



VOICES FROM
THE FRONTLINE

**POST-COVID
WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT:
A DIGITAL
TRANSFORMATION
AND
WHAT IT MEANS
FOR WORKFORCE
PROFESSIONALS**

SEPTEMBER 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Digital Transformations: The Future of Bringing the Office Home	5
Survey Respondent Demographics and Organization Types.....	7
Section I	
Digital Transformation of Workforce Development Since the Onset of Covid-19	9
The Adoption and Future of Remote Work.....	10
New Tools incorporated into Frontline Work.....	12
Skill Gap in Frequently Used Digital Systems.....	15
Training.....	16
Outcome Metrics and Digital Infrastructure.....	19
Section II	
Job Developers, Case Managers, Trainers & Instructors: Three Case Studies of Trends in Digital Work	21
Digital Communication Tools: Important for On-Site and Work from Home	24
Digital Infrastructure for At-Home Work.....	25
Conclusion	
Digital Tools Promise Greater Flexibility for Workers and Improved Service for Clients, but Require Robust Planning and Support	27
Acknowledgments	29
Endnotes	31

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



During March-May 2021, Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) and the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School conducted a survey of over 200 workforce development professionals whose primary responsibilities are client or jobseeker-facing. The survey focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these workers. It follows up on a January-February 2020 “Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals” conducted by WPTI just prior to Covid-19’s arrival in New York City. That earlier survey assessed the needs, perspectives, and concerns of workers in this field.

This report revisits these questions in the pandemic’s wake, adding new findings that address the monumental shifts in the tools, norms, and settings of work the pandemic produced. We surveyed frontline employees who were asked to don PPE and work from the office, or set up new workspaces at home, or juggle a hybrid work environment that incorporated both on-site and remote work.

THREE BROAD CATEGORIES OF TRANSFORMATION ARE ANALYZED:

- ➔ NEW DIGITAL TOOLS
- ➔ NEW WORK NORMS
- ➔ NEW AREAS OF SUPPORT AND TRAINING

The report discusses what we call the “digital transformation” of the workforce development sector. Three broad categories of that transformation are analyzed:

- New Digital Tools
- New Work Norms
- New Areas of Support and Training

New Digital Tools: The survey reveals the high rate at which workforce development professionals, regardless of their specific titles or areas of expertise, increased their use of digital communications technology as part of their job. Reflecting a sweeping shift to remote or hybrid work environments, 87 percent of survey respondents reported that they are working at least partially remotely. More than 90 percent indicated that they are using digital communication tools, such as Zoom or Google Meets.

New Work Norms: Many survey respondents believe that they will continue to work remotely, at least part of the time, in the future,



adding a level of flexibility to their work but also requiring new training on the digital tools required to serve jobseekers and engage employers effectively. More than half of case managers, job developers, and instructors/trainers who responded to the survey indicated that they, rather than their employers, are supplying many of the digital tools they use for remote work. In the long term, if remote work is to continue as respondents anticipate, employers will have to address this challenge and ensure that workers are provided with the digital tools their jobs require.

New Areas of Support and Training: Many workforce professionals, even those expressing confidence in their digital proficiency, desire additional training on the digital tools they use. More than a quarter of respondents, across multiple job categories, indicated interest in receiving additional training and developing additional skills on a range of tools, from PowerPoint to Learning Management Systems.

The report's findings have serious implications with regard to racial, gender, and economic equity, especially relevant in a field in which the vast majority of workers are people of color and women, with a disproportionate number of women of color. Ensuring that they have the digital tools, skills, and training needed to succeed and advance in the workforce development field, as both the field and the broader labor market rapidly digitize, will help foster an agenda of equity across the sector.

Later in 2021, WPTI and the Center for New York City Affairs will publish a second, fuller report based on our 2021 survey. It will address the impact of Covid-19 on workforce development professionals, focusing on issues ranging from compensation and hours to worker morale, job quality, and racial and gender equity.



INTRODUCTION

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS: THE FUTURE OF BRINGING THE OFFICE HOME



Digital Transformations: Integrating New Tools, Training, and Support for Workers into the Workforce Development Sector

In the wake of a global pandemic, a rapidly changing labor market, and an increasingly digital economy, WPTI has recognized that New York City's workforce development system needs to modify existing ways of doing business and use technology and digital strategies to adapt, reskill, and upskill to better serve jobseekers. Our *Digital Transformation Initiative (DTI)* takes on the digital divide facing New York's low-income communities and the organizations that serve them, addressing digital access, digital infrastructure, and digital fluency. DTI focuses on: 1) Enhanced technology infrastructure; 2) Networked data collection, analysis, and sharing; and 3) Key skills and competencies for practitioners.

Salesforce, one of the country's leading cloud-based software development companies and a leader in customer relationship management (CRM) systems, defines digital transformation as, "...the process of using digital technologies to create new - or modify existing - business processes, culture, and customer experiences to meet changing business and marketing requirements. This reimagining of business in the digital age is digital transformation."

Between March-May 2021, WPTI and the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School surveyed over 200 frontline workers in the workforce development sector. This followed a year of dramatic workplace transformations, for the workforce development field, the human services sector, and the economy at large. The economic rollercoaster and public health crisis following the onset of Covid-19 made the responsibilities of workforce development frontline workers both daunting, and, as the economy reopens, essential. In New York City, the recession induced by the pandemic created levels of unemployment not experienced since the Great Depression. As the city gradually reopens and employment rebounds unevenly across the



As the city gradually reopens and employment rebounds unevenly across the economy, workforce development frontline workers will play crucial roles in reconnecting displaced New Yorkers to jobs.

economy, workforce development frontline workers will play crucial roles in reconnecting displaced New Yorkers to jobs.

Workforce development professionals also saw a year of dramatic change in their work routines, communication strategies, and the tools they were expected to use. With many offices closed, 2020-21 was a year of digital transformation. Frontline workforce providers incorporated new digital tools into their work, enabling them to continue to connect with and serve clients throughout the pandemic, as well as collaborate with peers. Connecting unemployed workers to jobs is often the work of a team and this year saw the emergence of new digital platforms for such collaboration.

The inclusion of funding for broadband expansion in President Joe Biden's proposed infrastructure plan, as well as recent State legislation designed to guarantee affordable internet to all New Yorkers, underscores a clear lesson of the pandemic: Reliable access to the internet and digital technology is central to full participation in the economy and in educational opportunities.¹ Digital literacy as well as reliable access to broadband and technology will be essential for an equitable economic recovery. It will be especially crucial for providers in the workforce development field. To connect, or reconnect, workers to employment and feed an equitable economic recovery, they must have the digital skills they need.

This past year saw the emergence of new work norms in workforce development. This survey provides insight into the benefits and challenges of remote work, and highlights areas in which staff and supervisors will need to continue developing sustainable remote work strategies. There is a evident need for greater, continued discussion about communication, collaboration, and flexible schedules for those who continue to work remotely and those who will have flexible, hybrid, and in-person work situations in the future.

Finally, this survey illuminates new ways that those providing frontline workforce services will need to be supported and upskilled. It highlights specific areas of training in digital tools and technologies, as well as the need to consider how technological infrastructure will be supported in at-home work settings. With many organizations considering reduced office space, the home will remain an important work site for many in the foreseeable future. This shift can have benefits for both workers and clients if it is made deliberately, with a focus on training and communication. Attention must also be paid to the digital and other costs potentially transferred from employer to employee in providing services remotely.

This survey gives a detailed look at how working from home and the incorporation of new technologies have changed the tools and habits workers find most effective, as well as outlining areas of urgent need for staff, supervisor, and industrywide discussions about how remote work may continue to influence the workforce development sector.

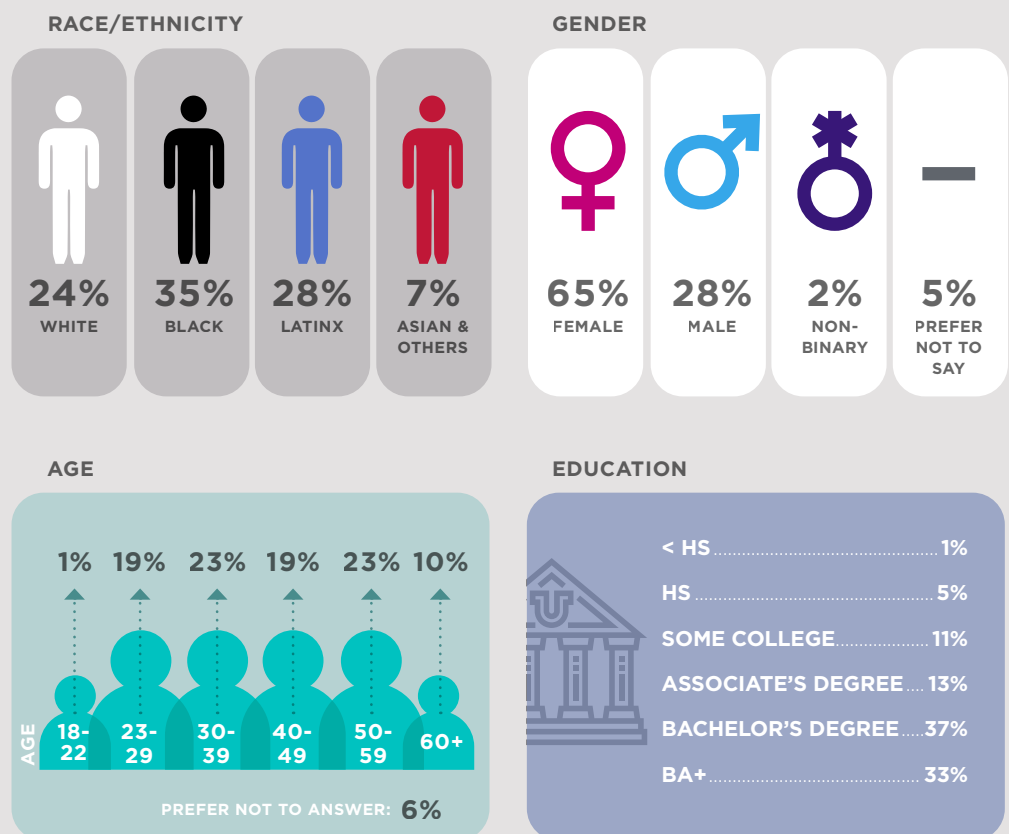
SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND ORGANIZATION TYPES

The overwhelming majority of respondents (86 percent) reported working directly with jobseekers and program participants. More than nine in 10 respondents worked for a non-profit organization (two percent worked for a university, three percent for the for-profit private sector, and three percent for a government agency). More than six in 10 worked for an organization employing 100 or more workers.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified as women and more than a third identified as Black (Figure 1). Workers from

Figure 1.

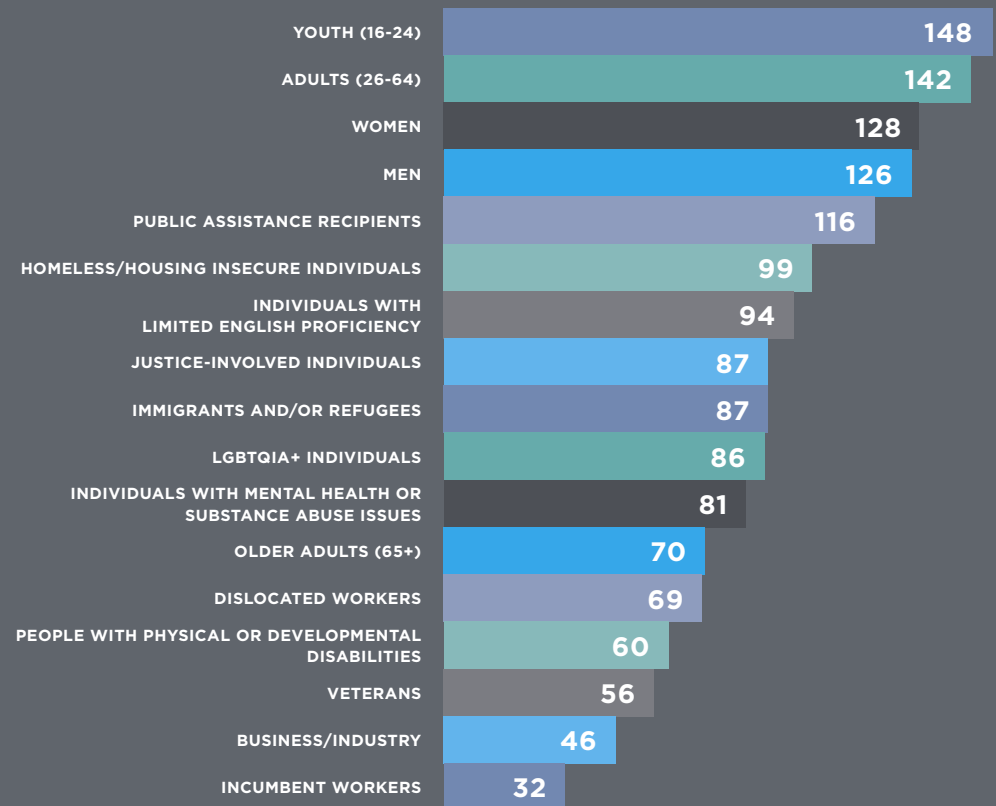
FRONTLINE WORKFORCE SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



across the age spectrum were represented, with respondents as young as 18 and as old as 60-plus. The majority (65 percent) fell between 30 and 60 years old. Most respondents were full-time employees (84 percent) and had worked for their current employer for more than a year (86 percent). Additionally, most respondents were experienced in the workforce development field, with more than seven in 10 having over three years of experience and a third having more than 10 years of experience. The organizations represented serve a range of constituents, led by: youth (ages 16-24); public assistance recipients; homeless and housing insecure individual; immigrants and refugees; and justice-involved individuals (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

SURVEY RESPONDENT CONSTITUENCIES



Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple constituencies.

Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

SECTION I

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SINCE THE ONSET OF COVID-19



Section I: Digital Transformation of Workforce Development since the onset of COVID-19



We learned from workers that there are still significant gaps in training and support for digital work.

Workforce development professionals provide the essential services of preparing unemployed or underemployed women and men for employment and connecting them with job opportunities and career pathways. The frontline workforce in this field encompasses a range of job titles, including job developers, case managers, career advisers, trainers, job coaches, and retention specialists. They handle an array of tasks and responsibilities in helping jobseekers secure quality employment and advance economically.²

In a typical week, such a frontline worker might engage in a wide range of activities: Outreach and recruitment of job seekers; intake and assessment; contacting employers; editing resumes; staying in contact with clients to facilitating training and job readiness sessions; entering intake and retention data and keeping track of the metrics of program completion and job placement. In addition, workforce professionals often connect jobseekers to supportive services needed to ensure that they are able to persist along their career journey.

Especially in the wake of Covid-19, much of this work was done using digital tools. Though workers have become familiar and in many cases adept at using these tools, many challenges remain: What digital tools do workers think they need additional training to use effectively? Is training most often delivered at the point of hiring or are digital tools learned “on the job?” What professional norms have developed around using digital interfaces? What new norms would help ensure client services are professionally delivered? And, for those who continue to work remotely or on a hybrid schedule, how can workers keep their professional responsibilities from taking over their home spaces?

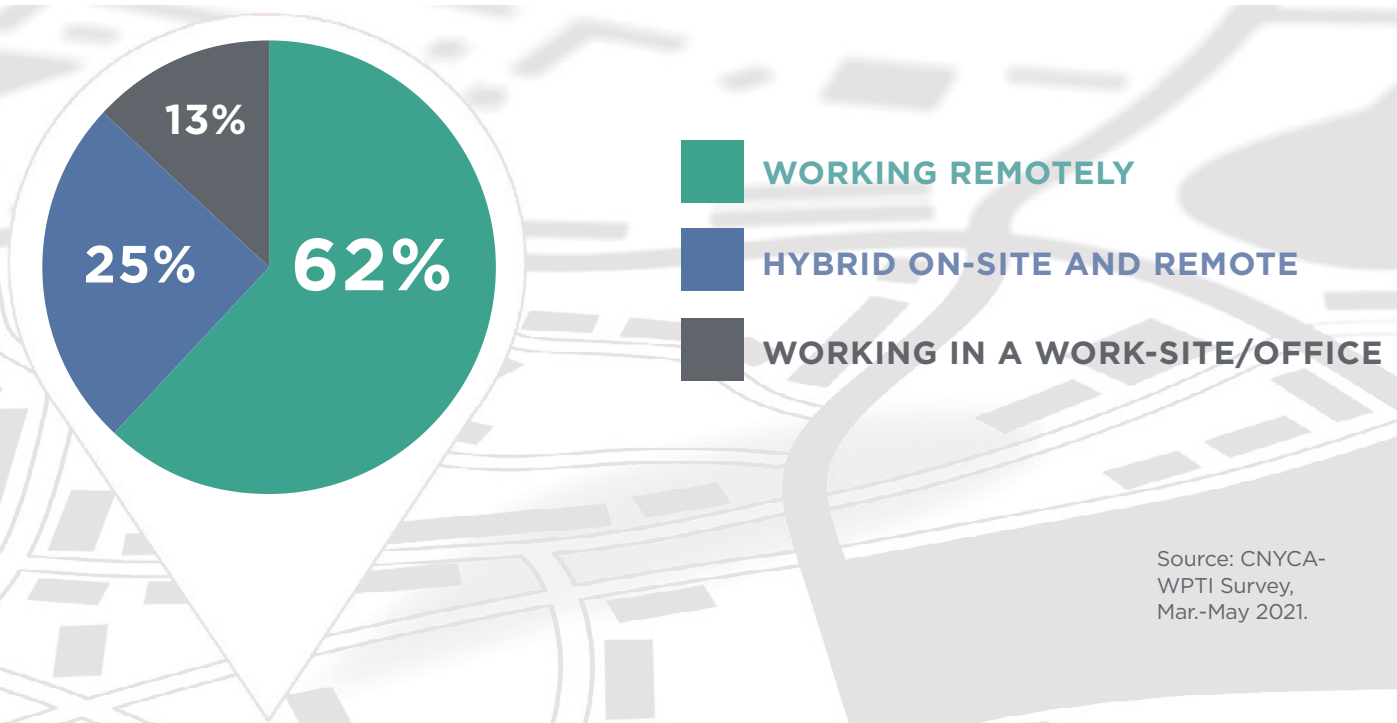
We learned from workers that there are still significant gaps in training and support for digital work. In what follows, we outline the new tools,

work norms, and areas of frontline worker support thrown into sharp relief by the past year's unusual work conditions.

The Adoption and Future of Remote Work

The overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they were working the same schedule as prior to Covid (82 percent). A small number (three percent) worked reduced hours and a slightly larger group (nine percent) worked additional hours. The remainder reported facing more irregular hours and unpredictable schedules. Just over 12 percent said they were regularly expected to work overtime; the rest said they were not.

More than six in 10 respondents at the time of the close of the survey in May 2021 were working entirely remotely (62 percent) while an additional 26 percent were following a hybrid schedule: working in the office part-time and remotely part-time (See Figure 3). The remaining 13 percent reported they were working exclusively in a worksite or office.





Survey respondents showed that changes in work habits are likely to remain for the foreseeable future.

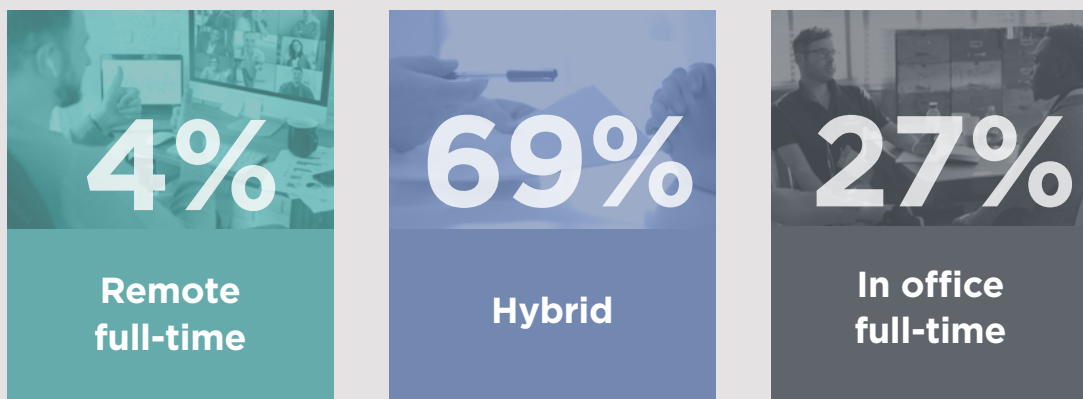
In the past year, with many schoolchildren learning entirely from home, many workers required greater flexibility in their work schedules. Of the more than 200 respondents, 85 percent reported that their bosses or managers had been at least moderately flexible about allowing them to adapt their work schedules to handle child care demands, with over a third saying that their bosses had allowed “a great deal” of flexibility.

Survey respondents showed that changes in work habits are likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Just under half (45 percent) of respondents said that their organization had downsized their office space during Covid, and only 27 percent said they expected to be in the office full-time post-Covid. The large majority (69 percent) said they expected to work a hybrid schedule (See Figure 4). The decrease in office space many employers envision, as well as the long-term plans that many workers have for continuing with at least part-time work from home, underscore the need to create effective and manageable digital work practices.

This survey suggests some initially short-term adaptations will continue to characterize the workplace beyond the pandemic.

Figure 4.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT YOUR WORK LOCATION TO BE POST-COVID?



Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

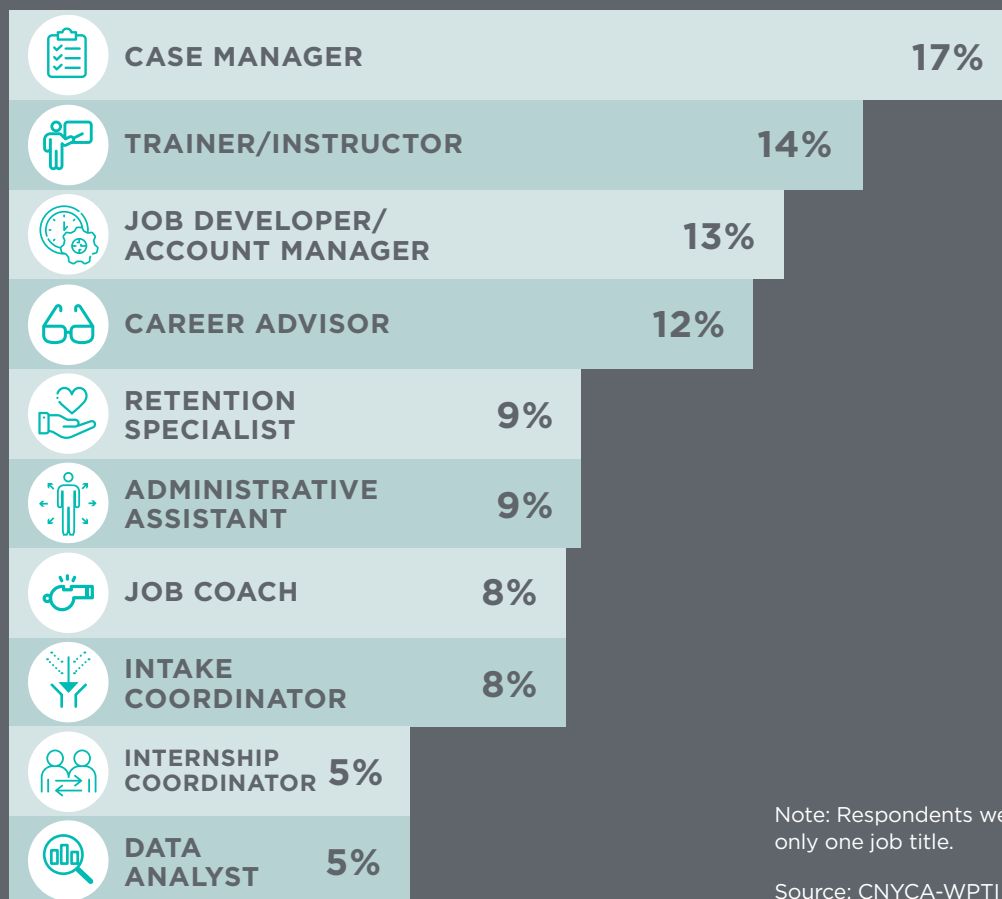
New Tools Incorporated into Frontline Work

The unprecedented social and economic changes of the past year catalyzed a leap in the use of new digital tools for work. These tools were quickly and thoroughly incorporated into daily work. This steep increase in communication, collaborative, and work technologies not only transformed daily routines; it also required workers to learn and become adept with these tools, often on their own.

A range of workforce development jobs and responsibilities were represented in the survey (See Figure 5). These were led by case managers (17 percent of respondents), trainers and instructors (14 percent), and

Figure 5.

SURVEY RESPONDENT JOB ROLES



Note: Respondents were allowed to select only one job title.

Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

job developers (13 percent). Across all respondents, data entry and analysis topped the list of regularly performed job tasks, followed by job readiness and soft skills instruction, career counseling, and case management. These tasks both explicitly and implicitly rely on expertise with a variety of digital tools, from Customer Relationship Management systems (CRMs) and learning management systems to collaborative tools like virtual meeting software (See Figure 6).

CRMs are databases typically used by workforce organizations to track participant demographics, service delivery outputs, case notes, and program and participant outcome, such as training completion, job placement, retention, and advancement. For most organizations, their CRM or database system is the essential tool for tracking program and participant information needed for reporting to public and private funders.

Figure 6.

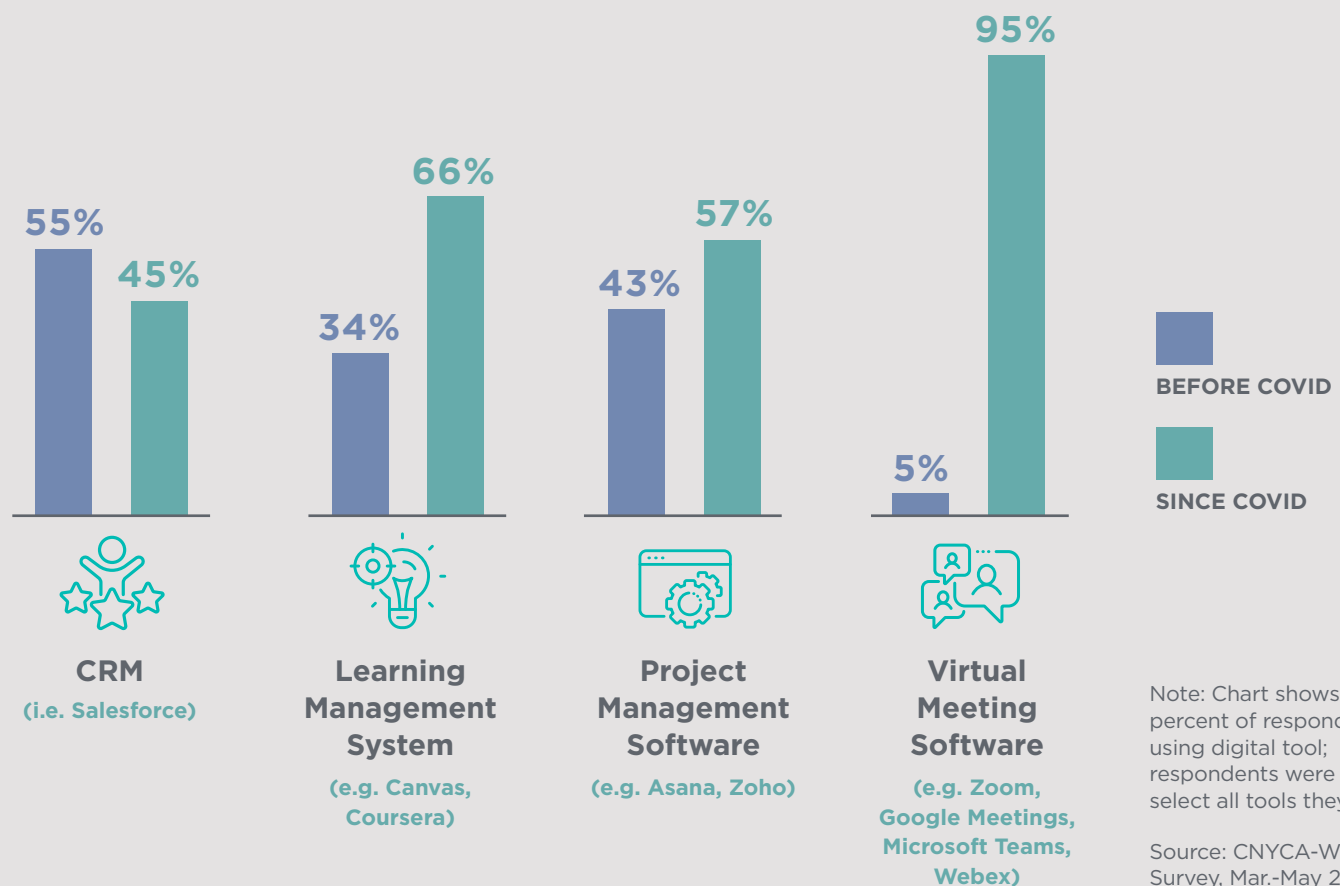
JOB TASKS REGULARLY PERFORMED



The range of new tools that workers have incorporated into their daily professional lives increased dramatically during 2020-21. The use of virtual meetings software skyrocketed across the board. Learning Management Systems, such as Canvas and Coursera, also increased (See Figure 7). These digital teaching tools might be deployed in multiple ways throughout the workday. A learning management system can be used by a job developer to host virtual synchronous or asynchronous courses for jobseekers. While a CRM is relied upon by workforce practitioners to track participant attendance and completion of training, jobs applied for, internships and job placements, job retention and career advancement.

Figure 7.

DIGITAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS USED BEFORE AND SINCE THE ONSET OF COVID-19



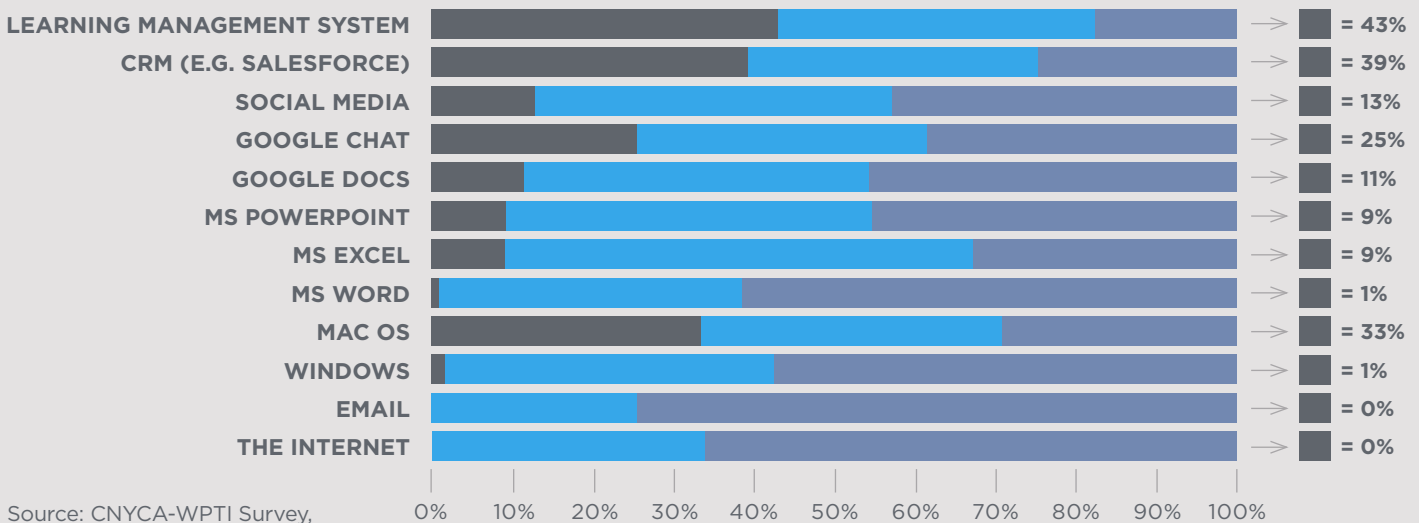
Skill Gap in Frequently Used Digital Systems

Respondents rated themselves in proficiency with these tools. While many felt confident using communication tools, like email, there were some tools that respondents did not feel confident using that have seen increased use in the past year. In particular, nearly half (43 percent) of frontline workers reported that though use of Learning Management Systems had nearly doubled over the past year, they nevertheless ranked themselves as “beginners” in understanding how to use them. An additional 40 percent called their skill level “intermediate” when using an LMS like Canvas and Coursera; only 17 percent called themselves “advanced” users. Skills in which respondents ranked themselves as beginners (see Figure 8) also included CRM (39 percent), Mac OS (33 percent), Google Chat (25 percent), and social media (13 percent). It is also worth noting that self-reported confidence levels regarding technological proficiency may assess the tools a worker regularly uses rather than the full range of a tool’s technological capabilities. Workers who both rank themselves as proficient users and desire greater training may be highlighting areas of unfamiliar tool use. Additional, more objective analysis would require an outside assessment, [such as that offered by Northstar](#).

Figure 8.

DIGITAL TOOL SKILLS

■ BEGINNER ■ INTERMEDIATE ■ ADVANCED



Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

Training

Clearly, technology training has become essential for frontline workers, and also for the clients they serve. Yet the survey reveals that current training falls far short of what is needed. Fewer than half of respondents said they received training as part of their onboarding (47 percent) and fewer than two-thirds said they received training at any point on new technology used by their organization (64 percent).


By contrast, a large majority (83 percent) of respondents said that technology training and technical assistance was available to them through their employer, and that their employer provided a designated resource (staff member or service) they could contact for training (80 percent). There is evidently a gap between those who receive training and those for whom it is available through their employer. It suggests that something prevents employees from taking advantage of valuable training and resources.

Approaching technology education as an essential part of worker training, ensuring each worker has a baseline skill proficiency, rather than viewing it as a trouble-shooting resource, may be essential as organizations look to incorporate long-term remote and hybrid service provision.

Many workers reported wanting more in-depth training on: data management tools, such as Excel and Salesforce; presentation, teaching, and training tools, including PowerPoint and Learning Management Systems; as well as collaborative tools, like Google Docs. Employees also highlighted communication tools for further skill development, including social media tools for communicating with the public and advocacy groups, as well as tools like Google Chat for communicating with fellow staff members.

Respondents were divided over how familiar they were with social media tools and how often they used specific services. Social media tools that topped the list of either occasional or frequent use were LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram (See Figure 9).

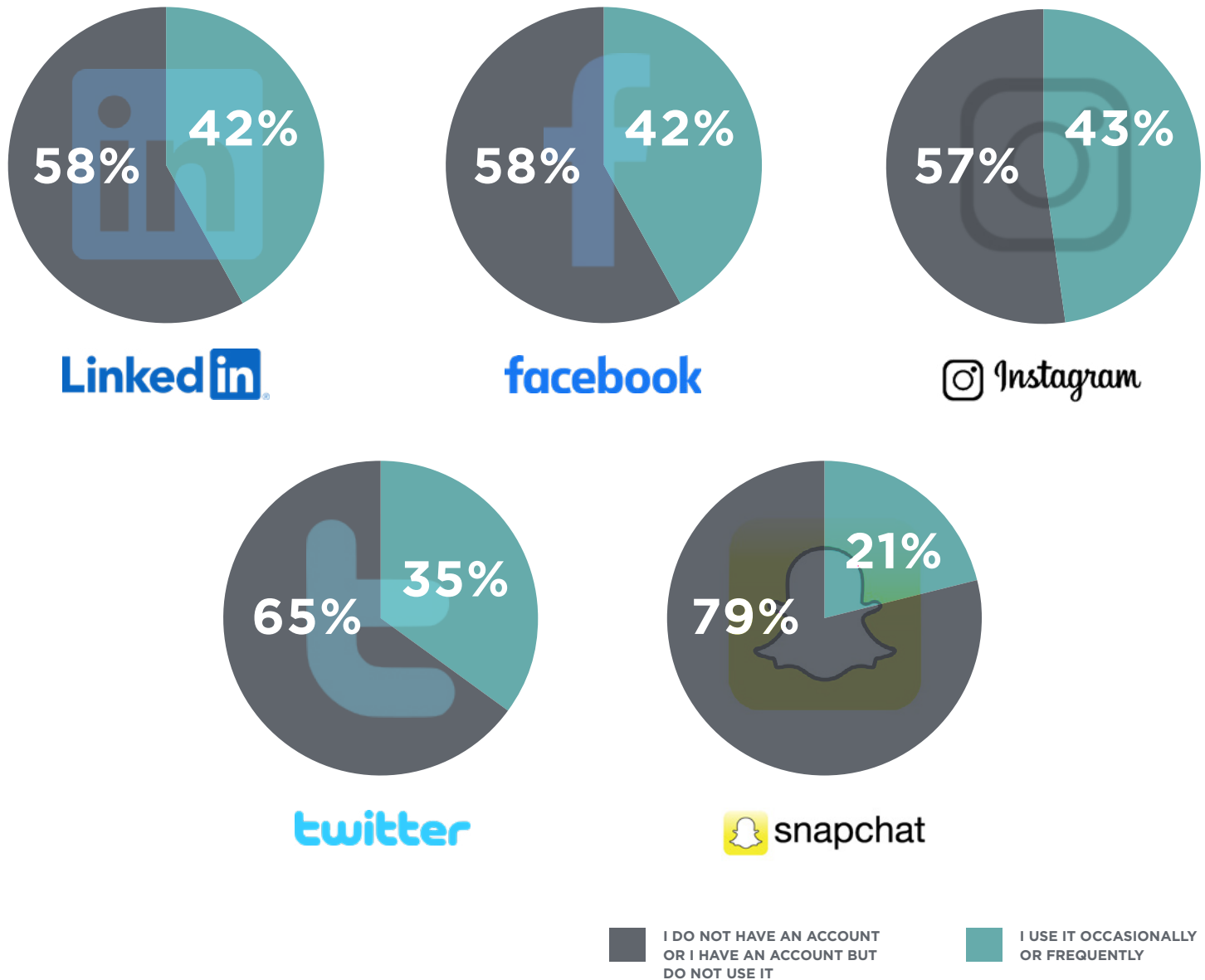
While the majority of respondents said they were communicating with their supervisor as frequently as prior to the pandemic (58 percent), slightly more reported that they were communicating more frequently (24 percent) as opposed to less frequently (19 percent). Respondents tended to use email, followed by Zoom and phone calls, for communicating with their boss and coworkers (See Figure 10).



The survey reveals that current training falls far short of what is needed.

Figure 9.

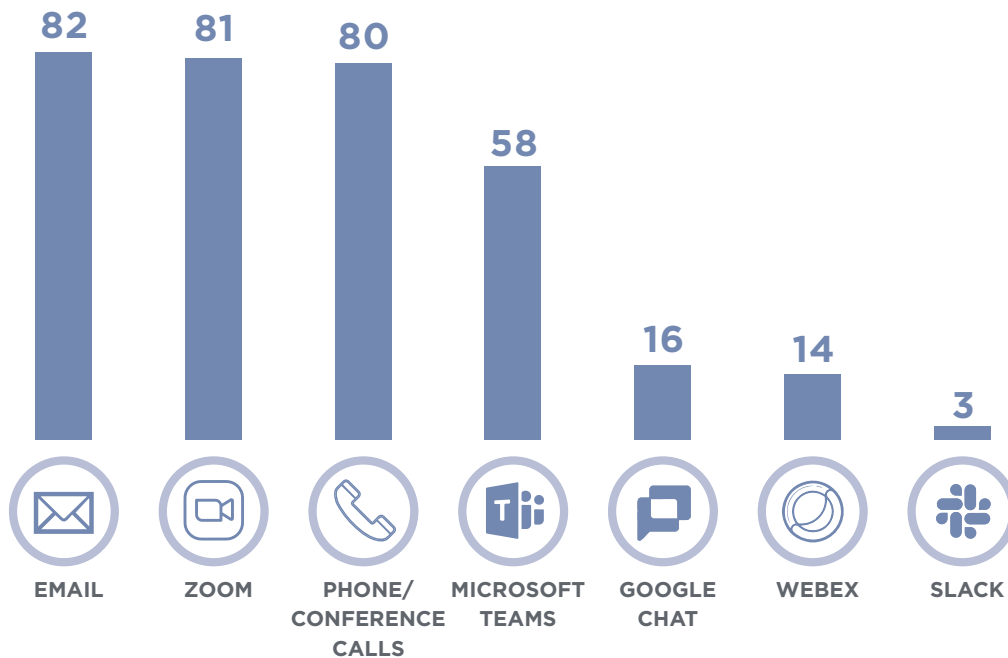
LINKEDIN, FACEBOOK, AND INSTAGRAM LEAD RESPONDENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA USE



Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

Figure 10.

EMAIL, ZOOM, AND PHONE CALLS TOP RESPONDENTS' COMMUNICATIONS LIST

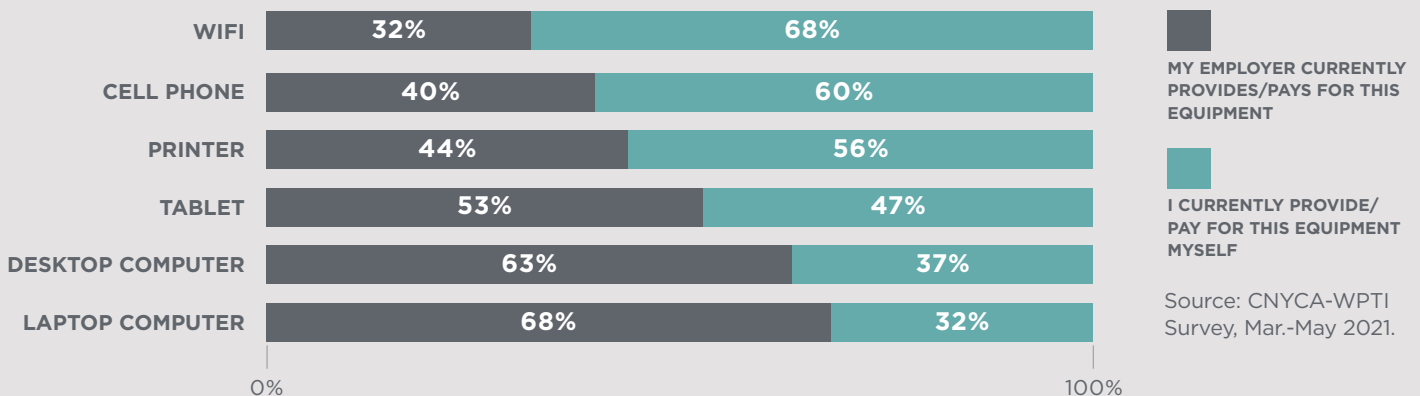


Note: Chart shows number of respondents. Respondents were able to select all communications tools they regularly use.

Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

Figure 11.

WHO PROVIDES AND PAYS FOR DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AT HOME?



Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

Outcome metrics and digital infrastructure



More than 70 percent of respondents reported that they felt increased pressure to meet outcome metrics in the Covid-impacted work environment.

Workforce development organizational funding is often dependent on meeting metrics that are tracked in online databases, a practice that requires workers to have reliable access to digital infrastructures. More than 70 percent of respondents reported that they felt increased pressure to meet outcome metrics in the Covid-impacted work environment.

The use of metrics to monitor at-home workers took two distinct forms: maintaining or extending the use of metrics for measuring participant outcomes; and an increased emphasis on tracking precise employee work time. In both cases, workers reported that tracking metrics took up an increasing amount of work time. Nevertheless, as organizations seek reliable and scalable ways to facilitate working from home, steady access to digital infrastructure will be essential to meet metric reporting requirements. Organizations may also need to reevaluate how much work time is dedicated to data input.

One respondent pointed out that while working remotely she felt increased pressure to keep detailed records of output metrics, such as program enrollees or job placements, but at the same time her “remote access to some of the systems, records, and resources required to achieve these goals was limited” by the digital infrastructure. Another respondent put it bluntly: “Computer and Wi-Fi issues made reporting and communicating with clients more difficult.” Additionally, some respondents pointed out that working from home added another layer of data reporting to their job. One said that it “introduced on top of the regular workload and getting in the way of focusing on the main job of producing employment outcomes.” This worker continued: “Learning new platforms and performing well on those platforms was added on top of the ‘old’ job requirements.” Finally, some respondents said that the shift to remote work produced a shift in attention to micromanaging their workdays, with one worker saying she felt like “funders wanted to know what we were doing during every second of the day and management felt obligated to meet those unrealistic demands.” However, the same worker also said that the initial avalanche of worry about accounting for worker time has subsided and “remote work feels more like a regular workday.”

Reliable digital infrastructure is essential for facilitating work; an unreliable infrastructure can get in the way of basic day-to-day responsibilities. However, the judicious use of reporting and oversight is also important for making remote work feel like a “normal workday,” with workers allowed reasonable control over how and when they fulfill their responsibilities. As one respondent put it, “I look for creative ways to perform well,” and while she is working remotely, she knows that “trust and productivity go together.”



“

**I look for creative ways
to perform well.
Trust and productivity
go together.**

—RESPONDENT



SECTION II

JOB DEVELOPERS, CASE MANAGERS, TRAINERS & INSTRUCTORS: THREE CASE STUDIES OF TRENDS IN DIGITAL WORK



We asked three questions:

What are their primary tasks and responsibilities?

What digital tools are these workers most practiced at using?

What areas of training are needed?

Digital tools have the potential to make work schedules and locations more flexible while maintaining close ties to clients and collaborators. However, workers playing different roles may need different kinds of tools and have unique learning curves and support needs.

To illustrate this point, we took three sample job categories: Case managers, job developers, and instructors or trainers. We then asked three questions: What are their primary tasks and responsibilities? What digital tools are these workers most practiced at using? What areas of training are needed?

Each case study demonstrated that workers' top responsibilities closely tracked their job titles (see Figure 12). However, in each case, workers also reported a range of responsibilities that they often shared with other job titles. Career counseling was among the top five job responsibilities for all three case studies. Both case managers and trainers reported data entry and analysis as a frequent task. And job readiness was a priority for both job developers and trainers.

Yet despite these commonalities, the areas in which workers highlighted their interest and need for more training differed. Case managers highlighted PowerPoint, Google Docs, and Excel. Job developers identified social media, email, and Word as the top three tools for which they would like further training. Instructors and trainers listed a CRM and LMS, alongside Windows and Mac OS more broadly as their desired areas of digital education.

While job responsibilities may be shared, the survey suggests that different jobs may be constructed to rely on unique kinds of tools. Employers can therefore use more targeted training to give workers the tools they know they need to be effective.

The survey asked workers to assess their current skill level in each of the digital tools they were interested in learning more about. However, there was no clear correlation between the tools workers thought were important to learn to use better and ones they felt they already knew well. For example, while case managers placed PowerPoint at the top

Figure 12.

CASE MANAGER, JOB DEVELOPER, AND INSTRUCTOR PRIMARY JOB RESPONSIBILITIES AND AREAS OF DESIRED DIGITAL TRAINING

CASE MANAGER

PRIMARY JOB RESPONSIBILITIES



1. Case management
2. Refer clients to other organizations and/or services
3. Career counseling
4. Job readiness / soft skills instruction
5. Data entry / data analysis

DIGITAL TOOLS

(% RESPONDENTS RANKED AS INTERESTED OR VERY INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE)

1. Powerpoint (**39%**)
2. Google Docs (**38%**)
3. Excel (**38%**)
4. CRM (**37%**)
5. LMS (**35%**) / MS Word (**35%**)

JOB DEVELOPER

PRIMARY JOB RESPONSIBILITIES



1. Job development
2. Employer outreach and/or engagement
3. Job placement
4. Career counseling
5. Job readiness / soft skills instruction

DIGITAL TOOLS

(% RESPONDENTS RANKED AS INTERESTED OR VERY INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE)

1. Social Media (**34%**)
2. Email/Internet (**30%**)
3. MS Word (**29%**)
4. Powerpoint (**27%**) / Excel (**27%**)
5. CRM (**26%**)

TRAINER/INSTRUCTOR

PRIMARY JOB RESPONSIBILITIES



1. Job readiness / soft skills instruction
2. Data entry / data analysis
3. Career counseling
4. Case management
5. Refer clients to other organizations and/or services

DIGITAL TOOLS

(% RESPONDENTS RANKED AS INTERESTED OR VERY INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE)

1. CRM (**26%**)
2. LMS (**26%**)
3. Windows (**25%**)
4. Email (**24%**)
5. Social Media (**22%**)



The findings of this survey offer a beginning place for these conversations by highlighting the top digital tools that more than 200 respondents in the workforce field find important and predict would require further training.

of their list of skills they felt interested or very interested in receiving further training on, 44 percent of respondents said they felt their skill level was “advanced,” 44 percent said they had “intermediate” skills, and only 12 percent called themselves beginners. Additionally, though more than a third of respondents said they would be interested in increasing their skill with MS Word, 56 percent of respondents said they were already “advanced” users.

Many workers clearly felt further training would improve the skill and effectiveness with which they use even familiar tools. By contrast, while survey findings suggest that the CRM is an important tool for tracking outputs and outcomes and that most workers are responsible for entering case notes and information in the system, the CRM nevertheless ranks low as a desired area of training (Figure 12).

Because these tools, in many cases, have a wide range of capabilities, it will be important for organizations to, with input from workers, highlight the critical functions of each tool and formally assess worker skill level in those specific areas. Combining skill assessments with conversations among workers and supervisors to determine the most essential digital tools will allow both workers and their supervisors to determine whether their familiarity with the digital tools matches up with the functions necessary for providing services to clients and working together effectively. The findings of this survey offer a beginning place for these conversations by highlighting the top digital tools that more than 200 respondents in the workforce field find important and predict would require further training.

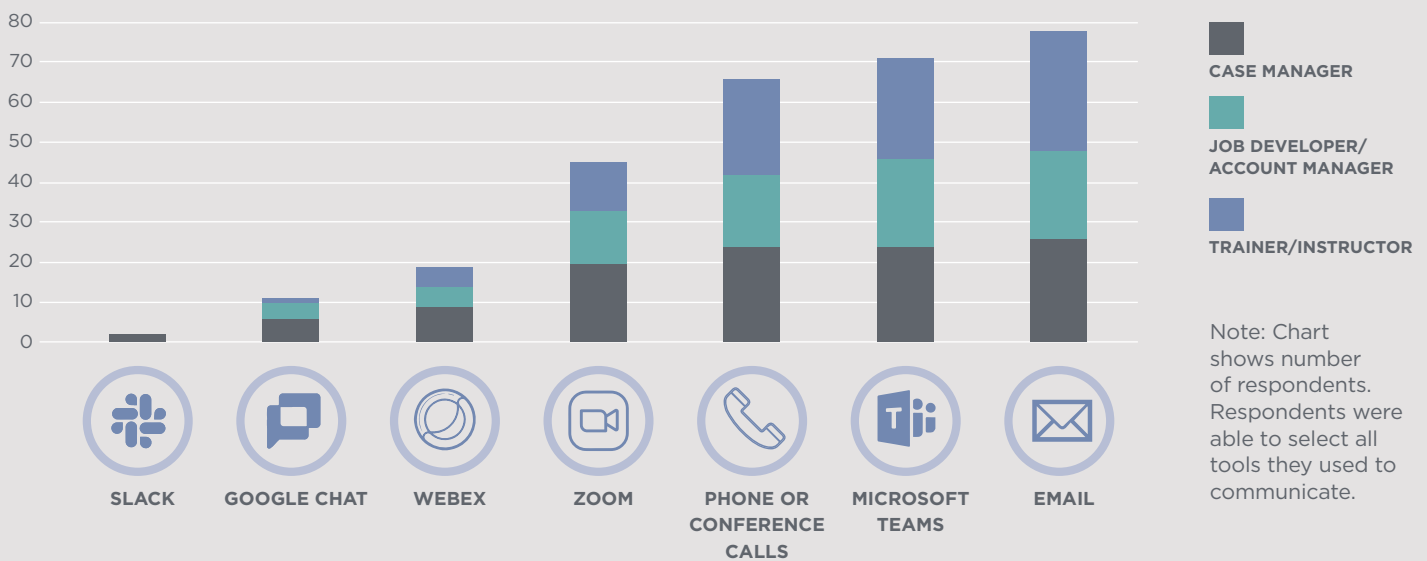
Digital Communication Tools: Important for On-Site and Work from Home

Communication tools are important for frontline workers in both on-site and remote work settings for reaching out to clients, checking in with supervisors, and collaborating with coworkers.

Case managers reported that they use email, followed by Microsoft Teams, phone or conference calls, and Zoom. Job developers said Zoom and phone calls were their top modes of communication, followed by email and Microsoft Teams. Few respondents mentioned that text platforms were used to send general information about program services or job openings to large groups of clients. Trainers and instructors also listed email as their top tool for communication, followed by phone and conference calls, and Zoom. Low on the list of preferred communication tools used by all three case study jobs were Slack, WebEx, and Google Chat.

Figure 13.

CASE MANAGER, JOB DEVELOPER, AND TRAINER WORK TOOLS



Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021

Digital Infrastructure for At-Home Work

As case studies, the three sample jobs reveal inconsistent rates of employee- and employer-provided technology. On average, case managers reported the overall highest incidence of paying for digital tools and infrastructure themselves. Aggregating all digital tools, including WI-FI, printer, cell phone, tablet, and desktop and/or laptops used at home, nearly half of workers reported having to provide or pay for equipment themselves (See Figure 14). Even key pieces of equipment, like a laptop or desktop, show differing rates of employer-provision; while nearly three-quarters of case managers report that their laptop is employer-provided, just over half of job developers and instructors do. There are multiple kinds of hardware that can perform the same functions for workers: laptops, desktops, or, in some cases, tablets. It is important that employers provide technology in an equitable fashion and not add unfair expenses to working from home for frontline workers.

Figure 14.

ABOUT HALF OF AGGREGATED DIGITAL TOOLS ARE PROVIDED BY EMPLOYERS FOR FRONTLINE WORKERS

DIGITAL TOOLS AND INFRASTRUCTURE USED AT HOME

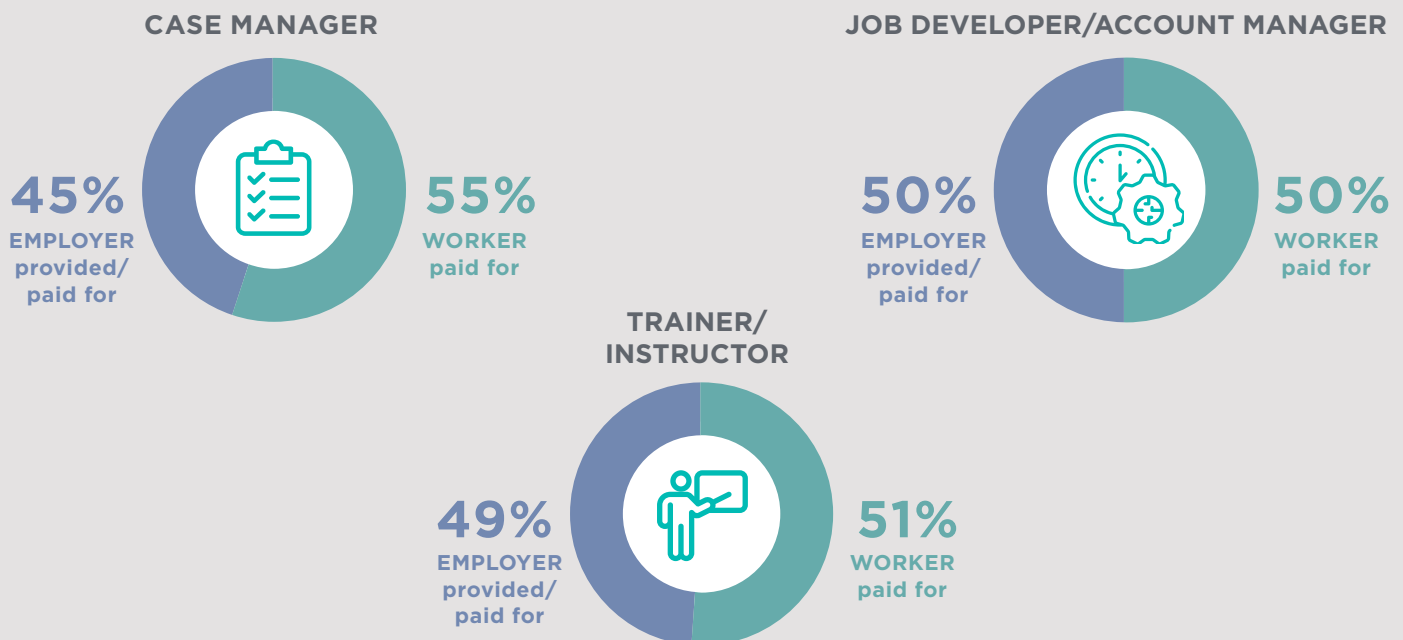
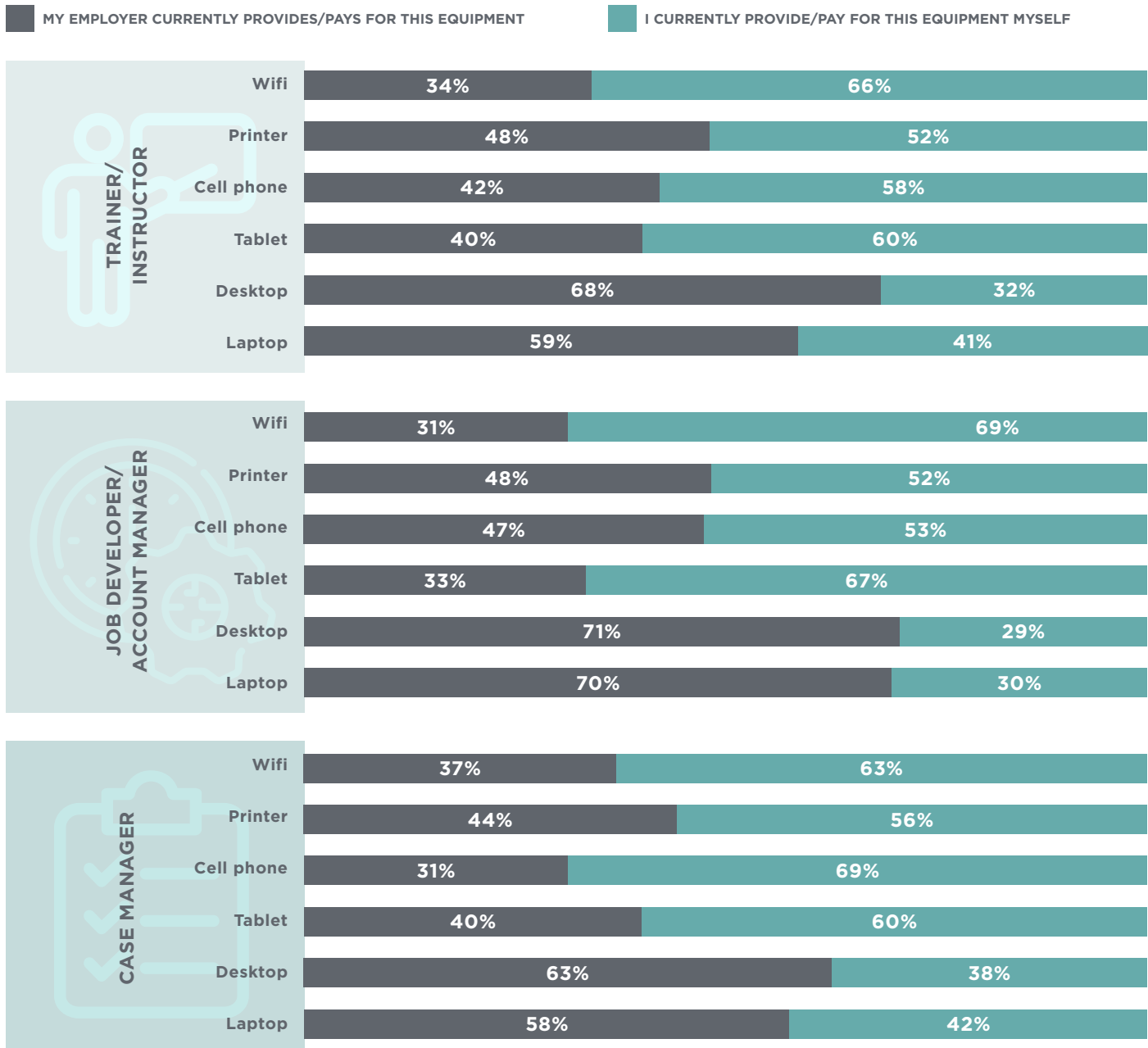


Figure 15.

DO EMPLOYERS OR EMPLOYEES PROVIDE THE TOOLS FOR WORKING FROM HOME?



CONCLUSION

DIGITAL TOOLS PROMISE GREATER FLEXIBILITY FOR WORKERS AND IMPROVED SERVICE FOR CLIENTS, BUT REQUIRE ROBUST PLANNING AND SUPPORT



Improved support for clients

Frontline workforce professionals use digital tools to meet a range of collaborative needs within their organizations and to perform client services. While many of these tools were used before Covid-19, the shift to remote work accelerated their expanded use and the adoption of new tools for training and instruction, data collection and analysis, and communication and collaboration. This past year demanded that workers learn quickly, adapt to new workflows, and be creative in fulfilling their demanding and critical jobs.

This period of digital transformation highlights areas in which workforce development organizations need to focus support and training to help their own workforces succeed. The incorporation of new digital tools into the workforce development sector raises daunting.

Nevertheless, the digital transformation of workforce development also provides opportunities for better serving clients. It has the potential to provide more seamless and sustained relationships between workers and clients. When jobseekers move or have caregiving responsibilities that impede traveling to receive services in person, these services might be delivered remotely.

Particularly as organizations incorporate virtual program models or shift to a hybrid service environment, providing the support and training for frontline workers to become proficient with digital tools will be critical for their success and for New York's economic recovery.

This survey demonstrates that greater and perhaps more tailored technology training will be necessary as the use of new digital tools continues to expand. It shows that less than half of respondents said they received technology training as part of their onboarding, even while the majority also said that digital training was available to them.

Connecting employees to available staff resources and making training a part of paid staff work time will be important for raising the digital literacy of frontline workers.

Furthermore, as workers have been forced to invest their own money in purchasing equipment, or are simply making do with the equipment they already personally own, it will be important for their employers - mostly non-profit organizations - to find the resources to invest in providing technology hardware and software to their workers. Training on this new technology will be critical. In spite of professed confidence in using certain key software, the desire for increased training is evidence that workforce professionals may not know how to use this technology to its utmost capacity. An investment in both technology and training will enable workers to be far more efficient and effective on the job, and could potentially lead to improved outcomes, as well as improved workplace morale.

We look forward to releasing an additional report, in the coming months, on data gathered from our 2021 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Development Professionals. It will focus on the impact of Covid-19 on these workers' workplace experience, it will include such topics as compensation and benefits, hours, layoffs, opportunities for advancement, and career goals. It will address issues of morale and job quality, and will conduct significant analysis using a lens of racial and gender equity, acknowledging the central roles that race and gender play in the workplace, as well as how the Covid-19 and the resulting economic crisis have disproportionately impacted people of color, women, and other marginalized communities.

This report will also compare survey responses, provided in the wake of Covid-19, with those from WPTI's original 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals, conducted just prior to the pandemic. We will seek to determine where we have seen the greatest change in worker experiences, perceptions, and needs. This upcoming report, expected to be released in early fall, will be followed by a series of policy recommendations directed at government and other key stakeholders from New York City's workforce development system. The goal will be improving the workplace experience and job quality for frontline workforce professionals, ultimately leading to better retention of talent and a stronger workforce system.

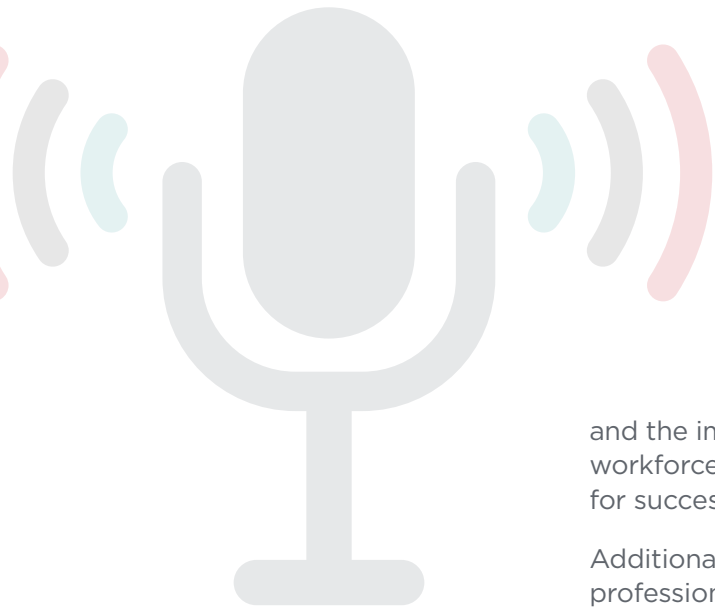
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This report is a publication of the Workforce Field Building Hub (The Hub) at Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) and the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School. It was authored by L.K. Moe of CNYCA, along with Justin Collins, Andrea Vaghy, and Yanni Deconescu of WPTI. The *Voices from the Frontline* initiative is managed by Justin Collins, Assistant Director of The Hub. Research support is provided by Gregory Brodie, Senior Associate of Programs, Operations, and Research. We would like to thank Bruce Cory, Center for New York City Affairs, for editing and James Parrott, Director of Economic and Fiscal Policies, for comments. We are grateful to Kristen Morse, Executive Director of CNYCA, Seth Moncrease, Director of Operations of CNYCA, and Sharon Sewell-Fairman, CEO of WPTI, for general support. The 2021 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Development Professionals, which serves as the basis for this report, was developed and conducted, in partnership, by The Hub and the Center for New York City Affairs. East End Advertising led design and layout efforts for the report, and Stacy Woodruff and Dana Archer-Rosenthal serve as strategic advisors to the *Voices from the Frontline* initiative.

The 2021 Survey follows in the wake of WPTI's 2020 Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals and the series of reports developed from its findings. Stacy Woodruff, WPTI Senior Fellow, led research efforts in connection with the 2020 Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals and crafted the initial reports for the initiative, with support from research consultants Matthew Vanaman and Scott Koenig, as well as Justin Collins and Gregory Brodie of WPTI. The 2020 Survey of NYC Workforce Professionals was designed in partnership with the CUNY Labor Market Information Service (LMIS), who also provided extensive data analysis.

WPTI wishes to express gratitude to the dozens of frontline workforce professionals, leaders, and intermediary partners from across the New York City workforce ecosystem who participated in focus groups and stakeholder interviews, broadly disseminated the 2020 and 2021 Surveys of NYC Frontline Workforce Development Professionals, and provided valuable feedback to realign initiative priorities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These individuals provided informed, candid, and often heartfelt assessments of the roles assumed by frontline workforce professionals; the challenges encountered within workforce organizations and embedded into the fabric of the workforce system;



and the importance of the often passion-driven work of frontline workforce professionals in their efforts to position more New Yorkers for success in the labor market.

Additionally, we thank the more than 200 frontline workforce professionals who participated in the *2021 Survey of Frontline Workforce Development Professionals*; without their input, the *Voices from the Frontline* initiative would not be possible. Finally, we are grateful for the support of WPTI's Executive Director, Sharon Sewell-Fairman, and the full WPTI team for working every day to provide support, increase capacity, and raise the standards of quality service throughout New York City's workforce development field.

ENDNOTES



- 1 “Governor Cuomo Signs Legislation Establishing First-in-the-Nation Program to Provide Affordable Internet for Low-Income Families,” April 16, 2021. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-legislation-establishing-first-nation-program-provide-affordable-internet>
- 2 For more information on workforce development and the importance of frontline workforce professionals, read “Who is the ‘Frontline’ of the Workforce Development Field?” and “Why Focus on Frontline Workforce Professionals?” - both published by Workforce Professionals Training Institute in 2020.



VOICES FROM
THE FRONTLINE