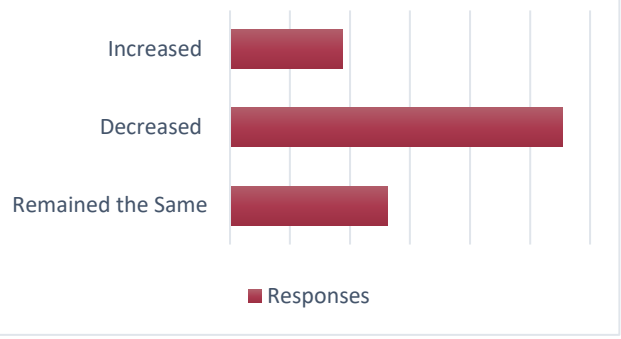
BUSINESS IMPACT

The graph demonstrates the overall impact felt by these businesses.



Of the 502 businesses that participated in the survey, 18.73% of the participants stated that their revenue had increased during the March-July (shutdown period), and 55.18% said their revenue had decreased. Additionally, 26.10% remained the same during this time period.

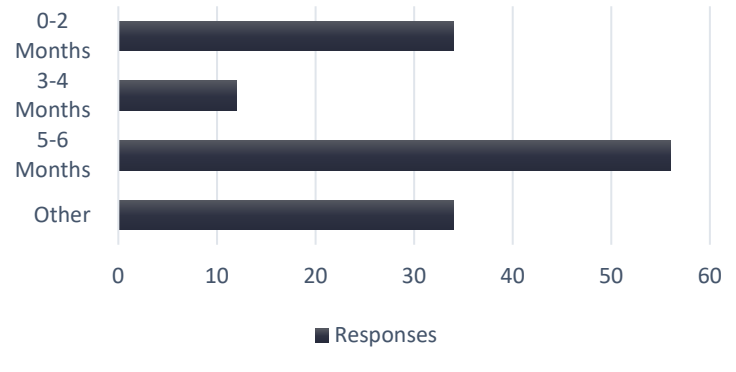
Has your business revenue changed since March-July (shutdown period)?



We also asked how long businesses were shut down, with 38.65% shut down temporarily from March to September 2020. Of these, 46.88 were closed for less than two months, 29.17%

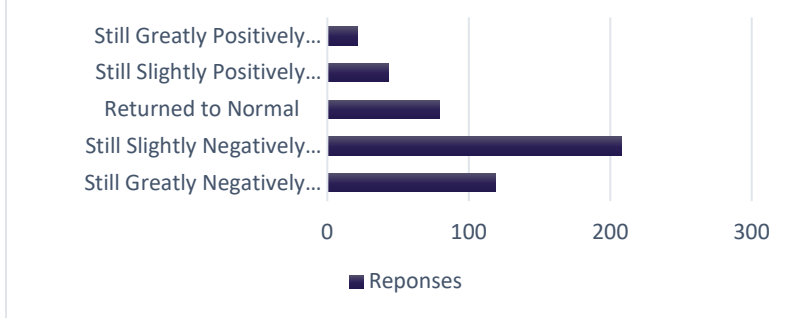
for 3-4 months, 6.25 for 5-6 months, with others having varied reasons, such as permanent closures, closures longer than six months, some modifying operations and others being operational, but closed to the public or working remotely.

If yes, for how long?



Following this question, we asked if the business revenue had returned to pre-covid levels. There were 36.25% of participants who responded yes, and 63.75% said no. The respondents were then asked 'if no, what would assist their businesses to pre-covid levels' Some of the responses included in-person gatherings, open the economy, more events and tradeshow, an end to lockdowns and restrictions, reinstating travel, more people in a room, marketing, more customer access, people spending more money, more cash flow, increased projects, and overall sentiments that an overall increase in revenue was needed.

If your business was impacted, is it still?



The pandemic required 41.83% of businesses to lay off employees during the pandemic; of this, 41.83%, 46.75% were re-hired, and 53.25% were not. The reasons for not hiring all employees back included not having enough work for them, employees finding employment elsewhere, business closures, and limited business operations, still not resuming full activity.

The next portion of the survey discussed the supply chains of businesses and their product lines. Of the total number of respondents, 56.57% of companies had their supply chains disrupted, and 21.51% stated that they were required to outsource materials from somewhere else. These outsourced materials came from local and regional businesses (26.61%), sources within Alberta (18.35%) or within Canada (40.37%), with less than 15% outsourced outside of Canada (14.66%).

We asked the respondents if they had diversified their goods or services to fit the new needs of customers; 42.43% responded yes, and 56.77% answered no. There were 24.70% of businesses that decreased their product offering or services to customers, and 20.52% of companies worked to create collaborations with other complementary companies or organizations to reach new customers or share clientele.

Collaborations included recommending other local businesses to finish projects such as carpentry and tiling, partnering on social media giveaways, referring patients and clients to other businesses of the same service when scheduling conflicts occur, co-marketing programs, working together on sales programs, and networking with other businesses.

BUSINESS FINANCING

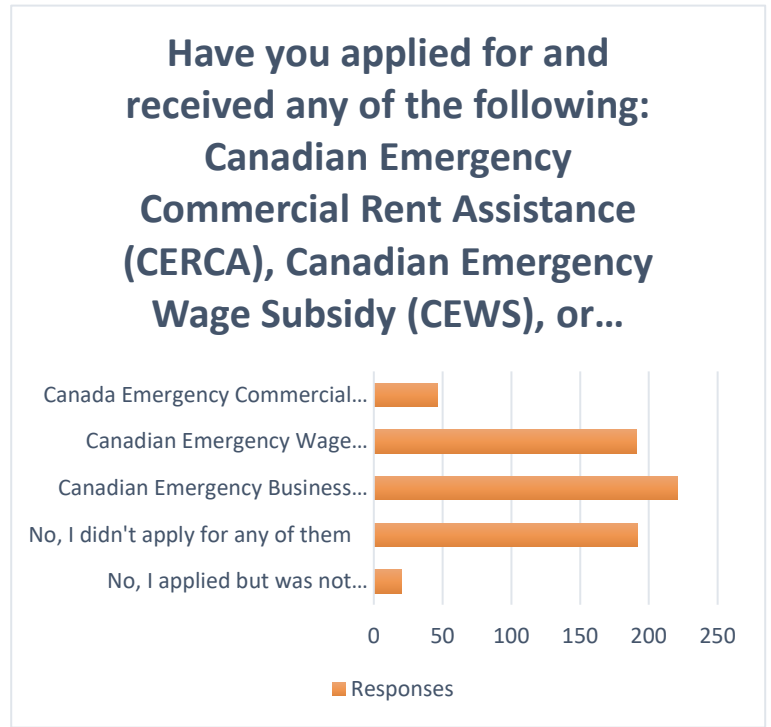
The next portion of the survey asked businesses what they believed would help expand their business' reach? Responses included increased subsidies, upgraded websites, more social media and social media campaigns, increased buy local campaigns, better international trade agreements with other countries, more advertising, more networking, social media training at a reasonable price, expanded delivery systems, project grants, and brand recognition. The main concern of business owners was increased online presence, with more access to knowledge on using social media and more advertising.

The next section focused on the sustainability of businesses and what they had done to access funding, in addition to financing options available and those that business owners have accessed.

There were 70.52% of respondents operating at a sustainable level of economic activity. However, 29.48% responded that they were not. If they were not operating at the desired economic level, we asked how long they would need subsidies to continue with varied responses of 2, 3, 6, and 12 months. There were 116 businesses in the area that stated that they would need continued financial support. About half said that they would need continued assistance for the next year, 25% required support for up to six months, 15% stated two to three months, and the remaining number stated that they would need assistance for the length of the pandemic and however long lock downs lasted.

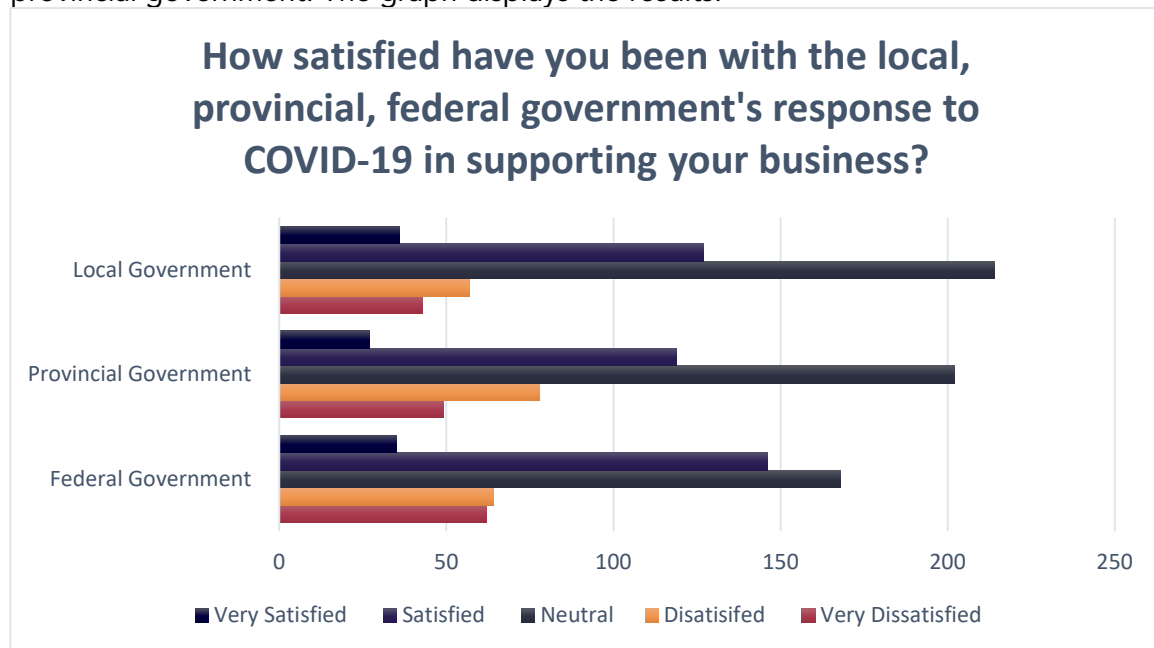
Business funding supports were also assessed, including the Canadian Emergency Rent Assistance (CECRA), the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and the Canadian Emergency Business Account (CEBA). There were 9.62% of participants who applied and/or received the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance, 39.96% have applied for and/or received the Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy and 46.23% and or received the Canadian Emergency Business Account. Surprisingly, 40.17% of businesses did not apply for any of them, and 4.18% of companies were not approved. There were 21.43% of businesses who accessed other financing and or capital to assist them. These options included

business lines of credit, personal investments, grants, savings, and bank loans. There were 8.73% who stated that it was very difficult to access financing, 15.08% said it was difficult, 41.27% stated that it was neutral, 25.40% said it was easy, and 9.52% said it was very easy to access financing.



BUSINESS SUPPORT

The survey went on to discuss the government's actions at all three levels and the overall satisfaction of businesses in response to those actions. We received varying reactions to the question 'How satisfied have you been with the local, provincial and federal government's response to Covid-19 in supporting your business'. The government that was voted the most beneficial was the federal government, followed by the local government and, lastly, the provincial government. The graph displays the results.



The survey addressed what each level of government could do to help the survival of businesses now and after the pandemic. Some of the responses for the local government included opening businesses while flattening the curve and resisting the temptation to lock down the city, more

financial support and grants, breaks on income taxes and utilities, more growth and development in the city and help with access to new projects. The business owners also suggested that the city develop a better plan for future restrictions and implement strategies to mitigate impacts of future lockdowns.

For the provincial government, people suggested making changes to the qualifications of the grants, more open restrictions when considering small businesses compared to mass merchants, stopping economic lockdowns, taking actions in a timelier manner, providing greater benefit to the small business owners in the province. Other suggestions included economic diversification, clearer guidelines, and keeping markets such as tradeshow and businesses open.

Business owners requested that the federal government provide more clarity on the situation, more financial supports, stimulus for job creation, and overall tax reductions.

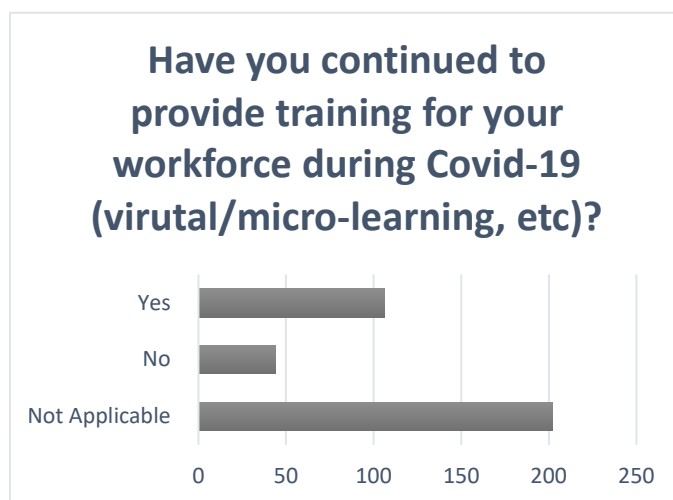
The survey also evaluated potential gaps in services for businesses and was left as an open-ended response. The main themes that emerged included:

- Options for businesses and non-profits to form collaborations and industry groups
- Local first contractor preference
- Increased marketing and advertising options increased promotion of local businesses
- Learning about what drives our business community and what the unique factors are

Understanding business needs and activities will help establish business supports, supply chain linkages, and diversification and growth.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce development was another section of analysis with evaluation of employee levels and retention as well as training and development of employees. The graph below displays the workforce training and development in the region based on the survey.



For those businesses that have not continued training during covid, 43.94% said they would resume training in the next 12 months, and 56.06% said they were not planning on resuming training. Of this training, 10.90% said that training had increased in cost during the last year, 9.77% said training costs had decreased. Costs had remained the same for 79.32%.

Pre-Covid, we know that many employers struggled with employee retention, with 77.92% stating they did not expect this to

continue in the future, and only 22.08% felt this would be an ongoing problem. Retention strategies for employers included employees' benefits, wage assistance, investment in training, workplace culture and motivation. There were 12.12% of businesses that had employees resign due to fears around covid, 4.49% had employees retire, and 10.91% of businesses had employees take a leave of absence. Of the businesses surveyed, 11.46% increased their benefits packages since the beginning of the pandemic, and only 1.86% of employers decreased their benefits. A majority (64.71%) did not adjust their benefits package for the pandemic.

Between March 2020 and October 2020, 39.58% of businesses hired new employees while 60.42% have not. Business owners were asked if there are any assistances or services that would help with their hiring processes.

Businesses suggested finding a way to attract more talent to the Medicine Hat area, covering training costs, and creating a job board broken down into various sectors to organize jobs and candidates for those positions. Employers stated that finding the right talent was difficult, and employees stated that finding work they were qualified for was difficult as well. There were 10.94% of employers planning to increase their employee numbers in the next six months, with 17.33% planning to decrease their employee count. A majority of employers were planning on keeping their labour force the same (71.73%). There are 25.17% of businesses that have had employees work remotely, with 14.24% still working remotely. Surprisingly, 51.99% said that there was no option for their employees to work remotely.

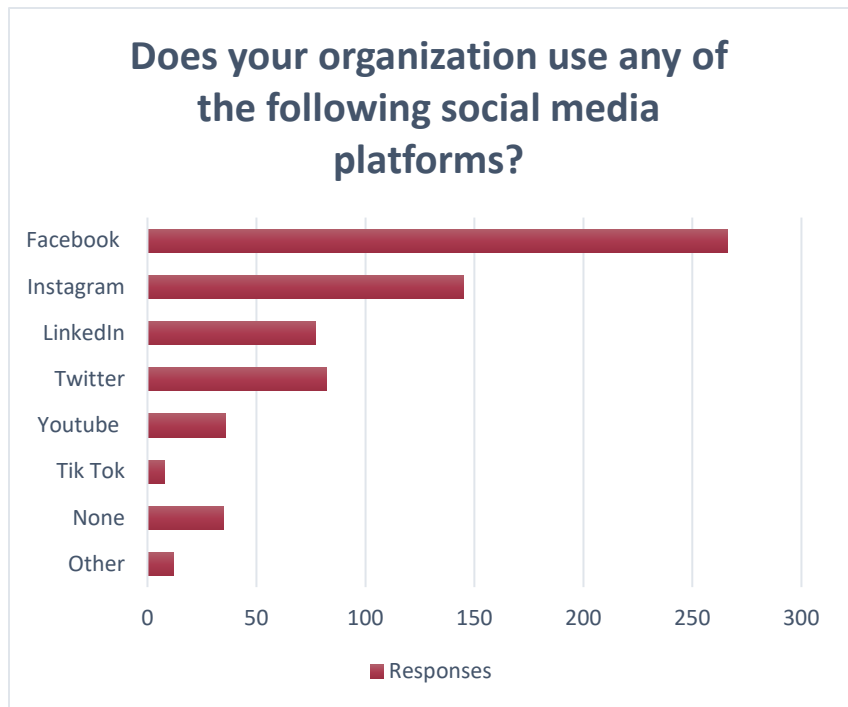
TECHNOLOGY

Due to the pandemic, many businesses increased their operational costs due to new required technology improvements for remote work and increased cleaning costs. Operating costs have increased for 30.63% of businesses, decreased for 8.75% and remained the same for 60.62%. Of the increases, 54.29% were related to new required technology such as computers, internet, and proper telecommunications. It was felt that working remotely decreased productivity among various businesses because of poor internet connections and lack of adequate project coordination. There were 16.48% of employees who could not work efficiently because they did not have access to high internet speeds. The other connectivity issues that employees face include scarce access, slow speeds, low data caps, high costs and weather impacts.

Prior to the pandemic, 40.35% of businesses in the area had plans for business expansions or modernization of the organization's technologies. Some of these businesses have gone forward with these plans, while others stopped due to the pandemic. Multiple businesses have not progressed because they are not able to now due to lack of income, restrictions, and differing needs of customers. There are technological advancements that would enhance business for various employers in the area. Some of the suggestions include inventory systems, online shopping and web presence for local businesses, a larger e-commerce platform, software and hardware, including server networks, technology training, financial support for technology investments.

Of the businesses that participated in the survey, 84.18% have an online platform, while 15.82% do not. Of the 15.82% that do not have a website, the reasoning is related to costs, knowhow, no desire, and other reasons. Other reasons included no need for it, saving money and using existing platforms instead of creating their own. There were 24.66% of business owners selling their goods and services online. The 35.81% that do not sell online stated that their reasons are related to cost, knowhow and no desire.

Businesses in the Medicine Hat and area use various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. Other less common platforms included google reviews, email, salesforce, Esty and Kijiji. Other businesses that stated that they did not use social media to promote their businesses were due to lack of time, no desire, no direct customer sales, or lack of knowledge on how to use it.



FUTURE OF EVENTS

There are 25.09% of businesses that have used virtual events to connect with their customers. Most businesses state that they feel very comfortable or comfortable attending online events. Businesses surveyed felt comfortable overall attending online events; however, they did not want to pay fees for attending.

For sponsorship and to invest in events, businesses stated they would need a guarantee of high attendance.

The option of a Business-to-Business expo was also evaluated as this type of event currently does not exist in the region. Of those surveyed, 36.90% stated they would be interested in a business-to-business expo. There were several suggestions for a business-to-business forum, with the highest level of interest in innovation and technology (51.69%), followed by an economic forum (38.2%) and human resources management (16.85%). There were several other suggestions, primarily focused on networking, marketing, and industry-specific forums.

Although many businesses are comfortable attending online events, 66.99% would prefer to attend a business-to-business event in person. There is 30.10% that prefer hybrid events, and 31.07% would prefer online events at this time. Most participants would prefer one-day events versus multiday events.

The current economic and business standing of Medicine Hat and District is based on the survey participants. This data does not include all businesses in the area.

SECTION 3: RESEARCH CONNECTIONS

The Chamber's business research is connected to the Business Retention Expansion and Workforce Development Report (BREWD) as well as the Regional Vitality Action Plan. The BREWD research was a collaborative project implemented in the City of Medicine Hat and regional area by Invest Southeast Alberta to identify the economic gaps before Covid. The regional vitality plan was completed by the Medicine Hat College, the City of Medicine Hat, and the Medicine Hat and District Chamber of Commerce to encourage regional vitality through collaborative action and mutual advocacy within Southeastern Alberta¹. The business research conducted by the Chamber was completed to assess the gaps caused by covid and what strategies could be implemented to counter the impacts. Although these research projects were completed at different times, all three projects set out to identify gaps in our economy and community and discussed goals, strategies and policies needed to move forward. Identifying these gaps and providing strategy recommendations allow businesses, governments and economic planners to engage in economic initiatives that remove these gaps.

BUSINESS RETENTION EXPANSION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT REPORT (BREWD)

The purpose of the BREWD data is to foster a more competitive business environment that provides businesses and industries with the economic support system they need to grow and succeed.² The BREWD data recommended eight key strategic themes. The strategic themes included were:

1. Encourage business development and local shopping by promoting the region and its business
2. Help facilitate business expansion and diversification by improving access to capital, land & buildings and incentives
3. Help facilitate expected regional growth by improving regulatory conditions, infrastructure and downtown development and maintenance
4. Plan for the impacts of ongoing and upcoming technological innovation on regional businesses
5. Workforce Development: Inform to improve labour force availability and qualifications: Develop and communicate workforce information regarding education, training, careers, workplace issues, human resources, and labour market data within the region.
6. Workforce Development: Attract to improve labour force availability and qualifications: Identify strategies and tactics to attract new labour, including focusing on immigration, mobility and attracting both skilled and unskilled workers from outside the region.
7. Workforce Development: Retain to improve labour force availability and qualifications: Focus on education, training and developing the skills and knowledge of all current and potential workers within the region
8. Workforce Development: Develop to improve labour force availability and qualifications: Encourage community and work attractiveness by developing tactics to engage employees, helping retain skilled and experienced workers already in the region's workforce.

These strategic themes are broken down into several projects and possible partners/leads to accomplish these strategic themes. This data used essential information to map out a path for the community. This report builds strategies that can be transformed into a plan of action that will remove those gaps and build on the economy's strengths. The BREWD survey and employer interviews were conducted in September and October of 2019.

¹ Regional Vitality Action Plan

² BREWD

The "projects" outlined in the Strategic Themes throughout the report were developed and decided upon in late 2019 and early 2020. While the data was collected before the pandemic, the information is still reliable and valid.

The full BREWD report is located on the Invest [Southeast Alberta website](#).

REGIONAL VITALITY ACTION PLAN

The Regional Vitality Report included three main goals, broken out into subsequent strategies:

Goal 1: Our region is an attractive place to live, work and play.

Strategy 1: We will offer access to resources people need to live the life they want

Strategy 2: we will minimize duplication through collaboration

Strategy 3: We will build a community network.

Goal 2: Our region is resilient.

Strategy 1: We will boost advances in agriculture, technology and resource industries

Strategy 2: We will pursue economic diversity

Strategy 3: We will source reliable internet.

Goal 3 Our future mindset drives our momentum

Strategy 1: We will advocate collectively for regional vitality

Strategy 2: We will tap into our collective skills and experience

Strategy 3: we will challenge conventional thinking

The full Regional Vitality Report can be located through the [Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce website](#) or directly through the Medicine Hat College: <https://www.mhc.ab.ca/AboutMHC/CollegeProfile/PoliciesandPublications/Publications>

The goals, strategies and policies recommended throughout the research projects are similar, with the reports tackling various economic initiatives, strategies, policies and recommendations. All of the goals are focused on long-term benefits with the region's economic interests in mind. This existing research provided a background to the significant gaps in the city and allowed for creative and ways to generate new strategies and solutions.

This report aimed to take the most evident gaps in the economy due to Covid and make recommendations on how to decrease those gaps.

These research projects all contribute to the voices advocating for opportunities. These opportunities involve connections, innovation and collaboration to build a better future for the region.

SECTION 4: ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

STRATEGIES AND POLICIES FOR ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

The next step towards a progressive economy is to engage in new policies and strategies to restore economic growth. We also need to understand that we have been in a period of economic downturn or a recessionary period, shifting both the needs and the expectations of producers and consumers. Both parties will need to adjust their understanding and implementation of various business strategies to achieve economic growth and recovery.

Understanding the gap of where we want to be economically and where we currently stand is crucial for developing the appropriate policies and strategies for implementation. Understanding the gap will allow business owners and policy makers to work together to fill those gaps. New policies and processes need to be implemented to address any gaps, regenerate economic growth and prevent a further economic spiral.

The strategies and policies addressed through this report include small business support, financial aid, price stability and cost controls, privatization, diversification, infrastructure and municipal development, workforce development, consumer trends, marketing and social media, innovation and technology, as well as mitigation and prevention strategies for future crisis response situations. It will also address more specific initiatives and opportunities.

SMALL BUSINESSES

Small businesses are crucial to our economy. 95.9% of businesses in the Medicine Hat area are classified as small businesses as of 2019³. These businesses employ a large number of individuals and contribute highly to the overall GDP. It is essential for the government locally, provincially, and federally to ensure that small businesses survive this pandemic and overcome the restrictions, lockdowns, and cutbacks in economic activity. The differing levels of government policies and decisions have provided varying degrees of financial aid and support to business owners; however, many businesses continue to struggle.

For economic prosperity in the future, governments will need to evaluate the impacts of their decisions on small businesses and provide continued support and consistency in policies, plans and information.

ACCESS TO CAPITAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Securing liquidity is essential for the survival of small businesses. One of the key challenges this past year for small business owners has been accessing cash. Numerous small businesses do not survive the five-year mark due to overhead costs such as rent, utilities and payroll. These expenses leave very little cash flow for the owners, especially in the early years. Due to the pandemic this past year, small businesses have had their operations cut drastically, resulting in even less liquid cash for the owners. This, in turn, has decreased overall business, employment levels and economic revenue for these businesses. The increased closures and restrictions have significantly reduced revenue levels. In the data collected, multiple business owners stated that they had accessed government funding in the last year or delved into personal savings such as retirement funds, savings accounts, and or opened lines of credit and/or accessed bank loans. Of the business owners who did access financial aid, many of them stated that they would need further financial support post-pandemic to survive.

For economic prosperity in the future, governments and financial institutions will need to evaluate fiscal policies related to access to capital and creating greater ease and efficiency in accessing financial supports.

³ Statistics Canada

COST CERTAINTY AND PRICE STABILITY

The objective of cost certainty and price stability can be interpreted as meaning that we are trying to moderate economic fluctuations. Cost certainty allows businesses to budget more effectively and mitigates potential risks of a volatile or uncertain market. Price stability is when the general level of prices in the economy avoids significant fluctuations, meaning they do not rise and fall drastically in indexes of price such as consumer price index (CPI). Price stability supports higher living standards by reducing uncertainty about general price developments, thereby improving the transparency of the price mechanism. It makes it easier for consumers and companies to recognize price changes that are not common to all goods. Price stability promotes efficiency and long-term growth by providing a monetary and financial environment in which economic decisions can be made. Markets can operate without concerns about unpredictable fluctuations in the purchasing power of money.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses need cost certainty and price stability, including business costs such as taxation and utilities, to mitigate risk and manage unpredictable fluctuations, as well as to provide price stability to their consumers

PRIVATIZATION

Privatization directly shifts the focus from political goals to economic goals, which leads to development in the market economy (Poole, 1996). Privatization increases efficiency and helps governments save money, creating a competitive economic environment in which firms strive to increase efficiency and maximize profit. Privatization saves taxpayer's money, increases flexibility, improves service quality, increases efficiency and innovation, allows policy makers to steer rather than row, streamlining and downsizing the government and improving overall maintenance.

For economic prosperity in the future, governments will need to look at viable options for privatization and streamlining the size of government.

BUSINESS EXPANSION AND DIVERSIFICATION

Business expansion and diversification are important to economic development because reaching new markets and developing new products and expanding facilities to create and deliver new products and or services positively affect the economy. Growth and diversification can be achieved through practices such as expanding locations, expanding a product or service line, entering into a new market or industry or creating new products or services which your business does not currently offer.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses will need to look at avenues to scale and expand their business operations and evaluate opportunities to expand and diversify their product or service offerings. Governments will also need to assess their assets and attract diverse industries that complement existing land, services, supports and supply chains.

INFRASTRUCTURE

A key economic policy to promote growth is improving infrastructure in strategic growth areas. Construction is an important sector that contributes significantly to economic growth, stimulating job growth and investing in the local economy. Infrastructure includes the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (e.g., buildings, roads, power supplies), both in new investments and infrastructure maintenance and improvements. In the short run, government investments in infrastructure projects promote economic growth through job growth and increased community investment. In the long run, infrastructure investments can boost economic growth by increasing the potential capacity of supply in the economy.

For economic prosperity in the future, governments must plan not only for present infrastructure needs but also for future infrastructure and possible projects that could effectively provide further economic stimulus and long-term benefit during an economic downturn.

MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT

Municipal development influences the economy with both short-term and long-term benefits and engines for growth. Municipalities contribute to economic growth through resources (land and labour), industrialization and commercialization, development of transport and communication, and investment in educational and recreational facilities. Municipal development would lead to further urbanization and fuel growth, innovation, and enterprise by investing in economic development through projects that further stimulate investment in commercial activities, leading to increased regional vitality and consumer engagement.

For economic prosperity in the future, governments will need to look at their overall municipal development plans and how they can influence growth in the short and long term, not only in infrastructure investments but also in commercialization, technology and innovation development.

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

Downtown development is an economic growth driver because it creates a concentration of commercial activity in one targeted investment area. It serves as an incubator for new, small, and locally owned businesses. Downtown is usually home to a community's arts and cultural offerings, acting as an economic driver and a catalyst for business and cultural development. Downtown development is beneficial as it often builds on existing assets. Pre-existing city assets can be economic growth generators, not only through existing infrastructure but also from existing natural and built landscapes, outdoor recreation opportunities, historical significance, arts and culture and emergency trends and interests. Downtowns help a community define their identity through distinctive, often historic architecture, shops, restaurants and well-established community gathering places.

For economic prosperity in the future, governments will need to look at targeted supports for downtown development and removing any potential barriers for investment in a downtown core.

CONSUMER TRENDS

Interpreting your customers' needs is an important aspect of regenerating economic growth and ensuring that your business survives in a post-Covid economy. The pandemic has significantly impacted everyone's lives. Both producers and consumers have changed their living and spending habits. With the pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions, and future uncertainty, consumers' spending changed and influenced the economic downturn. Further, the pandemic caused issues for producers in uncertainty and supply chain issues. During the lockdowns, most consumers were discouraged from their typical purchasing habits and focused on necessities, causing a decrease in economic stimulus. Lockdowns caused supply chain issues, reducing the demand for some services while generating a significant increase in other products and services. The lockdowns also created a decrease in labour for multiple businesses, either due to financial restraints or changes in operations and increased restrictions in the way the workforce was allowed to work, which decreased employment and consumer spending.

During times of crisis, producers/suppliers need to eliminate any risks that can make customers take their businesses elsewhere. Product/service diversification is one strategy that allows companies to reach new and existing consumers through a redesign based on customer needs. Changes to price, convenience, design, reliability, performance, efficiency and customer service delivery may meet existing and new customers' needs. Business owners also need to understand how their customer base has been impacted by the pandemic, either through direct customer feedback or competitor analysis. Businesses can expand their products and services, evaluate their unique value proposition, understand their brand offering and expand their business reach through marketing. Implementation of new ideas, products and services will allow for economic growth for both the short-term life of the business and the long term.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses need to better understand their customers' habits and create business strategies and planning for the future.

MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

During Covid-19, the world saw the need to quickly adapt to and embrace technology. The world has become increasingly more connected through technology and social media channels. Social networks have strengthened the relationship between public sector entities and the constituents that they serve, and businesses have found ways to connect with their clients and customers in new ways. With the varying restrictions enforced by the government, individuals and businesses were no longer able to communicate as they had before the pandemic. Social media marketing has gained momentum as more and more businesses and individuals embrace social media as part of their lives and even as careers. In the past year, many businesses increased their marketing budgets to reach out to more potential buyers in the current economy. When the customer cannot come to the product, companies sought ways to bring the product to the customer. This change in behaviour connected social media marketing, technology, consumer demand and diversification of a customer base. Social media and expanding the online presence of businesses allowed for an extension of business services beyond a brick-and-mortar building. It allowed companies to expand their customer base across borders and time zones. It allowed consumers to get the product and some services while still abiding by the restrictions. It created engagement in a world where physical distancing prevented interactions and supported more local purchases as consumers sought out products online. Social media marketing can expand the market share that a business holds and can take a business from having a regional reach to a global reach.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses need to increase their online digital presence through not only a web presence but also through google listings, e-commerce sites and social media accounts to expand their customer reach and revenue potential.

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Advancements in technology and innovation can positively influence economic growth. Technology is a broad-based term including, but not limited to, technology training, technological strategies, implementation, adaptation and improvements to existing technical or technological products or services.

Innovation can lead to higher productivity, meaning that the same inputs generate greater output. Finding more effective and innovative products or processes is beneficial. It can be achieved by creating the right environments for innovation to occur, whether through workforce development, encouraging innovative adaptation or process improvements, or driving innovation through a culture of constant creativity and process improvement⁴.

While technology and innovation positively impact an economy, there are still multiple barriers to fully embracing its adaptation, including time, cost and knowledge. Some business owners have stated that they do not understand technology and social media or do not have time to invest in understanding new technological or innovative options nor have the time to invest in creating or understanding new technology or new innovative solutions. For many, they do not have the money to continually invest in new opportunities, whether simple point of sale solutions, customer management databases or investing in hardware and software to streamline operations. Ensuring that business owners had access to the proper resources they needed to embrace technology in their company would be beneficial on multiple levels. Technological adaptation and implementation of innovative processes allow for more efficient operations and better delivery of goods and services, driving prosperity.⁵

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses need the knowledge and resources to understand and implement technology and innovation strategies. Governments, business organizations and educational institutions must work together to identify the gaps in technology and innovation and increase awareness and accessibility to technology solutions and increase the education and awareness of innovative solutions.

⁴ The Four Drivers of Innovation

⁵ Knowledge, Technology and Complexity in Economic Growth

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Labour market regulations include labour market institutions as well as part of labour market policies. The labour market refers to the supply of and demand for labour. The workforce development can be broken down into four key areas, developing, informing, attracting, and retaining labour.

Developing the Labour Force

Development of the workforce can occur through training for employers and employees, education, career coaching and workshops. This stage can be broken down into two more categories: those currently searching for jobs that do not have the required skills and those about to enter the workforce. The first group can improve their skills and education through training programs, workshops and possibly

This past year, many businesses have had to lay off employees due to the government's restrictions. With these layoffs, unemployment has increased, and the number of individuals searching for work has increased dramatically. As a result, the labour market is more competitive, giving those with advanced skills and education a greater chance of gaining and retaining a job. Those that lack education or have a very specified set of skills have experienced a more difficult time finding a position. Due to the number of people searching for employment and the lack of matching talent, the first step is to develop the workforce. Employers can help ensure that these requirements are met through cross-training, job shadowing, mentorship, work-integrated learning and apprenticeships.

The second part of developing the labour force would be to focus on those entering the labour force. Individuals require career coaching and knowledge of careers in demand and require the appropriate soft skills training needed for the workforce so that skills and training are there to guide labour, skills development, and career matching.

Education and training are investments in human capital, similar to investing in better equipment. Productivity rises as the number of educated workers increase because skilled workers can perform tasks more efficiently and have a broader range of experiences and education to inform their workforce practices. Educating and training the workforce will help the economy become more competitive and will provide advantages as the region grows.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses will need to look at how they train their existing and future workforce. Governments, educational institutions, and companies will need to collaborate to identify workforce training needs, identify training facilities, new training opportunities, and various education and training delivery methods. Governments will need to look at ways to incentivize both employers and the workforce, removing potential barriers for skill development and continuing education through tax breaks and training subsidies such as the Canada-Alberta Job Grant.

Informing the Labour Force

Informing the workforce goes hand in hand with development. Employers need to make existing and potential future employees aware of their organization's opportunities through initiatives such as open houses, job fairs, and information sessions. Informing the workforce can also be done through job shadowing, work-integrated learning opportunities, career profiling and streamlining processes through employment connector platforms that match employers with individual skills and talents they require. In the survey we conducted, many of the business owners in Medicine Hat said it was hard to find the right employees on sites such as indeed where it was expensive to post ads and skills rarely matched the job description.

For economic prosperity in the future, business organizations and educational institutions will need to collaborate on developing a platform or tools that provide better job matching capabilities, providing the option for employers to search employees by resume and skills set, while also providing employees to search for and apply for relevant job opportunities.

Attracting Talent

Attracting talent is an integral part of hiring. The talent that your business attracts affects the productivity and efficiency levels of operation. Attracting talent can be difficult due to the current economic situation and the recent pandemic. However, attracting and retaining talent can be accomplished by profiling community assets, offering competitive pay structures, unique benefits, diversity in your workforce, and utilizing various recruitment methods, while also promoting flexible and remote employment opportunities and opportunities for continuous learning and professional development. Attracting talent extends beyond that which is available in the region. Through proper use of technology, talent can be accessed from anywhere at any time, giving businesses ample opportunity to access the resources that they need.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses will need to use various methods and incentives for recruitment and highlight the regional benefits, costs of living, wage comparisons, lifestyle options, and affordable professional development opportunities in our region.

Retention of the Workforce

Retention is the last part of improving the labour market. Once talent has been developed and potential employers have been informed of the possibilities for work opportunities, retention of this talent is necessary for employers. Employee turnover in businesses can be high, and finding new talent is difficult and expensive. High employee turnover can be caused by issues in the organization, low employee morale, absence of a clear career path, lack of recognition and possibly poor management. Employee retention can be increased by meeting the needs of employees. This can include flextime, compressed work weeks, spousal employment, daycare, and making sure that individuals who are new to the area have the resources they need to succeed and make them feel at home in the community.

For economic prosperity in the future, businesses need training on retention methods, including access to mental health and wellness supports, opportunities for team and culture building, professional development for employers and an understanding of turnover costs.

PREVENTION PROTOCOLS, PLANS AND PRACTICES

Over the past year, we have experienced how a pandemic, directly and indirectly, impacts all areas of our lives. Ensuring that all levels of government are prepared and have plans in place for the next potential pandemic would be beneficial for the economy because it would allow individuals and businesses to adapt and recover more quickly. Pandemic plans should document how an organization will provide essential services when there is a widespread outbreak of an infectious disease.

Preventative measures and quick actions at the beginning of a pandemic shorten the long-term effects and can drastically reduce the impacts of the disease on individuals and the economy. In addition, clear communication strategies are needed for consistency and clarity. Governments at every level need to ensure they have updated pandemic and emergency response plans and templates for the future, including communication strategies, clearly defined protocols, processes, and guidelines to better equip them to address future crises and pandemics effectively. There must be template plans and guidelines for businesses that provide consistency and clarity. There must be clear methods of effectively engaging and informing all businesses and residents, so they can clearly understand the situations at hand and have a means to provide feedback. We must also assist companies in developing their own pandemic and emergency preparedness plans, in addition to business continuity plans, so that they are better equipped to adapt and respond to situations more quickly and efficiently, mitigating the adverse short- and long-term effects that can occur.

Clear, transparent and timely communication will continue to be critical as we recover. Creating well-defined plans and communication strategies to build from in the future should minimize uncertainty and mitigate some of the negative impacts on the economy that may arise in the future.

SECTION 5: ECONOMIC INITIATIVES

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT

Immigration and a growing population are key factors to ensure the economic growth of the city. The 2016 Census reported that nearly 1 in 4 people in the Medicine Hat workforce were over the age of 55, with 9,500 workers likely to retire in the next decade.⁶ The overall population of the city is aging. In 2017, there were 82 young people for every 100 people over the age of 55. The number of people in Medicine Hat reported on Canada Pension rose 27% between 2008 and 2016⁷. Given that the aging population is growing, that number will increase significantly in years to come. The aging population could lead to more worker shortages in many strategically important industries in the near future.

Attracting talent and ensuring that there is a talent pipeline is essential to continued economic growth and future city development. The Medicine Hat workforce is aging, and the pipeline of younger workers is shrinking. There are several ways the community can expand the number of available workers in the years ahead, including attracting business investment, drawing on the student population, and promoting the city.

Medicine Hat College has enrollment numbers of nearly 3,000 students on the Medicine Hat campus and over 200 on the Brooks campus. International students make up 11% of this population⁸. In 2019 there was a 30% increase in international students enrolled in the Medicine Hat college compared to the previous year.⁹ International students pay far more for tuition, and beyond that, living expenses provide economic stimulus. Most international students have long-term potential to boost the economies of countries they study in if they can work after graduating. The latest IDP Student Buyer Behavior Survey found that students think Canada is the best destination for post-graduation work opportunities. With distinguished multiculturalism, Canada is an attractive destination.¹⁰ Canada offers expedited visa processing for qualified individuals as well as 3-year work visas for graduates. Not only do students contribute to the development of the economy, but they also contribute to growth and innovation.

Southeast Alberta can improve talent availability by collaborating with and promoting the College and expanding the number of programs available for skill development. Many of the College programs involve a two for two process, meaning that students will take two years of education at the Medicine Hat College and then transfer into a university to complete their degree. This moves the talent away from the Medicine Hat area. The opportunity to study close to home increases the likelihood that talent will stay in the region. In addition to university studies programs that lead to degree completion elsewhere, MHC offers two full degrees in partnership with Alberta universities. Enhancing degree access through partnership, or capitalizing on legislation that now allows colleges to offer degrees, may benefit the region in the future.

Another method of ensuring and growing a talent pipeline is to attract individuals and families from outside of the community. Events, referrals, campus recruiting, and social media marketing can aid in accomplishing this. Attracting the right talent influences an organization's productivity, creativity, efficiency, and long-term success. Enticing this type of talent to the city would require the right value proposition to move to this region and the use of technology to promote the opportunities and promote development and growth.

The last method for attracting talent can do achieved through the attraction of businesses. The attraction of private investors and new businesses can be accomplished through city branding, marketing and business investment incentives.

CITY BRAND MARKETING

"Medicine Hat has a story to tell. Our story highlights our natural environment, thriving creative culture, climate, positive attitude, and quality of life. Our story is one of sunshine."¹¹ The overall success of a city relies on branding and the perceptions that people have about the community. The city needs to focus on promoting its assets and strengthening its brand perception in the community. There should be a focus on increasing community buy-in and creating positive perceptions about our community by taking the existing brand and promoting it through residents, media and digital outlets to raise this positive public profile.

Cities compete for attention, investment, visitors, shoppers, talent, events, and the like. Overall, it becomes apparent that the competition for residents, tourists, and investments has increased substantially among the cities interested in developing their tourism inflows. Today, cities need to brand similarly to products. "It is possible for a city to have a brand and an image that evolves into a "quality of place," this, in turn, establishes brand loyalty which is essential to the economic survival of the city. The crucial parts of city branding are identifying the unique and irreplaceable brand identity, shaping the identity into the image, and finally communicating the brand values to the target audience."¹²

The best way to develop and grow a community's population is to brand and sell its lifestyle. Medicine Hat, in particular, is a smaller city that offers all the necessary amenities. It is very family-friendly and a very affordable cost of living.

Medicine Hat has been referenced as the 'forgotten corner' and given the name of a "retirement community," which are not strong brand perceptions. This further emphasizes the need for a more robust brand campaign, which will lend to more robust talent and investment attraction, changing the community's image as we move forward. Branding the lifestyle and marketing the city has the potential to increase the number of students, foreign investors, businesses, and the overall population of the city, essential for economic growth and sustainability.

Medicine Hat could accomplish this by building a marketing campaign for the city. The campaign should be established to increase awareness of the city and the lifestyle that comes with living and investing here. Positive City branding also has the potential to boost tourism, which increases consumer spending through new dollars invested through tourism traffic. It would increase overall exposure to the region and increase promotion and referrals through positive experiences and reviews. This lends well to future development and economic diversification opportunities as more and more people become interested in visiting the region and ultimately making this region their home.

Multiple key factors can be used in promoting and marketing the city, including creating and maintaining a dashboard of key statistics and creating investment incentives to attract new businesses. Equally important is developing and marketing a compelling brand story, including the community's culture, lifestyle, and unique selling points and creating a strong visual and verbal identity guide for the community.

One of the most influential factors for city's growth and development is to elect and appoint leaders who prioritize community development and are interested in growth. Leaders should be focused on the community's growth through the attraction of talent and marketing the lifestyle of the city. These leaders should be willing to listen and adopt new ideas and practices. They should be focused on creating a positive business and economic environment. They should be engaged in planning and development decisions. They should also be open to new ideas and available to listen to their constituents.

⁶ Statistics Canada

⁷ Statistics Canada

⁸ Mhc.ab.ca

⁹ Stats Canada

¹⁰ Timeshighereducation.com

¹¹ Medicinehat.ca

¹² City Branding and its Economic Impacts on Tourism

BUSINESS COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Partnerships and collaborations can be highly beneficial for the growth of small businesses, corporations, and communities. Some of the key benefits of collaborations across businesses include diversified revenue, increased communication, mobilized resources and stronger community. There is a high capacity for success. However, success relies on the execution of the partnership and mitigating some of the risks sometimes associated with partnerships and collaborations. Partnership-based resourcefulness is referred to as doing more with less through novel and clever ways to bring, assemble or deploy resources through multiple actors working together.¹³ Resource-based partnerships have two key effects, transformational capacity as well as transactional capacity. Transformational capacity for resourcefulness is a dramatic increase in an actor's ability or power to behave resourcefully, based on long-term and deep relationships. This means that when partnerships are created, they can influence both businesses' brands and revenue. Partnerships can increase the market shares of both businesses working together to increase revenue and sales when partnerships are lasting agreements. In contrast, transactional capacity for resourcefulness occurs when an actor's ability or power to behave resourcefully is based on short-term and superficial relationships. Resourceful capacity and execution are related factors leading to sustainable growth outcomes.¹⁴ Transactional partnerships can occur to increase earnings for a specific period of time. Transactional partnerships are short-term and have a financial interest as the main reason for the relationships. Both transactional and transformational partnerships have short-term and long-term benefits for both parties involved. Partnerships and group collaborations create a sense of togetherness, which builds community and strengthens group (city) identity. Established networks can provide continuous support, assistance, and feedback and build on joint ventures and create a larger impact on the economy. Different partnerships can be considered. For communities specifically, you can establish both local and global opportunities through partnerships, networks and collaborations.

Business Accelerators

Business accelerator programs give developing companies access to mentorship, investors and other supports that help them become more stable, self-sufficient businesses. Business accelerator programs help businesses adapt and recover from major economic events or build on innovation and technology opportunities. Since the pandemic began, numerous companies have taken a hit, and through the use of business accelerator programs, they could access more supports. Mentorship and investment opportunities through a business accelerator program could promote the growth of businesses throughout the community. Those that are struggling greatly and have not accessed financial aid or have accessed financial assistance and are still struggling could realize future potential growth opportunities. The goal of accelerator programs is to get these businesses ready to run on their own again, with solid positioning to claim their share of the target markets. Through this opportunity, business owners could access resources and collaborate to improve economic growth in the city.

Localized Partnerships and Collaborations

In the Medicine Hat area, a business networking platform could be implemented where business owners from all sectors have the opportunity to build connections, promote their products and services and build a stronger community. Established business networks provide businesses with the opportunity to interact and engage with companies from all over the city, to directly build partnerships to enhance access to resources, engage a more extensive client base and learn from other business owners in the area. A network of business connections would allow for new inspirations, growing personal networks, and increased problem-solving. This could take the form of various social media platforms and could complement in-person networks built based on what the business owners in the area want.

¹³ Partnerships as an enabler of resourcefulness in generating sustainable outcomes

¹⁴ Partnerships as an enabler of resourcefulness in generating sustainable outcomes

Global Partnerships and Collaborations

Globalization is the ever-increasing connectedness of the world. Technology has played a considerable role in this process by improving communications, increasing trade, and promoting knowledge, skills, and innovation. To thrive and succeed long term in today's economy, a global presence is increasingly more necessary and will only increase as time progresses. Cities can adopt international networks to create new pathways for their businesses. International networking can be promoted through programs abroad, seeking out social exchange events (virtually) and staying connected. Global networks are created through the flow of goods and services, money, people, and information. This has become increasingly easier as technology levels have increased, and individuals and companies have embraced these changes. For the survival of business long term, international networks will be crucial. The idea of international relationships is a concept that is relatively new but has numerous growth opportunities. The first step would be to build connections with businesses, organizations, and governments in other countries, possibly through the Chamber's international network, to help companies in the city increase global confidence and connections. Sister cities are a common mechanism used to promote the growth of international networks and can be used to encourage the development of both cities. International programming can help attract new resources, investors and encourage overall attraction in the city.

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

At its most basic, innovation is about making things better in ways that benefit everyone. Innovation is not always based on technology. Any idea can be transformed into a simple solution that results in new products or services. Innovations can create an entirely new process, jobs, markets, and industries, making industries more productive and efficient.¹⁵ Innovation contributes to the competitiveness of domestic and international markets and increases economic and industrial potential.¹⁶ As such, managers and leaders need to promote or incentivize innovative behaviours for businesses and organizations to develop and thrive into the future. To push for more innovative practices in the area, governments need to look at incentives for innovative approaches and an innovative edge or create programs and competitions to incent businesses to become more innovative.

Technological progress will be the driver of business in the future, allowing for more efficient production of goods and services, capital accumulation, improved communication, and enhanced competitiveness. Throughout the last year, many business owners were forced to understand the impacts technology could have on their businesses. Due to restrictions and lockdowns, companies still had access to markets through technology, social media and online platforms, allowing for customer diversification and expanded target markets. Technology allows for a whole new way to accomplish business beyond physical borders, improving communication, processes and efficiency.

With the implementation of technology and innovation, small businesses in the area can increase their market shares by reaching a broader target market, giving the region a global competitive advantage that could stimulate recovery and future growth. Additionally, if the region works together to promote training, to develop programs for entrepreneurship, to increase technological adaptation and innovative strategies, there will be an increase in new production practices, processes, a more innovative labour pool, increasing the diversity in our product offerings and creating new investment opportunities. Although investment in entrepreneurship, technology and innovation is risky, it has the potential for great rewards. The optimal incentive scheme that motivates innovation exhibits substantial tolerance (or even reward) for early failures and rewards for long-term success.¹⁷ Innovative practices can be taught and promoted through government programs, which could be further incentivized through grants, entrepreneurial education, or innovative competitions.

¹⁵ ic.gc.ca

¹⁶ Innovation risks: challenges and prospects

¹⁷ Motivating Innovation- The Journal of Success

CHAMBER SPECIFIC SURVEY QUESTIONS AND STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

There were questions in the survey that were directly targeted to the Chamber. These questions asked about chamber communications and the overall satisfaction of the Chamber's services.

Question 26 of the survey asked, 'did you learn about government subsidies through the Chamber?' 22.75% of the respondents replied yes, and 77.25% said no. Question 31 asked about subscriptions to the Chamber newsletter, with 67.72% of respondents being subscribers and 23.62% were not. Of the respondents, 8.66% did not have a subscription but were interested in subscribing.

Question 35 asked how they wished to receive information from the Chamber. A majority were still in favour of the e-newsletter at 86.71%. Only 3.85% of respondents said LinkedIn; 13.94% stated Facebook, 5.24% said Instagram, 3.50% answered twitter, 1.05% said podcast, and 7.69% said a members' only Facebook group with the remaining 10.49% stating other. The main form of communication stated under the other section was email.

Question 36 asked about the interest in setting up a members' only forum type group (virtual or in-person). Of this, 50.94% stated that they would be interested, and 49.06% indicated they were not interested.

The survey also analyzed how often the Chamber was used in finding the information they needed (for example, searching for businesses when you need service/supplies or searching for businesses resource). To this question, 4.08% answered once a week or more, 12.77% answered once a month, 27.72% responded once every couple of months, 24.73% stated once a year, and 30.71% answered never.

In terms of engagement on social media, 22.30% of businesses currently engage with the Chamber on social media, with 64.75% of companies responding that they did not engage with the Chamber on social media and 12.96% stated that it was not applicable.

Of the survey respondents, 3.31% of businesses participated in the Chamber's online social media conference in May-June of 2020, and 96.69% did not.

From the data collected, the recommendations for Chamber specific strategies and policies include:

1. COMMUNICATION

Based on the responses, there is potential for the Chamber to increase awareness of their resources and increase communication through the Chamber. Increased and enhanced communication to and between members would increase advocacy and build a stronger community. The first step to enhancing the communication channel that flows from the Chamber would be to identify the business community's communication needs. This could be accomplished through short member's needs surveys, polls on social media and advertising the resources that are already available for the members. Communication would bring awareness to the advocacy, investment and mentorship opportunities available to aid in building business success. Regular contact with members is crucial for communication to increase. Communication within and through the Chamber can be improved by social media campaigns, networking events, webinars and seminars. The Chamber has the opportunity to improve and enhance the communication flow to help connect businesses with the information they need. Development of the communication strategies within the Chamber would influence member attraction and retention. Boosting the awareness of the resources and supports that stem from the Chamber would enhance the Chamber brand so that that Chamber would become a more attractive resource for its existing members and aid in the attraction of new members.

2. MEMBER ENGAGEMENT, SERVICE AND RETENTION

In the Chamber-specific questions, many respondents stated that they had a low engagement with the Chamber on social media and did not use the Chamber to access resources. The Chamber could grow memberships through outreach to new businesses and retain existing members by building value. This could be accomplished through events and activities that promote member interaction, collaboration and cooperation. A Chamber Ambassador program could optimize engagement and retention. Demonstrating member success, exploring new ways to promote businesses, and promoting regular communication, training, conferences, information, and referrals would all aid in member service, engagement and retention.

3. WORKSHOPS, EVENTS AND SEMINARS

The Chamber could increase awareness of the services they offer through workshops, events, and seminars, strengthening the community and the opportunity for education and awareness. Education should be a strategy to promote growth within the Chamber and the community. Most memberships occur to increase knowledge to enhance their business. Workshops, events and seminars ensure that members can always gain value from their Chamber.

4. MEMBERS' FORUM

The survey results showed that several members would be interested in a members' only business group. The survey results show that Facebook would be the best way to reach out to the largest number of members to create community, share knowledge, and enhance the knowledge among businesses in the area. This group would also be a good way for the Chamber to remain in contact and continuously interact with the members. Active engagement would also allow for members to have a voice that is valued and heard. A member's only forum would be an opportunity for the Chamber to influence collaborations and strengthen the network within and between businesses in the region. This network could explore partner opportunities, build networks and promote efficient connections and pathways to information and expertise. This forum would also be an opportunity to engage with industry trendsetters and the youth.

5. ADVOCACY OF WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

Work-integrated learning is an excellent opportunity for both employers and students. It provides employers with the opportunity to access new talent to offer a fresh perspective to the organization. It also allows students to integrate academic learning with practical application in the workplace. Some benefits of work-integrated learning include using academic theory in the real world, developing awareness of global challenges and industry issues, leadership, teamwork, and communication skills and developing practical skills necessary to transition between work and school. Work-integrated learning opportunities allow students to experience the industry related to their academic curriculum and guide what kind of work they wish to be involved in upon graduating. Advocating for work-integrated learning throughout the city would benefit the community due to the aging population and the need to recruit a younger workforce in the future. An increase in work-integrated learning opportunities would counter the aging population and increase the city's economic growth. Increasing work opportunities would attract talent to the area. Not only would talent counter the aging population curve, but it would also help rebrand the city as a desirable place to live. The Chamber advocating for work-integrated learning might promote the acceptance of the idea and increase the number of work-integrated learning opportunities in the region.

6. ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Entrepreneurship holds the potential to flourish in social, non-profit, and public sector organizations.¹⁸ Fostering entrepreneurship programs in the city would be a beneficial way to increase innovation, attract talent and has the potential to increase economic opportunities. Fostering entrepreneurship requires cooperation and encouragement of risk and creativity. The Chamber could adopt or create an upcoming entrepreneurship program, course, competition,

¹⁸ Fostering corporate entrepreneurship through internal marketing: implications for change in the public sector

or club to promote the city's entrepreneurial ability. Entrepreneurship leads to innovation which has a high potential to increase economic growth through increased competition. Fostering entrepreneurship in the city might begin with a group of individuals interested in entrepreneurship but lacking the resources they need. There are multiple platforms that the Chamber could use to access existing talent in the city and build the program out to attract more talent. Although entrepreneurship is a high-risk investment, there is a high potential for growth and development.

The Chamber creates value for its members through leadership, learning opportunities, marketing and building community. The Chamber has various strategies and practices that it currently uses to create value for its members and the community. However, society continuously changes, and so there is always an opportunity for growth.

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