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New North, Inc.

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UW Oshkosh COVID-19 survey indicates broadband internet access impacts work-from-home options for Wisconsin businesses

WEDC and New North join UWO to announce sixth statewide survey results

NEW NORTH, September 29, 2020 – More than half of all businesses responding to the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh's sixth monthly survey to monitor the COVID-19 impact in Wisconsin shows access to broadband internet is limiting employees' ability to work from home.

Responding businesses pointed to internet bandwidth (53%) and availability (29%) as significant barriers, even though only 15% indicated lack of access limits their ability to offer online services. And only a quarter of respondents have added new online services since the beginning of the pandemic.

Jeff Sachse, interim director of UWO's Center for Customized Research and Services, suggested the broadband findings are especially interesting when considered with findings from last month's survey.

"Given that a large majority of businesses have continuously expressed some level of concern regarding adopting work-from-home policies, we now know that a lack of high-speed broadband is one of the barriers that likely feeds this concern," he said. "This factor also has impacted businesses' ability to pivot into new markets and services as it is likely that business owners are not confident they can manage these services remotely."

"New North is developing strategies to better understand the needs of delivering distance learning to students and other residents' broadband access requirements to be connected to healthcare services and work opportunities," said Barb LaMue, president and CEO of New North, Inc. "As such information becomes aggregated, it will be critical in formulating short- and long-term solutions for residents within our 18-county region."

The 453 Wisconsin companies responding to the Sept. 1-18 survey represent 20,677 employees, with 92% completing each of the past six surveys. The response rate is similar to recent months at a +/- 3% margin of error.

Respondents reported renewed losses in August, including:

- \$1.4 million in inventory losses
- \$4.2 million in lost income
- \$804,000 in lost wages and productivity
- \$23.9 million in other financial losses

Responding businesses also continue to face a difficult labor market, adding only 70 net employees over the month.

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“The renewed downturn in August is connected both to the end of the summer tourism season and the continued increase in COVID-19 cases. This is reflected both in the losses identified and the priority that businesses continue to express for increased customer contact,” Sachse said.

In addition, less than 30% of businesses applied for financial assistance – the lowest level observed over the six months. “This is likely due to an ongoing lack of resources as Congress continues to consider new stimulus measures,” Sasche explained.

The September survey also focused on supply chain issues. One-third of businesses have been forced to find alternate suppliers this year, with 62% of those businesses indicating they found a Wisconsin-based supplier to meet their needs.

Similarly, 38% of the businesses reported exploring or expressing interest in reshoring – the practice of moving manufacturing back from other countries to the U.S. – at least some level of production. Sachse noted that it is unclear whether such interest will increase as the pandemic persists.

The survey is a partnership of UWOC, the state’s nine Regional Development Organizations, including New North, and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.

Results can be found at uwosh.edu/ccrs/covid-19-survey.

The October survey will launch to the survey panel of more than 4,000 unique businesses on Oct. 1.

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New North, Inc., is a 501(c)3 non-profit, regional marketing and economic development corporation fostering collaboration among private and public sector leaders throughout the 18 counties of Northeast Wisconsin, known as the New North region. The New North brand unites the region both internally and externally around talent development, brand promotion and business development, signifying the collective economic power behind the 18 counties. The counties include Outagamie, Winnebago, Calumet, Waupaca, Brown, Shawano, Oconto, Marinette, Door, Kewaunee, Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Fond du Lac, Green Lake, Marquette, Florence, Menominee and Waushara. To find out more information about New North, Inc., please visit our website at www.thenewnorth.com.

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