Impact of COVID-19 Study

Fall 2020

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Upskill America at the Aspen Institute is an employer-led movement that promotes training and advancement practices to help workers progress in their careers and attain better-paying jobs.

We place a heavy emphasis on the need to assist frontline and entry-level workers, who are disproportionately women and people of color.

Study Overview

- A 12-month, 3-phase study to learn how the pandemic and heightened attention on racial inequities have influenced companies' employment plans for the months and years ahead.
  - We are especially interested in learning how the current context may influence employers' education and training programs.

- Study supported by Strada Education Network and Walmart.org

Study Overview

Phase I (Fall 2020)	Employer Interviews	Information Gathering
Phase II (Winter 20/21)	Additional Interviews/Survey 1	Data Gathering
Phase III (Spring 2021)	Additional Interviews/Survey 2	Data Gathering/Comparison

Key Questions

- In today's rapidly changing business environment and economy, what are the workforce skill needs that are increasingly important?

- In what ways are these skill needs affecting a range of employment practices, including education and training programs for frontline workers?

- How has the current context - the pandemic and heightened attention on racial inequities - influenced businesses' workplace hiring practices as well as plans to support career advancement for frontline workers?

- What types of employee concerns have surfaced regarding what they are facing in the workplace and at home? What are the ways that businesses are helping to support employees' needs?

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Businesses Interviewed

As of November 2020:

- 16 leaders from businesses and industry associations participated in 45-minute interviews

- Interviewees included: HR leaders, learning officers and executive directors

Sector	# of Interviews
Healthcare	2
Hospitality	1
IT	3
Manufacturing	3
Professional Services	3
Retail & Restaurant/Food Service	4

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Businesses Interviewed

- A little more than half of the businesses operate globally, and the rest have operations solely in the United States. Some were smaller businesses with a few thousand employees, and others had more than a hundred thousand employees.

- The businesses represent the geographic diversity of the United States. Large cities, medium cities, and rural areas were represented. Some companies were competing with other large businesses for talent, and others were the sole large employers in the area.

- About one-third of the businesses we spoke with, have a primary local/regional presence in one geographic region.

- The day-to-day responsibilities of frontline workers across companies varied. Many workers in the hospitality, retail, healthcare and manufacturing continued to go to work every day. Entry level workers in IT and professional services were able to continue their work remotely.

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Businesses Interviewed

The companies we interviewed have experienced the pandemic in a wide variety of ways.

- Essential healthcare and retail businesses are struggling to keep up with demand, and the manufacturing leaders we spoke to reported various levels of customer demand. Professional services and IT businesses were able to remain stable or grow after transitioning to remote work.
- Interviewees reported a mix of experiences related to staffing, including layoffs and furloughs, delaying layoffs in order to meet projected future demand, or mass hiring to keep up with demand.
  - With few exceptions (e.g. hospitality), there wasn't a discernible trend within industries

Businesses Interviewed

Employment trends were consistent with designation of 'essential business'*

- A retail grocer that was deemed an essential business at the onset of the pandemic experienced considerable growth in consumer demand. This resulted in staffing shortages and revamped hiring and onboarding processes to bring in new employees.

- Within a month of the pandemic, 70 to 80% of hospitality employees were unemployed or furloughed.

- A large healthcare provider responded at the onset of the pandemic by centralizing operations to staff Emergency Room and ICU units – and as the situation has stabilized, the patient concerns for health & safety and increased interest in telehealth care is resulting in continuously decreased demand for clinics, etc.

- Manufacturers reported a mix of experiences:
  - Some change can be attributed to customer demand – e.g. demand for food manufacturing and white goods increased, while automotive and aerospace sector have had decreased consumer demand.
  - Also, many manufacturers were deemed essential, but if their customer demand dropped or they couldn't accommodate running at capacity in a way that adhered to safety protocols, manufactures may have elected to remain closed. Other manufacturers were in a growth position and struggled to find sufficient workers.

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Economic and Cultural Context

2020 Year In Review – The Economy, COVID-19, and Racial Injustice

- January 2020: The national Unemployment Rate was 3.6%.
    - (Rates varied by age, gender, race and ethnicity and education)

- January 20: The first COVID-19 diagnosis in the U.S.

- March 19: California issued stay at home orders to its 40 million residents.
    - Other states or local jurisdictions soon followed

- March 27: President Trump signs the $2.2 Trillion CARES Act to provide economic assistance for workers and families and small businesses, and to preserves jobs.

- April: 20.5 million people lost their jobs, sending the Unemployment Rate to 14.7%.
    - (Rates varied by age, gender, race and ethnicity and education)

- Spring 2020: Workers of color (Black, Latino, Asian American and other non-whites) account for 43% of all essential workers.
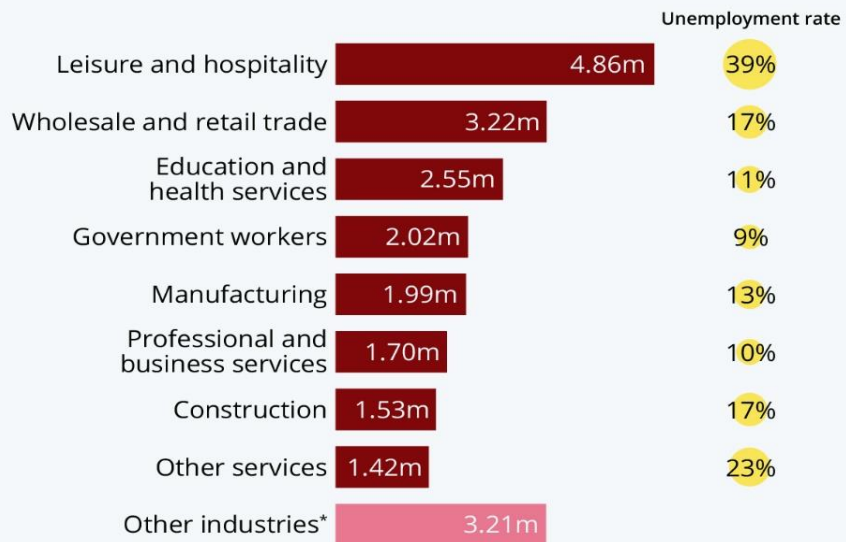
2020 Year In Review – The Economy, COVID-19, and Racial Injustice

- Spring: Schools are closed, sending forcing nearly 93% of households with school-age children to take at least some form of distance learning.

- May 25: George Floyd was murdered, further highlighting racial injustice and prompting weeks of protests calling for justice for this and other police killings of Black men and women.

- September: The national Unemployment Rate had declined to 7.9% as more Americans returned to the workforce throughout the summer.
  - Rates varied by age, gender, race and ethnicity, and education

- By the fall of 2020, U.S. residents had seen schools closed, colleges emptied, bars, restaurants, hotels, shops and other businesses shuttered, sports cancelled, and office buildings abandoned
.
- Many families have endeavored to live, study and work from home, waiting for things to return to "normal."

- By November 11th, 240,000 U.S. residents had died of COVID.
  - People of color have disproportionally experienced health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19's impact on employment

The Industries Worst Affected by the COVID-19 Job Crisis

Number of unemployed persons aged 16 and over in the U.S. in April 2020, by industry

Industry	Unemployed	Unemployment rate
Leisure and hospitality	4.86m	39%
Wholesale and retail trade	3.22m	17%
Education and health services	2.55m	11%
Government workers	2.02m	9%
Manufacturing	1.99m	13%
Professional and business services	1.70m	10%
Construction	1.53m	17%
Other services	1.42m	23%
Other industries*	3.21m	

* incl. persons with no previous work experience and persons whose last job was in the U.S. Armed Forces
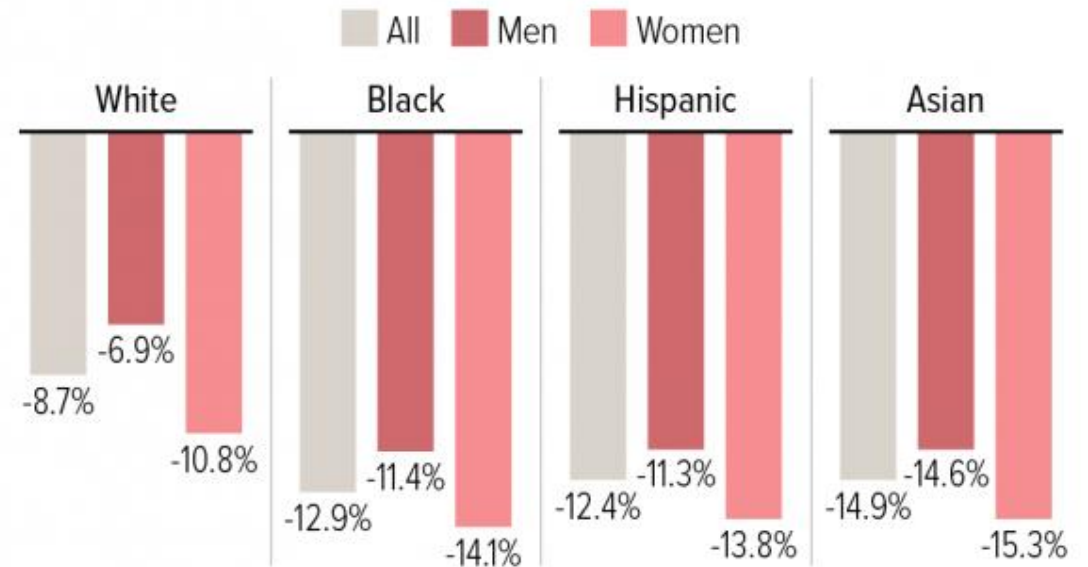Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

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Workers of Color, Especially Women, Likelier to Lose Jobs in Current Recession

Employment losses by race/ethnicity and sex, February to June, 2020

Legend: All | Men | Women

White
- All: -8.7%
- Men: -6.9%
- Women: -10.8%

Black
- All: -12.9%
- Men: -11.4%
- Women: -14.1%

Hispanic
- All: -12.4%
- Men: -11.3%
- Women: -13.8%

Asian
- All: -14.9%
- Men: -14.6%
- Women: -15.3%

Source: CBPP analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

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Response to Context
Recurring Themes from Interviews

- The overlapping crises of 2020 are unprecedented in our lifetimes. No living person has experienced anything like this, nor has anyone been prepared to navigate it.

- This year has tested leadership like never before.

- Absent national policies, states, counties, cities, and individual businesses have had to develop policies and implement procedures to keep workers and customers safe. These policies have varied widely from place to place and have fluctuated significantly given conditions.

- Adaptability was one of the most discussed survival skills for businesses and individual employees alike.

Response to Context
Recurring Themes from Interviews, cont'd

- 2020 has brought about a bifurcation of the workforce; those who are workplace dependent and those who are workplace independent.

- The economic impact of 2020 is being felt by individuals in dramatically different ways.

  - Example A: A highly compensated, married professional, with no caregiving responsibilities, whose job is workplace independent.

  - Example B: A single parent, with school age children, earning low wages, in a workplace dependent, customer-facing job.

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Response to Context
Recurring Themes from Interviews, cont'd

- Though companies universally acknowledged how difficult and stressful 2020 has been, many also noted how the circumstances had forced them to question long-standing assumptions and processes and find new and better ways to do things.

- Examples of processes/policies that companies listed as having been improved during the pandemic include:
  - Work flow
  - Collecting employee feedback
  - Candidate screening
  - Hiring
  - Interviewing
  - Onboarding
  - Workplace flexibility
  - Internal communications

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Response to Context
Recurring Themes from Interviews, cont'd

- Many companies that mentioned improved policies/processes, feel these changes are permanent because they realize their value.

    - One leader said, "we've been turned on our head, but we realized we like the view upside down and we don't want to go back."

    - Another leader said "everything from the basic corporate functions, to how we produce our product, to how we sell and interact with our customers, all of this has challenged us to reconceive and revisit all of our underlying assumptions. It has also put a spotlight on new things that we never thought about previously. We've gotten a lot more agile in ways that we had never been before."

Response to Context
Recurring Themes from Interviews, cont'd

- Business leaders used terms such as 'shock,' 'triage,' and 'recovery,' to describe what they perceived as phases of the pandemic.

- Companies are currently caught in a balancing act of trying to keep workers safe, make adjustments in the workplace that are needed, and still have enough workers to meet market demand.

- Uncertainty was a term frequently used to describe the near-term business climate.
  - **As one interviewee noted, *"I've never seen a crystal ball so cloudy before."***

- Businesses now anticipate slower hiring levels than initially expected.
  - In April, 60% expected hiring levels to return by January 2021, now down to just 25%, with 11% expect hiring to return by July 2021, 5% expecting longer and 21% remain uncertain. (Source: ManpowerGroup Quarterly Hiring Outlook survey)

Workforce Skill Needs

- What skills are rising in importance during the pandemic and why?
- How are skill needs affecting a range of practices, including training for existing and new employees?
- What are the challenges to meeting skill needs?

Context for Workforce Skill Needs

● Goals for training related to the pandemic that were identified:
  – Training to do the same job with new procedures (i.e. restaurant cleaning, and food delivery)
  – Training to do the same job in a new location (i.e. remote management and remote sales)
  – Training to do a different job at the same or different location (i.e. hospital office staff now taking temperatures)
  – Cross-training to do multiple jobs at the same location (i.e. hotels and restaurants)
  – Training and education to do a different job at a different company (i.e. outskilling of workers no longer needed)

Workforce Skill Needs

- Frontline Worker Skills Identified As Rising In Importance During This Time:
  - Foundational Workplace Skills
    - Adaptability
    - Resilience
    - Problem-solving
    - Growth-mindset
  - Conflict Resolution
  - Digital Skills

- Management Skills Identified As Rising In Importance During This Time:
  - Leadership
  - Supportive Managing
  - Inclusivity

Workforce Skill Needs – Foundational Skills

- Adaptability, resilience, problem-solving, and a growth-mindset were identified as the key frontline workforce skills rising in importance during this pandemic.
  - One interviewee noted, "Adaptability is probably the most important workforce skill. I'm not sure that's something you can teach--it's something that you have to support that comes from deep inside. A company can provide the infrastructure, safety, and resources for someone that wants to be adaptable. Adaptability is connected to our own fears, our insecurities, our failures, our identity. Anytime that something is connecting to identity, shame can take hold and paralyze someone's career. You have to be able to encourage it and support it. The leaders that are good at it are the ones that create emotional safety."

- Factors influencing this need are:
  - new and evolving protocols for business operations (e.g., cleanliness standards, social distancing, PPE requirements
  - interacting with customers in highly stressful environment
  - operating with a leaner team requires employees to juggle multiple responsibilities

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Workforce Skill Needs – Conflict Resolution

- Interviewees in the service sectors (retail, restaurant, hospitality and healthcare) all noted the rising importance of conflict resolution skills.

- Implementing de-escalation techniques is necessary for customers who may not be wearing masks or are not abiding by other health and safety protocols.

- Employees in the hospitality sector are learning how to deal with a new type of clientele. Some hotels are now providing emergency housing for people who are homeless through government contracts. Other hotels have decreased their nightly rates and are attracting a different clientele.

Workforce Skill Needs – Digital Skills

- Across sectors, there will be some element of remote work, especially for office staff that aren't workplace dependent, for the foreseeable future. There is a need for reliable, high-speed internet and the tools to access it. To continue remote work requires a strong digital skillset, including mastering new technology platforms for communication and collaboration.

- Digital skill needs for frontline workers include:
  - In healthcare: The uptake of telehealth will be a trend that will likely remain. To deliver telehealth, digital skills are needed for a range of provider staff – clinicians, IT staff, operations. Skills identified include virtual rooming of patients, remotely assessing social determinants of health, providing empathy in a remote environment, and supporting the reading of diagnostics from medical equipment in patients' homes.

  - In manufacturing: Digital skill needs that were important before the pandemic may become increasingly important if manufacturers transition to more precision/smart manufacturing practices. There are needs for strong digital analytics skills for CNA machine operators, robotics maintenance, etc.

  - In professional services and sales occupations: One leader said "virtual communication is a completely different ballgame. We used to teach public speaking and how to present, but that looks different virtually. Some adapted quickly while some are struggling – particularly those who thrive off the energy in the room. The video platform has changed the way you approach the most basic tasks.'

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Digital Skills Layers

Innovator. Someone who has the skills to study, test and understand how technology is advancing, and create the next stages in development and the future of digital transformation.

Programmer/Developer. The skills to write code in programming languages that instruct software and apps to perform the desired tasks, or the skills to teach computer systems to perform tasks through artificial intelligence, or the skills to teach machines to learn from experience (machine learning).

Infrastructure Builder and Defender. The skills to migrate to the cloud, deploy technology in the workplace, including creating and maintaining networks and the cyber security to protect them.

Data Architect. The skills to manage databases, mine them to extract information, analyze data, identify findings and display the findings in a meaningful way that tells a story.

Designer. The skill to design digital content in visually attractive and user-friendly styles that enhance the wording.

Instructor. The skills to assist digital citizens with their questions and problems so they can accomplish their tasks.

Technology Enabler. The skills to understand technology tools that can be deployed at home or in the workplace and how to use these tools to improve job performance or for personal enhancement.

Technologically Informed. The skills to understand how digital transformation is happening in the workplace, how your job is affected and how you can interact with the intelligence and machines being deployed.

Digital Citizen. The skills to know how to access and find information on the Internet and technical skills to communicate and learn in a digital environment.

Universal. Access to reliable high-speed internet service and updated tools with which to access it.
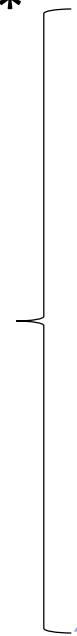
* Most commonly described skills during interviews

Workforce Skill Needs – Leadership

- Across all interviews, the importance of leadership in navigating this crisis was highlighted.

- Although our conversations focused on the frontline workforce, leaders note the transformative moment we're in and the critical need for "good leadership". No business leader has ever had to navigate a time like this, and it is proving who is able to adapt and demonstrate resilience.

- Includes need to navigate tough conversations and communicate about challenges and shortfalls, particularly when it comes to DEI.
  - Conversations can be challenging and requires empathic listening skills, authenticity and vulnerability (including leaders admitting that they may not have the answers).

Workforce Skill Needs – Supportive Managing

- There is a pressing need for a new set of skills for managers of frontline and entry level workers.

- Interviewees stressed how important it is to have good managers in place - they are on the floor guiding new protocols and procedures related to health and safety in the workplace as well as managing workers who are juggling multiple needs – e.g. managing remote work, caregiving responsibilities, concerns about job security, and personal health & safety concerns, including mental health.

- Having managers that are supportive and flexible is important. Additionally, interviewees noted that it is increasingly apparent that transactional work relationships are a detriment. Several interviewees underscored the importance of managers being able to build relationships and trust, which can be challenging in a physical and in a virtual environment.

- Managerial skills identified include:
  - Organization skills to plan and prioritize work in teams – especially when everyone is operating with minimal slack.
  - Communication skills, for explaining new protocols as well as to motivate and engage their team.
  - Strong empathy and listening skills are key. One leader shared: *"New skills needed now include listening skills—most of our leaders were 70% talking and 30% listening, but that doesn't work now. Understanding people's world view and where they are coming from, how to ask questions and be curious, all of that is important. People are struggling with childcare, sick family, etc. Leaders can't assume their issues are the same that others are facing."*

Workforce Skill Needs – Inclusivity

- Successful managers foster inclusion within their team so that all employees feel seen as a whole person at work. This requires empathic management skills, such as listening, being intentional about fostering relationships and connections, and building trust.

- A professional services firm interviewed has an apprenticeship program focused on recruiting students from underrepresented backgrounds. The leader believes that these opportunities can create a culture change where managers and leaders understand that it is part of their job responsibility to foster and cultivate diversity of backgrounds and experiences in the workplace.

Skill Needs' Effects on Practices

Interviewees described three areas where changing skill needs are influencing company practices:

- Communication
- Management Supports
- Culture that Supports Skill Development

Effect on Practices – Communication

- Interviewees noted increased and improved communication from company leaders. Taking the time to express commitment and appreciation to workers, being transparent about the business' financial stability, and answering questions directly from employees were practices reported.

- Tactics to support communication include:
  - Personalized and authentic video messages, using social media to thank and show appreciation for frontline workers, etc.
  - A more regular cadence of company-wide meetings, e.g. monthly all-staff town halls with Q and A

- Several companies noted that they are implementing two-way communication channels
  - We heard a common trend of pulse surveys replacing or supplementing annual employee engagement surveys. These surveys were used to get feedback from employees about remote work, their comfort with returning to the workplace, perspectives on equity and inclusion in the workplace, and suggestions for useful workplace supports.

  "It's important to share information and not let people create their own narratives."

Effects on Practices – Management Supports

- As one interviewee noted, in the current environment *"it is falling on managers to navigate this new era of work, but many don't have training to do this and may not have the HR supports and infrastructure to carry it out."*

- Interviewees further acknowledged that remote management is an area that they are still *"learning to build muscle in."*

- Practices identified in this area include developing resources such as toolkits and short-term professional development courses on how to onboard and manage remotely, and how to support/manage a workforce with new operating protocols, health and safety policies, and conflict resolution techniques.

Effects on Practices – Culture that Supports Skill Development

Leaders mentioned that they are looking for talent that is "nimble", who knows how to navigate ambiguity, is adaptable, has drive and possesses a flexible, growth-oriented mentality.

- One interviewee noted, *"These skills are not something that you can necessarily train for. Instead, a company has to support these skills by providing the infrastructure, psychological safety and resources necessary for workers to thrive."* Interviewee further noted that it's important to set a culture where employees' feel it is safe to acknowledge that there are skills they'd like to develop.

- Additionally, leaders in companies where cross-training practices were in place pre-pandemic felt that they were in a better position when the pandemic occurred. They were able to move employees into higher-demand departments with little to no additional training, which was especially important for critical healthcare occupations.

- One interviewee noted that the learning culture that they built pre-pandemic has allowed them to flex and be responsive to change. It was helpful to have cultivated an environment where employees embrace learning and change, and they were ready to adapt as the business needs continuously evolved.

Effects on Practices – Culture that Supports Skill Development, contd.

- Additionally, leaders in companies where cross-training practices were in place pre-pandemic felt that they were in a better position when the pandemic occurred.
  - For example, a health care provider noted that they have been able to move employees into higher-demand departments with little to no additional training.

- One interviewee noted that the learning culture that they built pre-pandemic has allowed them to flex and be responsive to change. It was helpful to have cultivated an environment where employees embrace learning and change, and they were ready to adapt as business needs evolve.

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Challenges to Meeting Skill Needs

- There's a tension between working on the business while working in the business – e.g. some businesses are operating with lean staff and needing to meet demand. This situation makes it challenging to train and develop new skills at work.
  - This challenge is particularly acute for smaller businesses with fewer resources and infrastructure in place to support skill development.

- Onboarding and training new hires requires intentionality in this new environment.
  - Some interviewees noted this can be especially challenging for young workers, who may not have had prior work experience and aren't provided the same kinds of high-touch mentorship supports.

- There is a rapidly evolving understanding of what procedures and standards need to be adopted, particularly for health and safety. This makes it hard to predict and be responsive to supporting skill needs.
  - For example, one leader described how their business developed new safety procedures three times over the last four months.

Status of Education and Training Programs for Frontline Workers

- How have recent events affected your education and training programs for frontline and entry-level workers?

- Any plans to cut back or expand training or tuition assistance programs?

- Any plans to partner with education/training organizations?

Status of Education and Training Programs for Frontline Workers

- None of the larger companies interviewed have discontinued or paused their in-house education and training programs.
- Companies are considering how long to continue education assistance benefits for furloughed and laid off workers.
- Since the pandemic began, employers reported an uptick in use of education programs.
- Since the pandemic, employers have also responded by expanding their education program offerings –
    - Courses that were previously in-person have been made virtual
    - Expanded partnerships with post-secondary educational institutions (in particular HBCU's)
    - Commitments to internships (including virtual internships) and providing apprenticeship opportunities

"The pandemic has given us the gift of a heightened attention to these things that have been happening for a long time. We've been on a journey to be better, but now we have a true "now's the time" to build things that will be sustainable, not just checking the box and doing some trainings. How can we come out of this better than we came in?"

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Status of Education and Training Programs for Frontline Workers

- Reasons for increased enrollment in internal education and training programs

  - One interviewee noted, "*COVID-19 has accelerated the need for internal career mobility. Betting on internal candidates pays off more than the gamble of bringing on someone new.*"

  - Other interviewees noted that some workers – such as when they were furloughed – had more time to enroll in education programs and used this as opportunity to expand their education and skills in case they need to prepare for another career.

  - In-person courses that are now virtual are accessible to a wider group of employees.

Status of Education and Training Programs for Frontline Workers

Interviewees shared important considerations to support worker success in education and training programs:

- **Financial assistance** – Offering scholarships, tuition disbursement and other subsidized education offerings (e.g., paying employees for time spent learning) to encourage employee enrollment and persistence

- **Accessibility** – Virtual offerings and supporting workers access to computers and internet; also employees can enroll in course that meets their personal needs and schedules

- **Flexibility** – Multiple on-ramps to a range of certificates for employees who are at different levels of education and experience

- **Coaching Supports** – This can help support employee persistence in education programs and to help employees understand and be exposed to a breadth of career path options

- **Supportive Services** – Transportation, technology access, and other wrap-around supports to aid employee persistence and retention

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Challenges with Education and Training Programs for Frontline Workers

- There is uncertainty about local in-demand occupations. Which jobs are future proof now?
  - Presents challenges for companies who offer outskilling programs

- Smaller employers face resource constraints when investing in training and upskilling for frontline employees.

- The virtual environment highlights the digital divide. Workers with limited or no access to broadband/high speed internet will not have access to the same education and training opportunities.

- The virtual environment can present challenges for English Language Learners as well learners with low literacy and numeracy skills. One leader characterized these marginalized groups as "hidden workers" and said "a lot of frontline workers are hidden workers—there isn't job security, pay equity, etc. Companies who don't figure out how to connect with their frontline workers aren't going to succeed."

Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- In what ways is your business supporting practices to advance racial equity and inclusion in the workplace?

- How has the current context with the pandemic and the heightened attention on racial inequities influenced your workplace practices?

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REI Context

- Clair Minson, Founder & Principal Consultant at Sandra Grace LLC, said we are living in a "double pandemic" economy, adding "we are not only continuing to deal with the impacts of COVID-19 on our economy and our lives personally and those that we are connected to, but we're also dealing with the lingering and very current impacts of racism on communities of color, specifically Black workers."

- Interviewees noted that there's been a heightened urgency to this work– companies realize that their previous REI actions weren't enough. There is a sense of humility around doing this work, and acknowledgement that there is a long way to go.

- We asked questions specifically related to how the heightened attention to racial injustice had affected workplace practices, but we also heard about DEI initiatives related to other identities such as gender and ability.

Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

Responses from business that indicate REI is a priority area:

- The racial and economic disparities that have been put under the spotlight this year have spurred companies to look more carefully at what they are doing and commit to doing better and more. Some interviewees noted that it made them realize their DEI practices were falling short. One leader said, *"until we stopped and listened, we didn't realize that we weren't meeting our employees' needs."*

- Most interviewees noted that the current moment has accelerated existing DEI work. It has underscored the importance of creating career pathways and supporting employee advancement in equitable ways.
  - For example, in healthcare, one leader shared the need to invest in partnerships, trainings and apprenticeships that helps attract and retain workers who have the cultural competencies necessary to serve their patient communities.

Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Leadership Development

- Diversifying Talent Pipelines

- Internships and Apprenticeships to Support a Diverse Set of Employees

- Utilizing Disaggregated Internal Company Data

- Building Relationships with Community Organizations

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Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Leadership development:
  - Recognition that diversifying workforce is not sufficient—it's necessary to create and support an inclusive environment.
    - As one interviewee noted, *"our programs/efforts to diversify our workforce are only as good as our culture, and culture is driven by leadership."*
  - Several interviewees noted that leaders are now having to equip themselves with the skills necessary to have explicit conversations about race.
  - Many interviewees noted that their senior leadership is not as diverse as they would like in terms of race and gender, and more work needs to be done to address this.
  - DEI task forces were a popular method of advancing this work. Some tasks forces were composed of senior leadership and entry-and mid-level employees, all working together to identifying challenges and creating solutions – including concrete action plans.

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Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Diversifying talent pipelines
  - New partners mentioned include HBCU's, local community colleges and high schools.
  - Commitments to hiring a specific populations of workers
  - New direct hire programs are being considered – e.g., recruiting veterans into an in-house accelerated training program to become a manager

Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Internships and apprenticeships to support early career opportunities and advancement opportunities for diverse set of employees
  - Firms reported continuing or expanding apprenticeship opportunities to talent pools (e.g., high school and community college students) they don't typically hire from.
  - Some companies are reconsidering educational requirements that may limit the diversity of their talent pool. A leader said that the apprenticeship model is proving an effective approach for companies to address systemic racism—"*where someone lives should not determine their future employment prospects.*"
  - An employer located in a city where protests against actions of police violence occurred said "*when you look at what you can do in the moment, internships and mentorships I think are now being looked at more so as ways to help the community rather than the company.*"

Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Using internal company data to examine metrics and guide business strategy
  - Disaggregating employment data by age, race and gender at multiple levels of staffing (entry, mid and leadership levels)
  - Instituting new processes around transparency & sharing of demographic data (some companies said they were more conservative about sharing data).
    - One company that wants to ensure that people of color and women are represented not only in entry, but in mid-level and leadership levels is developing a dashboard to track and assess metrics around team composition, and this will be included as part of the performance metrics for management and leadership.
    - One company noted that they are mining their data to assess the efficacy of their educational programming with a racial diversity lens. Includes disaggregating data to examine employee outcomes with respect to persistence in education programs, completion, grade and career advancement.

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Practices to Advance Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Building relationships with community organizations to provide coaching and support services
  - One company that offers apprenticeships partners with a non-profit organization that provides wrap-around supports tailored to the needs of the students they are recruiting.
  - One leader said: *"We don't want to set anyone up for failure. We have a licensed clinical service worker on staff. We pay half of her salary, but she's not housed here. She is super helpful for our staff. She helps solve things like we have an employee who was about to be evicted and has a son who is disabled. Our social worker met with the landlord and negotiated a new rent in a less expensive unit and waived all the fees."*

Challenges to Advancing Racial Equity and Inclusion

- Capacity constraints within smaller firms who don't have the resources to hire a full-time DEI leader and may have limited HR functions within the firm. It is resource intensive to do this work, and often if someone isn't responsible for it, no one is responsible for it.

- Leadership's preparation and capacity to have challenging conversations about race and equity can be a catalyst or obstacle to REI work. There also needs to be trust in leadership, as well as channels for employees to provide feedback.

- The current labor pool is composed of workers who have experience (e.g., 10 to 15 years of work experience) – making it a more competitive job market for a diverse pool of applicants who on average have less experience. Young workers of color will especially be impacted by this economic recession.

Worker Supports

- What types of employee concerns have surfaced regarding what workers are facing in the workplace and at home?

- Ways that businesses are supporting workers?

- Major issues that still need to be addressed?

Worker Supports – Context

- **The pandemic has amplified a bifurcation of workforce** – Frontline, essential workers and white collar workers are experiencing two totally different realities. White collar workers are able to stay at home and be safe, see increased wages and savings, and flexibility to work when they can. Essential workers are experiencing the opposite—little to no control over their schedules or willingness to go back into the workplace, lost wages, and financial strain. They also have an increased risk of contracting COVID, often needing to continue taking public transportation and interacting with colleagues and customers at work. This increased risk not only directly affects employees, but their families as well. Most worker supports are accessible for white collar workers, but it's important to make sure frontline workers' needs aren't made "invisible".

- Many worker supports are in response to an **increased need for health and safety protections.** It's in a company's best interest to keep employees safe and well so they can keep their business open. Businesses are taking the lead in crafting and enforcing health and safety precautions given the lack of national coordination and enforcement of safety measures.

- **Mental health and childcare are two critical needs** that rose up during interviews. Employees are experiencing burnout and fatigue, and those raising children have additional stress and uncertainty. One interviewee likened it to "running on empty." From healthcare leaders, we heard they are anticipating that frontline healthcare workers will experience PTSD-like trauma given what they have experienced during the pandemic.

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Worker Supports

- **Physical Health and Safety**: Access to PPE; social distancing at work; ongoing trainings to support continuous safety improvements; reduced or waived telehealth fees

- **Mental Health**: Reduced or waived behavioral health fees; increased number of mental health sessions for employees, partners, and their children; formalized peer support programs – one company started a program where employees who have tested positive for the virus can connect with colleagues who recovered from COVID-19 so they can cultivate a positive mindset

- **Financial and Food Supports**: Hazard pay; restaurant and food service employers are providing free meals to employees and their families, even if they were furloughed; free immigration support including lawyers and a dedicated support team

- **Flexibility**: Instituting practices such as no meetings on Fridays and asking mangers to respect employees' schedules; flexible scheduling to support employees with caregiving needs; extension of personal leave of absence policies to encourage employees not to quit and be able to take care of their families and themselves

- **Childcare and Caregiving**: Paid leave for employees with children impacted by school closures; subsidized childcare stipends; connecting employees to childcare providers and tutors

- **Increased Communication Touchpoints**: Ongoing engagement through pulse surveys to gather employee feedback and be more responsive to employees' needs; appreciation and thank you' s from corporate staff and through social media

Challenges to Providing Worker Supports

- **Childcare is a systemic issue.** Long before the pandemic, businesses of all sizes and their workers expressed frustration about lack of affordable, high-quality childcare and how it can impact attendance and productivity. COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges facing working parents.

- **Essential workers face heightened risks.** It can be difficult for businesses to accommodate all the needs of this segment of the workforce (e.g. flexible scheduling, ability to work remotely, total protection from exposure to COVID-19, etc.). Many businesses have taken significant measures to protect and appreciate their essential workers, but they are still in a precarious position. Some businesses, especially medium or small sized businesses, may not be in a financial position to offer hazard pay.

- **Guidance around COVID-19 is constantly evolving,** and the national and local context is dynamic – it can be challenging to provide worker supports in this environment. It requires a constant re-evaluation of employee needs and the capacity and resources to respond to these needs.

Looking Ahead

The Year Ahead – Key Questions with Implications for 2021

- **How severe and long-lasting will the current COVID-19 spike be? And, when will the vaccine be available to the public so people can return to work?** These are questions that are outside of the control and scope of individual businesses but will surely impact consumer demand trends and economic forecasts.

- **Will there be another economic stimulus with increased UI payments?** If so, this could impact the talent pool of frontline workers.

- **Will the energy and movement around REI work persist?** Given current events and heightened attention to racial injustice, many companies have made steps to address their REI goals. If these conversations fall out of the national spotlight, will these companies fulfill their promises?

- **Which of the current workplace modifications will continue beyond the pandemic?** Many workers can now work remotely. Will this continue once the fear of the pandemic has subsided? How will office spaces be used, and will the current flexibility around remote work continue?

- **What will be the impact on young adult workers and primary caregivers (mostly women)? How will this impact the professional development and careers of young workers in the long run?** Women, people of color, young adults, and other marginalized segments of the workforce will continue to be disproportionately impacted. The full or partial return to the in-person workplace could exacerbate inequities. For example, older, single men would be able to go back more easily, putting those who have caregiving responsibilities or have transportation challenges at the margins of in-person workplace collaboration. This could impact their ability to access mentoring opportunities, exposure to senior leaders, and how often they are considered for opportunities.