

RRR READY & COVID-19 SURVEY REPORT

The aim of the *RRR Ready & COVID-19* survey was two-fold. First to connect and support our historic Network in what has been and remains a challenging and stressful time. Second to understand regional work force potential if stimulus activities are rolled out across the WA regions. The RRR Network hopes to use this data constructively when advising state government of the regional impact and their capacity. The data will also assist the RRR Network in directing efforts where needed most.

To make sense of regional workforce potential, the RRR Network framed its questions that highlighted only a surface level exploration of social and economic impacts of COVID-19. The survey intended to be simple, quick to complete and mindful of not pressing too hard when employment and financial matters may have been escalating. The survey also invited personal comments to understand community sentiment around the crisis.

Overall, the number of survey responses was lower than hoped, but this may have been a result of several factors. Such as online survey fatigue, stress, distraction, fear about the virus and uncertainty, being overwhelmed, emotional with a new and strange way of life and possibly even a relaxing and disconnect to routine, commitments, and structure. In saying that, the survey was actively promoted over a 7-day period in April 2019 to a select audience and therefore the number of responses is reflective. The RRR Network's most engaged and responsive audience is predominately women in the agriculture sector and therefore a marginal market. However, the survey intentionally did not collect gender data. This is because the RRR Network wanted to understand an equal workforce potential, impacts and community concerns without conflating the responses with gender.

The RRR Network survey received 136 responses and 93 contacts to extend work opportunities to if they arise. Furthermore, 107 people shared personal comments expressing what they could do to assist their communities. Such as volunteering, counselling support, housing backpackers, supporting local businesses, advocating for disadvantaged and expediting grants and so on.

While this survey canvassed all WA regions, it *was* designed to understand the regional experience. Perth and Peel only represented 10% of total responses, resulting in most of the opinion reflecting WA regional people. The Wheatbelt and the South West regions represented 60% of all survey responses.

It was warming and positive to learn that when asked the question – *"How do you think you could assist your community through COVID-19 challenges?"* - the overwhelming response or

mood was of kindness, assistance, adopting sustainable measures and educating others, phone calls and checking in on neighbours. By asking this question it encouraged regional people to consider the plight of others more deeply *and* consider what they could do - based on their own skills and willingness to help. 30% of survey respondents said they were ready to volunteer. The exploration of this question on an individual level may have motivated regional people to reflect on their community's needs and drive action.

Our survey results indicated that 39% of people either had decreased hours, were at risk of losing their jobs, had lost jobs altogether or their employment opportunities no longer existed. Fortunately, 49% commented that their work had not been affected and the remainder were not in the workforce by choice. The survey highlighted how the agriculture sector was for the most part not affected economically. However, there was social impact and for many this was equally difficult to manage. For example, RRR Network member and WA Rural Women's Awards Winner Belinda Lay said -

"Usually when I would go to town for shopping - that would be my social day out. I relished those opportunities...regional isolation suddenly became even more isolating with COVID-19 and I really struggled with that".

When the survey asked "what are your concerns for your community related to COVID-19" the greatest response was of 'mental health' at 69%. The RRR Network are both comforted and concerned in this response. For one, it is great to see a focus on mental health which historically has struggled to be acknowledged, but the other is that we have a strong indication that mental health challenges has been triggered or heightened by COVID-19 across our rural regional and remote communities. As it is, access to essential health services in the regions can be difficult. Regional people are left with little option but to travel long distances to seek the services they require. In many instances, people simply go without because the cost or even the ability to travel is beyond their means. A focus on improving access to mental health at this point in time in the regions is highly recommended.

Other concerns were 'unemployment' at 57% and 'availability of food and essential services' at 51%. Other options to consider was 'reliable technology' at 40%, 'education outcomes for children' at 29% and 'displaced backpackers' at 25%. Other concerns offered freely were of economic recovery/rebuilding, the tourism industry, contracting the virus, closure of small business, families being separated, the elderly and trade.

38% of people were now working at their home because of COVID-19 and a further 21% were already working from their home - totalling almost 60%. Jo Palmer from Pointer Remote Roles said "COVID-19 has made professionals both in the regional and metro areas equal for the first time because they're all working from home no matter where that may be". Working from home has challenged traditional thinking i.e. ineffective for professionals, perceived loss of productivity, management and control will weaken, confidentiality, privacy and trust issues will complicate the work experience to name but a few. Now, because of COVID-19 working from

home has been encouraged and regional people are relieved of the paradigm shift. Moving forward, society may rethink flexibility and primary place of work.

The outstanding skill set for the 'working from home' cohort was Agriculture at 50%, followed by research and project management at 35% and grant writing, consultancy, leadership, finance, and community social work all sat between 21% to 25%. The survey encouraged participants to add their skills if theirs was not listed. In addition to the 13 options available, 18 participants contributed other skills such as health and fitness, photography, architecture, digital marketing, and community resource centre personnel. Whilst agriculture overall was the greatest skill at 41%, the remaining 60% was diverse and demonstrated an array of talent that resides in WA regions.

In conclusion, the survey gave us a brief insight into how regional people were feeling about COVID-19. It served its primary purpose of connecting with our Network and providing them a platform to communicate issues and concerns across regional Western Australia.

The most alarming result of this survey was escalating 'mental health' triggered by COVID-19. Regional isolation is already a challenge but with COVID-19 these emotions have been heightened. The RRR Network encourages people to reach out and engage with friends and family and regional health services (if available) that assist in this area. Seek help even if it seems unimportant or insignificant.

As a result of the survey findings, the RRR Network at present are exploring how they can effectively deliver regular online communications to engage, influence and develop women across WA so that our rural regional and remote communities will continue to thrive.