

Get There Oregon Employer Listening Sessions | Key Findings Report

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Introduction

Unprecedented changes have taken place across the business landscape over recent years with employers facing a multitude of challenges on many fronts. In the second quarter of 2023, Get There Oregon conducted a series of listening sessions to gauge top concerns among employers across Oregon and to determine how employee commutes factor into organizational priorities.

Session Strategy & Recruitment

Private and public sector employers from across Oregon were recruited to participate in a total of 10 listening sessions representing cities and counties, hospitals and health systems, knowledge-based companies, lodging and hospitality providers, manufacturers and distributors, and colleges and universities.

All employer listening sessions were conducted virtually with discussion moderated by Get There Oregon. Listening session discussion centered on the following main topics:

- Business needs and priorities
- How employee commutes intersect into operations and business priorities
- Employee commute needs and challenges
- Use of commute options and remote work
- How Get There Oregon and partners can better serve employers (resource and support needs)

Key Findings

The following are overall key findings compiled from the industry-specific employer listening sessions:

Business Needs and Priorities

When asked about top business needs and priorities, participants noted the following:

- **Retention and Recruitment.** Retaining and recruiting staff remain top priorities for employers across all industry types.
- **Engagement, Health, and Wellness.** Employee engagement, in addition to health and wellness, are high priorities for employers.
- **Cost Containment.** Containing costs has emerged as a pressing priority due to economic uncertainty and inflationary pressure.
- **Sustainability.** While a priority for some employers, sustainability is not a top priority.

Employer Perceptions of Employee Commutes

While commutes can be a barrier, providing commute options to employees can deliver definable opportunities and benefits for employers. Participants noted a variety of ways employee commutes affect operational success:

- **Retention and recruitment.** Across all industry types participants cited addressing workforce needs and demands as top organizational objectives for improving employee commutes.
- **Health and Wellness.** Participants recognize that providing commute options is valuable for improving employee health and wellness.
- **Job Access and Economic Growth.** By lessening commuter pain and reducing traffic volumes—especially in areas where commute distances have increased—participants see commute options as a way to facilitate job access and economic growth.
- **Parking Demand and Traffic Volumes.** For colleges/universities, hospitals, and some knowledge-based firms, reducing parking demand and traffic volumes are ongoing priorities. Cities, counties, and other employers with limited parking are also focused on addressing this challenge to workforce growth. Although parking constraints have lessened somewhat due to increased remote work, parking scarcity is expected to rebound as employers ask employees to return to the office.
- **Sustainability.** Participant responses regarding sustainability were mixed:
 - Among sustainability-focused employers, transportation is weighted lower than other priorities, including energy efficiency and waste management.
 - Employers in the Portland metro and Eugene/Springfield areas prioritize sustainability higher than those in other regions.
 - Southern Oregon employers noted that sustainability is not a priority.
- **Post-Pandemic Impacts.** Hospitals, knowledge-based firms, and senior living/lodging businesses, in particular, are considering employee commutes more than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily due to ongoing workforce shortages and employee retention concerns.

Employee Use of Commute Options and Remote Work

Universally, there's been a reduction in commute options use compared to prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, with one exception: the dramatic rise in remote work among professional staff. Employers focused more on remote work adoption and less (if at all) on other commute options during the pandemic. With COVID-19 subsiding, and in light of how commute habits and needs have changed, participants are interested in increasing commute options use and maintaining remote work use.

Participants noted the following about their employees' current use of commute options:

- **Hybrid Work.** Although many participants noted their organizations are starting to push harder for employees to return to the office, hybrid work is expected to remain the norm (e.g., hybrid schedules with standard in-office and remote days).
- **Compressed Work.** Compressed work weeks with extended daily schedules have become more common for both on-site shift workers and professional staff.
- **Transit.** Transit ridership significantly dropped during COVID due to health concerns and remote work. Some employees whose day-time work schedules allow have continued to take transit, but the increased use of compressed work weeks has more recently further reduced use.
- **Carpool and Vanpool.** Both carpooling and vanpooling dropped off significantly during the pandemic due to health concerns and remote work use. Some employers successfully started up vanpools post-pandemic, while most noted that workers are still carpooling, but not as many as prior to the pandemic.
- **Bike Commuting.** Bike commuting remains common in urban areas where amenities are provided and there is adequate safety.

Commute Options Challenges and Needs

Across all industry types, employers recognize two new commuting challenges affecting their employees: higher commuting costs and longer distances traveled. As a result, more employees are giving greater thought to the commute and difficulties in driving alone. Overall, however, employee awareness about commute options, services, and tools remains a significant barrier to use. Participants noted the following specific barriers to commute options use:

- **Longer Commutes.** Longer commute distances are now more common as greater numbers of employees live farther away from worksites due to the lack of affordable housing.
- **Lack of Affordable Housing.** The lack of affordable housing near worksites is causing more employees to travel longer commute distances, and intercity commuting has become more common among employees of all types, including shift workers and professional staff.
- **Remote Worksite Locations.** Worksites are often located in remote locations outside town centers with few amenities and limited transportation services or infrastructure.
- **Intercampus Mobility.** Some larger employers cited intercampus mobility issues, including employees having difficulty accessing spread out buildings without a car.
- **Carpool and Vanpool Matching.** Carpool and vanpool matching mostly happens organically and is limited by employees not knowing each other. Inconsistent shift schedules can sometimes make carpool and vanpool matching and maintenance difficult.
- **Transit Use Challenges.** A number of barriers prevent some employees from using transit:
 - The extended daily work schedules of compressed work weeks mean that commute times are often outside transit operation hours.
 - Limited routes that connect industrial districts with outlying areas, as well as last mile issues between transit stops and worksites, can make it difficult for employees to reach their destinations.
 - Some employees are deterred by physical safety concerns.
 - Monthly and annual transit passes do not align with fractured commute schedules of hybrid remote professional staff.

- **Bicycling Safety and Amenities.** Some employers lack basic on-site amenities for bicycle commuting, and several participants also noted safety and traffic concerns as barriers to bicycling.
- **Emergency Ride Home.** Participants from all industries cited a reliable emergency ride home as important for employees to use commute options.

Employer Commute Options Support

Participants noted the following support being provided to encourage employees to use commute options:

- **Employee Communications.** Most employers communicate commute information to employees digitally (e.g., direct email, e-newsletters, and intranet sites), and participants across all industry types noted that digital communications use increased during the pandemic. Hard copy materials are used, but now to a lesser extent.
- **Resource Events.** Participants noted that resource events were held more commonly pre-pandemic, but many employers are looking to restart. A few participants provide lunch and learns with local experts highlighting commute options, use tips, and services.
- **Seasonal Initiatives.** Participants expressed that seasonal initiatives, ranging from internal to those put on by local transportation options partners and the annual Get There Challenge, are useful.
- **Remote Work Arrangements.** Participants cited major investments made in implementing remote work (including remote work policies, IT systems, and tools), although employee training was not necessarily included.
- **Transit Passes.** Some employers provide subsidized or free transit passes and route information.
- **Bicycle Amenities.** Most employers provide outdoor bike lockers, and some provide additional amenities (e.g., covered bike storage, showers and changing rooms, and on-site repair and maintenance tools) and services (e.g., maintenance and repair workshops). Some employers also facilitate peer-to-peer bicycling support.
- **Carpool and Vanpool Support.** Most employers provide limited carpool and vanpool matching support on-site or through Get There Connect. A small number of employers provide premium carpool parking, and some invested in setting up and subsidizing vanpools among employees.
- **Commuter Perks.** A limited number of employers offer commuter benefits and wellness perks, such as financial credits for transit passes and bike or gear purchases. Some participants are considering offering these types of employee rewards. In a limited number of areas, local transportation options partners also provide incentives for logging commute options trips and remote work.
- **On-Site Vehicles.** A few employers provide on-site vehicles for employees to run errands or access personal appointments when they don't use a personal vehicle to get to work.
- **Emergency Ride Home.** Some employers provide emergency ride home options and programs.

Resource and Support Needs

Across all industry types, employers are interested in fresh and timely turnkey employee materials covering multimodal options and benefits, seasonal appeals, how-to-use tips, and service and tool information to support their commute options programs.

Participants cited a lack of resources and limited staff capacity as challenges to providing commute options support. Most participants expressed a desire to rebuild commute options use given COVID pandemic disruption and changes in employee commute needs and habits. Participants noted the following specific support needs:

- **Digital Content.** Employers of all industry types want digital content for use in employee direct email, e-newsletters, and internal intranet sites, and onboarding materials.
- **Hard Copy Materials.** Some employers expressed interest in hard copy materials for on-site use, including fliers, posters, stall sheets, TV slides, and carpool and vanpool matching cards. Many employers requested hard copy materials translated into Spanish.
- **Supervisor Materials.** Some participants would like supervisor materials (e.g., template letters and wallet cards) to engage supervisors to promote commute options.
- **Co-Branded Materials.** Many employers across all industry types expressed interest in co-branding materials to show efforts are “employer backed.” Similarly, employers relayed interest in setting up dedicated employer networks in Get There Connect and co-branding/customizing “where possible.”
- **Get There Oregon Coordination.** Some employers indicated they’d like to time their employee communications with Get There Oregon and local campaigns. Coordinating this with internal departments, such as HR and communications, on a regular basis can be challenging due to limited staff capacity.
- **Employee Surveys.** Some employers would like employee commute survey support, especially given recent changes in commute habits and needs. Assistance is especially needed in what types of questions to ask, how to conduct surveys (particularly among on-site workers without work email), and results analysis.
- **Employee Commute Planning Services.** Many employers expressed interest in employee commute planning tools provided digitally (e.g., Get There Connect or webinars) and in-person. Employers were strongly interested in help setting up internal carpool and vanpool matching programs, in addition to experts providing on-site assistance.
- **Resource Events.** Employers frequently requested resource events, including resource fairs, lunch and learns, and expert-led webinars.
- **Seasonal Initiatives.** Many employers want to use seasonal initiatives to offer incentives to generate employee interest in commute options.
- **Emergency Ride Home.** Many employers expressed a strong interest in tapping into emergency ride home programs.
- **Get There Connect Training.** Participants widely requested training and assistance in using Get There Connect, including:
 - Understanding scope of features and capabilities
 - Setting up dedicated employer networks
 - Sending direct communications to promote commute options, benefits, and initiatives to employees using the tool
 - Using commute planning and rideshare matching, metrics, direct employee communications, and rewards tools