

# 2021 Boulder Primary Employer Survey

## Executive Summary

### Background

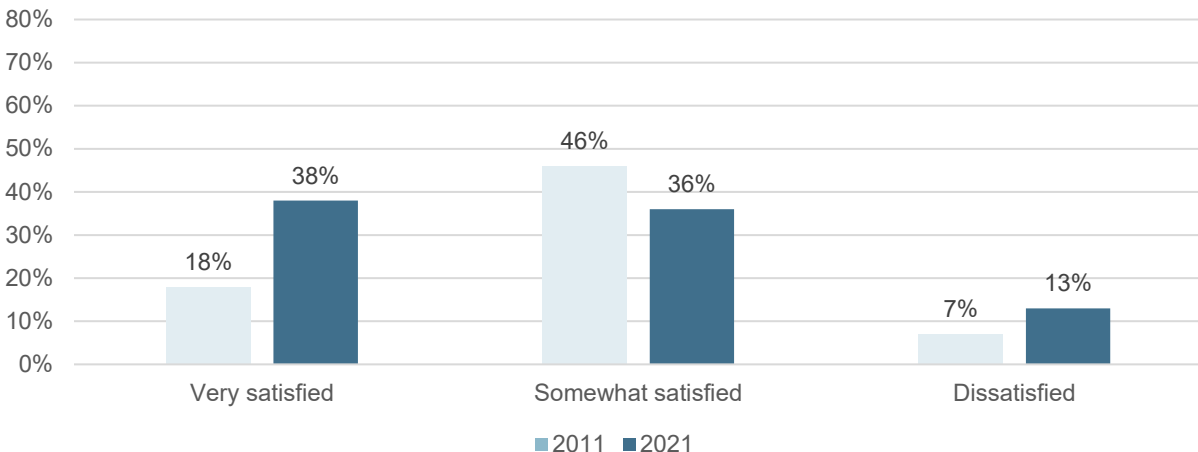
The City of Boulder commissioned a survey in 2019 to learn more about business concerns and challenges, perceptions about operating in the city, and plans for expansion. The survey was intended to update findings from similar surveys conducted in 2011 and 2012 which were used to inform the development of the city's Economic Sustainability Strategy (adopted by City Council in October 2013), Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan update, and other city projects.

After being delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the online survey was conducted in May 2021 by RRC Associates, a national marketing research firm based in Boulder. The survey was completed by 77 primary employers (defined as businesses of any size in industries such as aerospace, bioscience, manufacturing, cleantech, and technology that generate most of their revenue from outside Boulder County). Survey participants represent approximately 10% of Boulder's primary employers and included a mix of small and large businesses located throughout the city.

### Key Findings: Perceptions of Boulder

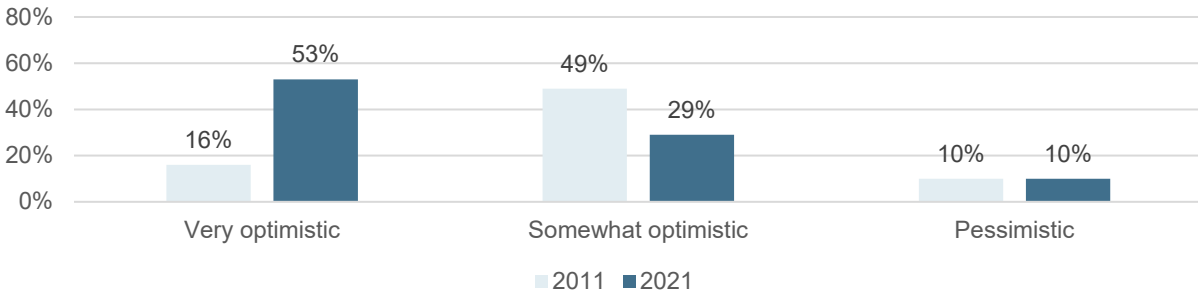
**Overall Satisfaction** – Survey findings indicate 74% of primary employers are satisfied with Boulder as a place to do business. Overall satisfaction has increased since 2011.

*Overall, how satisfied have you been with **Boulder as a place to do business?***



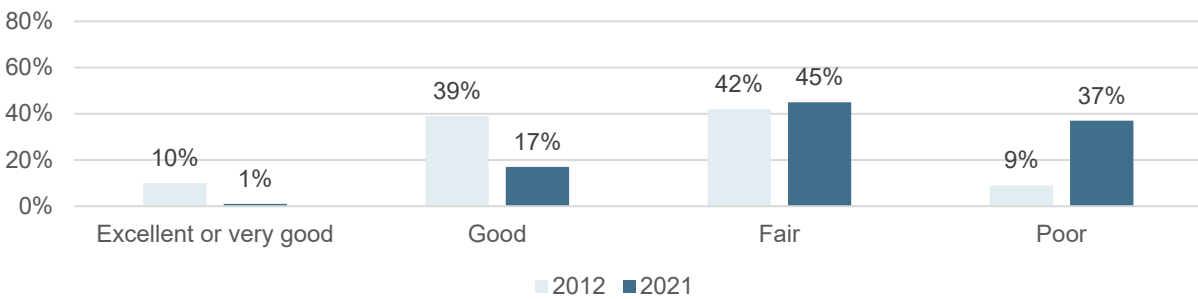
**Business Optimism** – Primary employers are mostly optimistic about the city’s economic future despite the pandemic, and over half indicated they are “very optimistic”. Of note, the Q3 2021 University of Colorado Leeds Business Confidence Index was 67.3 (50=neutral) compared to 44.3 for the same period in 2020, reflecting optimism among the state’s business leaders.

*How optimistic are you about **Boulder’s economic future**?*



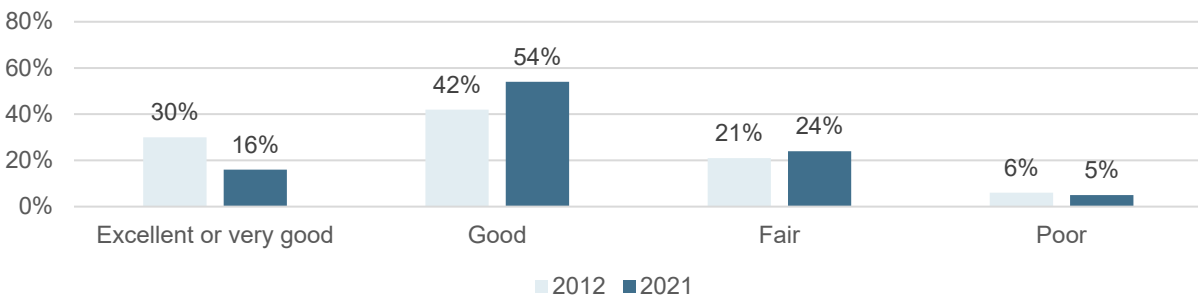
**Cost of Doing Business** – Over 80% of those surveyed rate the overall cost of doing business in Boulder as fair or poor, a significant increase from 2012.

*How would you rate the **cost of doing business** in Boulder?*



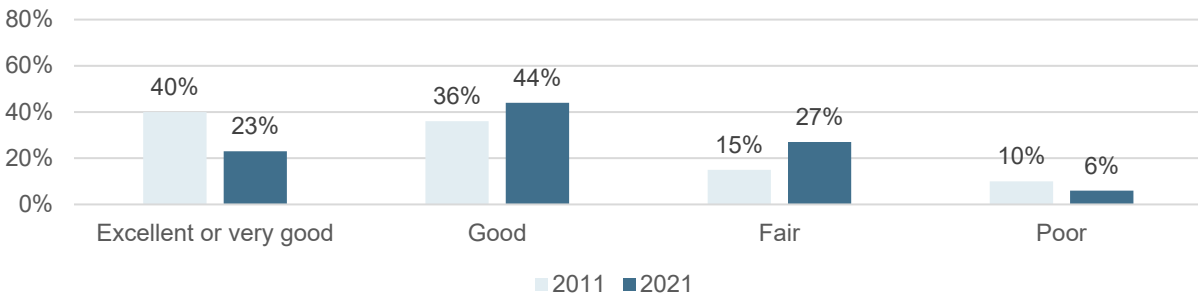
**Ease of Doing Business** – Seventy percent of primary employers rate the ease of doing business in Boulder as positive.

*How would you rate the **ease of doing business** in Boulder?*



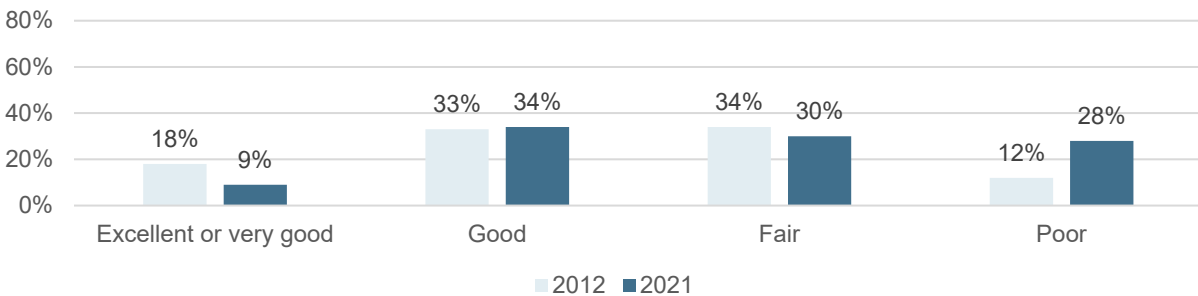
**Access to Resources** – Two-thirds of primary employers rate the access to business resources as positive.

*How would you rate the **access to resources** for businesses in Boulder?*



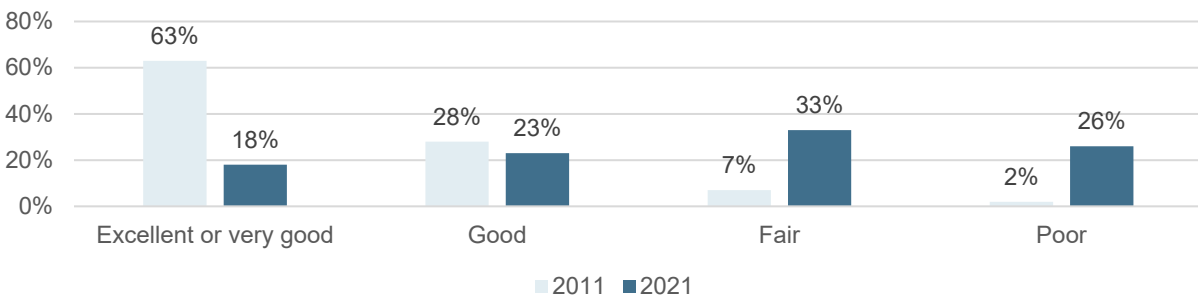
**Availability of Commercial Space** – The availability of commercial space remains a challenge for some businesses with 58% of primary employers rating it as fair or poor.

*How would you rate the **availability of suitable space** for businesses in Boulder?*



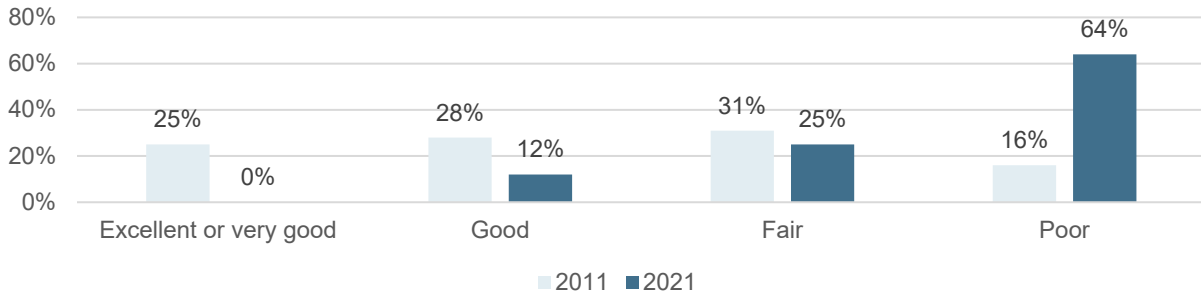
**Ability to Find/Retain Employees** – Nearly 60% rate the ability to find and retain employees in Boulder as fair or poor, a dramatic increase from 2012. It is helpful to note that difficulty in finding and retaining qualified employees is a common challenge in most industries throughout the U.S.

*How would you rate the **ability to find and retain employees** in Boulder?*



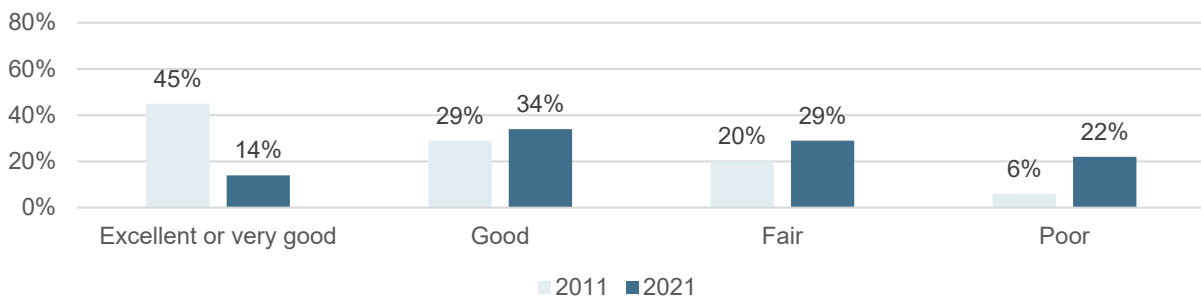
**Workforce Housing** – Nearly 90% of primary employers rated the availability of housing for employees in Boulder as fair or poor, a significant increase from 2011 that coincides with increased home prices in Boulder and Front Range.

*How would you rate the **availability of workforce housing** in Boulder?*



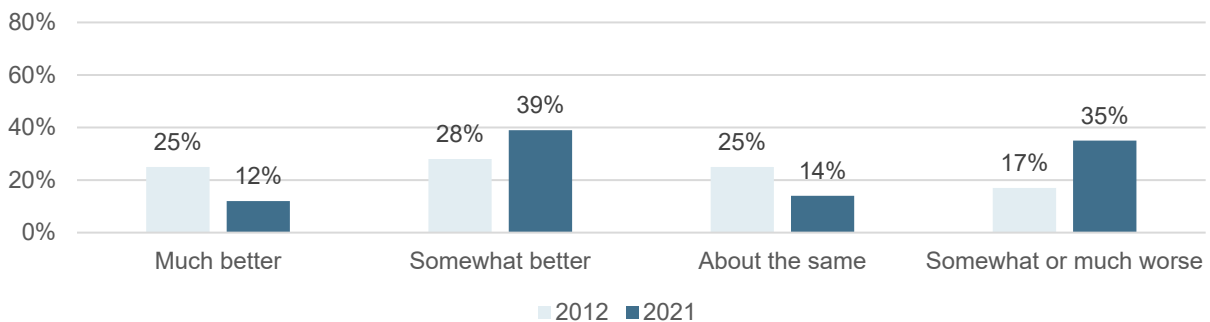
**Workforce Transportation** – Over half of those surveyed rated the availability of workforce transportation options as fair or poor, nearly twice as many as 2011.

*How would you rate **workforce transportation options** in Boulder?*

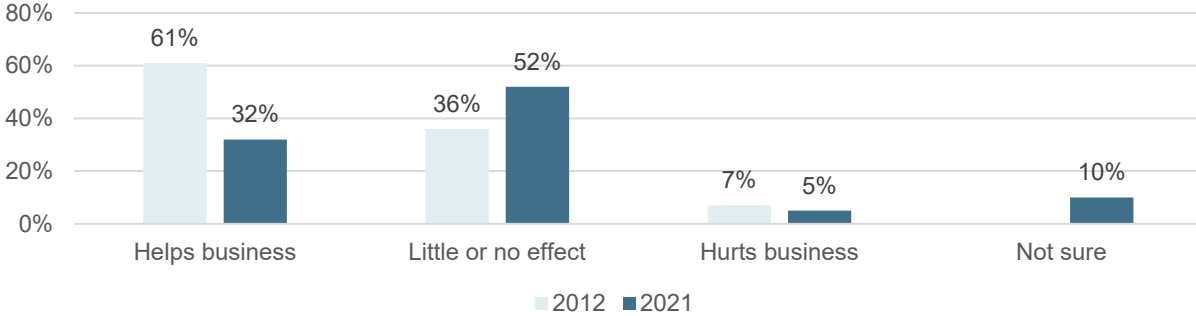


**Advantage of Boulder Location** – Just over half of primary employers think Boulder is better than other area cities for businesses like theirs and over one-third feel a Boulder address helps their business.

*In general, how do you think Boulder compares to other cities in the area as a **place for businesses like yours**?*



How does having a **Boulder address** affect your business?



Those who rated Boulder as better than other cities for businesses like theirs commonly cited its vibrancy, quality of life, supportive community, and well-educated workforce.

*“The Boulder business community is very tight knit and, in most cases, supportive of each other compared to most other cities. People who live/work in Boulder want to be here, and they tend to root for Boulder companies to succeed.”*

*“Concentration of resources and education plus a thriving real estate market.”*

*“Boulder has a wonderful lively atmosphere. Health and fitness oriented.”*

*“Reputation in the rest of the world. Curb appeal to visiting partners and investors.”*

*“Good talent would rather work in Boulder or be associated with Boulder than other towns or cities.”*

*“University town is good for creative people. Limit is it’s too expensive in the area, and that narrows down available people. I’m looking more remotely for recruiting.”*

Primary employers who rated Boulder as worse than other cities frequently mentioned high costs, city regulations and processes, and challenges in finding employees.

*“Many people we compete with are not paying the price to rent in Boulder. Our overhead is 2-3 times most of my competitors.”*

*“Staffing and rents are expensive.”*

*“Cost of rent and living is going up and companies like ours cannot compete with tech firms for salaries. Boulder is following the same trend that we had with our San Francisco operations ten years ago. We eventually had to downsize our presence there and are making plans to downsize in Boulder. Boulder does provide a nice quality of life for staff that can afford it.”*

*“The City over-regulates. Not only at the large scale but in minute details. This is a very inefficient process for all.”*

*“So many regulations make it hard to do the right things for the business and our customers.”*

*“Tech talent is harder to find here than Denver and costs are somewhat higher.”*



**Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses** – Primary employers rated Boulder highest on the following characteristics:

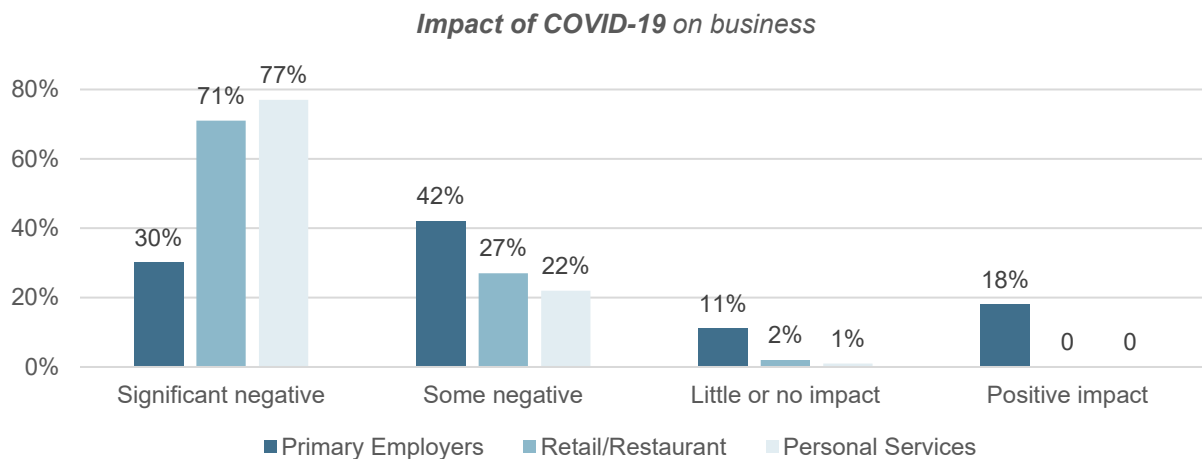
- Access to trails and recreation facilities
- Close proximity to a university
- Availability of restaurants, shopping, and services
- Reputation for innovation and entrepreneurship
- High speed connectivity/broadband service
- Access to public transportation
- Inclusive and welcoming environment
- Access to markets and customers
- Availability of qualified employees

Characteristics that received the lowest ratings were:

- Cost of space for businesses
- Diversity of local workforce
- Clear and understandable policies/regulations for businesses
- Availability of parking
- Employee wage rates

## Key Findings: COVID-related Impacts and Plans

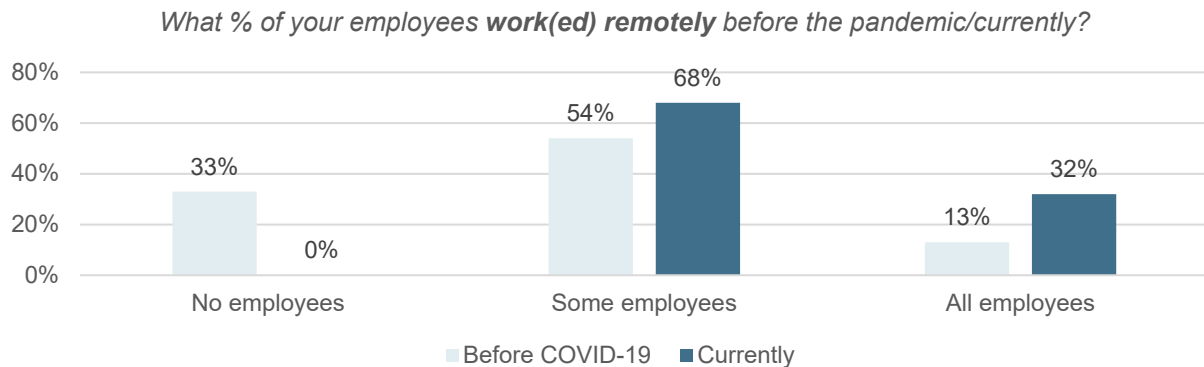
**Impact of Pandemic** – Over 70% of primary employers reported negative impacts from the pandemic. By comparison, nearly all of the non-grocery retailers, restaurants, and personal service providers surveyed in October 2020 reported negative impacts.



Businesses in manufacturing were more likely to report significant negative impacts than those in industries more conducive to telecommuting or remote work such as technology, media/publishing/marketing or professional and technical services.



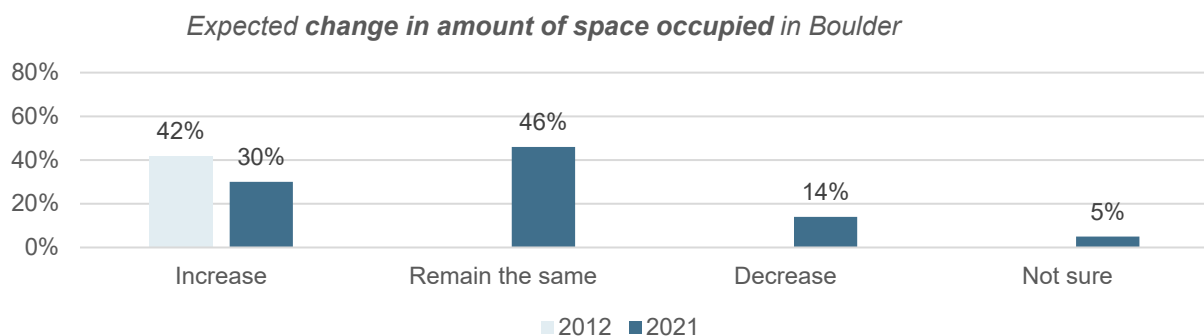
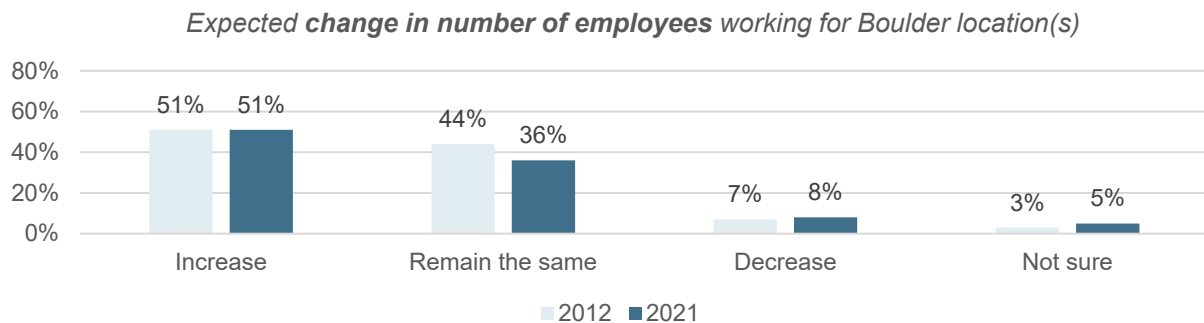
**Changes in Business Operations** – While having at least some employees working off-site prior to the pandemic was common among Boulder’s primary employers, survey findings confirm working remotely increased significantly during the pandemic.



More than half (52%) of those surveyed expected to allow more flexibility and remote working than before the pandemic, and only 13% plan to operate with most or all work done remotely.

## Key Findings: Expansion and Relocation Plans

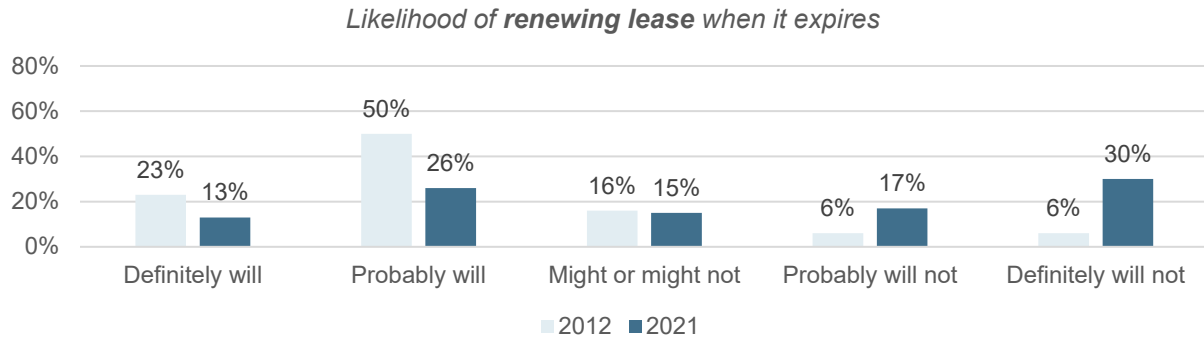
**Anticipated Expansion** – Over the next 1 to 3 years, 51% of primary employers surveyed expect to add employees and 30% expect to increase the amount of space their business occupies in Boulder.



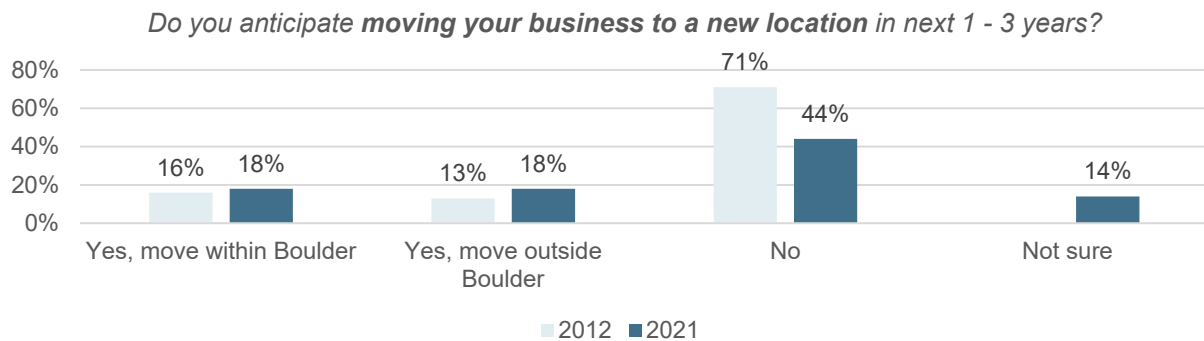
*Note: The 2012 questionnaire only asked if primary employers planned to increase the amount of space occupied*



**Anticipated Lease Renewals** – Nearly half of those currently leasing space, or 31% of all primary employers, indicated they may not renew their lease when it expires. This represents a significant increase from 2012. The cost of leasing space in Boulder and the need to reduce square footage due to remote work were the most frequently mentioned reasons for not renewing leases.



**Anticipated Relocation** – Just over one-third (36%) of primary employers surveyed expect to move to a new location in the next 1 to 3 years including 18% that anticipate leaving Boulder. Most common reasons for relocation outside Boulder were cost (64%) and lack of available space (29%).



Findings from the 2021 Boulder Primary Employer Survey, along with data from other research studies, will be used by the City of Boulder to inform economic recovery efforts and economic strategy updates. The Economic Vitality Program page of the city’s website includes a [link to the full report](#).

For more information, please contact Jennifer Pinsonneault, Senior Program Manager, Economic Vitality, at 303-441-3017 or [PinsonneaultJ@bouldercolorado.gov](mailto:PinsonneaultJ@bouldercolorado.gov) or Mark Woulf, Senior Manager, Economic Vitality & Business Services, Community Vitality at 413-7313 or [WoulfM@bouldercolorado.gov](mailto:WoulfM@bouldercolorado.gov).

