Companies Thriving During the Pandemic:

Most in-demand talent and skills during an unprecedented time

October 2021

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise. As countries around the world put in place varying degrees of lockdowns to mitigate its spread, the pandemic has inevitably and irreversibly changed the way we live and work.

In Malaysia, when the first Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented in March 2020, industries and jobs were significantly impacted. While several were impacted negatively, there were industries that proved resilient, even expanding their talent acquisition and retention strategies to meet increased demands, either locally, from abroad, or both, for their products and services.

The industries which saw a growth in business that resulted in positive hiring and retention of talent include:
- Information Technology (IT);
- Manufacturing and Electronics (M&E); and
- Banking & Financial Services (BFS).

Recognising there was a need to look at talent and skills development trends in these industries, especially with the relevant Malaysian based business, Aisling Group and Leaderonomics teamed up to do just that.

In this survey, we gathered insights and on the ground sentiments from HR leaders from these industries, focusing on two key areas:

- **Hiring Practices During & Post-Covid 19**
- **Upskilling & Reskilling Practices During & Post-Covid 19**

This whitepaper presents the outcome of this survey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The surveys were conducted in the form of questionnaires and were disseminated via Survey Monkey. The survey produced 61 responses, out of which were answered by employers or employees in various industries in Malaysia. Other demographic data collected were:

Number of employees in their organisation

32.79% of respondents had 150 to 1,000 employees in their companies at the time of the survey; 27.87% had more than 1,000 employees; 18.03% with 25 to 100 employees; 14.75% with 100 to 250 employees; and 6.56% with 25 employees and below.
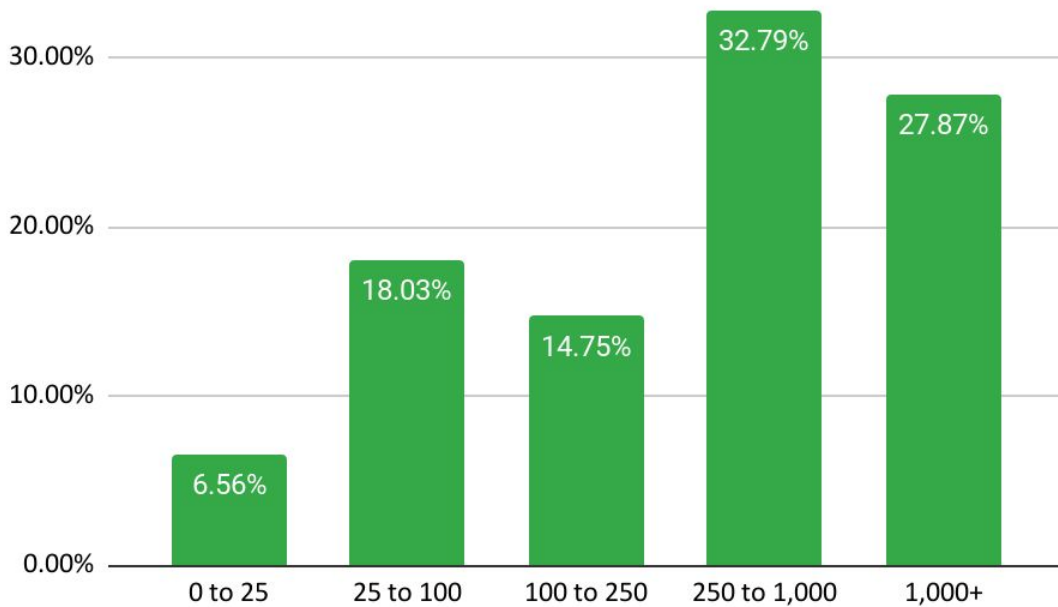
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Industry their organisation is categorised under

Industry Category	Count
IT	6
Financial	1
Software Industrial	1
Business outsourcing	1
Wholesale & General Trading	1
Mobility Tech	1
Financial Industry	1
Insurance	1
Food & Beverage	1
Banking	2
Shared Services	1
Machinery & Equipment	1
Plastic Packaging, re-use, and recycling	1
e-commerce and logistic	1
FINTECH	1
Software as a Service	1
Property	2
Information communication technology	1
IT system service provider	1
Rubber gloves	1
Takaful Insurance	1
Fintech	1
Digital media	1
Manufacturing	3

| Industry Category	Count
Technology	1
Education	3
Tech	1
Cyber Security	1
Chemicals	1
Bearing Manufacturing	1
FMCG	1
Rubber Manufacturing	1
OutSourcing / BPO	1
Business Process Outsourcing	1
Automotive	1
Hospitality Tech	2
Information Technology (Software)	1
Information Technology Services	1
Banking and Financial	1
Logistics	1
Aerospace MRO service	1
Retail	1
BPO	1
Telecommunications	1
FMCG Food & Beverages	1
Home financing/banking	1
HR Software and Services	1

1. How many new hires did your company make in 2020?
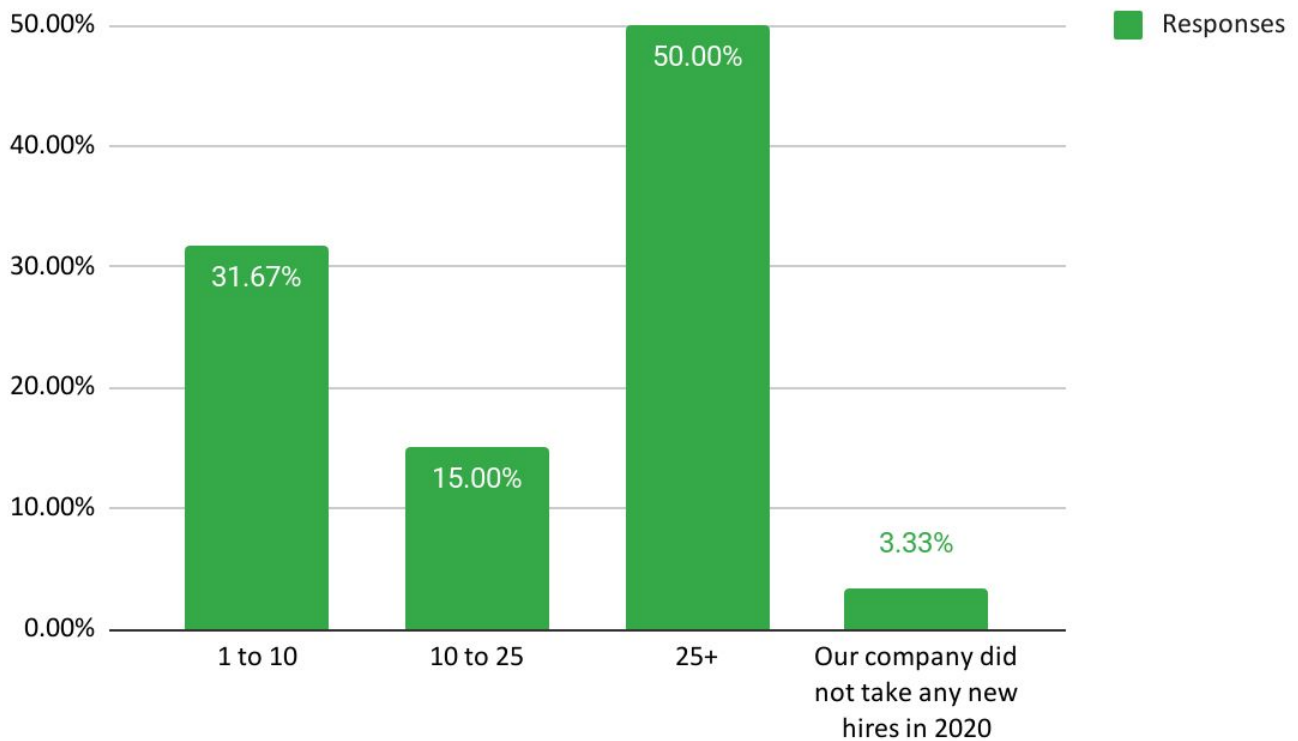
50% of respondents indicated that they employed 25 or more new hires in 2020. This is an interesting find as when the pandemic first hit, predictions from various quarters were that hiring would be reduced or put on hold. 31.67% of respondents indicated that their companies made between 1 to 10 new hires in 2020. This was followed by 15% of respondents employing between 10 to 25 new hires, and with only a minority of 3.33% who did not make any new hires in 2020.

Some context that could give meaning to this trend is the type of main industries the respondents were from. They were mainly in Banking and Financial Services, Manufacturing, Outsourcing, and Software Development; which were industries classified as providing essential services during the pandemic by the relevant regulatory bodies in Malaysia, hence these industries were less affected by the MCO as compared to others.

2. How many new hires is your company planning to make this year?
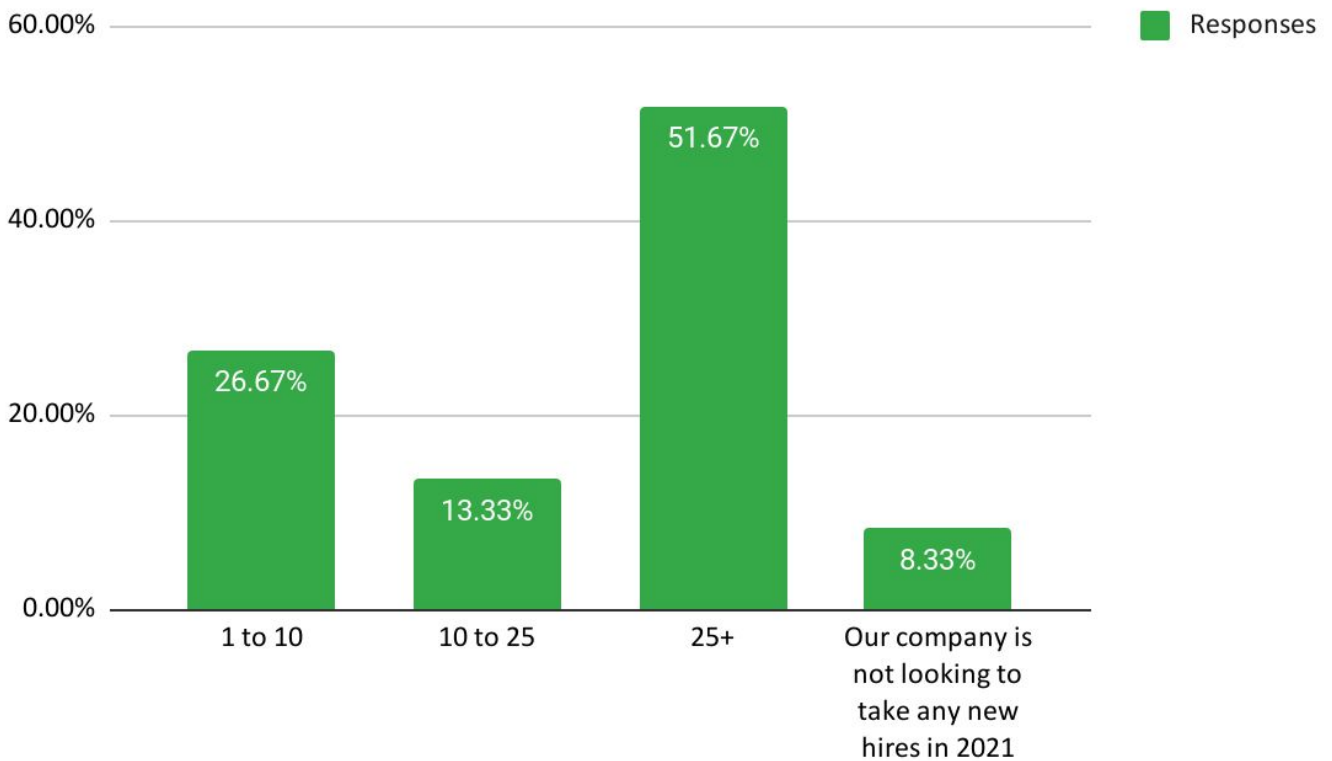
51.67% of the respondents indicated that they were planning to hire 25 or more new talents in 2021. At 26.67%, the respondents indicated that their companies were planning to hire between 1 to 10 new talents. This is followed by 13.33% of the companies planning to hire between 10 to 25 new talents, and with only the minority of 8.33% with plans of no new hires in this year.

In relation to the previous question, the trend seems to have increased for the category of hiring 25 or more new talents and decreased for the rest.

One key question that we may need to answer in future research would be, "***Did hiring during the pandemic in 2020 showed positive impact on the respondents' organisations which subsequently influence the increase of their hiring plans in 2021?***"

It may also be possible that during the start of the pandemic in 2020, there was lesser attrition and hence required less hiring compared to 2021. However, further correlations between these factors have to be examined and researched.

3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your company's talent acquisition and retention strategies?

Qualitative analysis was done in which responses were analysed, coded, and categorised into themes.
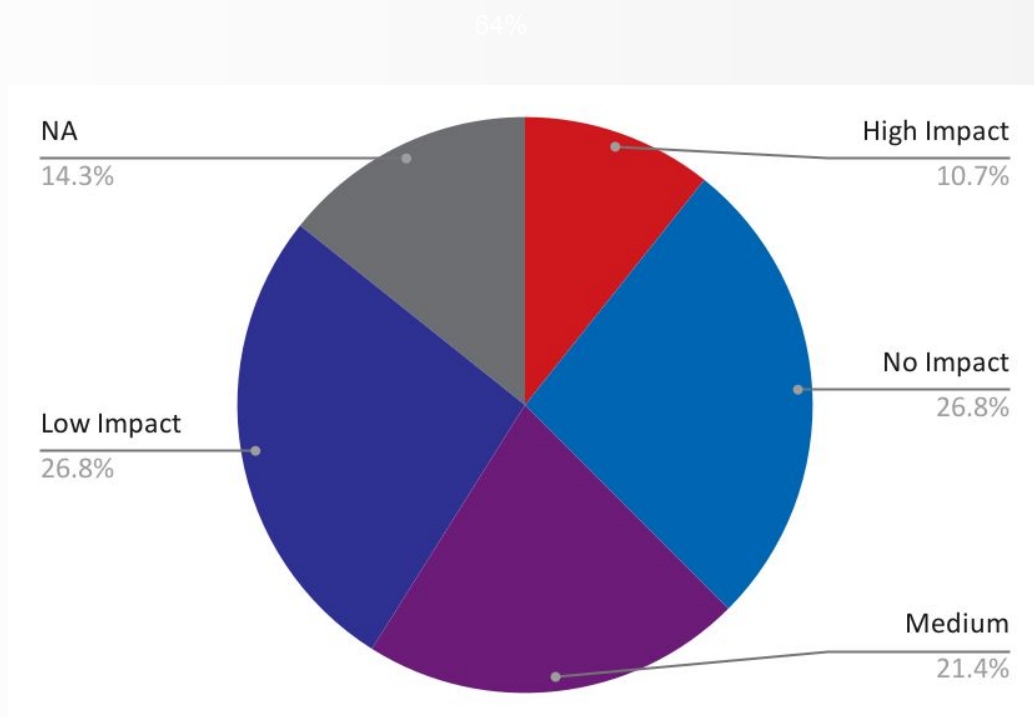
The highest number of responses were in the No Impact (26.8%) or Low Impact (26.8%) categories, followers by Medium Impact (21.4%), Not Applicable (14.3%) and High Impact (10.7%).

Here are some examples what the themes (categories) consisted of:
- **No Impact**: Hiring continued; no changes to hiring strategies
- **Low Impact**: Hiring slowed down
- **Medium Impact**: Hiring strategically focused on key roles, local talent, and aligning with business strategies
- **High Impact**: Hiring completely halted or was frozen
- **Not Applicable**: Answers were not relevant to hiring strategies (moved virtually, WFH strategies, etc.)

These responses once again is an interesting finding, contrary to general on-the-ground sentiments, which was that hiring, in general, would have halted completely.

4. During the pandemic, which talent roles and skills were business-critical? Please list the top 3.

Qualitative analysis was done in which responses were analysed, coded, and categorised into themes.

| Top 5 (Overall)	No. of Responses (%)	Top 3 (Level 1)	Top 3 (Level 2)	Top 3 (Level 3)
IT	12.30%	IT (13.8%)	IT (11.1%)	HR (18%)
Engineering	9.30%	Customer Service (12.1%)	Soft Skills, HR, Engineering (7.4%)	IT (12%)
HR	8.60%			
Soft Skills	8%	Engineering, Technology (10.3%)	Operations, Digitalisation (5.6%)	Engineering (10%)
Customer Service	6.20%			

The findings show that the top 5 talent roles and skills that were business critical were IT (12.3%), Engineering (9.3%), HR (8.6%), Soft Skills (8%) and Customer Service (6.2%).

Some of the examples that formed these themes were:
- IT: Information Technology, Software Development
- Engineering: Software Engineering, Engineering,
- HR: Human Resources, Employee Motivation/Engagement, Long term vision/Strategy, Talent Acquisition
- Soft Skills: Leadership, Creativity, Problem Solving, Communication
- Customer Service: Customer Engagement/Delivery/Management/Support

The responses were also broken down further into the tiers of answers as seen in the table above. The trend seem to show that IT & HR are still key talent roles or skill sets that is considered crucial during the pandemic. These themes were later recategorised in Q10 and Q11 to cover a broader range of skill sets that are related to one another.

5. What tools did you use as part of your recruitment process during the varying degrees of restrictions in movement? Please select all that apply.
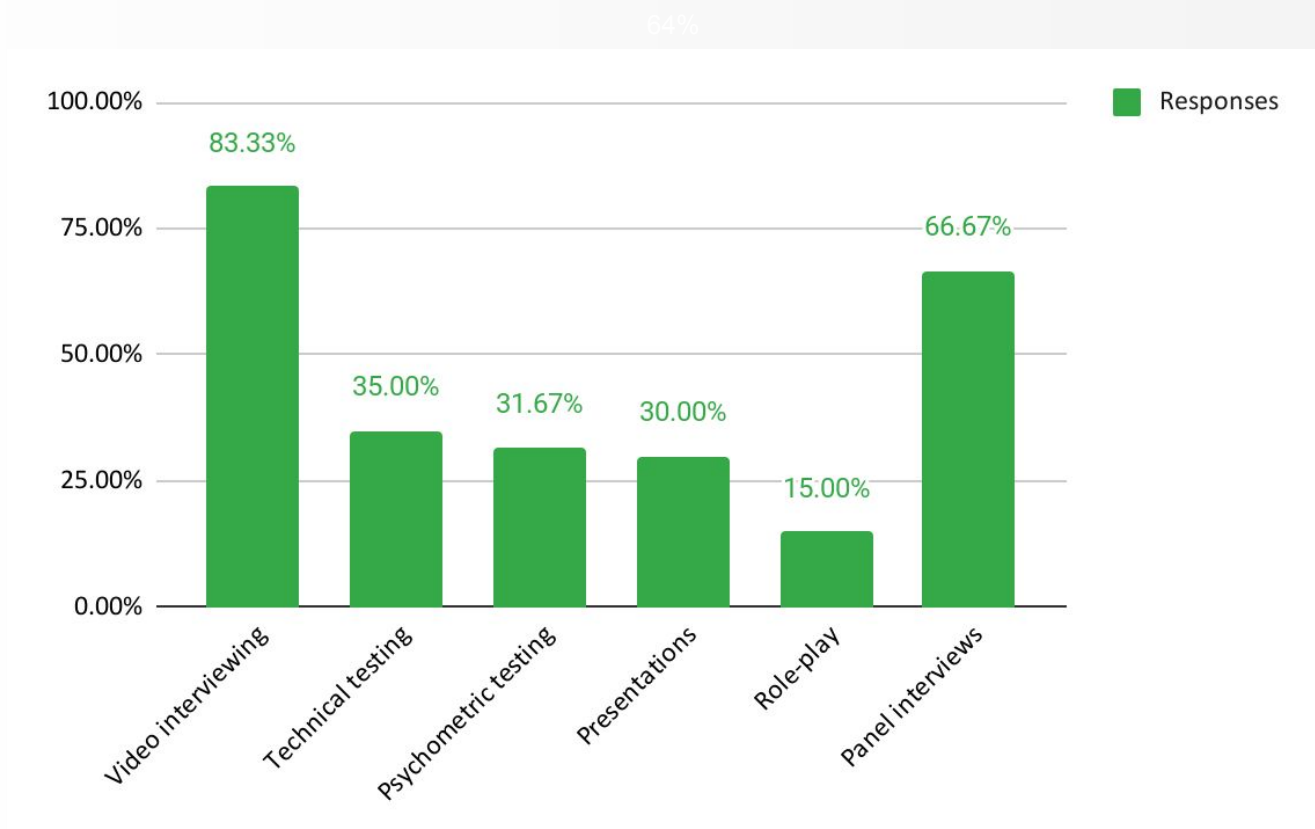
Based on the table above, Video format had the highest number of responses in regards to being used as part of their recruitment process at 83.33% This is followed by Panel Interview (66.67%), Technical Tools (35%) and Psychometric Tools (31.67%).

The trend shows that most organisations who continued with their hiring and recruitment focused on using Videos (Virtual Calls) during the pandemic. However, more data should be collected to further find a difference between pre-pandemic, during-pandemic and post-pandemic seasons.

6. What talent roles are you planning to acquire in 2021? Please list the top 3:

Qualitative analysis was done in which responses were analysed, coded, and categorised into themes.

Top 5	Percentage	Top 3 (1st Option)	Top 3 (2nd Option)	Top 3 (3rd Option)
IT/Tech/Digital	24%	IT/Tech/Digital (25%)	Supply Chain (29.2%)	IT/Tech/Digital (31%)
Supply Chain	17.30%	Engineering (16.1%)	IT/Tech/Digital (25%)	Supply Chain (19%)
Engineering	13.30%	Sales (12.5%)	Sales (8.3%)	Business (14.3%)
Sales	10.70%			
Customer Service	8%			

Majority of the responses were contributing to the Information Technology (IT)/Tech/Digital theme (category) at 24%, followed by Supply Chain (17.3%), Engineering (13.3%), Sales (10.7%), and Customer Service (8%). These were further elaborated where respondents labelled their first, second and third options.

Examples of how these themes were categorised:
- **Soft Skills**: communication, leadership, creativity, remote working, problem solving
- **Information Technology (IT)/Tech/Digital**: IT, technology, AI, cloud computing, software development, automation, e-commerce
- **Supply Chain**: production, operations, manufacturing, warehousing, delivery/deployment, compliance
- **Business**: commercial capability, business management, business strategy, human resources, and crisis/risk management
- **Analytics**: data science, data analytics, data mining

These responses were in sync with Q8 where the key talent roles or skills that were labelled as business-critical. This shows that the organisations of the respondents were aligned in terms of what were needed by their businesses and their hiring strategies.

7. What areas of talent upskilling and reskilling are you looking to invest in 2021? Please list the top 3:

Qualitative analysis was done in which responses were analysed, coded, and categorised into themes.

Top 5 (Overall)	No. of Responses (%)	Top 3 (Option 1)	Top 3 (Option 2)	Top 3 (Option 3)
IT/Tech/Digital	31.80%	IT/Tech/Digital (30.2%)	IT/Tech/Digital (26.5%)	IT/Tech/Digital (31.8%)
Soft Skills	20%			
Business	12.90%	Soft Skills (16.3%)	Soft Skills (20.6%)	Soft Skills (20%)
Supply Chain	12.90%	Supply Chain (16.3%)	Business (17.6%)	Business & Supply Chain (12.9%)
Analytics	8.20%			

Using the Categorical Data method, the responses were categorised into a total of 7 themes (categories).

The overall top 5 areas that organisations are looking to invest in talent upskilling and reskilling are Information Technology (IT)/Tech/ Digital (31.8%), Soft Skills (20%), Business and Supply Chain (12.9%), and Analytics (8.2%). To further break down what each of these categories cover:

- IT/Tech/Digital includes IT, Technology, AI, Cloud Computing, Software Development, Automation, Machine Learning, Digitalisation, and e-Commerce
- Soft Skills include Communication, Leadership, Creativity, Remote Working, and Problem Solving
- Supply Chain includes Production, Ops, Manufacturing, Warehousing, and Delivery/Deployment
- Business includes Commercial Capability, Business Management, Business Strategy, HR, and Crisis/Risk Management
- Analytics includes Data Science, Data Analytics, and Data Mining

The table above further breaks down the categories and respondents' order of preference. In all 3 options, the first answers focused on the IT/Tech/Digital category.

8. Does your organisation place an importance in upskilling and reskilling your current employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?

For example, sending employees for training, increasing budget for upskilling/reskilling.
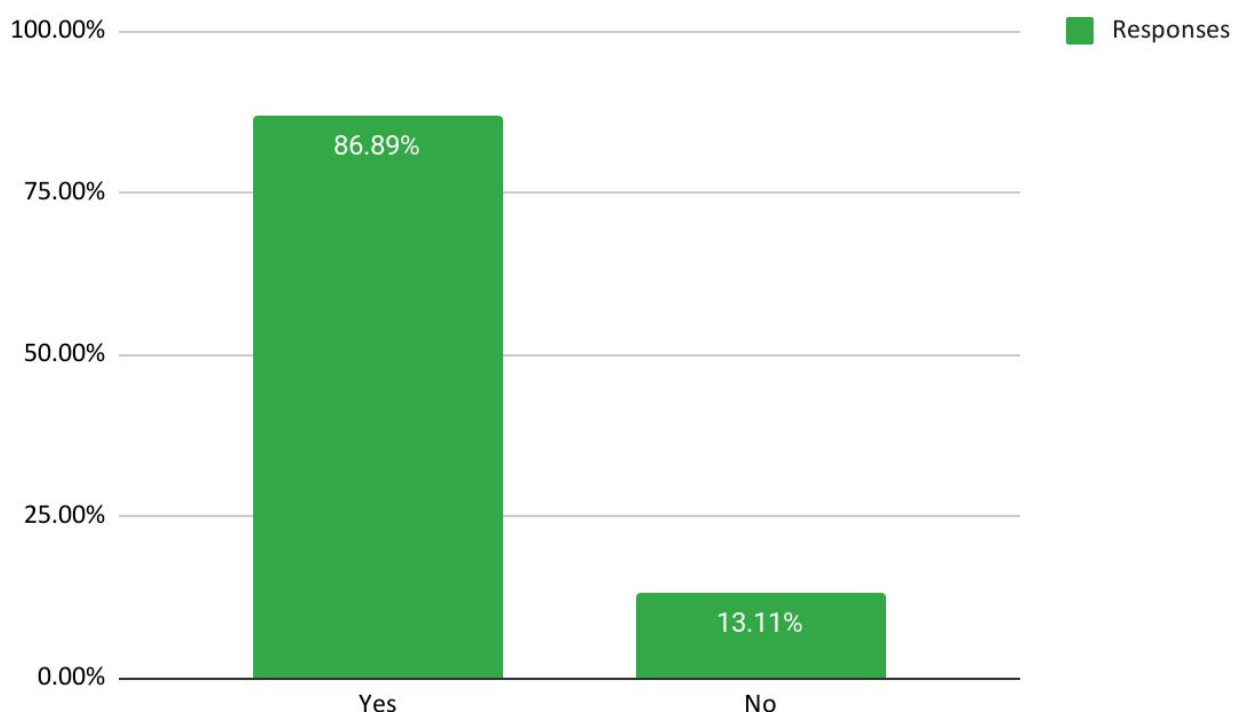
86.89% (53) of respondents said 'Yes' to their organisation placing an importance in upskilling and reskilling their current employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These findings were also contrary to the general sentiments of the public and even training organisations that upskilling and reskilling would be not prioritised during the pandemic.

This could be due to the fact that most of the respondents are from industries that are more technical in nature, and whose companies are classified as essential services during the pandemic. This may have resulted in their need to place an importance on upskilling and reskilling of their current employees with the necessary learning and development.

9. What are some of the skills that your organisation considers as crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please select all that apply.
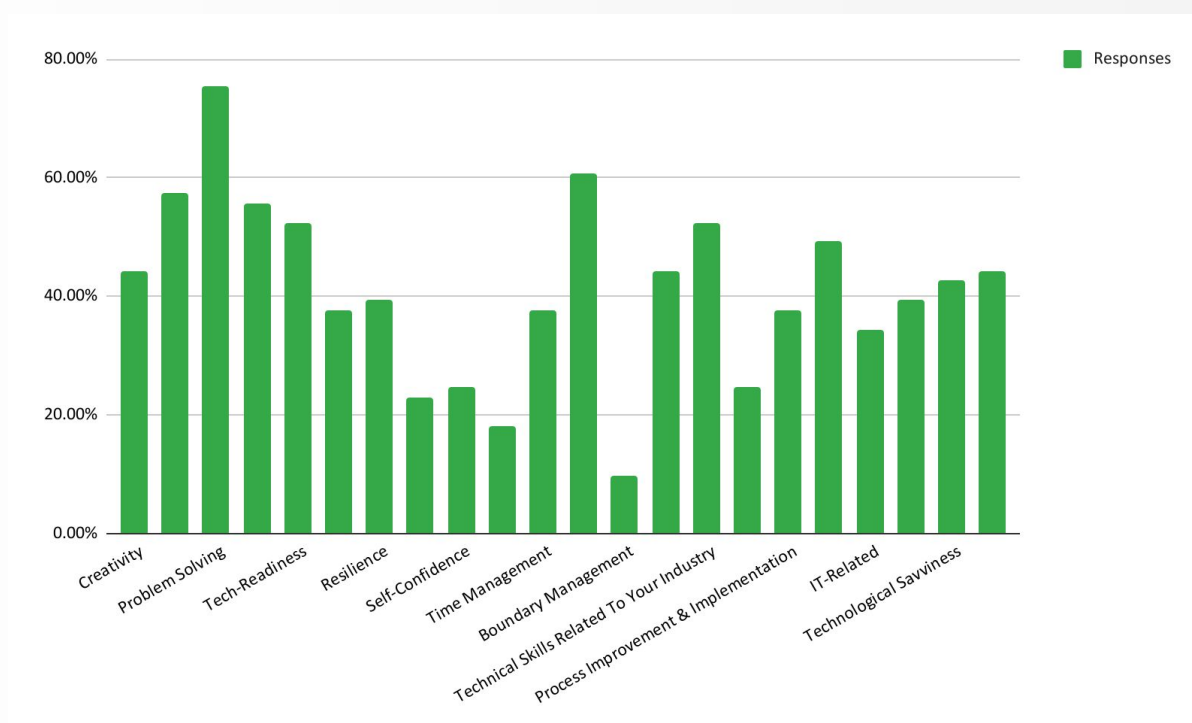

Based on the responses, the top 5 skills that respondents consider as crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic are Problem Solving (75.41%), Mental Wellness (60.66%), Innovation (57.38%) Project Management Skills (55.74%) and Tech-Readiness (52.46%). These skills point to the immediate need for businesses to solve problems that have risen during the pandemic according to the industries that are heavily impacted such as Hospitality and Tourism, Financial Services and Education (based on Q7). However, the general trend for organisations to focus on these skills may have been prevalent pre-COVID and become a more prominent need during the crisis.

Other skills such as Process Improvement & Implementation (37.70%), Data Analysis (49.18%), Technological Savviness (42.62%), Digital Forms of Conducting Work (44.26%), Technical Skills Related To Industry (52.46%), and Creativity (44.26%) were also relatively crucial during the pandemic as respondents strived to generate more revenue; reduce cost; and increase productivity and effectiveness while maintaining Work-From-Home (WFH) policies.

Interestingly, Boundary Management was seen with 9.84% respondents embarking on the said skill. This may indicate that as a result of extended WFH arrangements, Malaysian organisations which did not have a clear boundary management policy prior to the pandemic, may have seen its importance during and potentially, post pandemic.

10. How has the spending on upskilling and reskilling in your organisation changed during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic season?
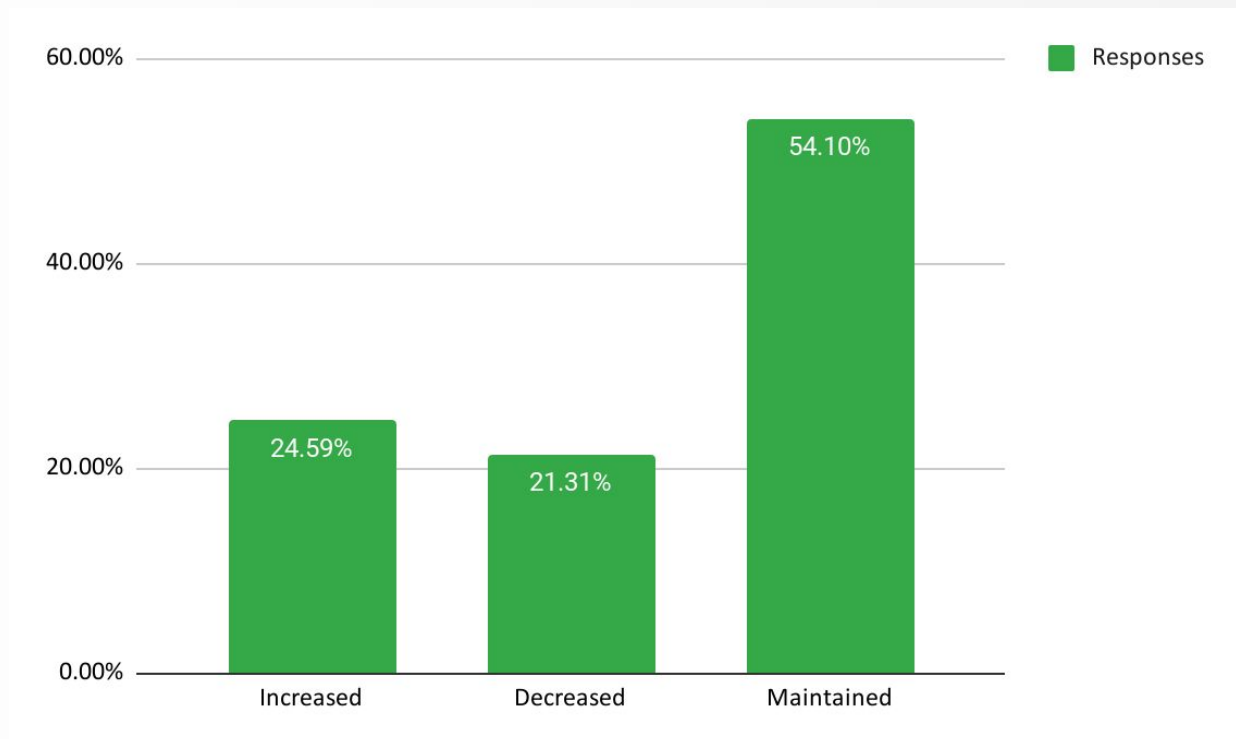
Contrary to the expectation, respondents showed that the spending on upskilling and reskilling in their organisations have mostly maintained (54.10%) and 21.31% has decreased whilst others (24.59%) increased their spending.

One of the possibilities of this trend is the need to pick up new skills and update skills sets of key employees (high on innovation, management, digitalisation) that are crucial to the survival of the organisation (refer to Q7 and Q8).

11. How does your organisation upskill and reskill their employees? Please select all that apply:
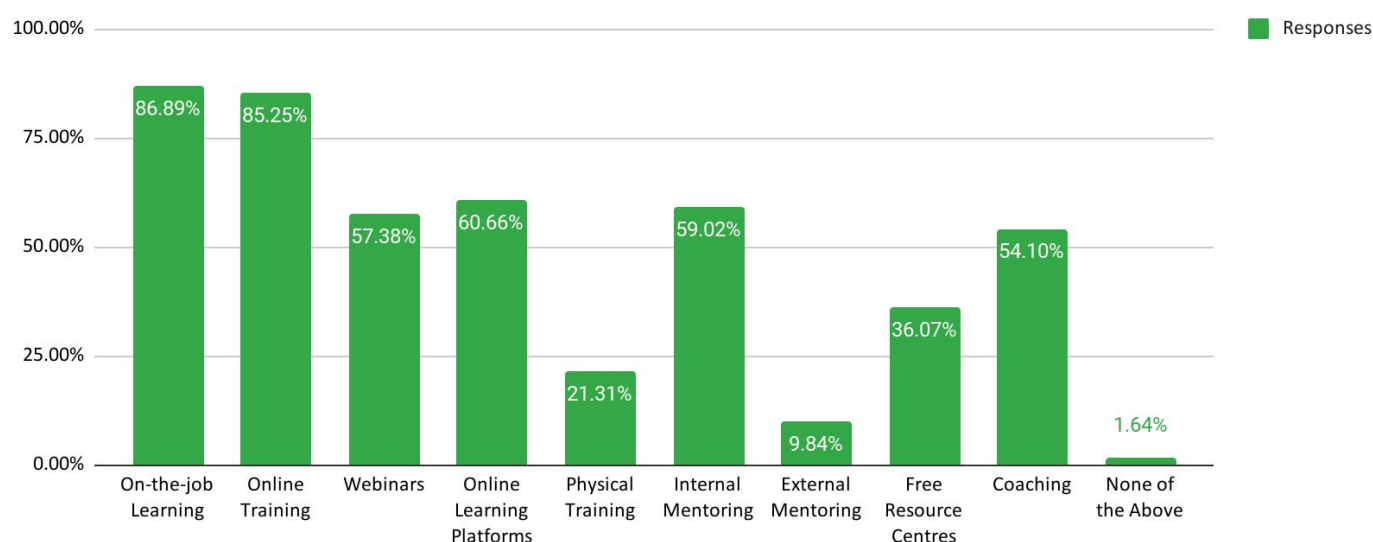
As seen in the chart above, most respondents selected on-the-job learning (86.89%) as a way for their organisations to upskill and reskill their employees, followed by online training (85.25%), online learning platforms (60.66%), internal mentoring (59.02%), webinars (57.38%), and coaching (54.10%).

A trend that is quite prevalent is that learning took place mostly online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical training (21.31%) was nearly a third less than online training (85.25%).

12. Who does your organisation focus on upskilling and reskilling? Please select all that apply:
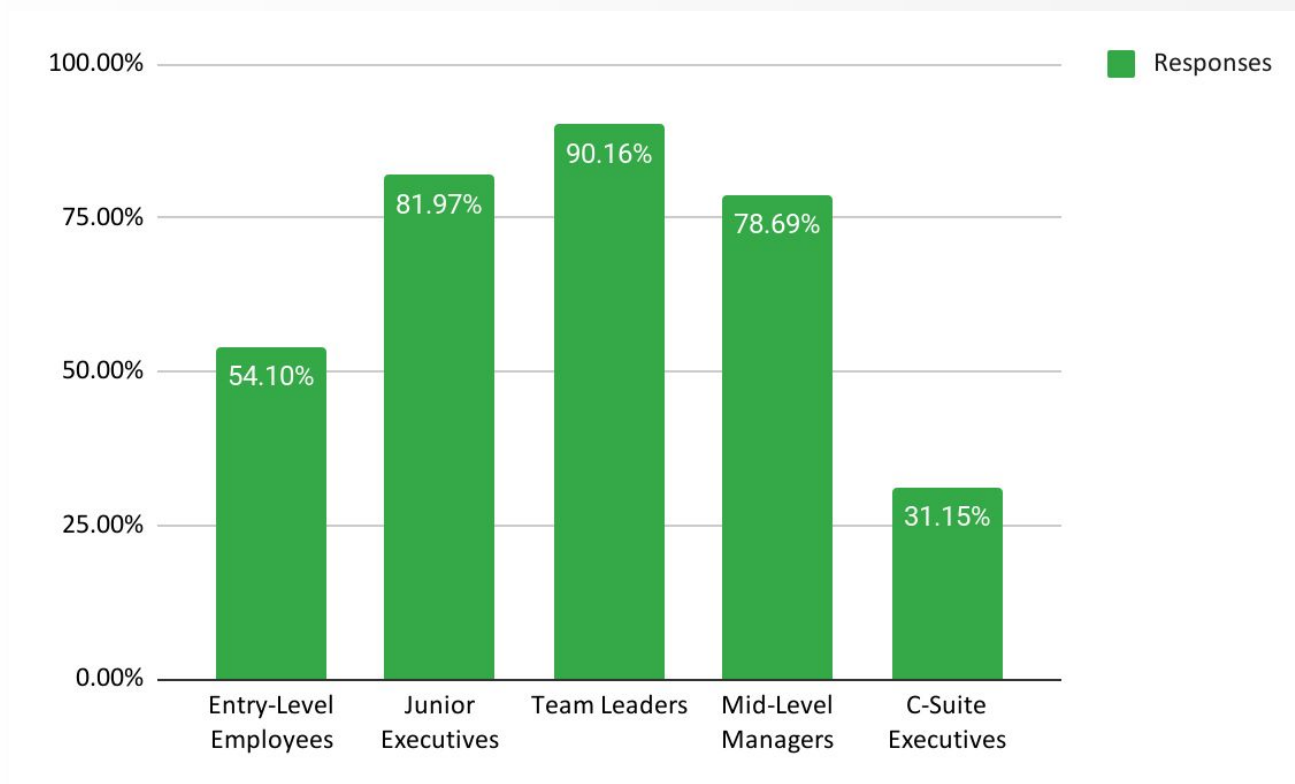

Another interesting trend to look at here is that most of the organisations of the respondents focused on upskilling and reskilling Team Leaders (90.16%), Junior Executives (81.97%) and Mid- Level Managers (78.69%).

One assumption is that due to the instability of the pandemic, team leaders are required to lead their teams towards survival based on their functions. This may have a correlation to Q13 where leadership skills, team management, crisis communication, and soft skills are crucial attributes for these individuals in ensuring business continuity.

As for Junior Executives, it may have a correlation with the skills these organisations consider as crucial during the pandemic, such as problem solving, creativity, technical skills related to industry, and tech-readiness, as seen in Q13. It is also possible that Junior Executives are more often expected to learn on the job rather than being sent to formal training (Q15).

13. How do you hope upskilling and reskilling can affect your organisation, and how fast do you expect application?
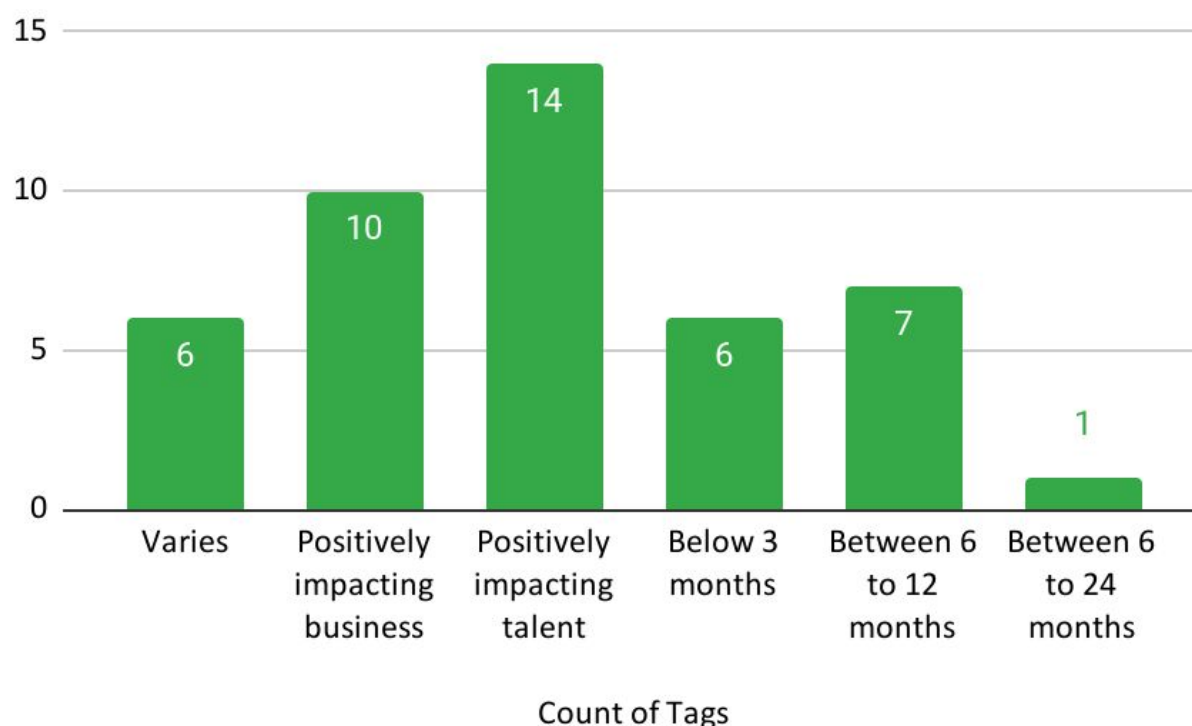
Based on 42 valid responses, the majority of respondents said that upskilling and reskilling has either improved their talent pool, or are hoping would improve the state of their organisations. 26% of respondents also expressed that upskilling and reskilling would be applied within 12 months. One respondent who is not looking into upskilling and reskilling during the pandemic indicated it was due to costs.

Another respondent expressed that "Upskilling and reskilling activities will help us retain top talents". Could it be that high attrition rates are due to the lack of talent upskilling and reskilling? It may be possible that talents who are not bringing their best potential to the table due to this lack of training and development are leaving companies even during the pandemic. Nevertheless, one possible assumptions to conclude from this final question is that upskilling and reskilling talent during the COVID-19 pandemic is valued and key to business sustainability and continuity.

Analysing Overall Insights & Sentiments

The findings of this survey showed that hiring and retention strategies among companies that did well during the pandemic have not entirely changed during this time.

Based on the findings of the survey, hiring strategies during the pandemic has positively benefited participating respondents, with most respondents having made new hires last year and/or are intending to hire more people this year. In terms of the recruitment process, most respondents have adopted virtual interviews to overcome challenges of operating during lockdown periods.

It has also shown that key talents that organisations focused on during the pandemic were mainly centered around Information Technology, Technology, and Digitalisation. Most respondents also showed that they were heavily focused on upskilling and reskilling existing employees on technical skills in relation to the essential roles that were critical for businesses, as well as soft skills.

This may indicate that there is a need to continue researching on the possible correlation of soft skills and technical skills with the impact on organisation's business continuity and survival, especially during an unprecedented time.

As found in other researches, one of the most important and wanted skills by businesses during the pandemic was problem solving and leadership. These claims should be further researched in the context of Malaysia, and a comparison of essential and non-essential industries should be made.

References

1. The Star: Jobs in Demand (February 2021).
   https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2021/02/15/jobs-in-demand
2. Society for Human Resource Management: Employers Get Creative with Hiring During Coronavirus Pandemic (April 2021).
   https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/employers-get-creative-hiring-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic.aspx
3. Department of Statistics (DOSM): Labour Force Survey Report, Malaysia, 2020 (April 2021).
   https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=126&bul_id=dTF2dkJpcUFYUWRrczhqUHVpcDRGQT09&menu_id=Tm8zcnRjdVRNWWlpWjRlbmtlaDk1UT09
4. Malaysia Economic Monitor: Weathering the Surge (June 2021).
   https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/publication/malaysia-economic-monitor-june-2021-weathering-the-surge
5. Harvard Business Review: Why Hiring During Covid Is Different Than in Previous Downturns (October 2021).
   https://hbr.org/2020/10/why-hiring-during-covid-is-different-than-in-previous-downturns

Aisling Group, comprising Aisling Search & Selection, Aisling Consulting and Aisling Professional Development, is a home-grown Malaysian talent solutions company.

Founded in 2016 by Melissa Norman, a HR recruitment veteran in Malaysia, and Miles Hunt, of Benula Capital, a UK-based investment firm with a track record of investments across HR, Consulting, Technology and Assessment Companies in Europe and Asia, with combined experience spanning over 30 years, Aisling is represented with knowledge, expertise, and more importantly, a deep understanding and care for our client and candidate communities.

With our clients, Aisling applies a highly specialised approach and value-effective solutions that require less time and resource to plan, execute and deliver.

With our candidates, we are committed to providing them with better access to an equitable future, supported by the right learning and development towards upskilling and reskilling; enabling them to build their experience and professional network.

All in all, we are driven to be a holistic human capital solutions provider by supporting our client and candidate communities in progressively shaping their talent management approach and initiatives in the areas of, talent identification, talent development, talent engagement, and succession planning.

Creating valuable partnerships and
making an impact in the world of work through people.
Ask us how at: **enquiry@aislingconsulting.com**

| Aisling

https://aisling.com.my/

LEADERONOMICS
The Science of Building Leaders

Growing People into Leaders, Building Communities of Love, Transforming the Nation

Leaderonomics is an organisation driven by the purpose of transforming the nation through building leaders. We believe that everyone with the right mindset and support can become a leader that can profoundly affect the social and economic health of their community, be it their organisation, community, or nation. With our guiding frameworks and intelligence gathered over the years, we work with children, university students, employees of all levels, management, and senior leaders to help them discover, develop and hone their leadership abilities.

Want to unleash your inner leader? We'd love to help.
Reach out to us at: **info@leaderonomics.com**

| Leaderonomics   **www.leaderonomics.org**