

Quality of Life, or Quality of Work?

The Great Resignation in Ontario

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Report Summary

The *Great Resignation* is a phrase that describes record numbers of people leaving their jobs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many labour market observers see the *Great Resignation* as a once-in-a-generation change to the way workers find a better work-life balance. Indeed, the *Great Resignation* is viewed by many as one of the major factors behind our ongoing labour shortages. While the *Great Resignation* remains an ongoing narrative, recently some U.S. studies have cast doubt on the nature and depth of the *Great Resignation*.

This paper, using Canadian Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, seeks to determine whether the phenomenon occurred in Ontario. Our work indicates that:

- The pandemic caused serious turbulence in the labour market. The tsunami of layoffs, followed by waves of mass hirings created noisy workforce data.
- While there were lots of stories and articles about employees dropping out of the workforce to find better work-life balance, the plurality of anecdote is not evidence. The number of people leaving jobs has not really increased except from retirement, which was an inevitability given Ontario's aging population.
- The LFS shows that the provincial employment situation and context remain remarkably similar to the pre-COVID situation. Pre, during and post pandemic LFS data indicate that Ontarians are leaving jobs for the same reasons and with the same proportionality as in the past.
- While the narrative of the *Great Resignation* made for an interesting story and spawned numerous sequels (Great Regret, Great Relocation, Great Renegotiation, and Quiet Quitting), there is minimal evidence that it occurred or is occurring in Ontario.



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Introduction

How Great was it?

*“And I just quit my job /
I’m gonna find new drive /
Damn they work me so damn hard /
Work by nine / Then off past five /
And they work my nerves /
That’s why I cannot sleep at night.”*

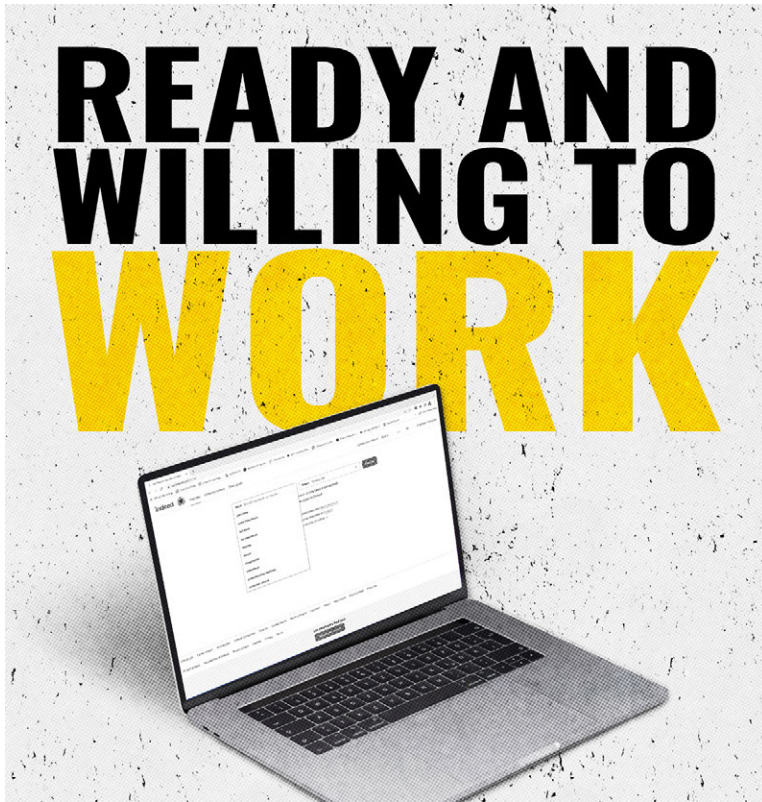
–Break my Soul
Beyoncé

The coining of the term *Great Resignation* is attributed to Anthony Klotz who used the phrase in a short article for Bloomberg news in May 2021. Klotz, an organizational psychologist at Texas A&M University, predicted that the pandemic would make a significant number of American workers reevaluate what they are actually getting out of their jobs. Klotz based his theory on four observations: pent-up resignations from the first year of the pandemic; mass burnout among workers on the front lines; a reprioritization of life priorities when confronted by a deadly pandemic; and the freedom that came with working from home. Klotz predicted a *Great Resignation* before it was apparent in any labour market data. In subsequent months, when the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that a record number of Americans had quit their jobs, the term became (and remains) an embedded narrative about the Pandemic’s long-term impact on worker behaviour. While first applied to the U.S. labour market in 2021, within the next 12 months, commentators across the globe saw signs of the *Great Resignation* in the UK, Australia, and France. Countries like Germany, Singapore, and Canada conducted various surveys that indicated workers there were reevaluating work/life priorities and had a general dissatisfaction with working conditions, uninspiring jobs, and corporate culture.

By the time Beyoncé dropped her seventh studio album *Renaissance* in the summer of 2022, the phrase *Great Resignation* had leapt from being a labour market buzz word into pop culture. Indeed, Beyoncé’s song *Break My Soul* was heralded as an anti-work anthem for the *Great Resignation* by a diverse array of voices ranging from music

fans to Forbes. As the number of resignations in the U.S. continued to set records through spring 2022, the topic of the *Great Resignation* became part of the pandemic story. Indeed, in April of 2022 the Human Resource Professional Association of Canada indicated that the *Great Resignation* wasn’t just a 2021 phenomenon, but was likely to get worse (“Is the Great Resignation Over? Not Even Close”). They noted: “What’s unfolding is not just the Great Resignation (the symptom) but the Great Prioritization (the cause). Simply put, people are putting a greater focus on well-being, health (physical, social and mental), family (childcare and/or aging parents) and other hobbies and interests – and by extension, taking the time to consider who they work for, how they work, and why they work.” (Seghal, April 6, 2022)

As economists began to examine the labour force data in detail, additional light was cast on the possible cause(s) and nature of the *Great Resignation*. Fuller and Kerr in the *Harvard Business Review* indicated that Covid-19 accelerated several existing labour market trends and wasn’t just short-term turbulence provoked by the pandemic. Instead, they saw increasing worker quits as a continuation of an existing trend of rising quit rates. They attributed these quits to an aging workforce; reconsideration of life priorities; reshuffling (moving to different jobs in the same or between sectors—instead of completely leaving the labor market); and the caregiving of aging parents. Fuller and Kerr conclude that the *Great Resignation* was no anomaly, and that the forces underlying it are here to stay.



"I'm an organizational psychologist, not an economist, so I have no business making labor market predictions. And if I was an economist, I'd be annoyed at me for doing so."

–Anthony Klotz,
Psychologist

Serdar Birinci, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis saw the cause of the *Great Resignation* to be more straight forward. He notes that “not all quits are created equal” and that most quits during the pandemic were related to job-to-job transitions that occur when a worker quits their job to take another job. He goes on to cast doubt on whether the *Great Resignation* actually occurred and suggests that the rise in quit rates was not due to workers reconsidering work/life balance but can be attributed to low-wage workers seeking out higher wages.

In “‘Great Resignations’ are common during fast recoveries” (Economic Letter, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, April 4, 2022), Bart Hobijn examined how the pandemic labour market recovered compared with previous rapid recoveries. Analyzing historical quits rate data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS), Current Population Survey (CPS), and the Manufacturing Labor Turnover Survey (MLTS), Hobijn states that the *Great Resignation* is driven by “young and less-

educated workers in industries and occupations that were most adversely affected by the pandemic” and that it was not an irregularity, but a pattern seen in previous recoveries. Hobijn concluded that the *Great Resignation* was not an irregularity and fast recoveries are often characterized by waves of quits as workers find higher paying employment. In short, Hobijn’s data indicates that worker “quits” were driven by low-income and less-educated workers looking for better pay and not by workers looking for better work-life balance.

In Canada, numerous articles appeared during the later stages of the pandemic which told anecdotal stories of middle-class workers leaving their jobs to pursue other life interests. However, Statistics Canada poured some cold water on whether the *Great Resignation* was occurring in Canada finding that job-changing rates among Canadians were similar to pre-pandemic levels, indicating a return to normal rather than an increase in resignations. Conversely, the Financial Post drawing from findings from a Microsoft Poll, suggested the *Great Resignation* was just starting to gain momentum



in Canada. They found that newly “empowered workers” were all too willing to walk off the job if their needs aren’t being met.

In the summer of 2022, the concept of the *Great Resignation* spawned the *Great Regret*. A poll conducted by Paychex indicated that job-changers who left their positions during the Pandemic regretted their decision. The survey, conducted with 825 workers, found that eight in 10 respondents regretted leaving their old jobs. In particular, the survey found that Gen Zs were the most likely to regret their job change. A study by Pew Research in December 2022 contradicted the Paychex survey. Using job tenure data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the study found that young adults had been on the job with their current employer about as long as young adults over the past four decades.

A poll conducted by Joblist with over 15,000 job seekers from across the United States had similar findings to the poll by Paychex. The survey found that over one in four people who quit their previous job (26%) regretted their decision. Of those who found a new job after quitting, 42% said that their new job has not lived up to their expectations. Additionally, the survey found that “unretirements” were on the rise. At the time of the survey, 27% of retired job seekers indicated they were re-entering the workforce for financial reasons. An additional 60% of said they were doing so primarily because they were “looking for something to do.”

With such conflicting evidence, the Toronto Workforce Innovation Group decided to examine the Canadian Labour Force Survey (LFS) to determine whether the Great Resignation occurred in Toronto.

What can the Labour Force Survey (LFS) tell us about the Great Resignation?

Since 1976, Statistics Canada has been collecting data every month for a selected sample of individuals from across Canada (primarily provinces) on a rotating six-month basis. An individual is surveyed for six months with roughly one-sixth of the full sample being replaced every month. The survey collects demographic information and current employment status. For those not working or no longer working or temporarily not working, additional information on status and reasons and other activities is collected. Specific information on “job leavers” is also collected.

The data presented below is all from the LFS (summary files or public use micro data) and is for all of Ontario. When appropriate, Statistics Canada has provided the sample weights used to develop full population estimates and shares from the stratified samples.

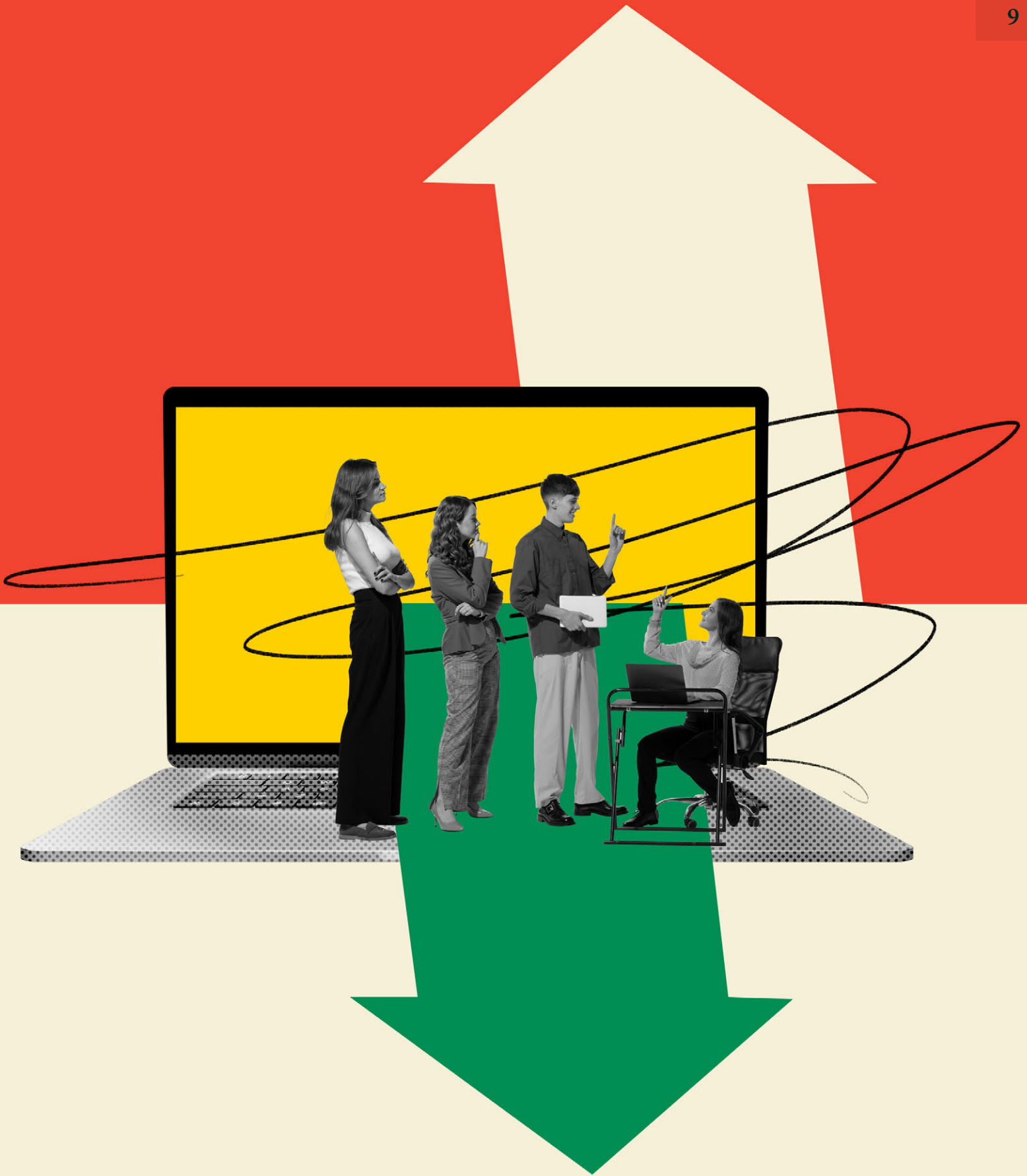
Total Workforce

First, let’s consider the composition of the workforce and total working age population (for this analysis those 25 and older are considered to avoid complications from those attending a post-secondary school).

Table 1 : Population of Ontario (2022)

**to the nearest hundred*

Employed	6,704,000
Unemployed	324,800
Total: Labour Force	7,028,800
Not in the Labour Force	3,631,500
Total: Working Age Population	10,660,300



Total Workforce

Chart 1 shows the share of Ontario’s working-age population Not in Labour Force, Employed, and Unemployed over time. With some fluctuation in unemployment, over the 47 years (1976-2022) the shares have remained fairly steady with roughly one-third (33%) not in the labour force, 63% employed and 4% unemployed.

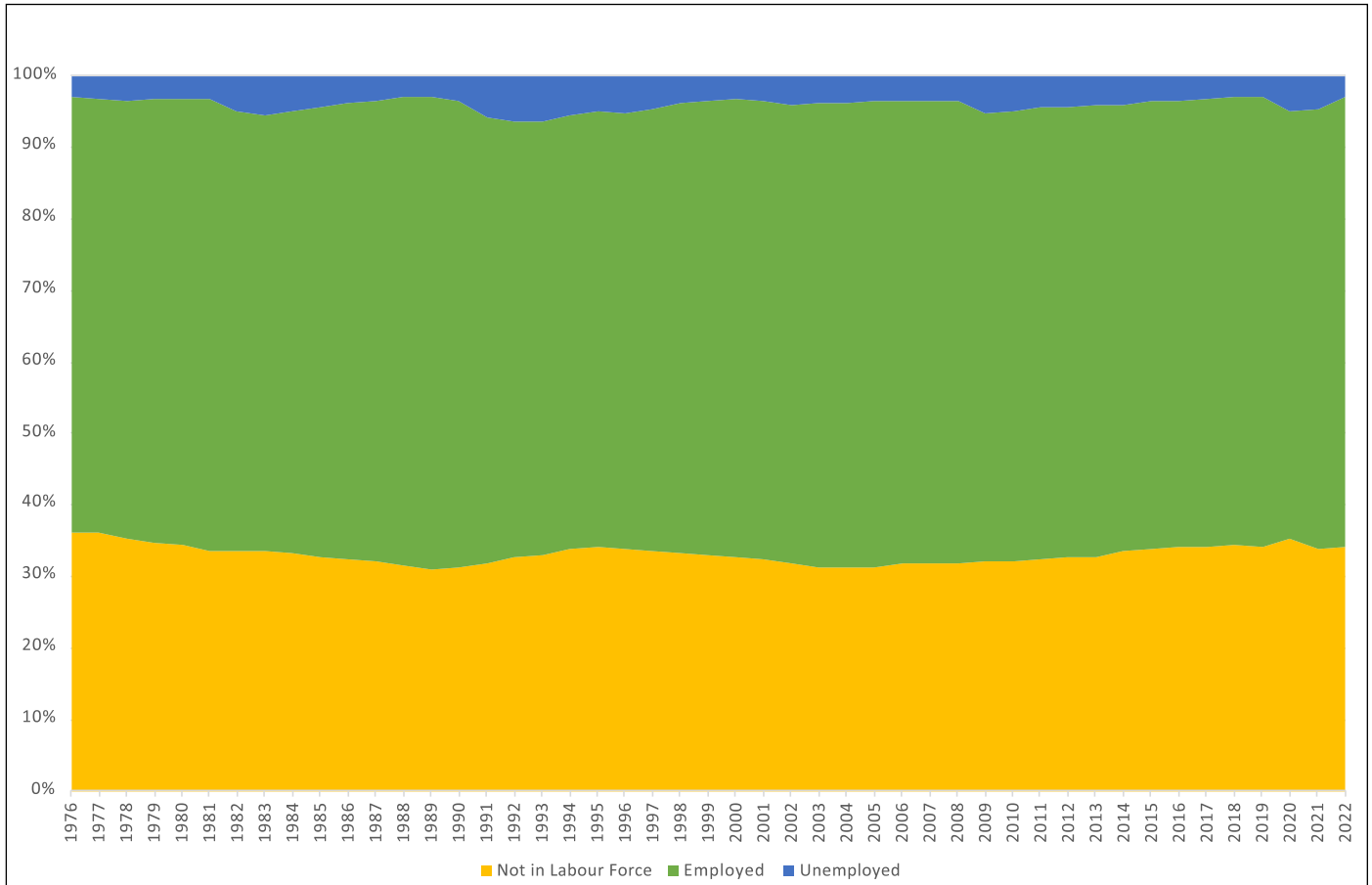


Chart 1: The area chart above shows the share of Ontario’s working-age population that are: Not in the Labour Force, Employed and Unemployed over a time period from 1976–2022

If just the past 13 years (2010-2022) are considered (see Chart 2 on page 10), the averages are basically the same. Not in Labour Force average increases to 33.7% from 33.2%. Although the general upward trend can be seen, the share Not in Labour Force goes from 32.1% in 2010 to 34.1% in 2022, that is generally attributable to the aging of the workforce as the Baby Boomers reach retirement age.

Total Workforce

Chart 2 does show an increase in Unemployment (5.0%) and Not in Labour Force (35.4%) in 2020, mainly from the economic impact of the global pandemic. However, both decreased in 2021 and 2022 to 3.0% and 34.1%, respectively.

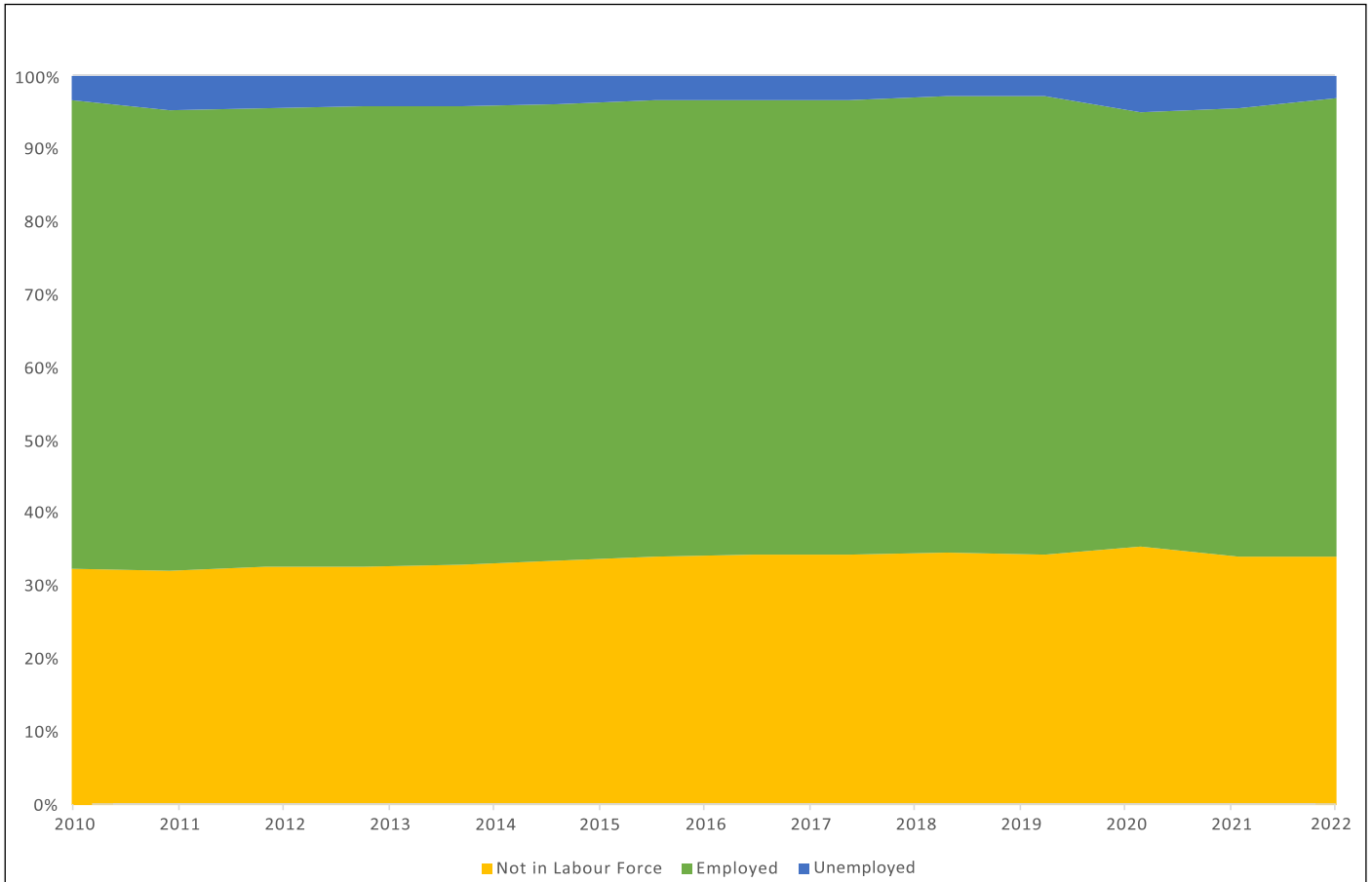


Chart 2: The area chart above shows the share of Ontario's working-age population that are: Not in the Labour Force, Employed and Unemployed over a time period from 2010–2022.

Overall, if there was a *Great Resignation*, it happened in 2020, was very minimal and was not lasting—at least that's as much as the overall provincial labour force statistics reveal. Luckily, the Labour Force Survey collects other data that can be used to investigate this question more fully.

Job Leavers

The survey asks those who have left a job (“job leavers”) the reason for leaving that job. (The reasons were revised in 1989, but have been kept consistent with earlier ones, so the data from 1976 to 2022 is comparable. We will look at this in more detail later for more recent years and will use the more robust set of reasons.)

For Ontario, in 2022 the number of people who voluntarily left a job and the reason provided were as follows:

Table 2: People and their Reason for Leaving a Job



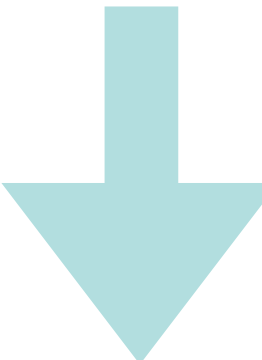
Reason for Leaving Job (2022)	Number of People (Nearest Thousand)
Own Illness or Disability	34,900
Personal or Family Reasons	41,700
Going to School	24,100
Dissatisfied	34,600
Retired	110,100
Other Reasons	27,300
Total Job Leavers	272,600



Job Leavers

Table 3 below shows the average of the share of workers in each year by the reason reported from 1976 to 2022 and 2020-2022. The shares vary across the years and over time. The most noticeable is the increase in retirement with corresponding decreases in the other reasons.

Table 3: Reason for Leaving Job, Then & Now



Reason for Leaving Job	Average (1976–2022)	Average (2020–2022)
Own Illness or Disability	16.5%	15.5%
Personal or Family Reasons	16.3%	13.5%
Going to School	9.7%	10.3%
Dissatisfied	13.2%	13.0%
Retired	27.3%	34.4%
Other Reasons	17.1%	13.2%

In 1976, retirement was cited by 18.3% of job leavers, while in 2022, 40.4% reported they left their job due to retirement.



Job Leavers

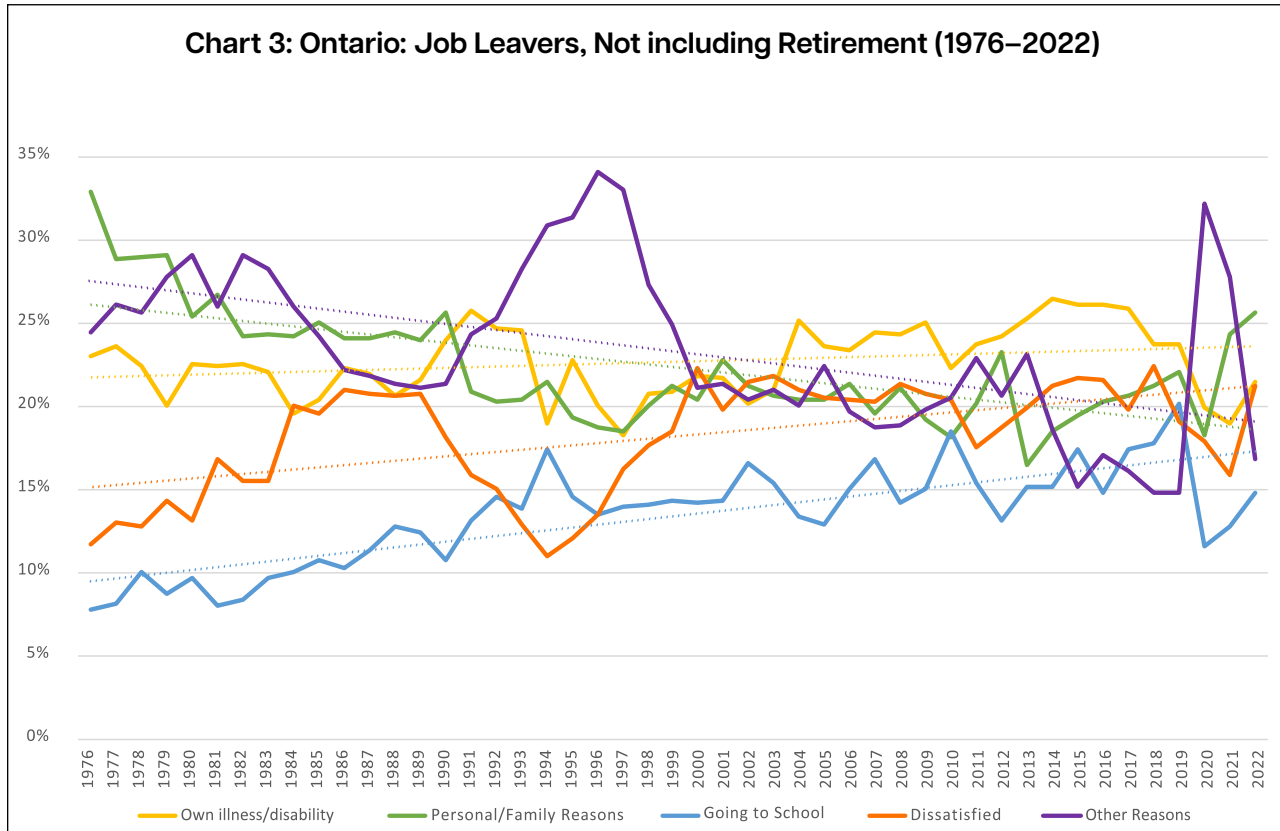


Chart 3: The line chart above shows the volume of people that have chose to leave their jobs over time and their reasons for doing so from 1976–2022. This chart excludes people who have retired.

If just looking at the shares of job leavers with retirements excluded (Chart 3), Illness or Disability has remained flat while Going to School and Dissatisfied have seen slight increases with Personal/Family Reasons and Other slightly decreasing.



Job Leavers

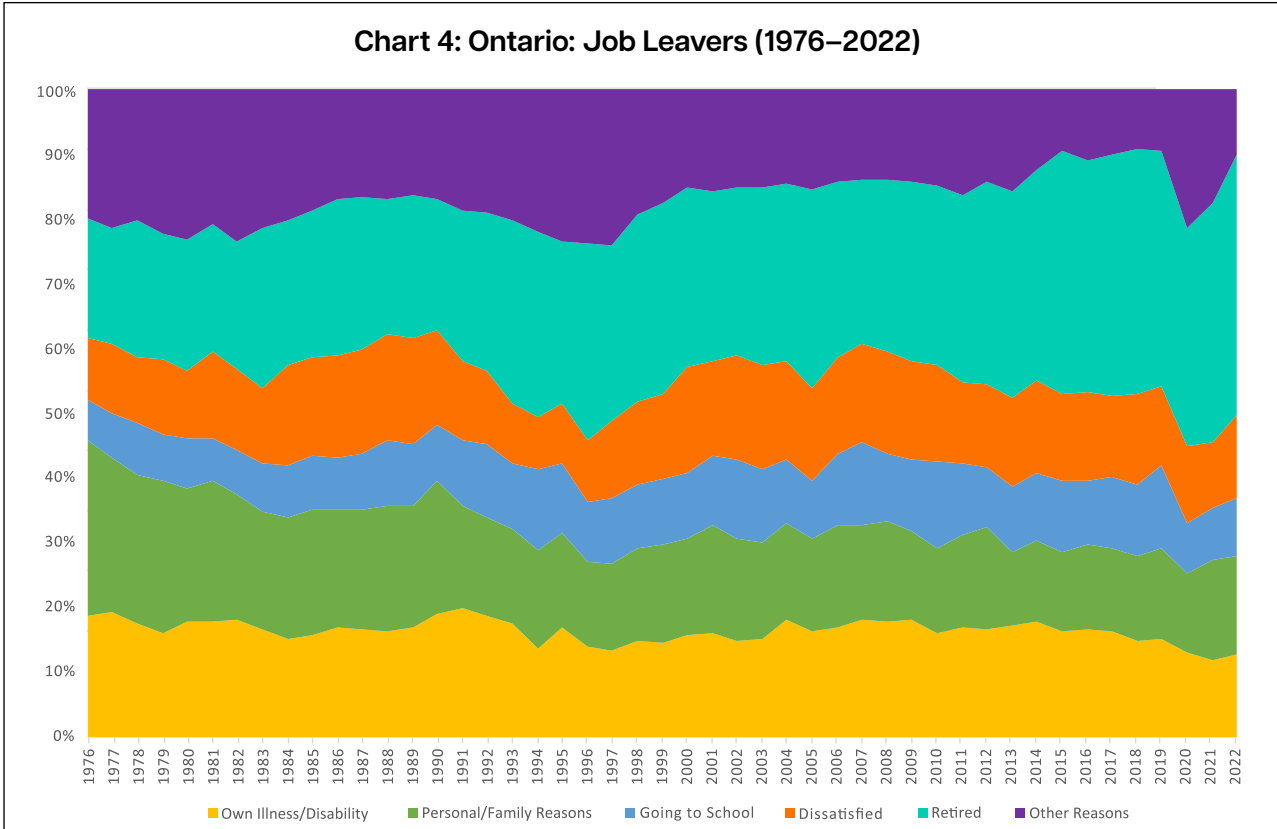


Chart 4: The area chart above shows the volume of people that have chose to leave their jobs over time and their reasons for doing so from 1976–2022. This chart include poeple who have retired.



Job Leavers

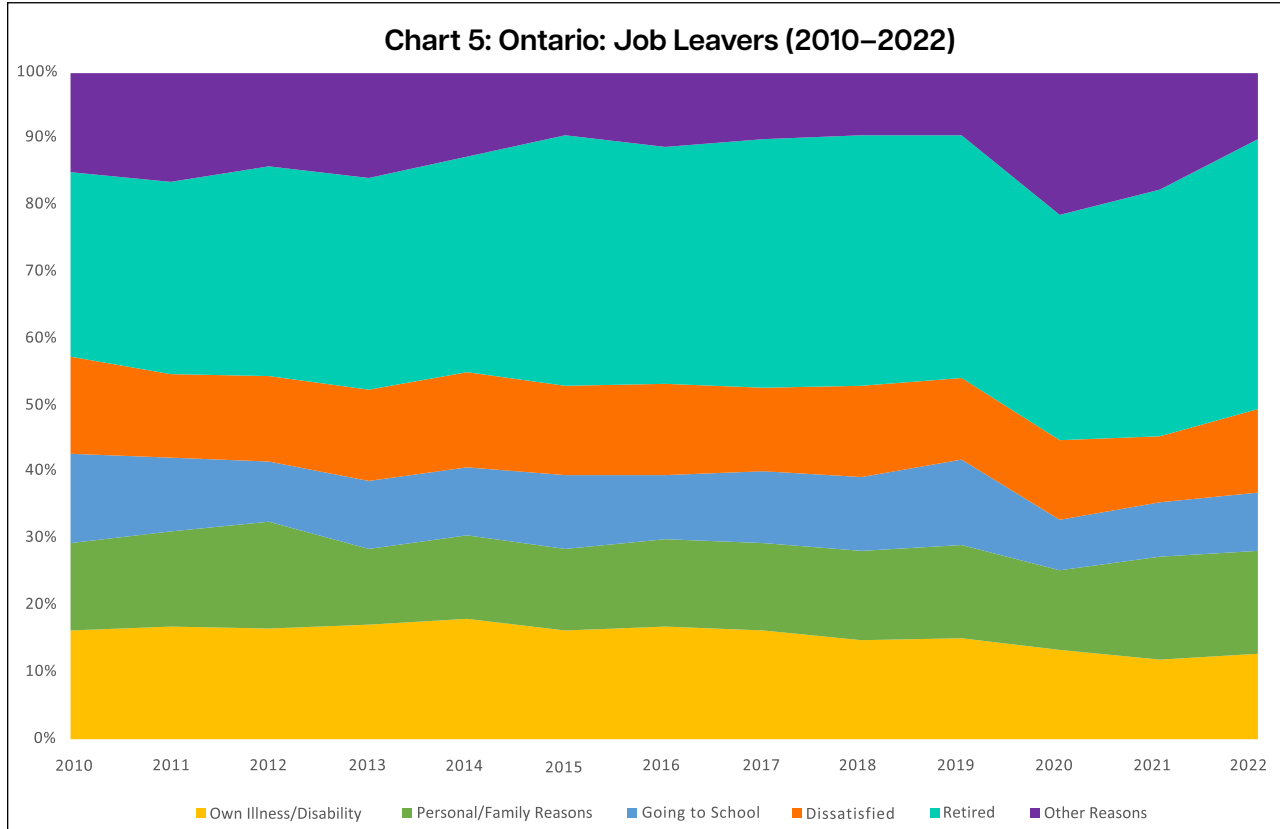


Chart 5: The area chart above shows the volume of people that have chose to leave their jobs between 2010–2022 and their reasons for doing so (including retirement).

The charts do not show an increase in people leaving jobs from dissatisfaction (maybe with a bump from 2021 to 2022, but at 21.3% the share is lower than some other years in 2010-2022 and several other years in 1976-2022 with a maximum of 22.4% in 2000).

Again, the Labour Force Survey data does not show evidence of individuals leaving jobs for different reasons than they have been leaving jobs previously.

It is possible that during the worst of the global pandemic individuals were leaving jobs for personal health and safety reasons to avoid exposure risk that they wouldn't necessarily characterize as an Illness or Disability, but that is conjecture. Whatever the case, while "Other" spiked in 2020, it returned to average within 2 years.

Job Leavers

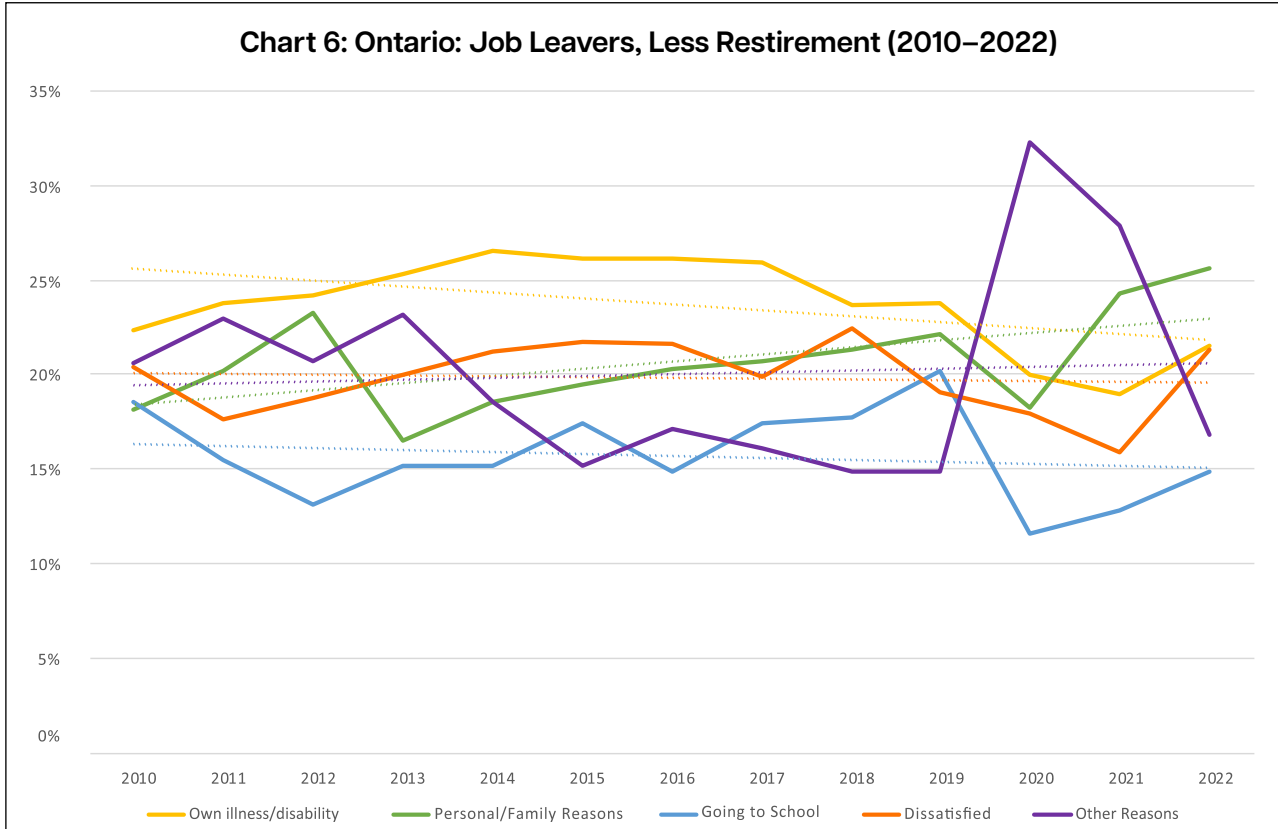


Chart 6: The line chart above shows the percentage of people that have chose to leave their jobs between 2010 – 2022 and their reasons for doing so (excluding retirement).

Over the past 13 years (2010-2022; Chart 6), Retirement has grown while the other reasons have remained relatively flat with Retirement excluded. However, 2020 shows a significant spike in the number of people reporting that they left their job for “Other” reasons. This is difficult to divine, other

than noting that it, by definition, does not include any of the other reasons listed (illness, retirement, etc.). And after peaking at 21.4% among all reasons, it dropped to 17.6% in 2021 and dropped further to 10.0% in 2022, which is lower than for the 47-year (17.1%) or 13-year (13.2%) averages.



Digging Further into the Labour Force Survey (LFS) Data

Although, so far, the LFS hasn't really produced any evidence of a *Great Resignation* (or even an "not-so-great resignation" for that matter), additional investigation is possible.

As mentioned, the LFS uses a six-month panel approach where individuals are surveyed for six months in a row. To maximize the usefulness of the public micro data available, individual responses were pulled from January, July, January so that three complete sets of individuals are included without being repeated. Because only a small portion of the sample will have recently left a job, the aggregation will decrease the amount of noise and increase the reliability of the results. Additionally, the workforce and "job leaver" data analyzed so far supports the contention that the most recent 13-month period (Jan 2022, Jul 2022, Jan 2023) can be compared with an earlier 13-month period (Jan 2019, Jul 2019, Jan 2020) that can be used as a pre-COVID "baseline" to determine if any underlying conditions or situations have changed with regard to those who

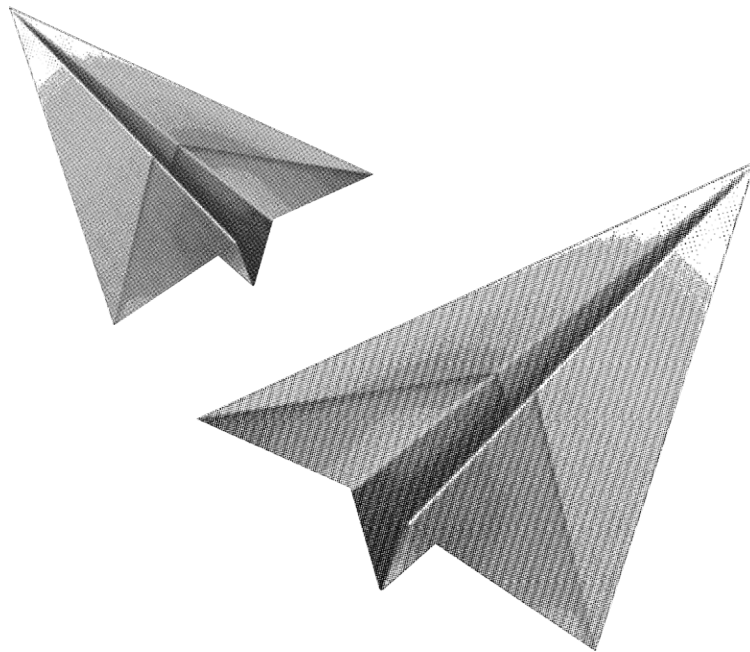
have left their jobs and their reasons. In addition, by keeping to the same months, any seasonal effects will "net out" in the comparisons.

Again, all comparisons are done only using results for the province of Ontario. This data will compare data from Jan 2019, Jul 2019, Jan 2020 (19/20) with data from Jan 2022, Jul 2022, Jan 2023 (22/23).

The Public Use Micro Data for the LFS has one record per person. Individuals who are not currently employed are asked if they have ever worked. The responses are coded to indicate if the person worked in the last year or more than a year ago or has never worked. For this analysis, those not working but who have worked previously are the population of interest. These are individuals who have been in the workforce previously but are not currently. It is not strictly those who have voluntarily left a job but includes those who may have lost a job and have chosen not to return to work.



Digging Further into the Labour Force Survey (LFS) Data



Detailed tables for everything discussed below are available. (Additional detailed data is available on request.) Below is just the summary of what these tables show. For each of these variables the following have been calculated and are compared:

- Average/Share for total population 19/20
- Average/Share for not working but worked 19/20
- Average/Share for total population 22/23
- Average/Share for not working but worked 22/23

This allows for the following comparisons:

- What are the baseline (19/20) differences between the full population and the not working but worked population? In essence, what are the typical differences between currently working and currently not working?
- What are the differences for 22/23 between the working and the not working but worked?
- How do these differences compare? Have the underlying situations changed since 19/20? In effect, this is looking for a systemic change – something that would support the notion of a persistent *Great Resignation* or at least some other major change in the way individuals approach the decision to leave and the revealed preferences in employment (or not) situations.

Demographic Data

Age (based on 5-year ranges from 15-19 to 65-69 and 70+):

Differences between those working and those not working

- Differences are basically the same for 2019/2020 and 2022/2023
- Older are more likely to be not working

Sex

Differences between those working and those not working

- Women are more likely to be not working
- Little difference between 19/20 and 22/23

Marital Status

Differences between those working and those not working

- Widowed are much more likely to be not working
- Very little difference between 19/20 and 22/23

Education

Some differences between working and not working

- Those with only a High School diploma are more likely to be not working
- Those with post-secondary (certificate, Bachelor's or above) are less likely to be not working
- Not much difference between 19/20 and 22/23 except for those with a post-secondary certificate or diploma. In 19/20 they were less likely to be not working while in 22/23 they are equally likely to be working as not working when compared to the general population.

Immigration:

In general, differences between working and not working

- If landed 10 years or less, much more likely to be working
- If landed more than 10 years ago, more likely to be not working
- If not an immigrant, little difference
- The results for 2022/2023 are consistent with the result for 2019/2020

Industry (of job last worked or current job):

Not a lot of difference in likelihood of working or not working based on industry

- Some industries show greater churn with a greater likelihood of not working if working in: Construction, Retail, Information/Culture, Education Services, Accommodation/Food Services
- Some industries show “anti-churn” (greater stability) with a greater likelihood of working if in: Finance/Insurance, Professional et al. Services, Healthcare
- The results for 22/23 are very similar to the results from 19/20 with two notable exceptions:
- Construction does not show the same churn in 22/23. Those in construction are equally likely to be working or not while in 19/20 they were more likely to be not working.
- Accommodation/Food Services jobs greatly increased their level of churn in 22/23. In both periods, these jobs were more likely to have people not working, but in 22/23 the likelihood of working went down while the likelihood of not working went up.

Occupation (of job last worked or current job):

- Not a lot of difference in likelihood of working or not based on occupation.
- In 19/20 the likelihood of not working was higher for those working in Trades and Transportation jobs. By 22/23, the likelihood of not working was equal to the likelihood of working. This was also reflected in the industry results for Construction and so supports the contention that in the recent timeframe, Trades work is more stable.

Demographic Data


Flows into Unemployment

- 2019/2020, Job Leavers accounted for 10% of all those currently without employment.
- In 2022/2023, Job Leavers accounted for 7.6% of all those currently without employment.
- In comparison to the baseline, the number of people without employment who were that way because they left a job, decreased.

Why Leave?

The table below shows the average of the share of workers by their reason for leaving their job as reported between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023.

Table 4(A): Reason for Leaving Job During the Previous Year



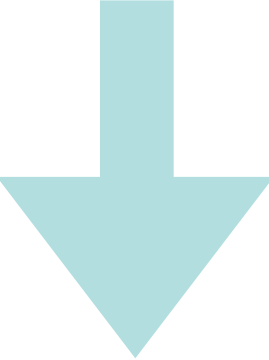
Reason	Average (2019/2020)	Average (2022/2023)
Other Reasons	2.9%	2.8%
Own Illness/Disability	5.1%	5.1%
Caring for Children	1.4%	1.3%
Pregnancy	1.4%	1.2%
Personal/Family Responsibility	2.4%	3.1%
Going to School	24.6%	18.0%
Dissatisfied	7.4%	7.5%
Retired	12.1%	12.9%
Business Sold/Closed Down (Self-Employed)	1.1%	0.8%



Why Lost?

The table below shows the average of the share of workers by their reason for job loss as reported between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023.

Table 4(B): Reason for Losing Job During the Previous Year



Reason	Average (2019/2020)	Average (2022/2023)
End of Seasonal Job (Employee)	12.4%	12.0%
End of Temporary/Casual (Employee)	13.5%	13.7%
Company Moved/Closed Down (Employee)	1.4%	1.1%
Business Conditions (Employees)	10.7%	15.4%
Dismissal/Other Reasons	3.7%	4.9%


As mentioned above, this includes additional reasons than had been collected previously. The additions are the last six on the list. “Other” became “dismissal or other”. It’s worth noting that “other” is a much lower share of overall reasons for leaving a job once the other categories are included. This supports the contention that much of what was included in “other” previously is now accounted for with these additional options.

As the table shows, there is very little difference in the share of people who have left a previous job for the various reasons. Personal/Family and Business Conditions increased slightly and Going to School decreased. There is nothing to suggest that in recent times, individuals are leaving jobs for reasons that are in any way different than why they were leaving jobs prior to the global pandemic.



Why Wait?


Table 5: Main Activity Prior to Looking for Work



Main Activity	Average (2019–2020)	Average (2022–2023)
Other	9.0%	11.0%
Working	55.5%	50.2%
Managing a Home	15.4%	20.7%
Going to School	20.1%	18.1%

Among those not working who worked previously, those who are looking for employment were working before. Between 19/20 and 22/23, the shares have changed some – fewer were working or going to school while more were managing a house. But, overall, the numbers don't change that much.

Table 6: Reason for Not Looking for Work During the Reference Week



Reason	Average (2019–2020)	Average (2022–2023)
Other	24.0%	18.4%
Own Illness or Disability	23.9%	30.7%
Caring for Children	10.1%	9.8%
Other Personal or Family Responsibilities	10.5%	11.2%
School	15.0%	10.8%
Awaiting Recall or Reply	10.1%	12.6%
Discouraged	6.5%	6.5%

Table 6: In the above table, it is important to note that all of the respondents cited that they wanted to work.

Why Wait?

Among those not working who worked previously, the reasons for not looking for a job do change in some cases between 19/20 and 22/23. Specifically:

- Other decreased
- Own Illness or Disability increased
- School decreased – this is consistent with earlier results showing fewer of those not currently working pursuing education
- Awaiting a Recall or Reply increased
- Interestingly, the share who are not looking because they are Discouraged, remained the same.

Overall, what does the LFS tell us?

It says that Ontario has not had a *Great Resignation*. The number of people leaving jobs has not really increased except from retirement which was an inevitability given Ontario’s aging population and has been well-discussed previously. Beyond retirement, people are not leaving jobs in greater numbers or for reasons that are very different than the reasons that they have been leaving jobs in the past.

The deeper dive shows that when compared to a pre-COVID baseline of 2019/2020, 2022/2023 shows the same general demographic differences between those not working who had worked before with the general workforce. Construction/Trades

have become a little more stable as employment opportunities and Accommodations/Food Service a little more unstable. Fewer people not working are pursuing education, but people are leaving jobs for the same reasons and with the same proportionality as in the past. Those who have worked but are not working are not looking for jobs for the same reasons as they had previously. While the results do show some minor differences between the two time periods, the LFS shows that the provincial employment situation and context remain remarkably similar to the pre-COVID situation.

Conclusions

The Covid 19 Pandemic and the subsequent closures and social distancing rules created massive disruption in Ontario's labour market. The pandemic caused a surge in unemployment and had a terribly uneven impact, exacerbating the inequalities already faced by women, youth and marginalized workers. Some longer lasting effects around hybrid work, front-line health care worker burnout, and the acceleration towards on-line shopping (e.g., Amazon) are still being played out.

Certain sentiments of the *Great Resignation* may ring true. Undoubtedly, many Ontarians (with the financial means to do so), reconsidered their work-life balance. And – there is still a constant cry about “where have the workers gone” from employers and industry associations faced with recruitment and retention challenges. While the *Great Resignation* provides a rather simple answer to the current shortage of workers, the reality is more complex. Canada now has half a million more jobs than we did before the pandemic. Combined with an increase in retirements and less immigration (due to the pandemic, Canada was short of its immigration targets by about 100,000), labour shortages were an inevitability. In summary, while the narrative of the *Great Resignation* made an interesting story and spawned numerous sequels (Great Regret, Great Relocation, Great Renegotiation, and Quiet Quitting) there is minimal evidence that it occurred, or it is occurring in Ontario.



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Toronto Workforce Innovation Group (TWIG) is a non-profit and independent research organization devoted to finding and promoting solutions to employment-related problems in the Toronto Region. Our Board of Directors is comprised of passionate leaders from Toronto's business, industry, and non-profit communities. Our staff are committed to action-based research and data analysis that can be used by the workforce development system to support Toronto's vibrant and diverse economy.

Learn more about TWIG at: www.workforceinnovation.ca



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