Survey of labour and issues confronting Gatineau Valley companies Focus groups

Presented to the Gatineau Valley and its partners











March 2023

Table of Contents

Objectives and methodology	3
Employee competency development	4
2. Digital technologies	11
3. Innovation	16
4. Changing customer/purchaser/consumer behaviours	20
5. Other comments	23
Appendix – Facilitation guide	25

Objectives and methodology



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Gatineau Valley SADC— and its partners Services Québec and the Gatineau Valley RCM — retained BIP Research to survey companies on its territory. The purpose of this first phase, which was completed in December 2022 and January 2023, was to document an action plan focusing on the area's needs in terms of the current labour situation in its companies and forthcoming needs over a one- to three-year horizon.

Although the survey did identify major issues facing companies, it became necessary to delve more deeply into these issues – employee competency development, digital technologies, innovation and changing purchaser/consumer behaviours – to gain a better understanding of the concerns, challenges, business needs and solutions to take them on. That is why a second phase was organized to hold focus groups with a sample of companies on the Gatineau Valley RCM.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Number of focus groups: 2. Low turnout by the first group was made up for with the addition of two one-on-one interviews Duration: 1:15 to 2 hours (focus groups); about 35 minutes (one-on-one interviews).

Dates: February 28 and March 1, 2023 (discussion groups); March 6 and 8, 2023 (one-on-one interviews).

Conducted in French, by videoconference and on the Teams platform



PARTICIPATION

Of the 17 persons recruited for both groups, 9 were present (2 at the first one, 7 at the second one. With the addition of two one-on-one interviews, 11 persons participated.

NOTE ON THE INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS:

Information gathered using focus groups was qualitative in nature. It is not intended to be used to extrapolate generalizable statistical conclusions but instead to gain a better understanding and assess the intensity of the opinions and perceptions of the study participants.



Participants consisted solely of small businesses, covering a range of diversified areas of activity – recreational tourism, retailing, manufacturing, construction, agri-tourism, sales, repairs, vehicle and equipment repairs and maintenance, professional services and computer sciences.



Characteristics of the issue: challenges encountered

During the discussion, participants raised three themes that precede but nonetheless greatly affect employee competency development.

Labour shortages and recruiting difficulties

- All participants, regardless of the area of activity they work in, pointed to an acute shortage of specialized and non-specialized labour, which makes personnel recruiting difficult, long and often costly.
- Some mentioned that the shortage has become worse in the region such as in the Gatineau Valley because of the fact that many young people leave for major centres after graduation. This particularly true when their post-secondary training is offered in major centres (generally in Gatineau) to start with. These students often do not return to their region. One company resolved this problem in part by offering an exclusive teleworking arrangement to a candidate not living in the region and then hiring that person.
- Some participants also mentioned that some professional and technical trades (requiring a vocational DVS or a technical diploma of collegiate studies) are not highly valued and do not resonate with students. Not only is enrollment down, but very few who do enroll finish their course. As a result, there are not enough graduates to meet market requirements.
- Several pointed out that, at the hiring interview, many candidates attempt to "sell" qualifications or competencies they do not necessarily have. There is a gap between what appears on CVs and what candidates say at the interview and what they show once they have been hired.(5 participants)
- Due to the lack of qualified candidates, several companies resign themselves to hiring people with fewer competencies that they would like.
- These factors are such that employee skills development and training is a key issue. They have no choice but to offer basic training to their employees when hired and then raise their competency level later on.

Characteristics of the issue: challenges encountered

Retention and feeling of belonging

- Practically all of the participants mentioned how hard it is to retain their staff, particularly young people. With the current labour shortage, they can readily find a job if their working conditions (duties, schedule, wages, benefits, etc.) are not to their liking.
- Several participants pointed out that the feeling of belonging and loyalty to the company are increasingly rare, especially with young people. Employers thus have the challenge of enhancing this feeling of belonging by task enrichment, scheduling flexibility (which is not often suited for several jobs), wage hikes, continuous training, and so on.
- The retention issue and the ensuing turnover have a direct effect on training and competency development. Training costs companies more, as many trained employees leave and the entire process starts over with newcomers hired to replace them. It is one of several factors (inflation, supply costs), which forces them to raise their prices.

Succession and knowledge transfer

- Several participants pointed to a entrepreneurial succession problem several companies are experiencing, especially the smaller ones. Increasing numbers of business owners are getting older and will have to turn over the reins to another generation. If they have no successors in the wings (it's not a lack of financial capability or the markets they serve), they will have to close their doors. This has created yet another issue of identifying and training potential successors.
- According to three participants, it is essential that entrepreneurial successors be trained and coached to take over businesses that are put up for sale. They indicated that many young people want to start their own business but often run into financial problems or do not have the requisite competencies.
- Companies must deal with increasingly older employees approaching retirement age. They will leave with extensive knowledge and know-how that cannot be readily matched by employees with little experience, even if they have a diploma. The knowledge transfer from the older to the younger generation is becoming a major issue. It is important that companies make the mentoring principle a cornerstone of the training they provide.

Characteristics of the issue: challenges encountered

Other comments on the training and competency development issue

- For the few positions requiring a university degree (which are few and far between in the participating companies), the issue of training and competency development is of little relevant importance.
- Some participants claim they prefer to hire and train people who are less qualified but who have the knowledge, enthusiasm, willingness to learn and move up in the company.
- Since participating companies are quite different from one another, the types of training providing varies widely. But each company provides all or most of the training in house. It is sometimes given by outside trainers who come into the company. Participants maintain that training is given within the company because they cannot afford to send one or several employees for training lasting a few days or weeks.
- Here are some examples of training given by the participants:
 - Basic task-related training (almost all participants).
 - Technological change: online commerce, transactional site, software, etc.
 - Operation of new equipment and new machines
 - Technical maintenance and repair training
 - Professional services advice.
 - Training of technical assistance in specialized retailing.
 - Multimedia.

Training and development plan

- Most participants expressed a desire to come up with a training and development plan for their employees. At the same time, several do not necessarily have the competencies needed to prepare a plan of this type.
- Several companies particularly smaller ones said they were not able to implement this kind of plan because they cannot afford several specialized training plans that are expensive. (3 participants)

Support, coaching and tools needed

- Some participants mentioned they would need coaching by a specialized resource to identify needs and develop a training plan.
- As for training per se, the needs expressed essentially centre on specific themes or involve targeted workers. For example:
 - Training intended for managers (or owners) of businesses to improve employee retention particularly younger workers and including psychology content: how to motivate them, maintain their interest in making progress, valuing them, etc. (5 participants)
 - How to encourage or stimulate employee shareholder plans, especially with younger people. The latter need a feeling of accomplishment, and a shareholder plan could be a factor that enhances retention, involvement and motivation. (4 participants)
 - An outside trainer who would come into the company to train apprentices and follow up on competency acquisition.
 - On-line training for training not offered in the Gatineau Valley. This would reduce costs and avoid trips outside the region. (2 participants)
- Two participants said they were not aware of the support, help or coaching offered by organizations in the region in the area of training and development.

Sponsorship, mentoring or hiring of certain types of young people

Sponsorship of students pursuing a specialized education

- Participating companies with specialized positions all mentioned their openness to and interest in sponsoring college or university students pursuing a specialized education.
- Four participants said they had previous experience with sponsorships. In each case, they were very satisfied with this arrangement, which they described as a win-win.
- One participant even sponsored a student living abroad, hired them (to telework) and is currently involved in the process of having them immigrate to Canada.

Mentoring of young dropouts for unspecialized trades/hiring of young people a distance away from the job market and overseen by an employability stakeholder

- Though participants are somewhat open to these two options, they expressed some reservations or fears they have.
- At least five participants have had experience with mentoring or hiring young people with this profile. In some instances, the latter were accompanied by or supervised by a teacher, monitor or social worker. Here are some of their comments.
 - These young people often have an occupational health or safety issue. They require more oversight and closer monitoring.
 - Several have problems being punctual, consistent and paying close attention. They are adequate and at times good during the first few days, but then gradually begin to slide or quickly leave on their own. This causes delays for the company and its operations.
 - Some have attention deficit or learning disorders. Though they have potential, they are not autonomous and require constant supervision.
 - Some have specific conditions and do not comply with all of the rules companies have to follow.
 - One participant indicated their experience was a positive one.
- Whether or not they have had experience with either mentoring or hiring, several participants said that these young people must be closely supervised, motivated, valued and be taught self-discipline.
- One participant said they did not want to take on or hire people with a criminal record.

Sponsorship, mentoring or hiring of certain types of young people

Need for support, coaching or tools

- Several participants have trouble clearly identifying what type of support, coaching or tools they would need to hire, sponsor or mentor these potential workers.
- Some said that reaching out for support is complicated, because their activities are governed by acts and regulations.
- The following are the main needs cited with respect to young dropouts and young people some distance away from the job market.
 - Pre-employability work is required. For example, they should be told what is meant by joining the working force and creating awareness of attitudes, soft skills, discipline, etc. (4 participants)
 - Offer them support and coaching outside working hours. This should not be taken on by employers, as they have neither the competencies, nor the skills to do so. Without this support, the employer's task of providing oversight during working hours will be more onerous and the risks of failure greater. (4 participants)
 - Provide a special oversight service through stakeholders for young people with an attention deficit or learning disorder. This is necessary for them to successfully join the work force. The participating companies would also like to see tax breaks to deal with this issue, as these young people require more supervision than the average. (4 participants)
 - Provide a service to drive these young people to their work place. Many do not have a car.
- As far as sponsoring students pursuing a specialized education is concerned, only one participant mentioned a need. This would involve guidance to enable a qualified immigrant to obtain a work visa to be able to be employed in Canada (legal aspects, procedures to be followed, etc.).



Understanding and characteristics of the challenge

- Judging from the comments made by participants, most had a poor understanding of what digital technologies were about and what is meant by digitization. For many, it can be summarized by online sales, online reservations and electronic communications with customers.
- The following are a few examples of technologies that participating companies have brought in or are planning to bring in along with their impact:
 - Online sales and presence in social media, changes on ways of doing promotion and contacting customers; changes in internal processes to deliver services and deliveries.
 - Revamping of the website from information-related to transactional and interactive in nature and referencing in search engines, maintaining the loyalty of certain customers who would go elsewhere and attraction of new customers.
 - Automation and robotization of some duties cutting down on errors, making work easier, saving time and eliminating tasks that are duller or less gratifying.
 - New telephone system that meets teleworking and online transaction needs; increase in call capacity and transactions.
 - Use of the cloud to facilitate operations and eliminate hard-copy forms.
 - Sensory detection equipment and new tools for maintenance and repairs.
- Several participants made known their major concerns about digitization, particularly online sales and robotization/automation: the danger of dehumanizing services, tasks and relations with customers. In their view, customers still need human contact to establish and maintain a level of trust with the company. Companies are therefore confronting a challenge, and that is to establish or pursue digitization to remain competitive, while at the same time still being "human" and offering personalized service. (7 participants)

Understanding and characteristics of the challenge

- All participants who invested in technologies, without having gone all in with digitization, mentioned the connection with the issue of employee competency development and training.
 - A major effort must be made to train personnel whose duties have been affected by technological change.
 - Managers and some employees must constantly keep up with new technological trends (e.g., virtual reality).
- Some participants made reference to an issue associated with digital technologies cybersecurity and protection of customer data. The more a company gets into digital technology, the more it is subject to cyberattacks. They mention that they lack some or all of the competencies required to fight cyberattacks and data theft, and they are aware of the vulnerability of their company.
- Two participants said they have no digital technology or do not sell online. To date, their business is doing well. Demand has remained steady, and they have never felt the need to digitize. However, this limits them to emails and presence in some social media.

Impediments to digital technology implementation

Participants identified several factors that could either impede or slow down digital technology implementation.

- Managers' lack of familiarity with the technology. At least three participants claimed they had very little or no basic knowledge of technology. They are able to communicate by email or search the Internet, but that is all. However, they are openminded on this and are aware that they will have to make the required effort to understand and master the technology.
- Resistance to change. Several participants, particularly the older ones, said their company has always done well without digitization and believe they do not need it. Meanwhile, others, while not close-minded about digitization, pointed out it is easier to cling to old habits rather than take a leap into the unknown. However, younger managers are much more open to technological change and to digitization (4 participants)
- The lack of qualified managers and personnel. In general, managers and personnel do not have enough of the competencies needed to embark on digitization without the assistance of consultants. (5 participants)
- A lack of knowledge about which digital technology is relevant to the company. Following up on the preceding point, several managers, though open to digitization, do not know what technologies their company needs, where to start and how to go about implementation. They see this as a huge and daunting task.
- The difficulty evaluating their return on investment. Two participants open to digitization have trouble seeing or understanding the financial benefits of going the digital route.
- Costs and insufficient financial capacity. Whether the issue is purchasing equipment or robots, changing various processes (production, suppliers, customer transactions, internal communication, etc.) or obtaining the services of outside consultants, digitization is expensive, and for very small companies, the cost is proportionately higher than for medium-sized and large businesses. (4 participants)
- Time constraints. Notwithstanding the preceding factors, managers of very small companies must be versatile and be able to wear several hats simultaneously (managing personnel, operations, suppliers, customer relations, etc.). In addition, they have to put out fires constantly and meet demands. In spite of their willingness to embark on digitization, they have little time to devote to it. Labour shortages also cut into their time, because the staff is often swamped. (4 participants)

Consulting support or coaching needs

Several participants made reference to consulting support or coaching needs they would need to implement digital technologies.

- Coaching by one or several practicing consultant(s) not only to develop a digital plan but to help implement it in the field and to train personnel. (4 participants)
- Find out about the experience of companies that made the shift to digital, the difficulties encountered, solutions reached and the errors to avoid (2 participants)
- Financial support from various levels of government to implement and train personnel. (3 participants)
- Online sales: how to implement it effectively and at reasonable cost while remaining competitive. (3 participants)
- Cybersecurity and data protection: how to guard against threats, which measures to implement to strengthen the security of information systems, how to render them operational. (2 participants)

In addition, some participants indicated they were not familiar with resources offered by regional organizations in the area of digital technology implementation. As a result, they do not know who to turn to and need information on the topic.

In response to this comment, two participants said that managers (of these organizations) must make the effort to learn more about resources being offered and take the initiative to contact them and express their needs.

3. Innovation

Understanding and characteristics of the issue

Most participants claim that they have innovated in recent years or are in the process of doing so. The main examples provided show that they are indeed certain types of innovation.

- Establishment of online commerce and a transactional site (purchases, reservations, take-out orders, etc.). On the one hand, companies want to meet the demands and needs of customers/consumers. On the other hand, they say they have no choice but to follow this onerous trend, which has picked up steam since the pandemic, because some customers will just go and shop elsewhere. (4 participants)
- In connection with the preceding point, one participant had to change their transactional platform to handle the increase in online purchasing. They also set up lockers where customers can come to pick up their online order.
- Another participant used a platform where customers can access their documents online and electronically sign contracts or documents.
- To address labour shortages, three participants invested in equipment and robots to reduce their labour requirements and make things easier for their employees.
- Others changed their work procedures (handling of tools and equipment) or their manufacturing processes (laboratory development) to make themselves more efficient. They could thus serve the same number of customers with one less employee, and the other participant was able to handle their ever-increasing customer traffic with the same number of employees.
- Two participants developed new products or services to respond to changing customer/consumer behaviours and tastes.
- To retain staff, one participant brought in a four-day and a four and one-half day work week, especially during the summer, while maintaining the same business hours and customer service.

Some participants mentioned that they are open to innovation but that, for the time being, it is more a dream than reality. They cited obstacles similar to those given for the implementation of digital technologies: time constraints (managers are swamped), a lack of financial capacity and a lack of competencies relating to innovation (what to innovate, how to implement changes).

Impact on the business model

Impact of innovation on the business model and personnel

Innovation has had major impacts on some participating companies in terms of their business model, employee duties and competencies and customer relations.

- Robotization and digitization of certain processes have both changed the workload and greatly simplified what employees do. Nonetheless, the amount of work they have is still heavy the number of hours worked has even increased at times but it is different and does require new competencies. Staff had to be trained as a result.
- Companies had to totally revamp their Internet sites. At one time, they were merely information and research sites, but they have now become interactive and transactional sites. Once again, the nature of the work done changed, which meant that staff had to be trained. For several customers, being able to do online transactions made the customer experience easier.
- Traditional paper-based methods were eliminated for both relations with customers and for internal management. The paperless office is gradually becoming a reality.
- The move to a shorter work week (to 4 or 4 ½ days) involved some work reorganization, because customer service still had to be offered at all times.

None of the participants mentioned instances where innovation and technological change altered their business hours (when they opened and closed) or the times when customer service is provided.

Consulting support or coaching needs

Coaching needs

- Some participants say they do not need or have few consulting support or coaching needs to bring about innovation in their company. One deals with consultants, and they find this sufficient.
- Some who belong to a network or an association can receive support or resources available to implement certain innovations.

Some of the main needs include:

- Promote innovation-related programs and consulting resources that are available. The discussions showed that participants have scant knowledge of what is out there either regionally, provincially or nationally.
- Offer innovation awareness and information sessions: trending products and services, customer/consumer needs, marketing, management methods (particularly human resources management), work organization and customer service, etc. The goal here is to raise managers' awareness and empower them on the need to innovate. (3 participants)
- Perform a diagnosis on the company to identify areas of improvement, aspects that could benefit from innovation, the required resources and competencies and training requirements (3 participants)
- Provide coaching using specialized marketing resources to develop new products.



Characteristics of the issue

All of the participating companies say they have noted changes in consumer behaviour in recent years, which picked up speed when the pandemic hit in 2020. These are the main changes they observed:

- Consumers are much more enlightened and informed than they once were, regardless of their generation. Before they buy, whether in store or on line, they do research on the Internet and social media and compare products and prices. When they enter a business, they can be as informed or even more so than perhaps the salesperson or the clerk. They know more about what they want and come in more to purchase than to shop around. (4 participants)
- Consumers and corporate clients are increasingly more demanding about wait and service times and are more impatient than before. For example, an online order must be in hand within 48 hours, and this includes the confirmation (5 participants). However, one participant mentioned that consumers are willing to wait if they are given the reason for the delay (particularly when a labour shortage is the issue) and they receive honest and quality service.
- Contrary to the scenarios described in the previous two points, some consumers do consult the Internet and social media but come away misinformed. Some of the information they have is wrong, biased, incomplete or taken out of context. This creates unrealistic expectations about service quality and delivery delays.
- Consumers in the younger generations are less loyal to a company or a brand than people were generations ago. They rummage around more, gladly try out new things and want to live new experiences.
- With inflation and interest rate hikes, consumers and corporate clients spend their money more carefully and are more price conscious than before. Companies must justify any attendant price increases. (3 participants)
- One participant noted an increase in certain customer segments, especially young adults (between 18 and 35) and women, who have expectations, needs and financial means different from traditional consumers (middle-aged or older men).

Impacts of this issue and measures to address it

Changes in consumer behaviour and expectations have had an impact on participating companies, and most have had to adapt as a result. Here are some of the measures they took:

- Steps must be taken to make salespersons and clerks more knowledgeable and competent to better respond to the needs and questions of consumers, who are better informed than they once were. (3 participants)
- Businesses must manage consumer expectations and impatience with respect to delays. Staff has been trained to reveal realistic delays (this question will be answered but not right away) and the reasons why. Participants did indicate that when consumers receive honest information, they are more understanding. (6 participants)
- When confronted by misinformation or a certain form of disinformation on the web, especially on the time it takes to provide a service, two participants had to go over the facts and explain to clients what actually goes on so that they could revisit their expectations.
- To compete with giants such as Amazon, Walmart and other large banners which offer lower prices and come up more readily on search engines consumers must be offer value-added features. For example, an extended warranty, customized service, exclusive offers, promotional codes to create loyalty (a fixed or percentage-based discount, free delivery if the purchase exceeds a certain amount).
- Two participants mentioned they diversified the profile of their employees to respond better to various generations of consumers and that they identify more with the company.
- One participant said they adjusted their package deals and prices based on new customer segments (young people and women).

None of the participants mentioned instances where changing consumer behaviours altered their business hours (when they opened and closed) or the times when customer service is provided. One participant had to scale back business hours at noon and discontinue some services, which was essentially attributable to staff shortages.



Other comments

To conclude the discussion, several comments peripheral to the four issues presented were made.

- Several organizations offer companies in the region a host of consulting support and financing services. According to the participants, these companies are not always aware of these services, and it is difficult to figure which is which at times. In this light, it is suggested that::
 - The service offer and the needs it can meet be better promoted;
 - A single window be offered to identify company needs so that they can be referred to the right resources;
 - Organizations be consulted more effectively to avoid duplication and to achieve complementarity.
- One participant deplored the fact no financial assistance is available to improve commercial and industrial buildings (not to purchase equipment and technological development).
- The shortage of available accommodations in the region and available affordable housing hinders business development. Not only is it difficult for them to recruit workers, but the latter have difficulty finding housing. This situation poses an obstacle to new employees coming to the region.

Appendix - Facilitation Guide

Gatineau Valley SADC

Focus groups **Facilitation Guide**

Group	Date	
 Companies available during the day 	Tuesday, February 28, 8 am to 10 am	
Companies available in the evening	Wednesday, March 1, 7 pm	
7 to 8 participants per group (recruit 9 to 10, as 2 desist on average)		

Introduction (10 minutes)

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION RULES

- Facilitator introduction.
- Confidentiality. No names are mentioned. Answers remain confidential and anonymous.
- Information gathered shall only be used for purposes of the study.
- Recordings used solely for note taking.
- Check the raised hand function, have one person speak at a time.
- Importance of spontaneity and personal opinions.
- No right or wrong answers per se.

MEETING OBJECTIVE

BIP Recherche was retained by the Gatineau Valley SADC and their partners - Services Quebec and the Gatineau Valley RCM - to consult with companies on the Gatineau Valley RCM territory via a focus group format. This process is a follow-up to the survey we conducted last December and January, which you took part in. It dealt particularly with labour and some issues confronting businesses. The objective of today's meeting is to delve more deeply into these issues and gain a better understanding of your concerns, challenges, needs and solutions.

DO A ROUND TABLE - INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS

- Your name
- Your position
- What activities is your company involved in?

Cumulatively: 10 minutes

Issue 1 – Employee competency development (25 minutes)

- How is this an issue for your company? Does this issue pose any specific challenges?
- To deal with the numerous issues and challenges examples include personnel retention. competency development, cybersecurity, digital technologies, innovation, changing buyer/consumer behaviours - survey data shows that the need or assistance most often cited by the participants is employee development training. (Page 44 of the report)

- > What kind of support, assistance or coaching tailored to your situation would you need to develop and implement this training and development plan? In other words, what would you need to take action?
- What tools could you be provided with?
- To address the labour shortage, the survey data shows that close to half of the respondents would be willing to: (page 33 of the report)
 - Sponsor students pursuing a specialized education:
 - Mentor young dropouts to take on unspecialized trades:
 - Hire young people far away from the job market, who would be overseen by an employability stakeholder.
 - What support, assistance or coaching would you need to hire, sponsor or mentor these potential workers?
 - > What action solutions or what tools tailored to your situation would enable you to take

Cumulatively: 35 minutes

Issue 2 - Digital technologies (25 minutes)

- Do you have a good understanding of what is meant by digitization? Do you know what technologies you need given the nature of your activities/operations?
- Why is it that digital technologies are taking so long to implement or is not happening at all in companies? What are the main impediments?
- · What would you need in terms of consulting support or coaching to implement digital technologies in your company?

Cumulatively: 60 minutes

Issue 3: Innovation (25 minutes)

- What does innovation actually mean in terms of your business? How could you innovate? (products/service, processes/procedures, marketing, ways of organizing business processes, etc.)
- Does or would innovation have an impact on your business model? Is there a link between the innovation issue and the issue of reducing or reorganizing hours of operation?
- · What factors would make innovation easier in your business? What consulting support or coaching would you need for this to materialize?

Cumulatively: 85 minutes

Issue 4 - Changing buyer/consumer behaviours (25 minutes)

 What changes have you noticed in buyer/consumer behaviour? Do they differ according to the segment they are in (e.g., age)?



- What impacts have these changes had on your business (products or service delivery, marketing methods, promotions or communication, etc.)?
- What measures have you taken or plan to take to adjust to these changing behaviours? Is there a link between this issue and the issue of reducing or reorganizing hours of operation?

Cumulatively: 110 minutes

Conclusion (10 minutes)

- Are there any other aspects, concerns or needs we have not discussed which are facing your company?
- The facilitator is taking note of the questions or items for further examination, which were disclosed by the observers.

Cumulatively: 120 minutes

Thank you for your participation.