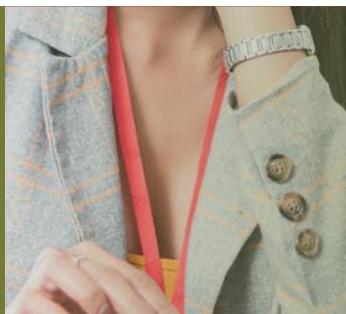


# LEADING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE PUBLIC-SECTOR WORKFORCE

2020 EMPLOYEE CONNECTION SURVEY



**EMPLOYEE**   
**CONNECTION SURVEY**

**EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY**

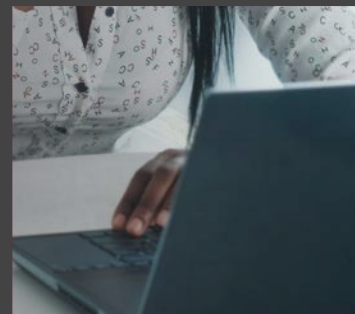
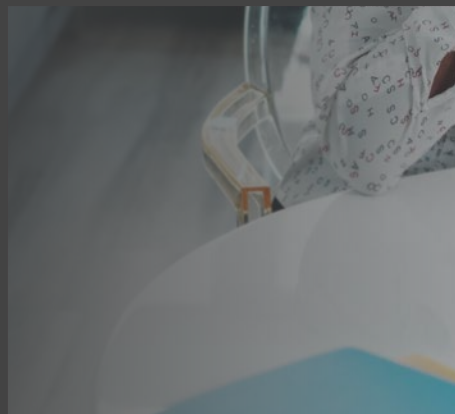


## WHY AND HOW

# WE DID THE SURVEY

**A**s part of CPS HR Consulting's continuing commitment to effective government, we designed our "Employee Connection Survey" to help public-sector organizations understand how their employees are faring during the COVID-19 crisis, and provide lessons learned to help government respond to the coronavirus as well as future workplace challenges.

The participating organizations administered our no-cost survey in the spring of 2020, after they had transitioned many employees to working remotely. In total, 19,550 employees from 65 organizations responded to the survey. All survey responses were completely anonymous.



## WHAT

# WE FOUND

- Employees are feeling unsettled by the workplace changes caused by COVID-19. Survey respondents said they are feeling “stressed,” “tired” and “anxious.”
- More than half of survey respondents reported that their organizations designated them as essential workers and they are still reporting to their regular worksites. This high percentage of essential workers is noteworthy given the national focus primarily on the increased number of employees working remotely.
- More than 30 percent of these essential workers either did not expect to be or were unsure about being designated as essential.
- Leaders generally did a good job adapting to the workforce changes caused by COVID-19, significantly better than our national employee engagement survey results on how leaders manage change in general. However, essential workers were less satisfied than remote workers about how their organizations adapted.
- Communication from leaders and co-workers was generally judged as helpful. Email was most often cited, but other useful approaches included live video, phone and instant messaging. Again, essential workers were less satisfied with communications, especially from their leaders.
- About 42 percent of essential and 34 percent of remote workers reported increased workloads. However, substantial percentages in both groups also reported that their workloads have decreased.
- While most essential workers said they have the equipment and supplies to protect themselves, 18 percent reported that they did not. Most remote workers have the tools and technology, and the home environment, to be productive.
- 85 percent of respondents who did not work at home before COVID-19 want to continue working remotely permanently, at least part of the time.

## WHAT THE RESULTS MEAN

# LESSONS LEARNED FOR LEADERS

- In an emergency such as COVID-19, leaders need to clearly identify and communicate – in advance – which employees are essential, to ensure that both the organization and these employees are prepared.
- Organizations need to respond to the stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic by providing employees with wellness and mental health support and resources.
- Leaders also need to monitor workloads to minimize burnout and disengagement due to increased workloads, but also ensure that all employees continue to be productive regardless of where they are working.
- Organizations should use a variety of communication approaches to ensure that all employees receive the information they need.
- Because the increased employee demand to work remotely is likely to persist, government organizations should:
  - Equip managers and supervisors with the skills to manage results and outcomes (and not just time and attendance)
  - Redesign jobs to adapt them to remote work
  - Acknowledge and communicate that employees working from home must have the flexibility to balance work and personal lives
  - Provide the tools and resources remote workers need, especially technology
- Leaders also need to provide essential employees with the information and tools they need, and also guard against creating two classes of workers – remote and essential – who could be perceived as the haves and have nots.
- Government should also view the demand for remote work as an opportunity to expand the search for talent (i.e., recruiting may no longer be limited by geography).
- Leaders need to systematically ask employees for feedback – including on their level of engagement – to identify and meet the needs of all employees.



CPS HR  CONSULTING

# LEADING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

## WHY WE DEVELOPED AND ADMINISTERED

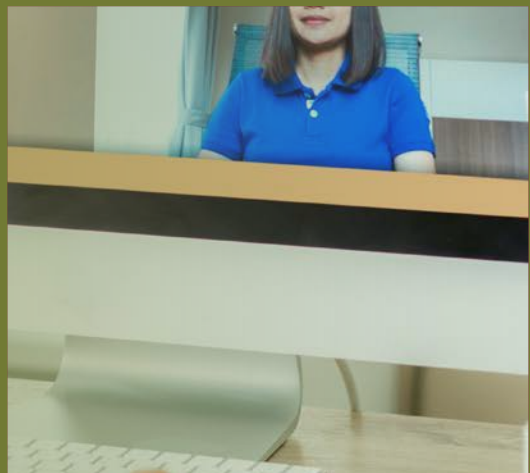
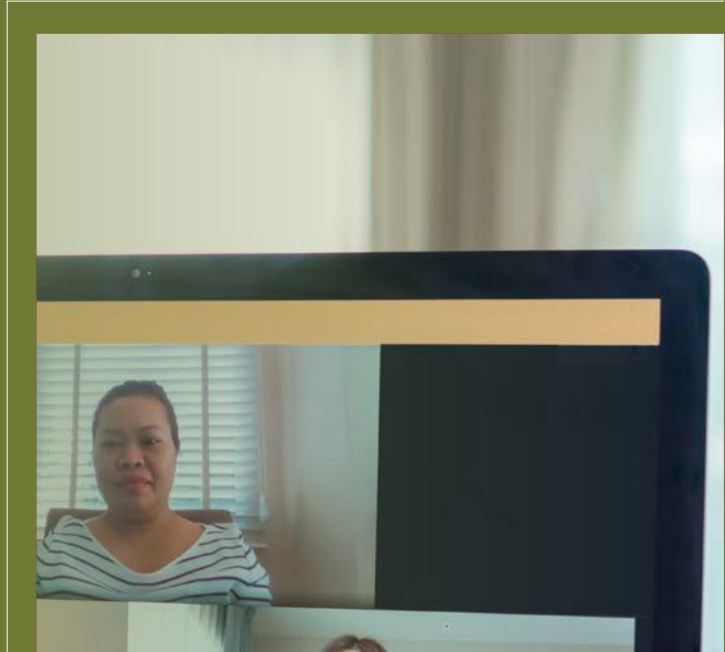
# THE EMPLOYEE CONNECTION SURVEY

CPS HR Consulting is committed to helping government organizations succeed, including during the COVID-19 crisis. As part of this continuing commitment, we created the no-cost “Employee Connection Survey” to:

- Help public-sector and nonprofit organizations understand how their employees are faring during this difficult time; and
- Identify and share lessons learned to help government respond to significant workplace challenges such as those posed by COVID-19.

CPS HR believes that the dramatic increase in the number of employees working remotely – which occurred literally overnight in many organizations – is not just a short-term response to the coronavirus. Instead, we think the large-scale transition to remote working signals a permanent evolution to larger numbers of employees working remotely. Therefore, our survey results provide lessons learned and recommendations to help government make this transition, and also be prepared for future crises.





## HOW WE DEVELOPED

# AND ADMINISTERED THE SURVEY

The Employee Connection Survey questions explored employees' feelings about, and experiences in, the COVID-19 workplace. We asked for their views on topics such as communication, tools and resources, and overall well-being. Respondents were also asked to identify whether they were reporting to their normal work locations (i.e., they are essential workers) or working remotely. Based on this response, we asked employees in these two categories slightly different questions.

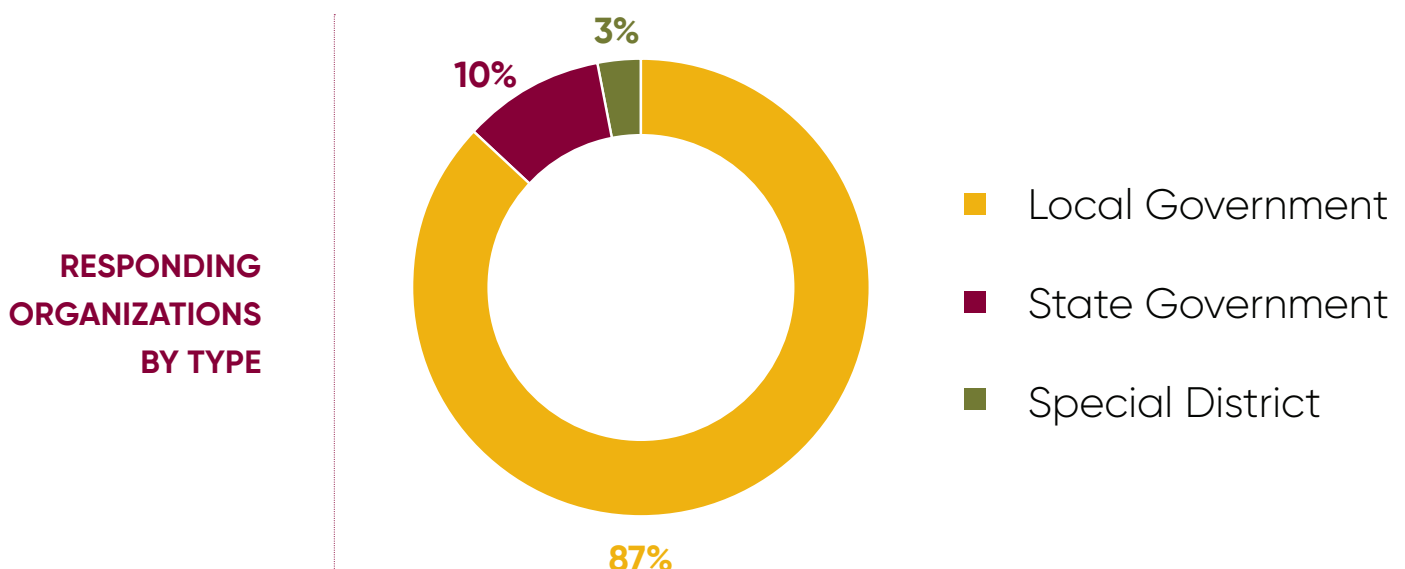
CPS HR developed the survey using a template initially created by our survey platform partner, SurveyGizmo, to reach out to employees working remotely. We adapted this survey to the public-sector work environment by altering the wording of questions, modifying the response scales, and adding a section specifically for essential workers. We also previewed the draft survey with a public-sector executive and accepted several of her suggested changes.

Beginning on April 21, 2020, CPS HR publicized the survey through email, social media and with partner organizations. We only customized

our standard Employee Connection Survey to include each organization's name and units (e.g., departments, divisions). We then provided a survey link for each organization to distribute to its employees.

Participating organizations administered the survey from April 21 through June 12, 2020, well after most organizations had transitioned large segments of their workforces to working remotely. All surveys were open for 16 days unless the organization requested a longer or shorter response period. We also sent each participating organization a link to an online report that gave them immediate and real-time access to their survey results.

Sixty-five state and local government and nonprofit organizations from across the nation administered the survey. In total, 19,550 employees from these organizations responded. All employees' survey responses were completely anonymous. As the chart below shows, about 87 percent of respondents work in local government, and ten percent in state government.





## HOW WELL ARE LEADERS MANAGING COVID-19 WORKPLACE CHANGES?

Even during so-called normal times, providing effective leadership and managing change can be difficult. In our national employee engagement survey, for example, we have consistently found that leadership and managing change is the most important influence on engagement in both the public and private sectors. It is also among the lowest-scoring survey dimensions.

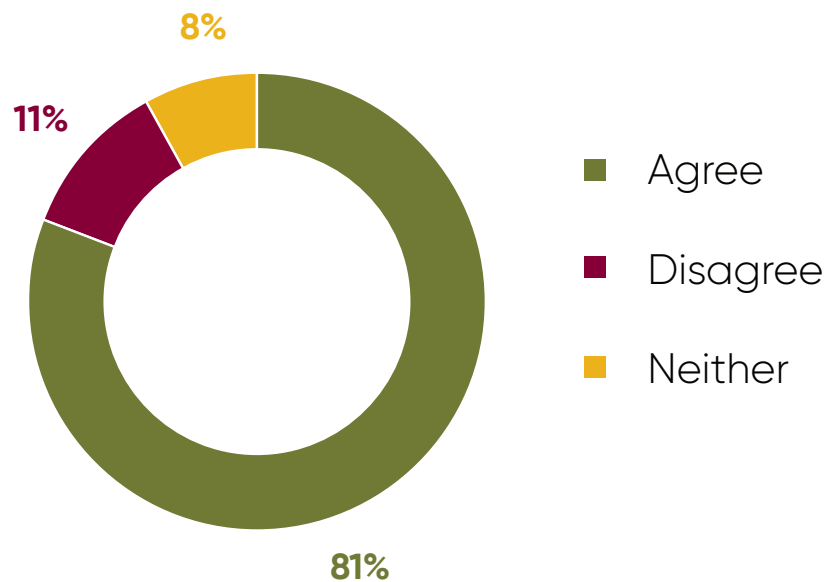
COVID-19 has caused large-scale disruptions in the way employees work. While many employees are working remotely, other employees designated as essential continue to report to their normal work sites, despite fears about contracting the coronavirus. The sudden COVID-19 onslaught has placed unprecedented stress on leaders to

manage the dramatic workplace and personal changes caused by the virus.

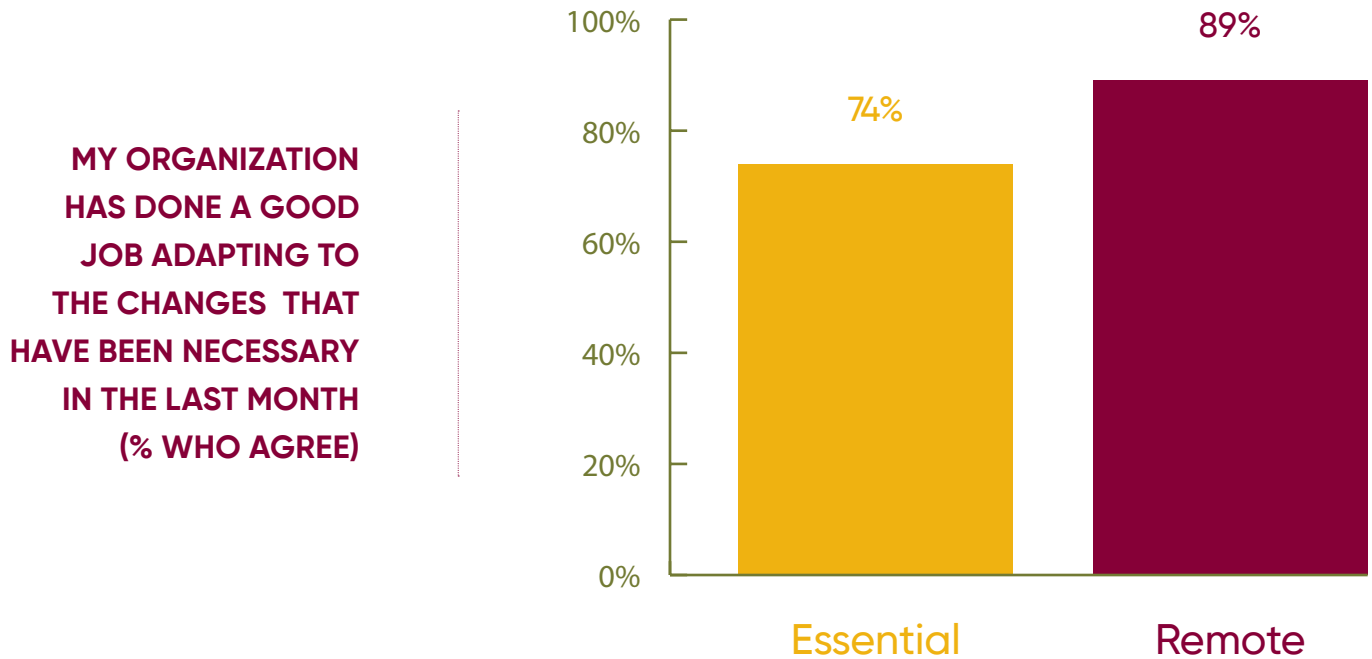
Despite this heavy lift, 81 percent of survey respondents agreed that their organizations have done a good job adapting to the sudden and disruptive workplace changes driven by the coronavirus. Only 11 percent disagreed.

This relative success contrasts sharply with results from our national engagement survey of public- and private-sector employees. In our most-recent survey, only 41 percent of government employees agreed that their leaders effectively manage change in general.

**MY ORGANIZATION  
HAS DONE A GOOD  
JOB ADAPTING TO  
THE CHANGES THAT  
HAVE BEEN NECESSARY  
IN THE LAST MONTH**

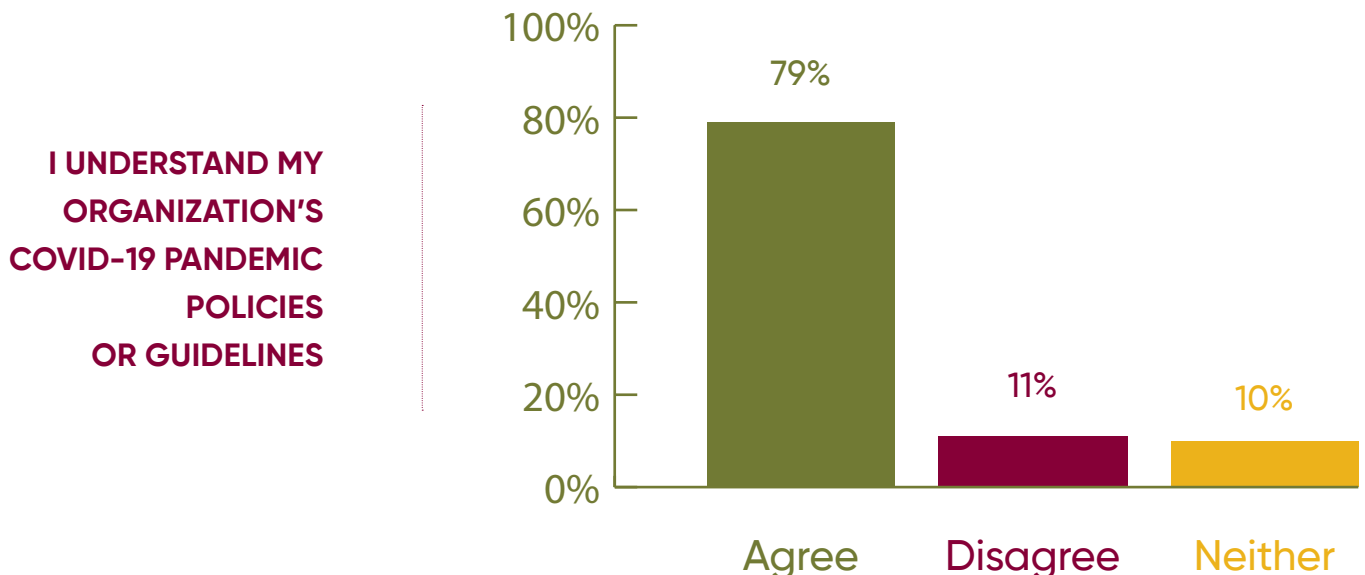


However, digging deeper into the survey result shows that essential workers were much less likely to agree that their organization has done a good job adapting to COVID-19. About 89 percent of remote workers agreed, while more than one of four essential workers disagreed.

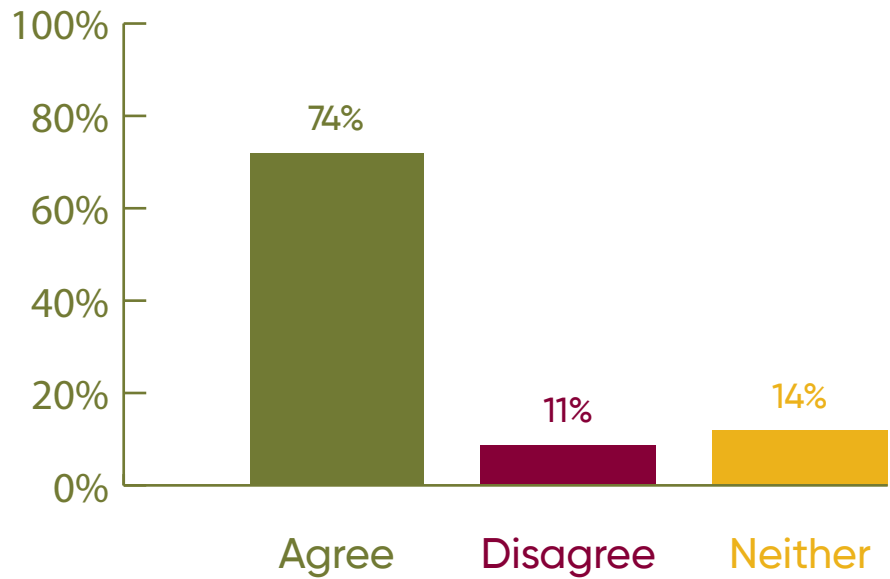


COVID-19 has also placed pressure on leaders to ensure that employees understand new workplace policies, as well as employee health benefits and resources.

The survey results reveal that participating organizations largely did this well. More than 79 percent of responding employees reported that they understood COVID-19 policies, while 74 percent reported that they understood their organization's health resources and benefits.

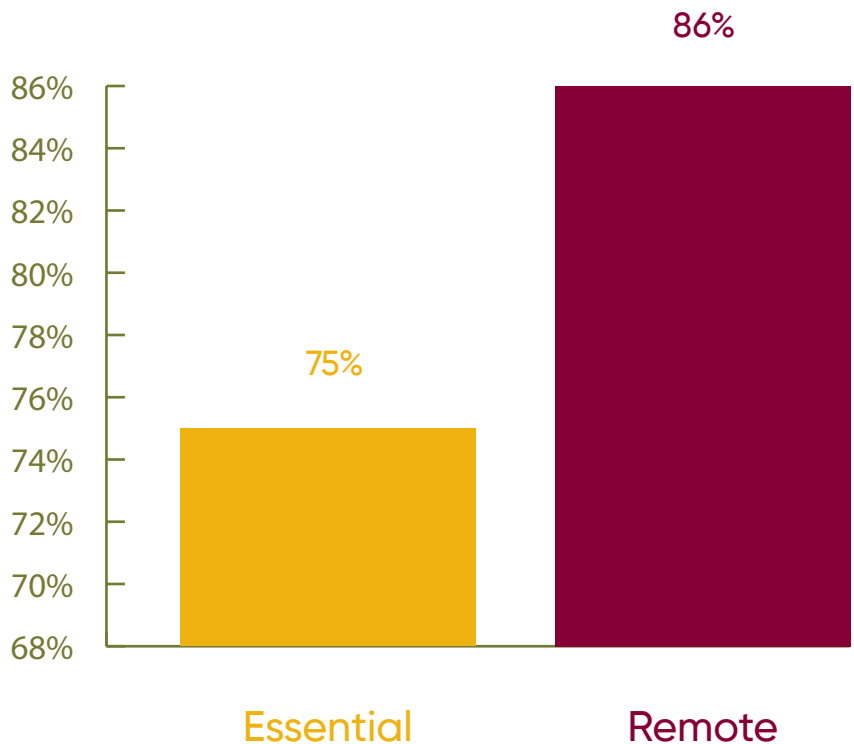


**I UNDERSTAND  
THE HEALTH  
RESOURCES AND  
BENEFITS AVAILABLE  
TO ME**

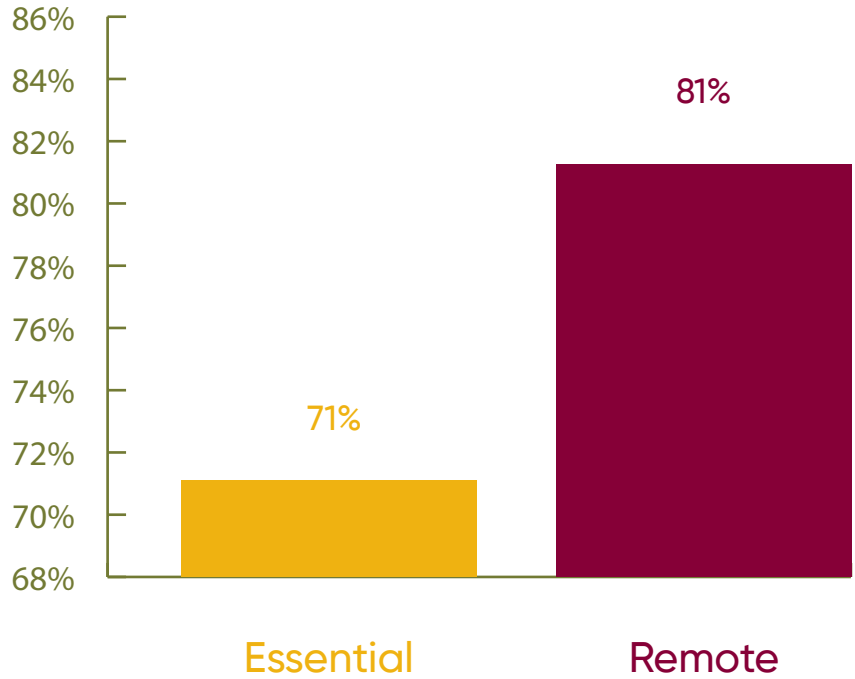


Again however, we found significant differences between the responses of remote and essential employees. As the charts below show, remote workers were significantly more likely than essential workers to agree that they understood COVID-19 policies and the health benefits available to them.

**I UNDERSTAND MY  
ORGANIZATION'S  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
POLICIES OR GUIDELINES  
(% WHO AGREE)**



**I UNDERSTAND  
THE HEALTH  
RESOURCES AND  
BENEFITS AVAILABLE  
TO ME NOW  
(% WHO AGREE)**



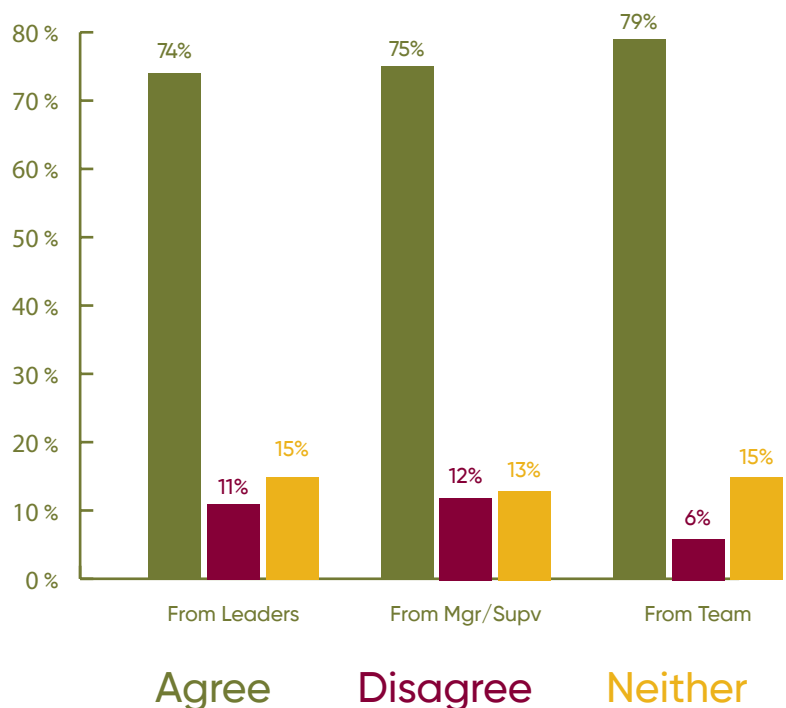
### HOW WELL ARE ORGANIZATIONS COMMUNICATING ABOUT COVID-19?

Our survey also asked employees to rate how helpful communications have been from their leaders, their managers/supervisors, and their team members.

About 74 percent of respondents reported that communications from their leaders was helpful,

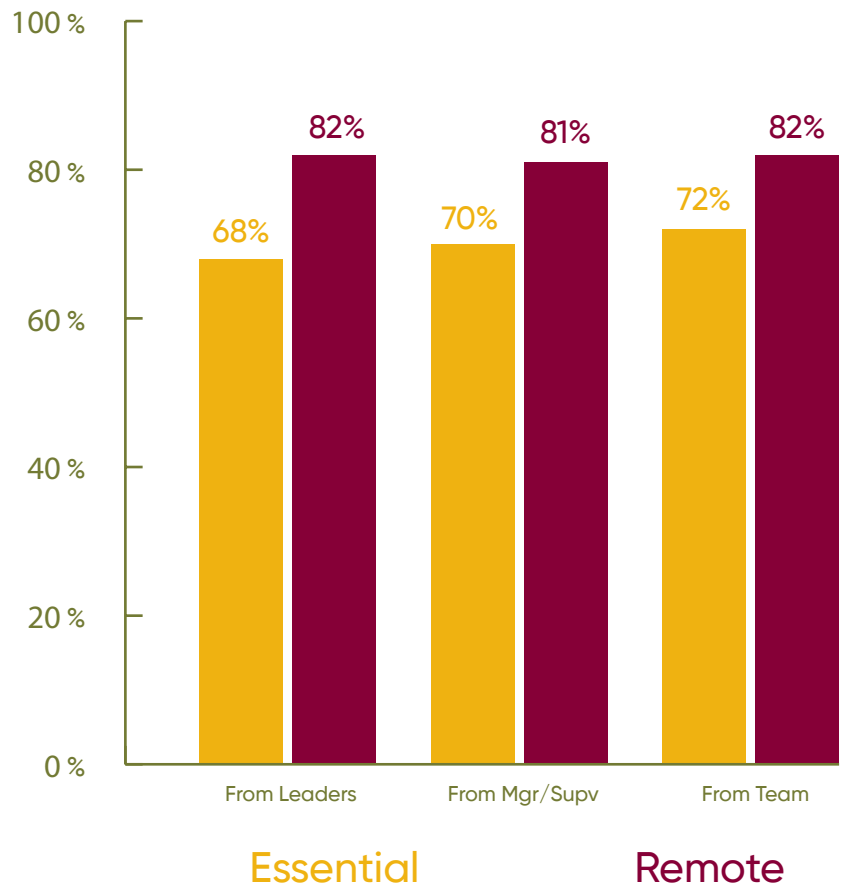
compared to 75 percent from their manager/supervisor, and 79 percent from team members. On the other hand, 11 percent of respondents characterized communications from their leaders as not helpful, and 12 percent said their manager's or supervisor's communications were unhelpful.

**RECENT  
COMMUNICATIONS  
HAVE BEEN HELPFUL**



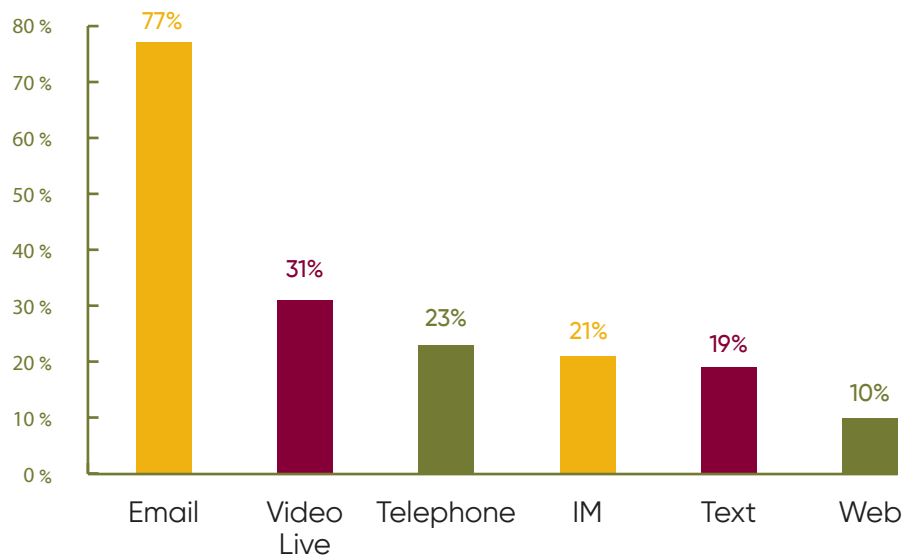
We again compared the responses of essential versus remote employees and found that essential employees were significantly less satisfied with communications from all three sources. The biggest gap was in communications from leaders. About one-third of essential employees rated communications from leaders as less than helpful.

**RECENT COMMUNICATIONS HAVE BEEN HELPFUL (% WHO AGREE)**



We also asked employees to identify the two most-helpful communications approaches. Email was viewed as useful by about 77 percent of respondents. Other approaches cited included live video (31 percent), telephone (23 percent) and instant messaging (21 percent). Despite these lower percentages, substantial numbers of respondents identified these approaches as useful.

**MOST HELPFUL COMMUNICATION APPROACHES**

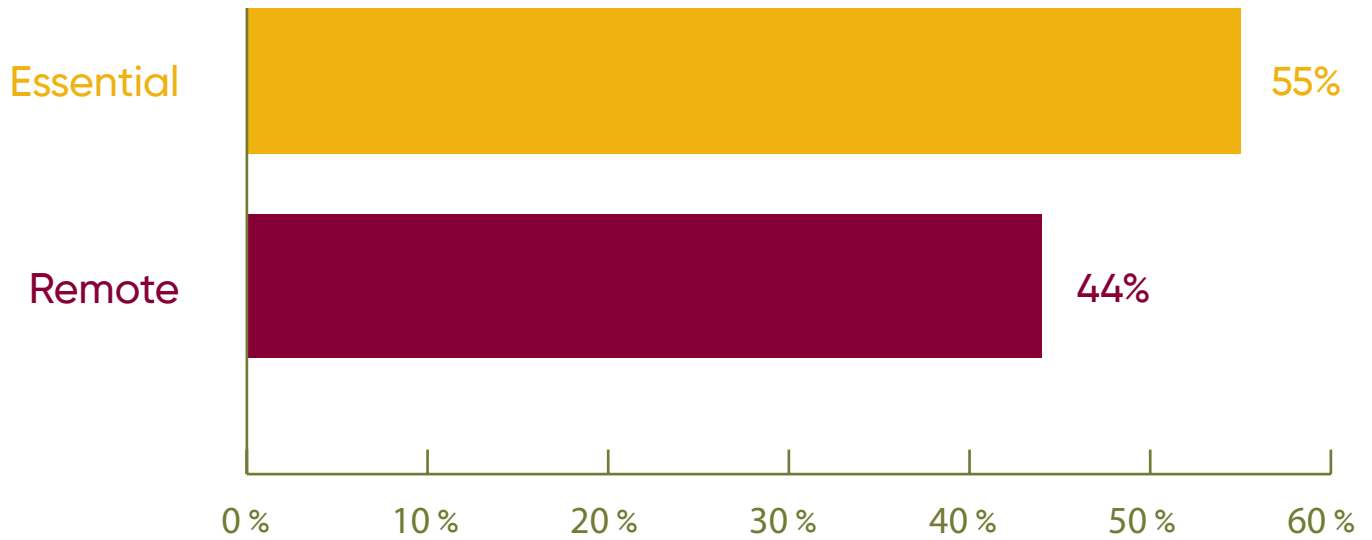




## HAVE WORK DUTIES CHANGED?

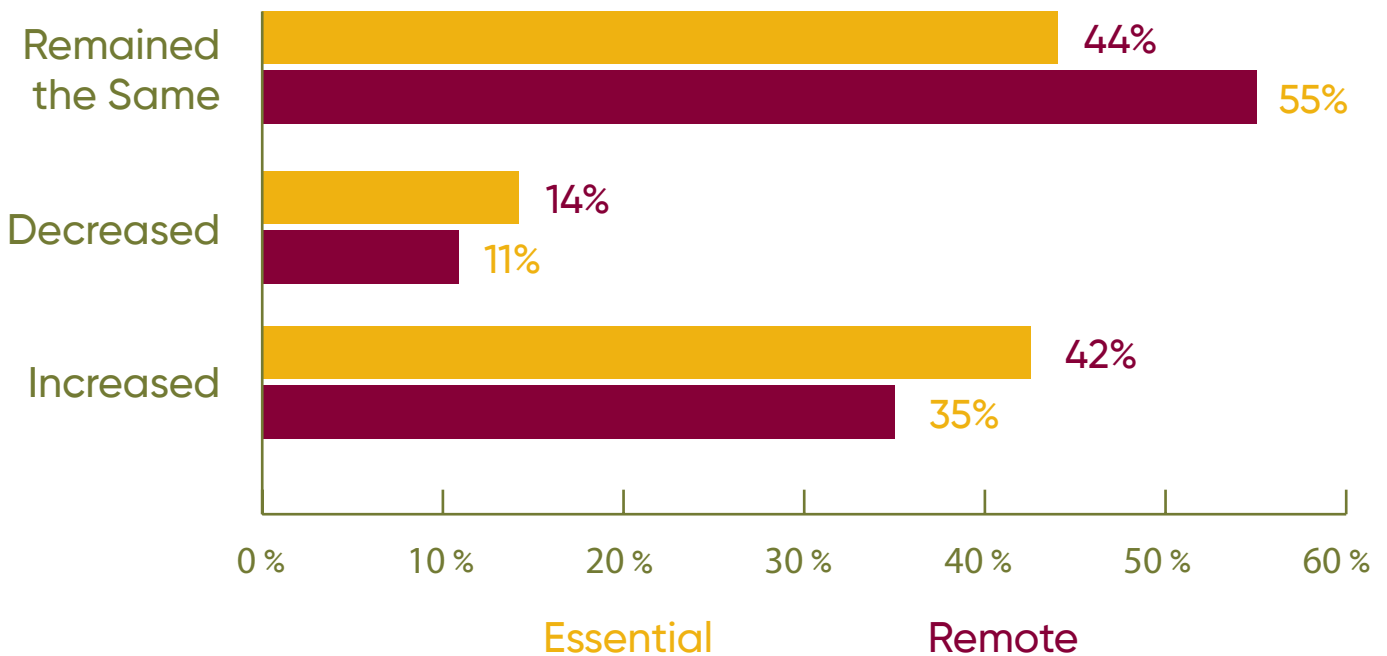
When asked if their work duties have changed as a result of COVID-19, 55 percent of essential workers and 44 percent of remote workers replied that their duties have changed.

### MY DUTIES HAVE CHANGED



We then asked both groups if their workload has increased or decreased as a result of COVID-19. About 56 percent of essential workers reported a changed workload – 42 percent said their workload increased while 14 percent said it decreased. Among remote employees, 35 percent reported that their workload increased while 11 percent were doing less work.

### MY WORKLOAD HAS ...

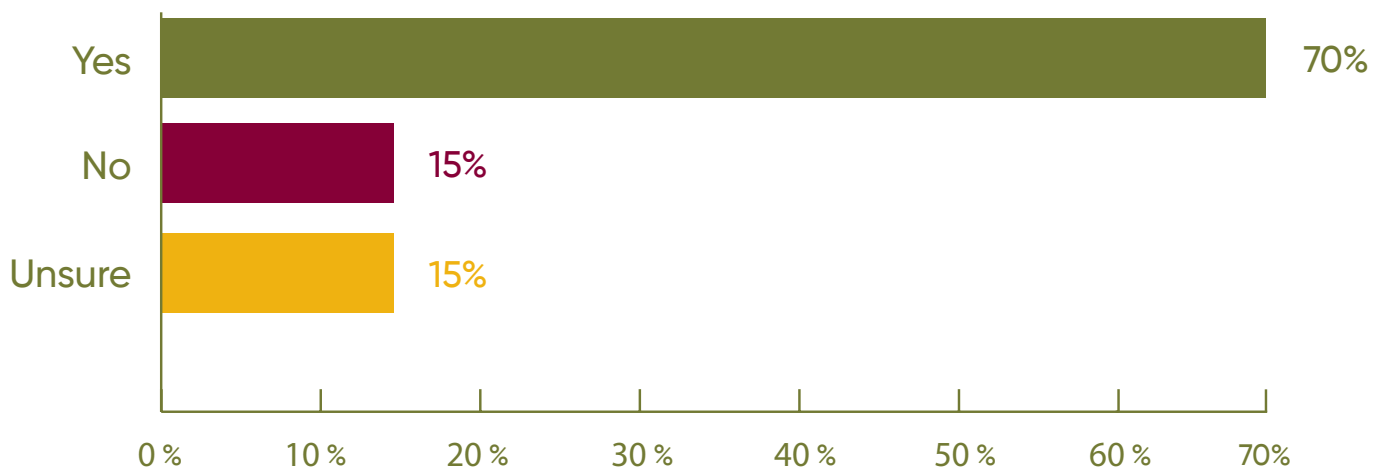


## HOW ARE ESSENTIAL WORKERS DOING?

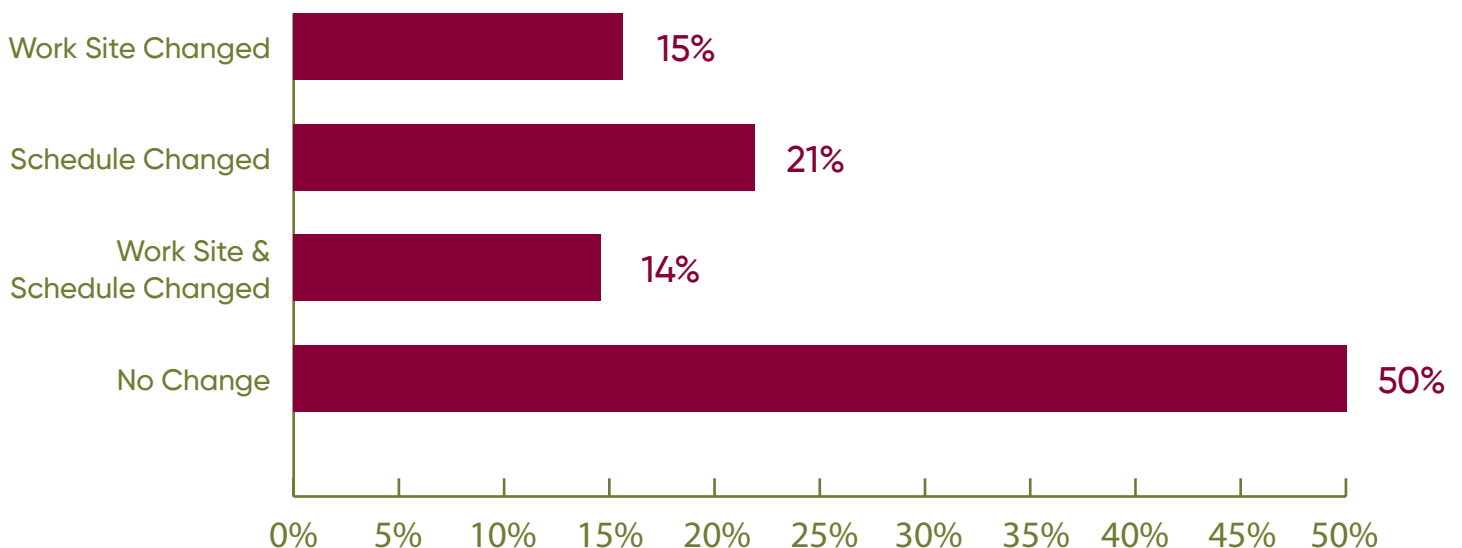
We asked the respondents who identified themselves as essential to answer questions about their specific COVID-19 work situation. Key results include:

- While 70 percent expected to be designated as essential prior to COVID-19, the other 30 percent did not expect this or were unsure.

### DID YOU EXPECT TO BE CONSIDERED AN ESSENTIAL WORKER IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS?

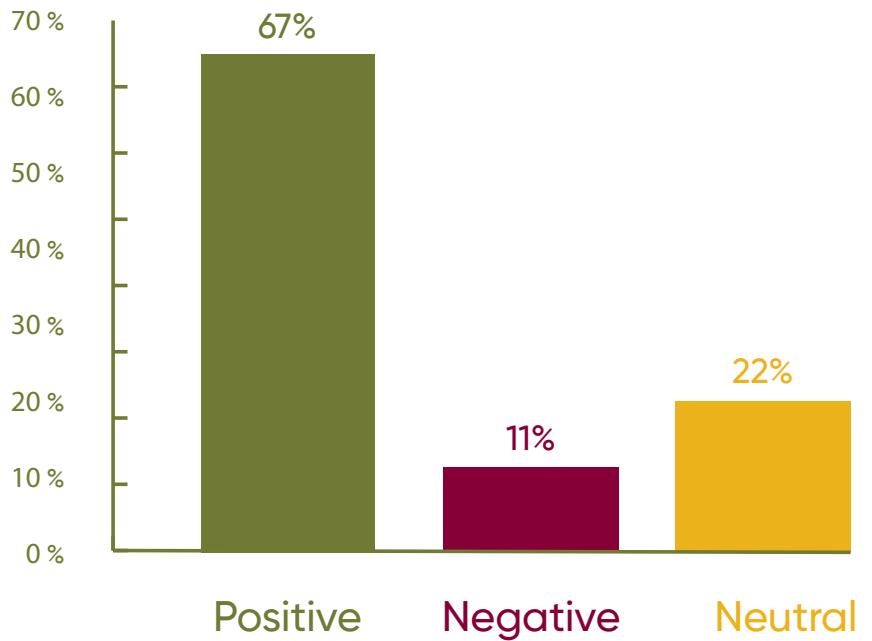


- About one-half of the essential workers replied that despite continuing to report to a work site (i.e., not working remotely), some aspect of their work situation has changed – either their work site or their schedule.



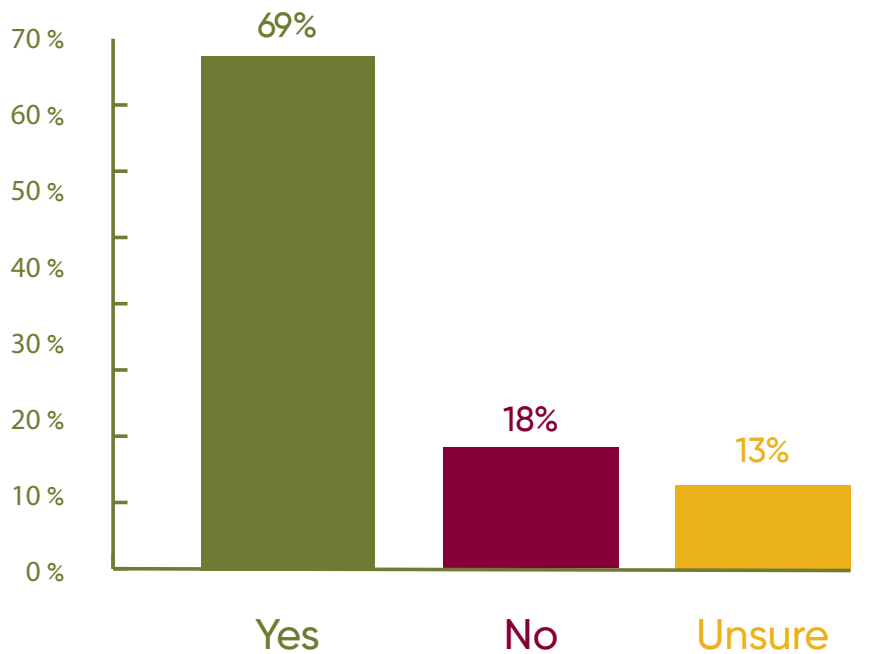
- About 67 percent felt positive about being designated as essential. Eleven percent were negative and 22 percent were neither positive nor negative.

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR STATUS AS AN ESSENTIAL WORKER?**

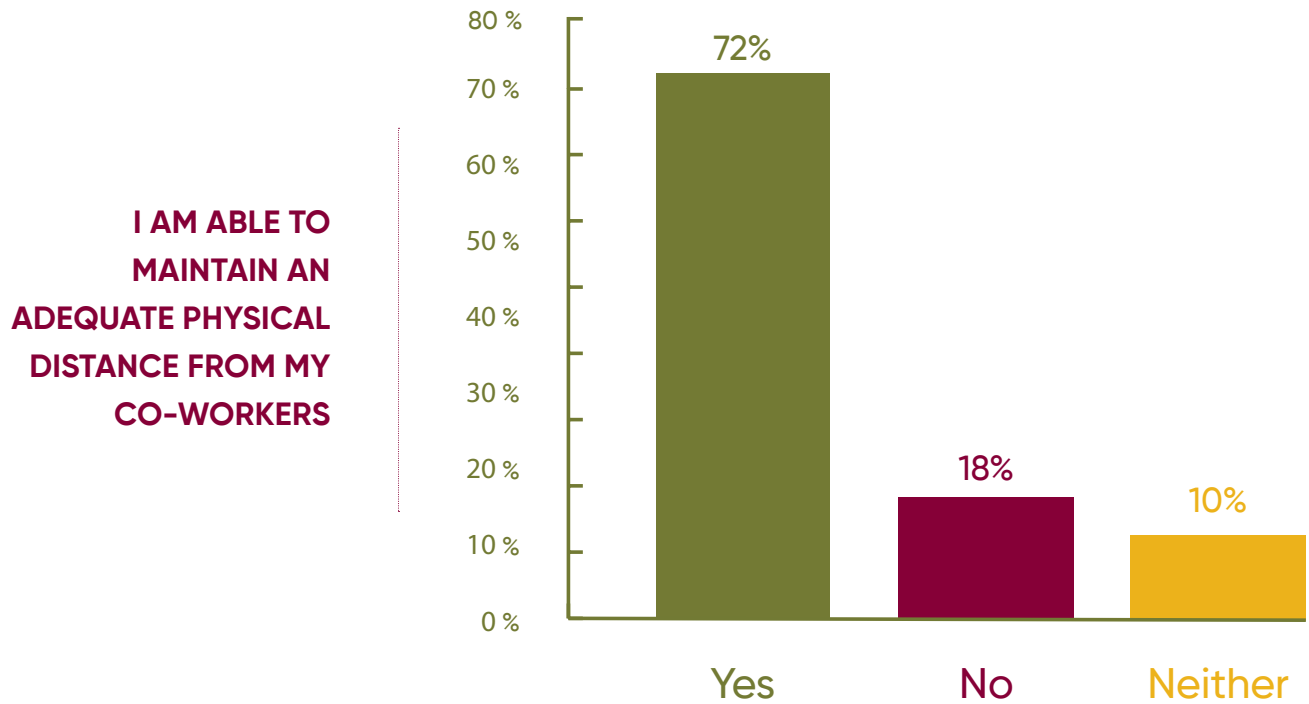


- About 69 percent of essential workers believed that they had the equipment and supplies to protect themselves, but 18 percent said they did not, and 13 percent were unsure.

**I HAVE THE EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES I NEED TO PROTECT MYSELF ON THE JOB**



- When asked if they are able to maintain a safe distance from their co-workers, 72 percent agreed but 28 percent disagreed or were unsure.



- We also asked the essential workers to list three tools or resources that would help them feel more connected, safer, or more productive in their work. As the word cloud shows, the most common responses included person protective equipment such as masks.

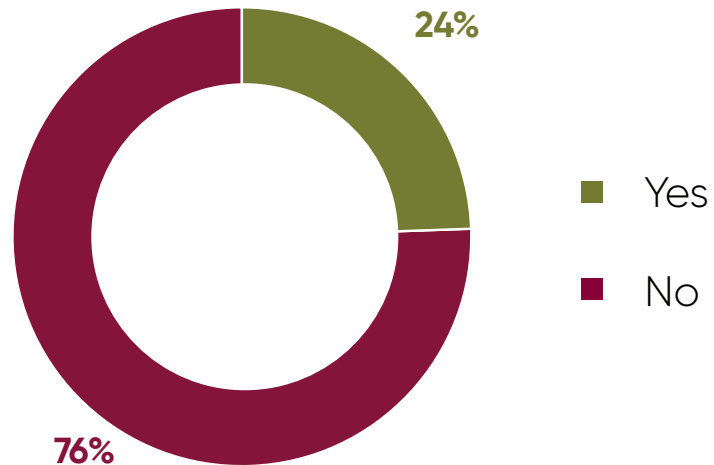


## HOW ARE REMOTE WORKERS DOING?

We asked the respondents who identified themselves as working remotely to respond to questions about their working situation. Key results include:

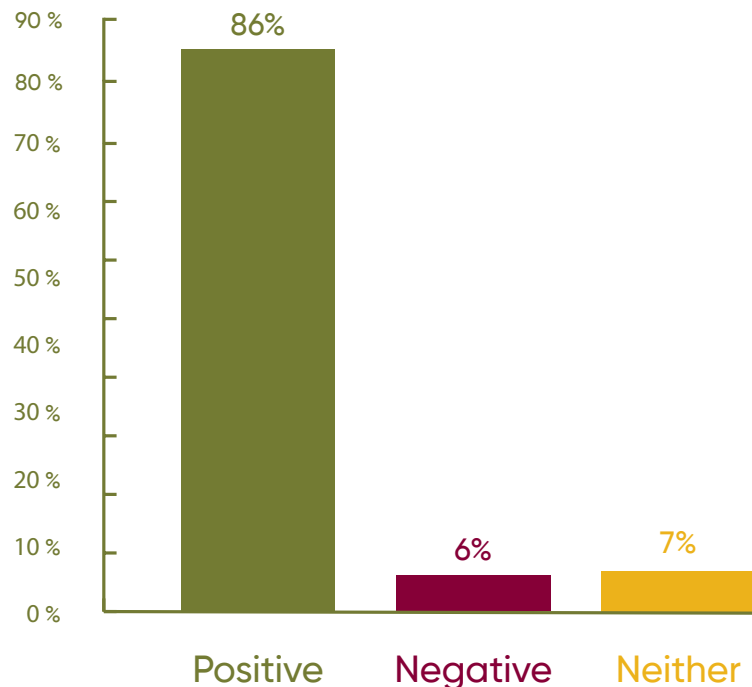
- Only 24 percent of respondents said they worked remotely before COVID-19.

### WORKED REMOTELY BEFORE COVID-19?



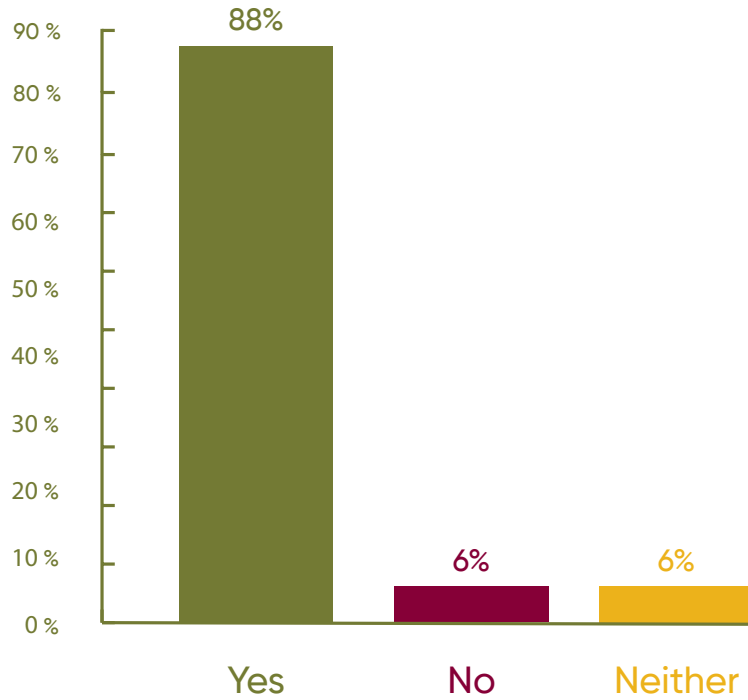
- The large majority of remote employees (86 percent) felt positive about working at home. Only six percent were negative.

### HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT WORKING FROM HOME?



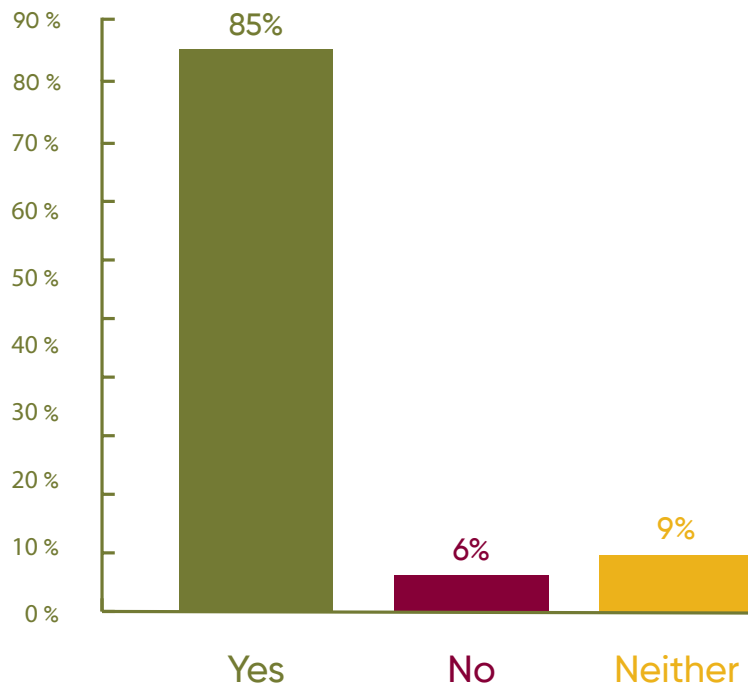
- About 88 percent reported that they had the tools and technology to be productive at home.

**I HAVE THE TOOLS  
AND TECHNOLOGY TO  
BE PRODUCTIVE AT  
HOME**



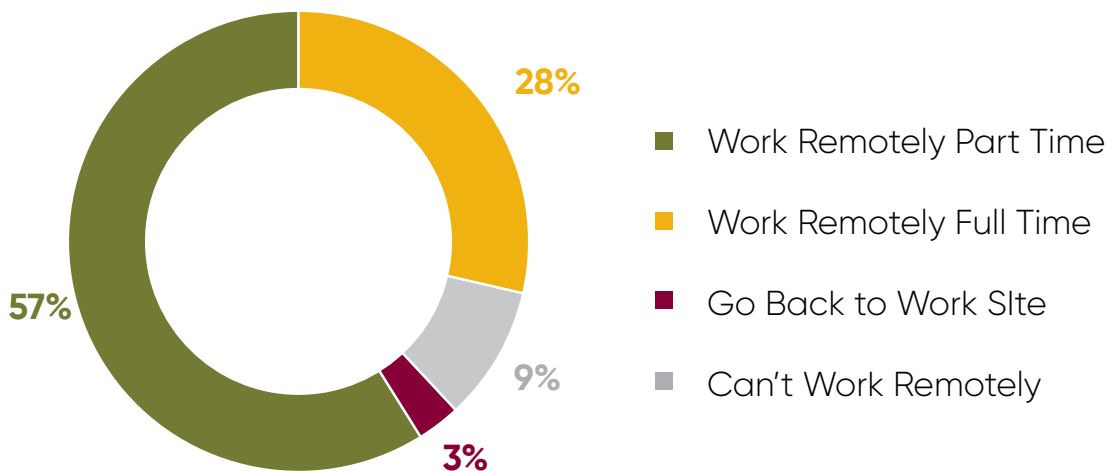
- About 85 percent said their home environment allowed them to focus on work, compared to only six percent who disagreed.

**MY ENVIRONMENT AT  
HOME ALLOWS ME TO  
FOCUS ON MY JOB**

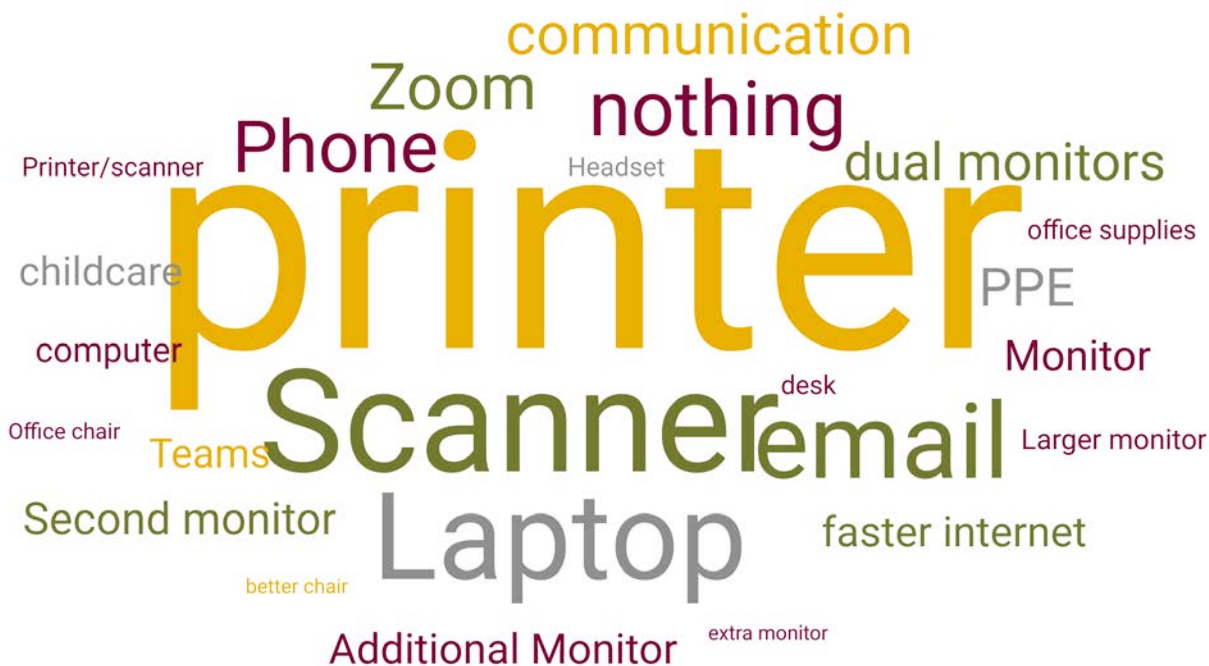


- Among those who were working from home for the first time, 85 percent said they want to continue working from home, at least part of the time, even when it is safe to return to their work sites. Twenty-eight percent want to work from home full-time.

**WHEN IT IS POSSIBLE FOR ME TO RETURN TO WORK, I WOULD PREFER TO:**



- We also asked remote workers to list three tools or resources that would help them feel more connected, safer, or more productive in their work. Not surprisingly, many responses focused on technology (e.g., "printer," "laptop," and "monitor").



## CONCLUSIONS

# WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?



### WHAT DO THE RESULTS REVEAL?

Analysis of the survey results from 19,550 employees in 65 organizations revealed the following:

- Employees are feeling unsettled by the workplace changes caused by COVID-19. Survey respondents said they are feeling “stressed,” “tired” and “anxious.”
- More than half of respondents reported that they were designated as essential workers. This high percentage of essential workers is noteworthy given the national focus on the increased number of employees working remotely across the U.S. workforce.
- Because of the services government provides, there will always be substantial numbers of public-sector employees who must continue to report to their work sites. Unlike some private-sector companies that have gone fully remote, or are considering this approach, government will likely never be able to transition completely – or even largely – to remote work.
- While both essential and remote workers feel positive about their designation, more than 30 percent of essential workers either did not expect to be, or were unsure about being, designated as essential.
- Leaders were rated as generally doing a good job adapting to the dramatic workforce changes caused by COVID-19, including communicating about new policies and resources. Leaders did much better handling this change than our national employee engagement survey results on how leaders manage change in general. However, essential workers were less likely than remote workers to agree that their organization has adapted successfully to COVID-19, and that they understand coronavirus policies and health benefits.
- Employees generally reported that communication from leaders and co-workers was helpful. However, remote workers were more likely than essential workers to agree.
- Email was rated most often as a helpful communication medium followed, in order, by live video, phone and instant messaging.





- For a large percentage of respondents, both essential and remote, their job duties have changed, and their workloads have increased.



- On the other hand, substantial percentages of essential and remote employees (14 and 10 percent, respectively) reported that their workloads have actually decreased.
- While most essential workers said they have the equipment and supplies to protect themselves, and can maintain a safe distance from their co-workers, 18 percent disagreed.
- Most remote workers have the tools and technology, and the home environment, to be productive, but about six percent do not.
- 85 percent of respondents who did not work at home before COVID-19 want to continue to work from home permanently, at least part of the time.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

# LESSONS LEARNED FOR LEADERS

The survey results include important lessons for public-sector leaders who are striving to operate effectively and deliver services despite COVID-19. The results also include lessons for how government can deal with future workforce disruptions. Specifically:

- In an emergency such as the coronavirus, leaders need to clearly identify and communicate – in advance – which employees are essential. This will prevent confusion and ensure that the organization and the essential workers themselves are fully prepared for these roles.
- Organizations need to respond to the stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic by providing employees with wellness and mental health support and resources.
- Leaders also need to pay attention to changes in employees' workloads. This includes measuring and monitoring work to 1) minimize burnout and disengagement since large percentages of both essential and remote workers said their workloads have increased and 2) ensure that employees with decreased workloads continue to be productive.
- Organizations should use a variety of communication approaches and media (i.e., not just email) to ensure that all employees receive the information they need. In particular, leaders need to ensure that organizations communicate effectively to remote workers, who were much less likely to agree that communication was effective and that they understand COVID-19 policies and benefits.
- To respond to employee demands to permanently work at home, organizations should:
  - Equip their managers and supervisors with the skills and tools to manage the performance of remote workers by focusing on results and outcomes, not time and attendance
  - Redesign jobs to adapt them to remote work
  - Acknowledge and communicate that employees working from home must have the flexibility (e.g., with their work hours) to balance their work and personal lives
  - Provide essential tools and resources, especially technology
- Employers should also view working remotely as an opportunity to expand the search for talent (i.e., recruiting may no longer be limited by geography) and therefore create an advantage in recruiting and retaining talent.

- Government organizations should focus not just on the needs of employees working remotely. A large percentage of public-sector employees will always need to report to their workplaces to deliver needed services. The essential employees who responded to this survey were less satisfied than remote employees with how their organizations have adapted to COVID-19, their knowledge of COVID-19 policies, and communication from leaders. A large percentage also reported their workloads have increased. Public-sector employers must therefore ensure that essential employees have the information, tools and support they need, especially if they are risking their health and safety to serve constituents. This includes guarding against creating two classes of employees – remote and essential – who could be perceived as the haves and have nots.
- Organizations need to systematically ask employees for feedback – including on their level of engagement – to identify and meet their needs.

It may be a cliché that the flip side of challenge is opportunity, but this is true of our new world of work. Effective leadership, flexible work environments and effective use of technology can drive employee productivity, well-being and engagement and, therefore, organizational performance – regardless of where employees are working.



# CPS HR CONSULTING

CPS HR Consulting is a self supporting public agency providing a full range of integrated HR solutions to government and nonprofit clients across the country. Our strategic approach to increasing the effectiveness of human resources results in improved organizational performance for our clients. We have a deep expertise and unmatched perspective in guiding our clients' organizational strategy, recruitment and selection, classification and compensation, and training and development.

## About the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement

CPS HR Consulting understands that many public-sector organizations seek tools and resources to help them measure, understand and improve the engagement of their employees. That's why CPS HR created the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement to support the public sector, conduct research, and spotlight successful practices. The Institute offers online engagement and other employee surveys, national benchmarks, action planning and integrated solutions.