

# 2019 Workforce Assessment of Michigan's Local and Regional Food System

Developing Michigan's local and regional workforce:  
challenges and opportunities identified by  
surveying business owners

Michigan's 2019 local and regional food system workforce assessment series  
Part 3 of 4

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## Authors

### **Judith Barry**

Assistant Director  
Center for Regional Food Systems  
Michigan State University

### **Jeannine La Prad**

Senior Fellow  
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

### **Anna Hughes**

Research Associate  
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

### **Mary Freeman**

Senior Policy Associate  
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce

### **Kaitlin Wojciak**

Community Food Systems Educator  
Michigan State University Extension

### **Rachel Bair**

Director of Sustainable and Innovative Food Systems  
Kalamazoo Valley Community College Food Innovation  
Center

### **Rich Pirog**

Director  
Center for Regional Food Systems  
Michigan State University

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## Racial equity statement of MSU Center for Regional Food Systems

CRFS recognizes that racism in the food system is historic, ongoing, and systemic. As we collaborate with partners to advance food systems rooted in local regions and centered on food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable, we emphasize racial equity as a foundation of our work. Read the Racial Equity Statement of the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems to learn more: [foodsystems.msu.edu/racial-equity-statement](https://foodsystems.msu.edu/racial-equity-statement)

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## Executive Summary

This report is the third in a series summarizing a 2019 workforce assessment of Michigan's local and regional food system.

The local and regional food system can be defined in a number of ways. For the purposes of this study, the local and regional food system encompasses organizations that produce, process, or distribute food from Michigan that is available to Michigan consumers, and/or organizations that support this system.

The project research for this section of the workforce assessment included **an employer's perspective of Michigan's local and regional food system workforce**. This involved:

- **Surveying employers to better understand employment, skill shortages and critical factors related to current and future workforce demand.**
  - A 31-question survey was sent in the spring of 2019 to approximately 2,046 individuals and organizations.
  - The goal was to target employers of businesses or organizations operating within the regional food system.
  - We received 143 responses (response rate: 7%).
- **Interviewing local and regional food system stakeholders to complement the survey data and better understand the current and future mix of jobs, potential career pathways, and availability of and gaps in education and training needs.**

There was a wide variety of types of organizations that responded to the survey. Food production, food retail, and nonprofit organizations were most commonly represented.

**Most organizations had a mix of full- and part-time workers.** Only 14% of respondents had exclusively full-time employees and 10% had only part-time staff. When looking at seasonal versus year-round employment, most respondents said their businesses employed four or fewer seasonal employees.

Despite respondents with job openings (41.2%;  $n = 135$ ) citing that many of their openings are due to replacement of individuals, respondents stated that overall they considered high turnover in their staff relatively uncommon. **Over the next one to three years, 86% of respondents expect to hire at least one new worker.** Currently, openings span a broad spectrum of food systems jobs. Entry- or lower-level roles in food service or food retail were the most common, as were crop production and farming roles.

**Employers face a number of challenges** when hiring qualified workers. **Their biggest challenge is the inability to provide competitive wages or offer benefits** (36% and 32% of respondents, respectively;  $n =$

101). **A tight labor market was also a reason** given for a lack of qualified candidates for a given job, or for losing candidates to other employers offering better wages and benefits. This tight labor market trend was particularly noted in interviews with food retail and food service employers. Employers mentioned that competition largely came from national businesses that could offer higher wages for what employees perceived to be less stressful work.

When referring to their pool of potential job applicants, **employer respondents said they see a lack of workplace skills (31%), transportation issues (26%), and a lack of previous work experience (19%) among these individuals, making it difficult to hire or retain staff.** Of the workplace skills, job readiness skills such as communication (23%), work ethic (19%), and reliability (17%) were in particularly high demand from employers ( $n = 78$ ). Facing a deficit in these desired skills, more than half of respondents (52%) said they hire otherwise strong candidates and train them on-the-job. Others (22%) opt to forego hiring until they can find a qualified candidate.

**The employers were asked to describe what they would need in order to hire additional workers.** Their responses coalesced around six common themes:

- **Access to capital/resources**
- **Increased revenue/sales**
- **Planned expansion**
- **Public policy**
- **Industry/market growth**
- **Commodity pricing**

Interviewees also emphasized other considerations that could impact future hiring, including:

- Equity and inclusion
- Technology
- Climate change

Survey respondents' areas of **greatest training needs** for common food system skills include:

- **Customer relations/customer service** for warehouses, storage and distribution, and retail and food service businesses
- **Day-to-day operations, food handling, safety procedures, and sales and marketing** across all business sectors. Sales and marketing training were especially needed in food processing.
- **Machine operation, organic farming, safety procedures, animal handling, and trade skills training** for food production business operations.

Employers suggest there will be significant hiring opportunities over the next three years in local and regional food systems, which could be strengthened by business support and assistance (such as access to capital, public policy, marketing, and sales) and workforce training in specific skill sets and experiential opportunities.

## Introduction

Michigan's local and regional food system development work is designed to improve lives and provide equitable outcomes for all. It is rooted in communities and seeks, through those communities, to:

- improve health through better healthy food access; and
- improve economic development through increased sales for Michigan businesses and better jobs.

Local and regional food system development in Michigan has centered on building collaboration infrastructure around the goals of the Michigan Good Food Charter,<sup>1</sup> a document that provides a roadmap for health and economic development outcomes. As this work has progressed, it has become increasingly important to understand the workforce behind local and regional food system and how to ensure that workforce grows and develops.

Availability of quality jobs is critical to improving communities and the economy. Of Michigan's nearly 4 million households, 14% are below the federal poverty level.<sup>2</sup> Over 1 million (29%) of Michigan's households are categorized as Asset Limited, Income Constrained Employed (ALICE), people who work to make a living but still have insufficient income to make ends meet.<sup>3</sup> To make ends meet, a single adult needs to earn a minimum of \$21,036 and a family of 4 (2 adults, 1 infant and 1 preschooler) needs to earn a minimum of \$61,272 to be above the ALICE bracket.<sup>4</sup>

Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) collaborated with Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC), MSU Extension (MSUE), and the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) to examine the local and regional food system workforce landscape in Michigan.

This is the third in a series of publications and webinars that report on our Michigan findings. It provides the research findings of surveys and interviews of employers in the local and regional food system. It also identifies some of the challenges that exist with hiring and developing a workforce and some of the changes that will happen in the coming years.

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<sup>1</sup> Colasanti, K., Cantrell, P., Cocciarelli, S., Collier, A., Edison, T., Doss, J.,... Smalley, S. (2010). Michigan Good Food Charter. Retrieved from <https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/michigan-good-food-charter>

<sup>2</sup> Michigan Association of United Ways. (2019). *ALICE in Michigan: A financial hardship study*. 2019 Michigan Report. Retrieved from: <http://www.uwmich.org/alice>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Defining the local and regional food system

Local and regional food systems can be defined in a number of ways. For the purposes of the workforce assessment studies conducted, including this scan report, the local and regional food systems encompass organizations that produce, process, and/or distribute food from Michigan that is available to Michigan consumers, and/or organizations that support this system. Where:

- *Produced* refers to crops grown, or animals raised in Michigan.
- *Processed* refers to food products processed or manufactured in Michigan, using primarily Michigan-produced foods.
- *Distributed* goods are ones that originate in Michigan but may cross state boundaries.
- *Consumption* is the end point for Michigan food products. Consumers can be individuals, households, or institutions. These consumers do not need to be in Michigan, but the majority should be in the Upper Great Lakes region.

This definition was created for the purpose of providing boundaries for this work with discussion from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), MSU Extension, and Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC).

## Methodology

A 31-question survey (Appendix A) was designed by CSW in close collaboration with CRFS, MSUE, and KVCC. The survey had three sections: the first gathered information on current job openings, hiring practices, and retention; the second asked about typical skills and qualifications needed for their staff; and the third asked questions about their organization's use of—and need for—additional training for their workers.

The survey was sent in the spring of 2019 to approximately 2,046 individuals and organizations compiled from distribution lists from the CRFS, MSUE, and an additional 116 businesses obtained from the Michigan Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives. The goal was to target employers within businesses and organizations operating within the regional food system. It received 143 responses for a total survey response rate of 7%.

Several factors may have contributed to the low response rate. First, outreach relied on existing listservs that may not have been sufficiently targeted to the desired audience. While an online survey was determined to be the best tool given time and resource constraints, it limited the number of employers the team could reach.

Due to the use of skip logic and some survey drop off, the number of responses varies by question. Response data from these partially completed surveys is included in our analysis. The low response rate affected the mix of responding organizations, with overrepresentation in food production, retail, and nonprofit organizations. Caution should be taken in generalizing survey responses across food system subsectors.

The survey completion rate (those who entered and finished the survey) was 43%, indicating a relatively high drop-off rate. Survey drop-off rates occurred largely at two points: the beginning of the section on current hiring needs (31% into the survey) and the final section of the survey on specific training needs (80% into the survey). These respondents were likely to either be employees in the organization (20% of employees versus 12% of total owners) or not have any current openings, thus may have lost interest or been unable to continue in moving through the survey. Response data from these partial survey takers is included in our analysis.

Analysis of the data included:

- Data cleaning, interpretation and recoding of open-ended or “other” responses. For example, creating an “Ongoing/As needed” category for the question, “What training do you provide to new hires?”
- Descriptive statistics for each question were calculated and presented in summary tables or charts using Excel.
- Cross-tabulations by employer type (farm, processor, etc.) were attempted; however, this was rarely feasible due to low sample sizes. In a few cases, chi-squared tests of independence using STATA (a general-purpose statistical software package) were conducted to test the relationship between turnover and current job openings.

- Open-ended responses were themed using key words, recoded, and presented in the report by theme.

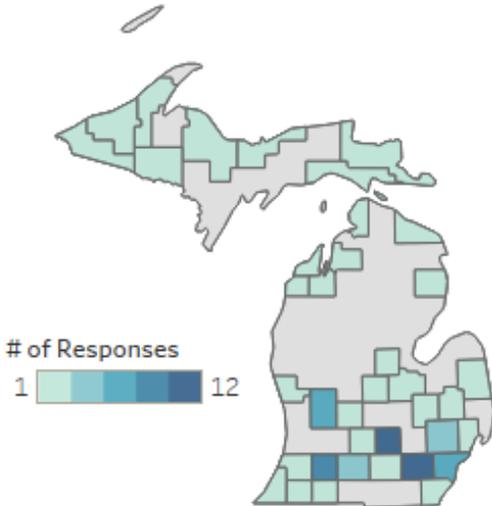
To complement and check the results of the survey, an additional 10 food system employers participated in follow-up interviews. Interview candidates were selected from survey respondents who volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews and from a short list of recommended employers procured during key informant interviews. A total of 35 organizations were contacted for interviews for a response rate of 29%.

## Results

### The respondents

Overall, 102 respondents provided their location in the survey, which is presented in the map in Figure 1. Southern Michigan was the most represented region. Washtenaw County had the most respondents (12), followed by Ingham (11), Kalamazoo (9), Wayne (7), and Kent (6) counties.

**Figure 1. Concentration of Respondents to the Local and Regional Food Systems Business Survey by Michigan County**



*Note: n = 102*

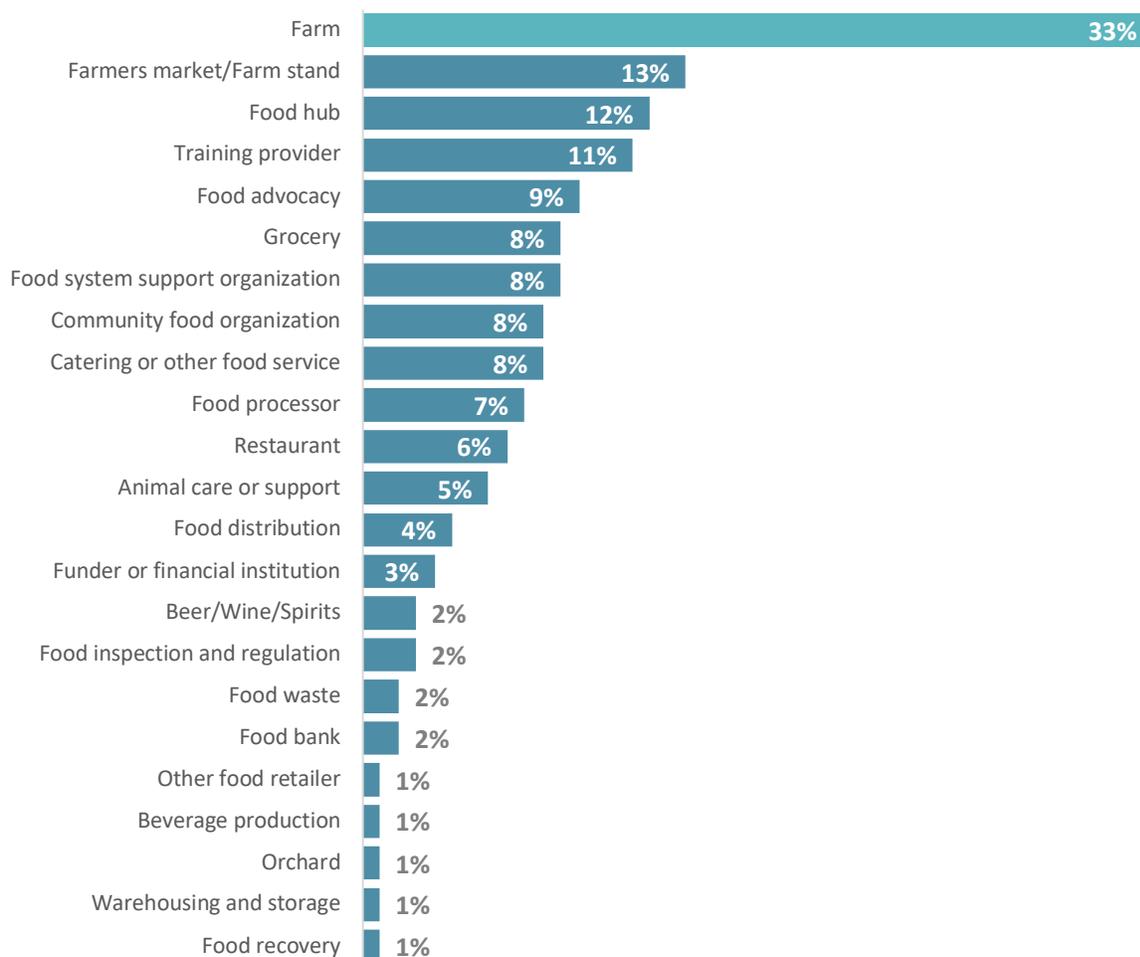
Two questions were asked to gauge how well the responding organizations perceived they fit into the project's definition of the local and regional food system. The first question presented the project definition: "Organizations that produce, process, and/or distribute food from Michigan that is available to Michigan consumers, and organizations that support this system." Respondents were then asked to rank how well they believed they fit that definition on a four-point scale from "to a great extent" to "not at all." The majority of respondents (89%) felt they fit this definition "to a great extent" (61%) or "somewhat" (28%).

The second question asked respondents to estimate the proportion of their food product that is consumed within the state, within the larger upper Great Lakes region, and the proportion consumed outside of these boundaries. This question generated fewer responses ( $n = 87$ ) but, of those responses, 82% stated 90% or more of their products were consumed in Michigan. On average, respondents said only 6.3% of their products were consumed outside of Michigan or the Great Lakes region.

There was a wide mix of types of organizations that responded to the survey. Most represented were food production, food retail, and nonprofit organizations.

Organizations were able to choose more than one organizational type, as some operations span multiple categories—for example, food hubs that produce and distribute food, or advocacy organizations that also provide training. One-third of respondents identified their organization as a farm, followed by farmers markets or farm stands, and food hubs.

**Figure 2. Types of Respondents to the Local and Regional Food System Business Survey**



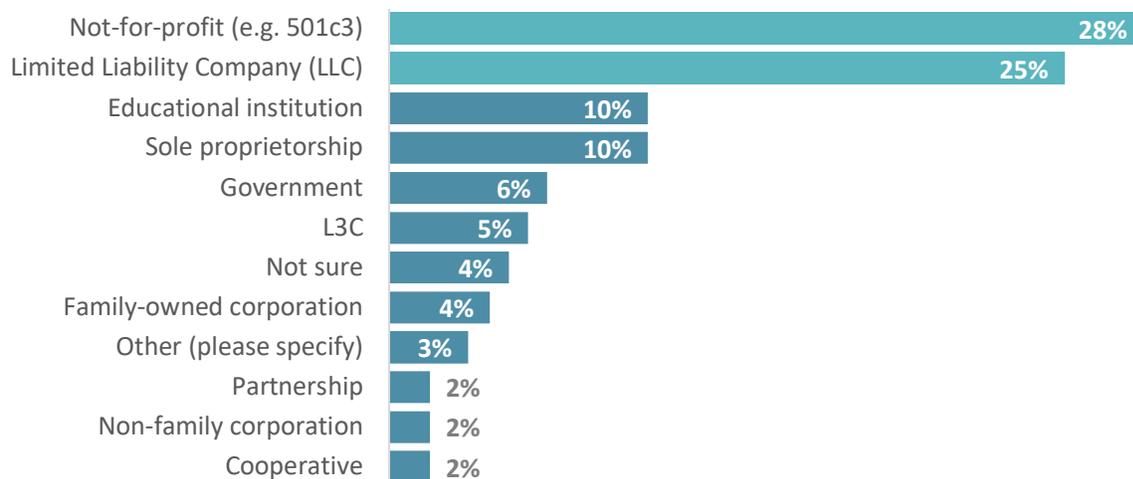
*Note: n = 134*

The majority of respondents operated in food production and/or food retail or service businesses with each comprising 35% of responses ( $n = 47$  for food production and  $n = 47$  for food retail and service). Respondents were able to select more than one industry group (if applicable). Nearly half (47%) of businesses spanned two or more industry groups. Food processing, manufacturing, and distribution businesses were not well represented among respondents.

It is unsurprising that 501(c)(3) organizations were the top reported business structure, as food support, advocacy, and community organizations made up a large proportion of survey respondents.

For-profit LLCs made up one quarter of respondents. Sole proprietors made up slightly less than 10%. There were also a large number of educational institutions (9.5%) comprising both K-12 and post-secondary institutions, as well as representation from local, regional, and federal government agencies (5.8%). A few respondents represented a blend of for- and not-for-profit organizations and social enterprises including low-profit limited liability companies (L3Cs).

**Figure 3. The Business Structure of Respondents to the Workforce Assessment Survey**



*Note: n = 137*

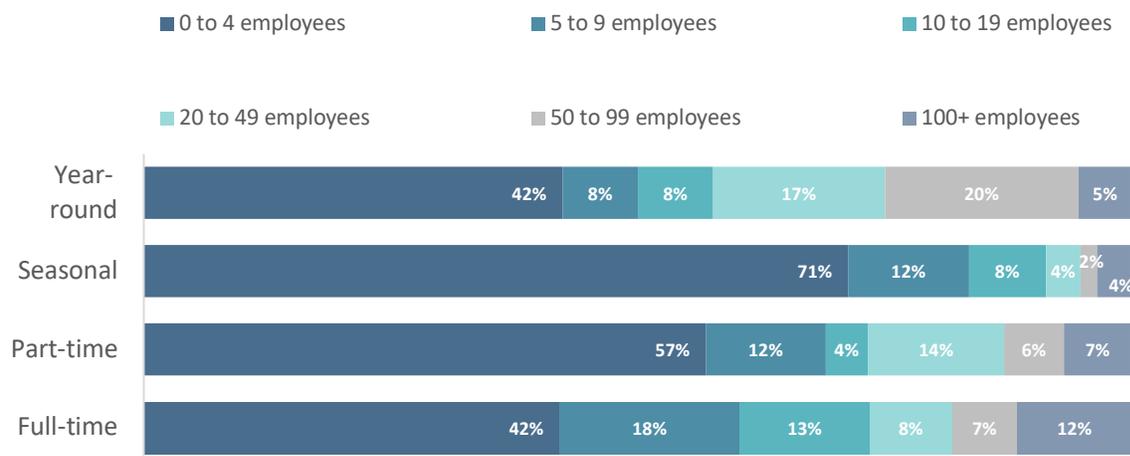
Nearly 70% of respondents were employees, not owners of their organizations. Based on analysis of their job titles, respondents ranged in organizational seniority from frontline roles such as baristas, farmhands, and laboratory technicians to more senior roles including owner, partner, and executive administration. Educators, regional planners, and chefs also were among the respondents. For a full list of the job titles of respondents, see Appendix B.

Nearly all the employers interviewed were owners of their business or in senior leadership roles. They represented a range of organization types including in food production, processing, grocery, food hub and distribution, food service and allied sectors including regional government, institutional consumers, and grassroots community development.

## The current and future workforce

Forty-two percent of respondents had four or fewer full-time employees, and 57% reported four or fewer part-time employees (Figure 4). Most organizations had a mix of full- and part-time workers, with just 14% of respondents having only full-time employees and 10% having only part-time staff.

**Figure 4. The Size of the Part-time, Full-time, Year-round, and Seasonal Workforces Within Local and Regional Food System Organizations as a Percentage.**



Note: n = 121

When looking at seasonal versus year-round employment, most respondents said their businesses employed four or fewer seasonal employees (Figure 4). Seasonal employment includes both migrant workers and local resident workers. Employers interviewed most frequently employed locals for seasonal work, but this trend was likely indicative of our interview sample and not the whole local and regional food system, as the latest data suggests there were nearly 50,000 migrant workers working in Michigan in 2013.<sup>5</sup> In key informant interviews, food system stakeholders reported they often work with large food system entities that rely heavily on migrant seasonal workers.

There was more variation in organizations offering year-round employment. Those with four or fewer year-round employees were the most common (42%), followed by entities with 50 to 99 year-round employees (19.6%) and those with 20 to 49 employees (17.4%).

### Hiring opportunities

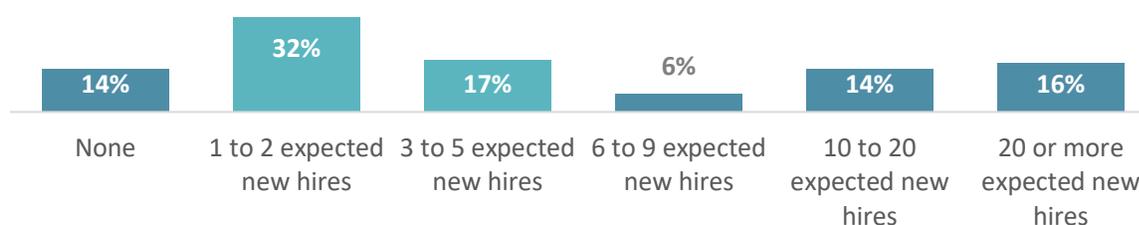
Fewer than half of respondents (41.2%) had current job openings (n = 135). Of those, the number of job openings ranged from one to 20, with an average of just fewer than five (n = 46). Respondents with job openings gave different reasons for multiple jobs that were open, including replacing workers lost to attrition (70%). Nearly 60% of respondents also said these openings were due to growth within their organization. Only 12.8% of respondents were filling jobs vacancies caused by retirement.

<sup>5</sup> Michigan Department of Civil Rights (2013) Michigan migrant and seasonal farmworker enumeration profile study. Retrieved from: [https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dhs/FarmworkerReport\\_430130\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/dhs/FarmworkerReport_430130_7.pdf)

Respondents overall stated that high turnover was relatively uncommon. Slightly more than half stated they have low turnover at their organization, 40% categorized their turnover as “medium,” and less than 10% said their turnover is high (n = 108). From the open-ended responses, there was a fair amount of predicted turnover from organizations tied to educational institutions where many, if not all, have workforces comprised of students.

Over the next one to three years, 86% of respondents expect to hire at least one new worker (Figure 6). Only 14% expect to have no hiring needs.

**Figure 6. Respondents Indicating the Number of Future Employees they Expect to Hire in the Next One to Three Years (as a Percentage of the Total Respondents)**



*Note: n = 98*

Current openings ranged across a broad spectrum of food systems jobs. Entry- or lower-level roles in food service or food retail were the most common, as were crop production and farming roles such as harvester, greenhouse operator, and head grower. Roles in food system education were also common, an example of which is soil educator. Occupations that support the food system were also listed by respondents, including grant managers, maintenance staff, delivery drivers, economic development specialists, and SNAP/Nutrition educators.

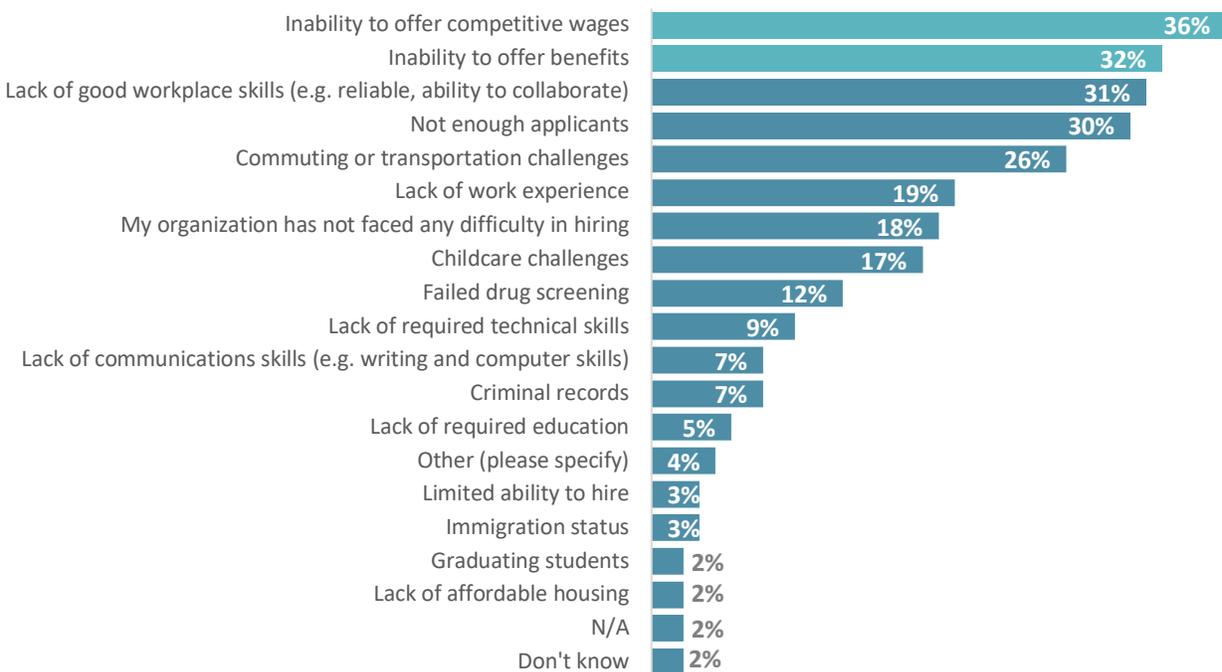
**Table 1. Job Vacancies Available at the Time of the Survey**

Food production & processing	Distribution, retail, and food service	Allied and support organizations
Butcher Delivery driver Farm assistant Farm laborer Farm team Farm technician Harvester Packager Greenhouse operator Head grower Market garden assistant Part-time van driver Tasting room pourer Value-added food producer Warehouse labor	Barista Bartender Cashier Caterers Chef Cooks Coordinator Warehouse associate Delivery driver Dishwashers Economic development specialist Farmers market intern Food busser Food hub assistant Food service associate Food service worker Front desk receptionist Front-end coordinator General staff retail Grocer JUICEologist Line cook Local foodivore Meat cutters Multiple department clerks Multiple department managers Pastry chef Program assistant Project manager Restaurant management Route driver Senior grant manager Server Staff positions at stores Summer food & health fellowship Tray passing staff Truck drivers, warehouse Utility Volunteer coordinator	Café & youth program manager Certified compost operators Farm assistant Farmer network coordinators Food hub assistant Haulers Infrastructure Internships Local food coordinators Processors SNAP/Nutrition educators Soil educators Truck drivers USDA navigators Youth farm worker

## Hiring challenges

When asked what challenges they face hiring qualified workers, local and regional food systems respondents overwhelmingly cited their inability to provide competitive wages or offer benefits (36% and 32% of respondents, respectively;  $n = 101$ ; Figure 7). A tight labor market also was acknowledged elsewhere in the survey and in the research interviews with employers as a reason for the lack of qualified candidates for a given job or losing available candidates to a competitor who could offer higher wages or benefits. A few employers said they are getting fewer and fewer applicants, to the point that if someone applies, they are likely getting the job. This tight labor market trend was observed to be particularly strong by employers interviewed in food retail or food service. More than once, retail and food systems employers said they felt competition from national businesses that could offer higher wages for what they perceived to be less stressful work.

**Figure 7. Response Rate Showing the Challenges Employers Face in Hiring Qualified Workers in the Local and Regional Food System.**



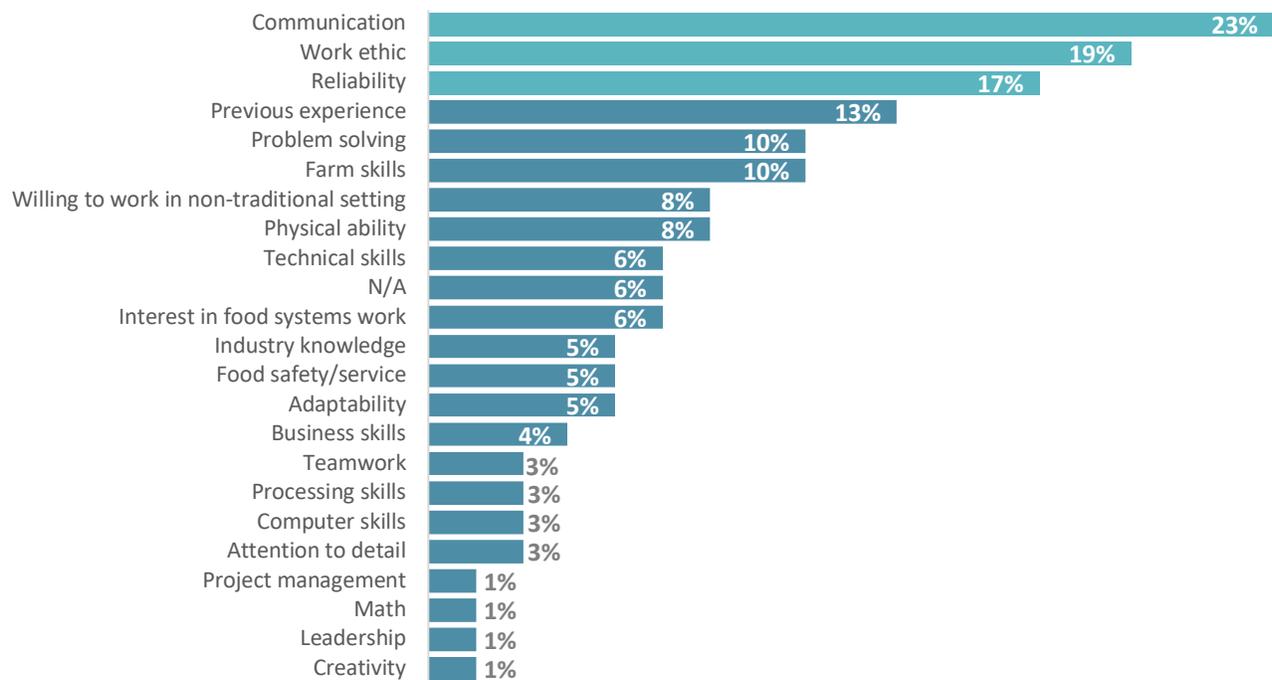
Note:  $n = 101$

When referring to their pool of applicants for the position, 31% of employer respondents said they are seeing a lack of workplace skills, transportation issues (26%), and the lack of previous work experience (19%) among these individuals, making them difficult to hire or retain in employment. Other challenges mentioned included barriers in the institutional hiring process at the respondent's organization, lack of candidates with the "right" personality, and the perception that people no longer want to work on farms. Only 18% of respondents said they did not face any hiring challenges.

Interviews supported the survey findings, though the “lack of good workplace skills” was discussed more than the inability to offer competitive wages or benefits. Though, employers suspected their inability to offer these higher wages results in a lower-quality candidate pool.

Specifically, Figure 8 shows the workplace skills that were most commonly mentioned by respondents in the survey. The need for strong soft skills or job readiness skills such as communication (23%), work ethic (19%), and reliability (17%) were in particularly high demand from employers.

**Figure 8. The Workplace Skills Most Difficult to Find in New Hires (*n* = 78)**



*Note: n = 78*

Facing a deficit in these desired skills, over half of respondents (52%; Figure 9) said they hire otherwise strong candidates and train them on the job. Others (22%) opt to forego hiring until they can find a qualified candidate. In open-ended responses, some said if they cannot find candidates with the necessary skills, they may even discontinue a type of service or product until they can fill that role.

**Figure 9. How Respondents Hire When They Establish that There is Not a Qualified Pool of Candidates**



Note:  $n = 90$

In interviews, some employers said they preferred to hire candidates with less experience, citing both the ability to train in their own unique systems as well as allowing them to hire at a lower hourly wage.

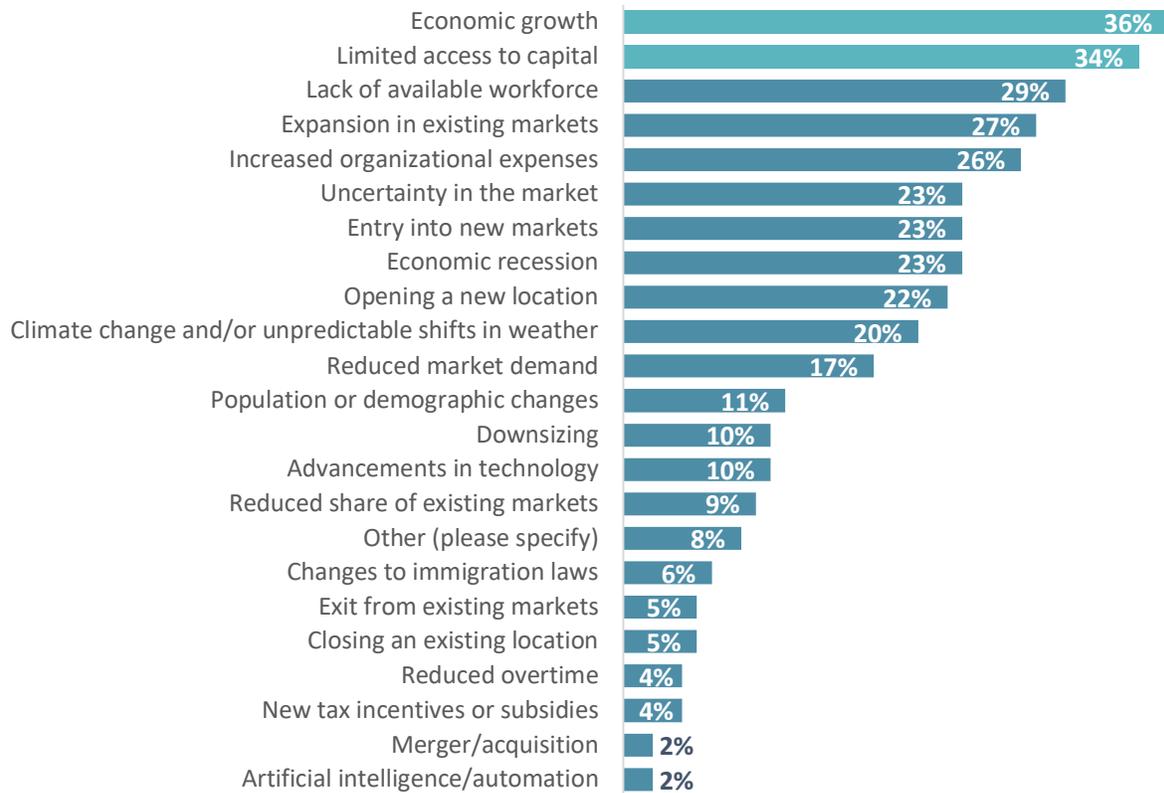
When asked if the challenges of finding workers with the necessary skills to do the job was holding back their organization's growth, a quarter of respondents ( $n = 94$ ) said yes. Interviewees shared experiences demonstrating turnover slowing growth, with training time and a lack of engaged or hardworking staff contributing to uncertainty and limitations to business operations.

#### Other factors influencing hiring and workforce development

Organizations are wrestling with macro level changes to the market that would affect their businesses and subsequently their staff needs in the immediate future (Figure 10). While most stated that economic growth (37%) or planned expansion (27%) would necessitate a change in their staffing, 34% cited limited access to capital and 29% the lack of an available workforce as potential constraining factors to hiring and workforce development.

Uncertainty was also a common response to this question, with some respondents expecting economic growth (36%), while others were anticipating a recession (23%) and/or uncertainty (23%). Although lack of capital was given as a reason to limit new hiring, few organizations cited near-term downsizing (9.8%), closing of locations (5%), or exiting completely from existing markets (5%) as factors they expect to impact their staffing needs over the next three years.

**Figure 10. Factors Respondents Shared That May Impact Staffing Needs Over the Next 1-3 Years.**



*Note: n = 102*

### Creating an environment to increase hiring

Respondents were asked to describe the circumstances they considered necessary to enable more worker hiring. Their responses coalesced around six common themes:

- Access to capital/resources
- Increased revenue/sales
- Planned expansion
- Public policy
- Industry/market growth
- Commodity pricing

Additionally, some respondents mentioned unanticipated seasonal needs would necessitate an increase in hiring.

### Access to capital/resources

Accessing capital, through investment or grant funding, and/or accessing resources such as land was cited by 31% of respondents as a key driver in their ability to hire workers. Grant funding was cited by interviewed employers in “allied industries” as an avenue to bolster their participation in the local and regional food system. Example: A large intermediate school district uses grant funding to procure local produce and prepared foods that would otherwise be outside of their budget. Collaboration and resource sharing were commonly mentioned in interviews, both through formal cooperative models or through incubators or accelerators.

### Increased revenue/sales

Following investor and grant funding, increased revenue from sales was a critical factor in considering changing hiring needs.

### Planned expansion

Respondents cited expansion of programs or increasing production as another factor that contributes to hiring. A few respondents stated they have tentative plans for expansion over the coming years, while others described their businesses being at an in-between stage on the cusp of expansion.

### Public policy

Examples of policy that affect hiring fell into two categories:

1. Changes to minimum wage and employment laws that affect the pay and schedules of workers; and
2. More public incentives, such as tax credits or write-offs, to help offset the cost of hiring.

Policy and regulatory concerns also came up in interviews. A few employers reported their struggle with tight profit margins and expressed concern about the minimum wage requirements. Others reported that hiring was constrained by changes in federal and state policy. Producers and food hub employers also cited changes in regulatory policies around meat, poultry, and eggs, impacting their plans for operating their businesses in the future.

### Industry/market growth

In addition to expansion of individual businesses, growth in the entire marketplace or industry would enable organizations to increase their staff. Market growth will not only open new distribution channels for businesses selling a product but also present opportunities for support organizations to grow. Growing demand for local food was mentioned by all interviewees as a growth opportunity.

### Commodity pricing

For a few respondents, particularly those in animal production, commodity pricing greatly impacts the ability of a business to finance hiring. The delay in income in the animal production industry due to the long period of time to harvest an animal and the ultimate sale price of the animal was raised as a reason for restricting hiring.

Other factors discussed in interviews that could potentially impact hiring were technology, climate change, and equity and inclusion.

#### Equity and inclusion

Race was an issue that was easier for some employers to talk about than others, indicating an opportunity for engaging our food system in continued education and discussion. Most employers interviewed acknowledged more could be done around equity in the food system and specifically cited structural barriers that limit people of color working in the food system. Barriers cited included access to capital and access to network. Those comfortable with the conversation spoke of either personal experience of inequity, racism, and/or discrimination, while others spoke of concerted efforts to include racially marginalized communities in food systems work. Those without direct ties often struggled to articulate the challenges they saw or solutions to inequities beyond attempts to procure from businesses owned by people of color (POC) when possible. Only one employer interviewed did not see any differences in employment opportunities by race in the food system.

#### Technology

Employers mentioned interest in investing in technology, although none of the employers interviewed were of a large enough scale that they were planning to make large investments in this area.

#### Climate change

Climate change is a major concern among employers. Those interviewed mentioned several ways they are seeing climate change affect their work, from changes or delays in crop planting due to extreme weather events to the effects of pollution on croplands and natural habitats. Strategies for approaching climate change through changing crop planting and investigating more viable solutions for the region with long-range planning of new crop varieties were cited as ways to navigate these challenges.

### Education and training

Respondents' perspectives on education and training needs and resources are presented here. As part of the overall workforce assessment, a local and regional food system training and education scan were conducted. The results of this scan are presented in a separate publication.<sup>6</sup>

Survey respondents currently partner with many training providers and educational institutions for their training needs, including:

- Michigan State University (nearly 60% had accessed training; n = 46), MSU Extension offices, or through specific programs or department such as agriculture tech, the Center for Regional Food Systems, or the Organic Farmer Training Program. This high number may have been because the survey list included MSU listservs.
- State associations (52%), such as the Michigan Farmers Market Association, Michigan Restaurant Association, and the School Nutrition Association of Michigan, among others.

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<sup>6</sup> Forthcoming at: <https://www.canr.msu.edu/michigan-food-workforce/resources>

- Other educational institutions including local four-year universities, community colleges, and K-12 school districts were also reported (35%).
- State, federal, and local government agencies related to agriculture, economic development, environment, and health are also accessed for training needs (20%).
- Community resources including foundations, nonprofits, and libraries (26%).
- Proprietary training providers including ADP training (a brand of payroll training) and Zingerman’s ZingTrain (11%).
- Open online resources such as Google, YouTube, and the Ridgedale permaculture web series (6%).

Many who responded to this question used multiple providers for their needs. A full list of training providers mentioned can be found in Appendix C.

In interviews, smaller-scale employers and businesses were less likely to access training providers due to cost. Smaller employers often said formal training would be something they would consider if and when their business grew to a certain size, but until then, they were satisfied with on-the-job training for their employees. Grant funding was a commonly cited method to justify sending employees to outside training or to gain access to training materials. A few interviewed employers did not believe formal workforce training would be able to address the lack of workplace skills, such as reliability or work ethic, they observe in their employees.

#### Desired training

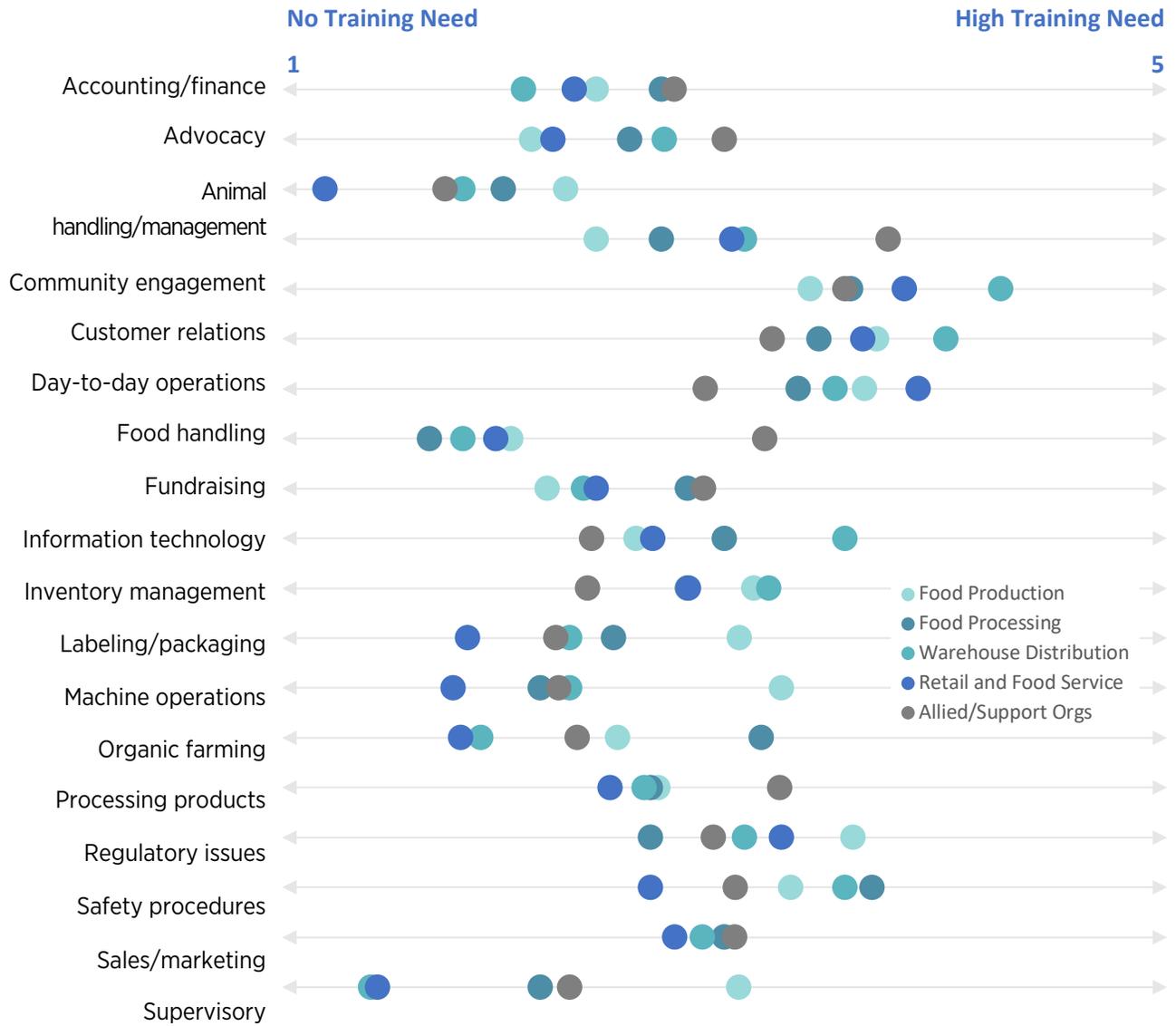
Survey respondents were asked to rank their current training needs against a list of common food system skills on a scale from 1 to 5 (Figure 11).

#### The areas of greatest needs include:

- **Customer relations/customer service** for warehouses, storage and distribution, and retail and food service businesses.
- **Day-to-day operations, food handling, safety procedures, and sales and marketing** across all business sectors. Sales and marketing training were especially needed in food processing.
- **Machine operation, organic farming, safety procedures, animal handling, and trade skills training** for food production business operations.

Managerial training for supervisors or managers (how to manage people, for example) came up in interviews as a critical skill for which employers felt training for their staff could be beneficial. Learning opportunities, including leadership opportunities for staff to gain hands-on experience on boards or councils, came up as a professional development strategy some also equated as a retention tool.

Figure 11. The Desired Training Skills of Different Sectors in the Local and Regional Food System.



Note: n = 94

## Conclusions and opportunities for action

This research identified a number of hiring challenges for employers in local and regional food, but it also identified some of the opportunities for workforce development. Some key takeaways from this work include:

- There are a wide range of full- and part-time employment opportunities in local and regional food systems.
- It is anticipated there will be a considerable increase in hiring in local and regional food systems over the next three years. Informing education organizations and workforce development agencies of this potential growth would be valuable.
- Employers are struggling to compete with other larger businesses to hire in a tight labor market, experiencing stiff competition for offering adequate wages and benefits to good applicants.
- Applicants in the job market are difficult to retain and hire, as they are lacking workplace skills, transportation, and previous work experience. Many employers do not require more than a high school diploma. It is recommended that a focus be placed on academic, vocational, and/or extracurricular programs and part-time employment for high schoolers that can improve much-needed skills such as communication, work ethic, and reliability.
- To develop a workforce and enable more worker hiring, our survey respondents indicated capital, resources, sales, business expansion, public policy, market growth, and/or commodity pricing were needed. Equity and inclusion, technology, and climate change were other factors discussed during interviews that would impact a growing workforce. Continually looking to improve and strengthen business support activities with appropriate technical assistance and local food policy development—particularly through an equitable lens—will support workforce development as it faces changes in the work environment.
- A number of specific training needs were observed by employers across sectors of the local and regional food systems. Additional research on the training needs of different communities can better equip local education institutions at the state and local level to provide a response.
- As described, the issue of workforce development is multi-faceted and complex from an education, training, business development, policy, and technical perspective. New cross-sector partnerships seeking collaborative improvements in their programming may help overcome some of the challenges.

# Appendix A

## Workforce Assessment Survey

### Michigan Local and Regional Food System Workforce Survey

#### Introduction

The Michigan Food System Workforce Assessment seeks to understand what it will take to keep Michigan's good food workforce growing.

Do you:

- Produce, process and/or distribute Michigan food to Michiganders?
- Support the regional food system?

If so, please fill out the survey to help us identify employment demand and training needs.

For more info and future results, please visit the Michigan Food System Workforce Assessment [project page](#). Thank you!

#### Organization and respondent information.

1. The focus of this study is on organizations that **produce, process and/or distribute food from Michigan that is available to Michigan consumers**, and organizations that support this system. To what extent does your organization fit this definition?

- To a great extent
- Somewhat
- Very little
- Not at all

2. What best describes your food system organization? (please review carefully and check all that apply)

- |                                  |                                 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Farm                             | Beverage production             |
| Farm supply merchant             | Training provider               |
| Food processor                   | Restaurant                      |
| Food distribution                | Beer/Wine/Spirits               |
| Food hub                         | Catering or other food service  |
| Food system support organization | Orchard                         |
| Warehousing and storage          | Grocery                         |
| Animal care or support           | Other food retailer             |
| Organic business                 | Food advocacy                   |
| Food recovery                    | Funder or financial institution |
| Food waste                       | Other (please specify)          |
| Food inspection and regulation   |                                 |
| Food bank                        |                                 |
| Community food organization      |                                 |

3. What percent of your total product is consumed in:
  - Michigan\_\_\_\_\_
  - Upper Great Lakes Region\_\_\_\_\_
  - Consumers beyond Michigan and the Great Lakes Region\_\_\_\_\_
  - I don't know
  
4. What is the structure of your organization?
  - Sole Proprietorship
  - Family-owned Corporation
  - Non-family Corporation
  - Partnership
  - Limited Liability Company (LLC)
  - Cooperative
  - Benefit Corporation
  - Not-for-profit (e.g. 501c3)
  - Other (please specify)
  
5. What is your relationship to the organization?
  - I am the owner
  - I'm an employee of the organization, not the owner
  
6. What is your job title?

Employee information

7. How many full-time and part-time employees currently work for your organization?

0-4    5-9    10-19    20-49    50-99    100+

Full-time

Part-time

8. How many seasonal and year-round employees work for your organization?

0-4    5-9    10-19    20-49    50-99    100+

Seasonal

Year-round

Employee hiring and retention

9. Do you currently have any job openings?

- Yes
- No (If no, skip to Q13)

10. If yes, please list your current openings:

11. How long are positions usually open before being filled?

- 30 days or less
- 31 to 60 days
- More than 60 days

12. Are these job openings due to:

- Retirement
- Replacement
- Growth

13. How do you find employees? (Mark all that apply)

- Newspapers
- Business or agriculture associations
- Community or technical colleges
- Community employment centers
- Four-year colleges or universities
- CareerBuilder, Indeed, etc.
- Local high schools
- Recruiting or staffing agencies
- Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.
- Word of mouth
- Internal referral
- Other (please specify)

14. Is your employee turnover?

- High
- Medium
- Low

Please describe\_\_\_\_\_

15. Please indicate any hiring or retention challenges. Mark all that apply.

- Childcare challenges
- Commuting or transportation challenges
- Criminal records
- Failed drug screening
- Hard to find seasonal workers
- Immigration status
- Inability to offer competitive wages and benefits
- Not enough applicants
- Lack of work experience
- Lack of communications skills (e.g. writing and computer skills)
- Lack of good work habits (e.g. reliable, good time management, ability to collaborate, etc.)
- Lack of required education

- Lack of required technical skills
- Low language skills
- My business/organization has not faced any difficulty in hiring
- Other (please specify)

16. How many new hires will you have in the next 1-3 years?

17. Will any of these factors change your staffing needs over the next 1 to 3 years?

- Climate change and unpredictable shifts in weather
- Advancements in technology
- Artificial intelligence/automation
- Downsizing
- Entry into new markets
- Expansion in existing markets
- Opening a new location
- Closing an existing location
- Exit from existing markets
- Reduced share of existing markets
- Limited access to capital
- Uncertainty in the market
- Lack of available workforce
- Reduced market demand
- Increased organizational expenses
- Reduced overtime
- Merger/acquisition
- New tax incentives or subsidies
- Economic growth
- Economic recession
- Population or demographic changes
- Changes to immigration laws
- Other (please specify)

18. Under what circumstances would you expect to be able to hire additional workers? For instance, accessing enough investment resources to expand the business, a new tax incentive or subsidy, reaching a certain target in sales revenue, etc.

#### Employee skills and qualifications

19. Describe the education requirements you prefer in your new hires in roles at the following levels.

High school    Associate    Bachelor's    Graduate    Industry Credential    N/A

- Entry-level role (1 year or less work experience)
- Mid-level role (2 to 4 years)
- Senior level role (5 or more years)

20. List any industry certificates or credentials you look for when hiring.

21. What training do you provide to new hires?

- Short-term (one month or less of on-the-job training)
- Medium-term (1-11 months of on-the-job training)
- Long-term (more than 12 months)
- Formal apprenticeships (if selected, skip to Q22)
- No training
- Other (please specify)

22. List any apprenticeships you provide:

23. What specific skills are hard to find in new hires?

24. Is the challenge of finding those skills holding back your organization's growth?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please explain

25. How do you address your organization's need for employees with specific skills that are hard to find?

- Hire otherwise strong candidates and hire a trainer to provide skill development on site
- Hire otherwise strong candidates and my organization provides that training on site
- Run your organization without those skills until you can find someone who has them
- Send employees to training programs offsite
- I don't know
- Other or additional comments\_\_\_\_\_

26. How strong is your need for training for either you or your employees in the following skills? 1 is no need and 5 is the highest level of need. Rating it 3 means it would be "nice to have" but wouldn't significantly impact the organization.

1      2      3      4      5

Accounting/finance  
Advocacy  
Animal handling and management  
Community engagement or organizing  
Customer relations  
Day-to-day operations  
Food handling  
Fundraising  
Information technology  
Inventory management  
Labeling/packaging  
Machine operations

Organic farming  
Packaging  
Processing products  
Regulatory issues  
Safety procedures  
Sales/marketing  
Supervisory  
Trade skills (i.e. plumbing, mechanics, electrical, etc.)  
Other (please specify)

27. List any educational partners you have worked with for your training needs:

#### Funding and other assistance

28. Does your organization receive any grant funding or subsidies from:

- Private philanthropy
- Foundation grants
- Value-added Producer Grant
- Michigan Good Food Catalytic Investment Grants
- None
- I don't know
- Other\_\_\_\_\_

29. Approximately how much of your revenue comes from grants or subsidies?

- None
- Less than 10%
- 10-25%
- 25-50%
- More than 50%
- I don't know

30. In what county is your organization based?

31. Please include your email address if we can contact you for a follow up interview.

Thank you for your time.

Your participation will help grow the Michigan good food system.

Responses will be shared in aggregate and your individual responses will be kept confidential.

A final report will be released in early summer 2019.

To keep up to date on the progress of this project, please visit our [project page](#).

## Appendix B

### Job Titles of Survey Respondents

Selected Job Titles of Survey Respondents		
Administrator	Executive Vice President	Member/Owner
Assistant Regional Planner	Farm Office Manager and Farm	Operations Manager
Assistant Winemaker	Labor	Organic Manager
Barista	Farmer	Organics Maven
Business Development Manager	Farmers Market and Pantry	Outreach Coordinator
Certified Market Manager	Manager	Owner/Operator
Chef	Farmers Market Coordinator	Partner
Chief Cook and Bottle Washer	Farmers Market Manager	Planner
Child Nutrition Manager	Farmhand	Principal
Co-founder	Food Educator/Community	Produce Coordinator
Community Development	Outreach	Produce Safety Technician
Specialist	Food Hub Manager	Production Manager
Community Food Systems	Food Safety Specialist	Program Coordinator
Educator	Food Services Operations Manager	Program Manager
Contractor	General Manager	Project Coordinator
Corporate Chef	Greenhouse and CSA Manager	Project Manager
Director of Community Food	Grower	Public Health Sanitarian
Programs	Instructor/Inspector	Recruiting Manager
Director of Culinary Education	Laboratory Technician	Regional Food Hub Director
Director of Field Operations	Land Grant Director	Seedsmith
Director of Food and Nutrition	Lead Consultant	Stakeholder & Network Partners
Services	Loan Specialist	Manager
Director of Operations	Local Food Coordinator	Sustainability Intern
Economic Development	Local Foodivore	Urban Farm Manager
Coordinator	MAEAP Tech and Farmer	Volunteer Committee Chair
Educational Programs Manager	Market and Produce Coordinator	
Student Organic Farm	Market Manager	
Educator/Instructor	Meatmonger	
Executive Chef		
Executive Director		

# Appendix C

## Training Providers Used by Survey Respondents and Interviewees

Education and Training Providers Survey Respondents Have Used for Occupational Training		
ADP	Lansing Urban Farm Project	MSU-HACCP
Bay Mills Community College	Michigan Agriculture	Muskegon Community College
Calhoun Area Career Center	Environmental	National Cooperative Grocers
Calhoun Intermediate School District	Assurance Program (MAEAP)	National Good Food Network
Capital Area District Library	Michigan Department of Education (MDE)	National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition
Cornell	Michigan Economic Developers Association (MEDA)	Nonprofit Network of Jackson
Crisis Prevention Institute	Michigan Environmental Health Association (MEHA)	Northern Michigan Small Farms Conference
Delta College	MI Farm to Institution Network (MFIN)	Northern Michigan University
Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (MDARD)	MI Farmers Market Association (MIFMA)	One Place (Kalamazoo Public Library)
Farmer Field School speakers	MI Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS)	Perdue
Farmers Market Coalition	Michigan Group Gap Network	Red Cross
Food Finance Institute	Michigan Nonprofit Association	Ridgedale Permaculture Web Series
FSMA advocates	Michigan Organics Council	School Nutrition Association of Michigan
Glen Oaks Community College	Michigan Recycling Coalition	Small Business Development Center
Google	Michigan Restaurant Association	Study-A-Farm host farms
Great Lakes Expo (GLEXP)	MI-Small Business Technology Development Center	Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (TBAISD)
Green Horn Training (Eastern Market)	Monroe County Community College	Tollgate Farm and Education Center
Health Department	MSU	United States Composting Council
Holloway Institute	MSU Ag Tech	University of Michigan
Incubator farms	MSU Center for Regional Food Systems	USDA
Institute for Child Nutrition (ICN)	MSU Extension	Wayne State University
International Economic Development Council (IEDC)	MSU IAT	Winrock International
Kalamazoo Valley Community College	MSU Organic Farmer Training Program	WMU
Keep Growing Detroit	MSU Product Center	You Tube
Land For Good		Zingerman's/ZingTrain

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The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems advances regionally rooted food systems through applied research, education, and outreach by uniting the knowledge and experience of diverse stakeholders with that of MSU faculty and staff. Our work fosters a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the nation, and the planet by advancing systems that produce food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable. Learn more at [foodsystems.msu.edu](https://foodsystems.msu.edu).

**Center for Regional Food Systems**  
**Michigan State University**

480 Wilson Road  
Natural Resources Building  
East Lansing, MI 48824

**For general inquiries:**

**EXPLORE:** [foodsystems.msu.edu](https://foodsystems.msu.edu)

**EMAIL:** [CRFS@msu.edu](mailto:CRFS@msu.edu)

**CALL:** 517-353-3535

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