



Can Investing in Workers Support Small Business Resiliency Through the Pandemic? – Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

November 18, 2021

Description

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed enormous stress on small businesses and their workers, as closures and new public safety measures have demanded that business owners shift operations and take creative steps to keep employees and customers safe. In this extraordinary time, small business owners are increasingly aware that the wellbeing of their employees is essential for business survival – and they are forging new partnerships and taking new approaches to support their workers.

Watch this discussion, hosted by the Aspen Institute [Economic Opportunities Program](#) and the [National Fund for Workforce Solutions](#), to learn about strategies that small business owners and workforce organizations can take to strengthen job quality for frontline workers in the wake of COVID-19. In this session, we hear from two restaurant owners in Baltimore, along with a workforce professional who helped them prioritize job quality through the pandemic.

Baltimore business owners share their experiences operating restaurants during this challenging time. And they explain how and why they chose to partner with Civic Works to invest in their employees as a resiliency strategy. Allie Busching shares her experiences using Pacific Community Ventures' [Good Jobs, Good Business](#) toolkit and providing business advising support to Baltimore-based small businesses.

Opening Remarks

Gayatri Agnew

Senior Director, Opportunity, Walmart.org

Gayatri Agnew is a leader in corporate and social impact strategy focused on human capital trends and future of work. Gayatri worked throughout her winding path to and through both her undergraduate degree and her MBA. She has dedicated herself to ensuring more people have access to meaningful work and to effective ways to learn and grow.

Gayatri serves on the leadership team for Walmart's Global Responsibility division where she leads strategy and partnerships on economic mobility, specifically human capital, shared value, partnerships,

and philanthropy. Her team focuses on key issues such as changing employer practices, better serving the learning and development needs of frontline workers, and scaling work-based learning and skills-based hiring. Gayatri's personal mission is for more people to be able find purpose and to learn through work and that this luxury of learning is equality accessible for all.

Raised by a strong a resilient single mom, Gayatri is a lifelong advocate for women both in the civic and social sphere. She is a former candidate for the Arkansas State House and was among the wave of working moms who ran for office in 2018. She's passionate about ensuring all voices are heard in centers of power including in government and in business.

Prior to joining Walmart Gayatri lived and worked in California and Washington. She worked on the campaign and in the administration of former Washington State Governor Christine Gregoire. She served as director of the Career Center at Seattle University and ran the Seattle-King County City Year (AmeriCorps) site. She lived and worked in India researching skills development pathways and employment technology and training tools.

Gayatri and her husband Ryan live in Bentonville, Arkansas, with their two young children, Rohan and Kamala.

Speakers

Shawn Parker

Co-Owner, Connie's Chicken and Waffles

Shawn Parker is an experienced leader with a demonstrated history of working in the real estate and restaurant industries. Shawn and his brother Khari opened Connie's Chicken and Waffles, named after their mother, in Baltimore in 2016. "The goal at Connie's," according to its website, "is to give everyone the same loving experience, that Connie has provided at her family gatherings for the past few decades... At Connie's we understand that a large part of our success comes as a result of the loyalty from the great members of the community that we serve. Connie's believes in giving back to causes that help advance the needs of the communities that we operate in. We support causes related to STEM, financial literacy, community empowerment and many more!" Shawn is also dedicated to helping his community through real estate by assisting people become homeowners. During his downtime, you can find Shawn enjoying nature or traveling to experience great food.

Laura Wagner

Co-Owner, Well Crafted Kitchen

Laura Wagner is one of four co-owners and founders of Well Crafted Pizza, which is a wood-fired mobile pizza kitchen and caterer founded on the beliefs and core values of community, connection, and food. Our locally inspired menu of creative and traditional pizzas is served from our vintage 1949 Dodge pizza truck or at our permanent Kitchen in north Baltimore. The menu is built with ingredients sourced from farmers and makers that are on average less than 150 miles from our kitchen and aims to facilitate a unique and quality food experience that creates an opportunity for all people to share, engage, and connect with their food, each other, and their place in the world. Before starting Well Crafted, Laura worked in nonprofits in youth development, refugee resettlement, and international access to education and continues to work in refugee integration. Laura holds a Master of Arts in International

Education Development from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations and Geography from Bucknell University.

Allie Busching

Former Business Development Coordinator, Civic Works

Allie is the former business development coordinator for the Civic Works Center for Sustainable Careers, a key partner in the Baltimore Advancing Careers in Retail Initiative and facilitator of the Good Business Works network, which recognizes high-road employers in Baltimore. Allie received a master's degree in social work with a focus on management and community organization from the University of Maryland and is committed to advancing creative approaches to strengthen local economies and empower frontline and service sector workers. She previously worked in organized labor and served as a New Economy Maryland Fellow with the Institute for Policy Studies.

Moderators

Jenny Weissbourd

Senior Project Manager, Economic Opportunities Program, The Aspen Institute

Jenny's work focuses on improving economic mobility and job quality for low- and moderate-income workers. She manages applied research and capacity building projects that support the development of innovative approaches to improving jobs and economic opportunities. Previously, Jenny managed strategy and development at The Food Trust, including helping to launch a small business training program, and consulted nonprofit and government clients at Fairmount Ventures. Jenny holds an MBA from MIT, where she worked with faculty at the Institute for Work and Employment Research to study labor policy, job quality, and worker voice in the 21st century economy. She also holds an MPA from Harvard, where she was a Fellow at the Center for Public Leadership, an editor of the LGBTQ Policy Journal, and a Dukakis Policy Fellow for Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo.

Tom Strong

Director of Employer Activation, National Fund for Workforce Solutions

Tom Strong is a passionate advocate for worker voice and the business benefits of investing in good jobs. As the National Fund's director of employer activation, he leads efforts to engage employers in local industry partnerships to increase their competitive advantage, make jobs better, and build more resilient communities. Tom previously co-led the Hitachi Foundation's Good Companies/Good Jobs program, and also worked as an open-book management coach with the Great Game of Business. Tom has an MBA from the University of Arizona, a bachelor's degree from Reed College, and is a founding board director of the Georgia Center for Employee Ownership.

About

This webinar is the eighth in our [Job Quality in Practice webinar series](#). The Job Quality in Practice series is designed to support practitioners across fields – including workforce development, economic development, investing and lending, policy, worker advocacy, and business – to address job quality in their work. Webinars share updates on current conditions and priorities as well as actionable tools and approaches. We also seek to highlight leading practitioners' work and create connections across disciplines.

We are grateful to Prudential Financial for its support of our Job Quality in Practice webinar series and our ongoing efforts to advance a job quality field of practice. We are also grateful to Walmart for supporting our Reimagine Retail initiative, which works to enhance job quality and improve mobility for workers in retail and related sectors.

Other webinars in this series include:

- [Assessing Job Quality and Equity in Your Local Labor Market: A Closer Look at Race, Gender, and Place](#)
- [To Boost Job Quality, Money Matters: Practical Tools for Engaging Investors and Lenders Toward Change](#)
- [How Can Workforce Leaders Boost Job Quality?](#)
- [Job Quality in the Age of COVID-19: Strengthening Frontline Management and Supporting Workers](#)
- [Worker Organizations Respond to the COVID-19 Crisis](#)
- [Increasing Equity in a Post-Pandemic Economy: The Potential for Growing Worker Ownership](#)
- [How the Workforce System Can Advance Workplace Health and Safety During and After the Pandemic](#)

The [Economic Opportunities Program](#) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. [Follow us on social media](#) and [join our mailing list](#) to stay connected to our work, including events, publications, blog posts, and more.

Transcript

Jenny Weissbourd (00:00:03)

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us. I'm Jenny Weissbourd, a senior project manager with The Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. At the Economic Opportunities Program we focus on advancing a more just and inclusive economy by expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, to participate in business ownership, and to build the economic stability necessary to pursue opportunity. We recognize that race, and gender, and place all dictate who has access to economic opportunity in America, and we work to address systemic racism as part of our work to advance economic justice.

Tom Strong (00:00:37)

And I'm Tom Strong, I'm the Director of Employer Activation at the National Fund for Workforce Solutions. The National Fund is a dynamic national network of over 30 communities that take a demand driven and evidence-based approach towards workforce development. At the local level, partner

organizations of ours, like Civic Works which will be featured in this call today, they contribute resources, they test out ideas, they collect data, and they work to improve both public policies and business practices that help workers succeed and help employers gather the talent that they need to compete.

Today we're really thrilled to welcome you to our conversation, which is "Can Investing in Workers Support Small Business Resiliency, Even Through the Pandemic?"

Jenny Weissbourd (00:01:25)

This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program's ongoing Job Quality in Practice series, in which we highlight innovative work by practitioners and businesses to advance job quality. We're grateful to Prudential Financial for their support of this work. We're also grateful to Walmart for supporting our Reimagine Retail initiative to enhance job quality and mobility for retail and service sector workers, including the work we'll be lifting up during today's webinar.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, small businesses and their workers have faced extraordinary challenges. Small business owners, many of whom were already operating with razor-thin profit margins before the pandemic have had to move quickly to transform their operations to keep employees and customers safe. Experts estimate that one in five small businesses may close their doors by the end of this year, and because of structural racism black owned businesses are shuttering at more than twice the rate of white owned businesses.

Over the last few months working closely with our wonderful partners at the National Fund and at Pacific Community Ventures, our research team at the Economic Opportunities Program has had the opportunity to interview and learn from small businesses and the workforce organizations that support them about their experiences during the pandemic.

We've heard just how hard these months have been, how stressful it's been to stay up to date on safety recommendations and to afford new protective measures with lower and unpredictable revenues. But we've also heard business owners describe how this challenging moment has underscored that business and worker interest are aligned. For small business owners, the safety and stability of their employees is essential for business survival. Recognizing this interdependence, small business owners are finding creative solutions and leaning on unconventional partners.

Tom Strong (00:03:07)

Today you will hear from two restaurant owners in Baltimore, Maryland, and you'll hear about their experiences both during the pandemic and how they learned that supporting their employees is critical to business resilience. With support from the National Fund these restaurant owners worked with a local workforce organization, Baltimore Civic Works. Allie Busching who led this effort at Civic Works is going to share how she used the Good Jobs, Good Businesses toolkit, which is developed by Reimagine Retail partner Pacific Community Ventures in order to coach and support businesses in making job quality improvements. One reason the National Fund funds collaboratives in so many different regions is that we recognize the importance of local innovation, and the fact that different parts of our country may require different kinds of solutions to their own workforce challenges. In this Civic Works has been an exemplary site. They've both prioritized important and challenging sectors like retail, and they've come up with creative ways to partner with businesses on emerging issues like job quality.

Now, before we start, it's my pleasure today to review the technology needs. So all attendees are going to be muted during this webinar. There is closed captioning available for this event. In order to activate it, click the CC button on the bottom of your screen. We welcome your questions. During the webinar

pleasure use the Q&A box on the bottom of the Zoom screen. You can also upvote questions other people ask that are of interest to you. We'll leave plenty of time at the end for your nonverbal questions. Try to get to ask many questions as we can. We do encourage you to use social media. If you have Twitter please tweet about this conversation. We'll be using the #jobquality, just one word. Then if you have any technical issues during the webinar, please email us at eop.program@aspeninstitute.org. Finally, this webinar is being recorded and will be shared by email and posted on the website.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:05:12)

And it's now my pleasure to introduce our first speaker who will share our opening remarks. Gayatri Agnew is senior director of opportunity at Walmart.org. Gayatri serves on the leadership team of Walmart's global responsibility division, where she leads strategy and partnerships for Walmart's efforts on economic mobility. I have to say I find it particularly inspiring to hear how Gayatri's experiences working in service sector jobs and attending community colleges inform her perspectives about talent and opportunity. Gayatri has a long and accomplished career and she's also done critically important work to advocate for women in civic life. So I encourage you to read her full bio on her website for more details so you can more fully appreciate how awesome Gayatri is and how honored we are to have her with us today. Gayatri, I'll turn it over to you.

Gayatri Agnew (00:05:59)

Thanks so much Jenny and Tom. It's my pleasure to be here, and thank you for having me to open up this panel. I want to call out, and I know we'll hear more about them, but I want to call out and to thank Laura, Shawn and Allie for your leadership in our economy right now. I sit at Walmart, which is a fairly large company, but one of the things that we understand intrinsically and deeply at Walmart is that the economy is a collection of people, of humans, and that the way our economy works is a system, and when parts of that system don't work, the other parts of that system so too fall apart. Our economy is struggling right now for a host of factors, many of which Jenny and Tom talked about in our opening, but for Walmart we sit in 4,700 communities across the US, so we are a place that is both in and of the community.

A lot of folks don't necessarily understand the relationship that Walmart has to small business, but we have it in a number of ways. We employ 1.4 million US workers, and many of those workers are also engaged in small businesses in their community, so there's a relationship between our workers and small businesses in our communities. Some are founders of those businesses, some are employees of those businesses, some are former workers in those businesses.

Walmart also physically houses over 10,000 small businesses who we were able to provide rent relief to because when own the building where they physically locate, co-locate through the early part of the pandemic, and then more recently as we've scaled up and launched Marketplace, which is Walmart.com's third-party online retail, we've actually enabled thousands of businesses, and in particular small businesses, to access channels for sales through Walmart's platform.

So it's a relationship, and when small businesses thrive, Walmart thrives, and when our economy is thriving, people in community can thrive. So I was thrilled to get to just join and to kick off with maybe two quick comments. One is that Jenny mentioned racial equity, the work around good jobs, and how we all survive this recession together, and I would argue that that's actually an equation. When we do one, we do the other, and when we do that, that is how we survive this current moment and maybe do more than survive but actually thrive. So I think our challenge today is just to spend some time exploring how we find our shared humanity that lives inside of a complex economic system, and how through that complex economic system we see opportunities to create new, and innovative, and maybe unusual partnerships. So above all else I just want to thank the small business owners who are leading

this work on the ground and in community. Thank you for your innovation and your willingness to think in new and different ways, and in how you've approached this work.

A huge thanks to the National Fund and The Aspen Institute. Walmart.org is very proud to support your work. You guys are changing the world on the ground place by place. So I'll turn it back to you, Jenny.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:09:10)

Thank you so much Gayatri. I'm loving this equation of racial equity plus good jobs equals surviving and thriving together. I think that theme will be central in today's conversation.

Now I'm delighted to introduce our panelists. Shawn Parker is co-owner of Connie's Chicken and Waffles, a restaurant with locations in Baltimore, Maryland, and Wilmington, Delaware. Laura Wagner is co-owner of Well Crafted Kitchen, a pizza shop and pizza truck in Baltimore. So if you're not already hungry, you definitely will be by the end of this conversation. Allie Busching is an experienced workforce development professional and former business development coordinator at Civic Works in Baltimore. You can read their full bios on our website. So thanks so much to each of you for joining us. We know how much you're dealing with right now, and we're really grateful to you for spending the afternoon with us and sharing the important work that you're doing.

We're going to start with a little bit of background on your organizations, and Shawn, I want to turn to you first. Tell us about why you and your brother Khari decided to start a restaurant and why you named it Connie's Chicken and Waffles.

Shawn Parker (00:10:16)

Thank you so much Jenny, and hello everyone. Again, I'm Shawn Parker, co-owner of Connie's Chicken and Waffles. So prior to starting Connie's Chicken and Waffles, Khari and I were in the corporate world, but we realized that we wanted to have an impact and actually help people. We were doing that in our individual careers, but not to the magnitude that we wanted to, so we decided to start this restaurant. It's kind of a social enterprise. We give food but we also convey a sense of love and community to everyone that we touch.

We started at Lexington Market, which is one of the oldest public markets in the US, located in Downtown Baltimore, which is also the center point for transportation here and it touches the entire city and community as a whole. We wanted to provide high quality, quick service, and a feel-good food experience, which is something that we saw that was missing to the entire industry.

We named the business after our mom, affectionately known as Miss Connie, who is still with us, because she's known for showing love around our family. She's the matriarch of our family, so all the family gatherings are at her house, which is a similar vibe we want to actually bring to Connie's. We want all of our customers, and friends, and family members that we like to call them now to feel comfortable when they come to any of our locations. We learned love from our mom, and we wanted to show a similar love to the entire community.

So in 2016 when we started it was actually right after the incident that happened with Freddie Gray, which was right here in Baltimore, and we noticed there was a lack of love throughout the city. So we realized that the whole world needs that love that our mom showed with us. We named it after our mom but I also have to give credit to our dad too who really pushed the entrepreneurship aspect and really showed us that side of him.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:11:52)

Thanks Shawn. Laura, I want to turn to you next. Tell us the Well Crafted Kitchen origin story. What inspired you all to found this business?

Laura Wagner (00:12:02)

Yeah, awesome. Thank you so much and thanks so much for including us in this discussion. So I am representing four co-owners. Liz, Ryan and Tom are my other co-owners and we all met in college. We took different career paths but we came together over a shared passion for food and wanting to bring people together over food. We landed on pizza specifically, wood fired pizza because we wanted kind of like a blank canvas. We wanted to prioritize the local food economy and creating sustainable local sources of food. You can kind of put just about anything on pizza and people are willing to try it. So, people who don't like beets will try beets if you put it on pizza. So, that was kind of one of our initial inspirations.

We started in 2016 with a 1949 Dodge truck that has a wood fired pizza built into it, and so we did private events, catering, we were at farmer's markets, popping up at breweries and wineries, and that was the first two years of our business, purely mobile. Then in 2018 we opened a permanent kitchen within Union Craft Brewing, and so we've been there for the past two years. It's not only the brewery space but it's a collective space that also has a rock climbing gym, a coffee shop, Baltimore Spirits Company, The Charmery and other local producers. Yeah, and at that time we went from a four owner operation to a 20 person team. So that was a really exciting and big expansion for us, so we've been doing that for about two years.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:13:47)

Great. Allie, you spent several years managing the Good Business Works initiative at Civic Works. So tell us about what that program does and how you came to know and work with Shawn and Laura.

Allie Busching (00:14:01)

Sure. So Good Business Works is a new initiative that's sort of an extension of a lot of the work that we've been doing with Civic Works Center for sustainable careers over the past 10 years. It's a new collaborative initiative that brings together businesses and workforce experts and community partners all centered around this belief that by investing in quality jobs we can also help to strengthen local businesses in our communities.

So in 2018 we were selected as one of three locations and sites through the National Fund For Workforce Solutions Advancing Careers in Retail initiative, which really kick-started our work and helped us to understand the importance of focusing on retail and food services and industries that aren't typically known for their quality jobs, but we really wanted to be able to lift up and counter this narrative that in order to be successful in business that it has to be at the expense of your workers and that you have to squeeze labor costs as much as possible. We were seeing wonderful businesses in our community, like Well Crafted and Connie's that were doing just the opposite. They were finding success by really investing in their workers, and we wanted to be able to partner with them, particularly partnering with small and locally owned businesses to be able to learn from their experiences and lift up their expertise to be able to expand practices that are going to increase job quality, create more equitable and inclusive workplaces for people regardless of race and gender identity, and put every Baltimorean on the pathway to a meaningful family sustaining career.

So by working with small businesses we really wanted to be able to lift up these messages and encourage more and more businesses to be able to follow in the footsteps of great companies like Connie's and Well Crafted.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:16:14)

So when you all set out to do this work together, no one could have anticipated the moment that we are living in now. I want to spend a minute talking about that. Shawn and Laura, I'm going to turn to you for this. I'd really like to understand how the pandemic and the widespread call for racial justice have impacted your businesses. What's it been like to be a small business owner during this time and what steps are you taking to support your employees? Laura, maybe I'll turn to you first for this one.

Laura Wagner (00:16:44)

Just a small question. But yeah, so I would say March, roughly before any mandates came in place we made a joint decision with Union that we needed to close the Tap Room or any direct service of food or beverage. So we switched to a purely carry-out model, which was not something we regularly did at all, but switched to purely dockside pickup. We also made it a dockside pickup for the entire collective, so folks could get anything that any of the collective businesses sold via one site. So we also engaged our local farm community so people could sell their farm goods through our site as well. So, that was kind of our model starting in mid March. Kind of May, June was the realization this was going to last much longer than we thought it was going to. Also to step back, at that point we had reduced our team by about a third. So we were down about 30% of our team. PPP was ending and we realized that this was going to be a long haul, so we started to think about three different priorities.

The first and foremost was at that point they were starting to say, and they still say that 15% of restaurants will survive the pandemic. So our number one priority had to be that we had to be the 15% that stayed in business because that meant A, we had a business, and B, we had work for our team. So, that was really the top priority. The second thing was how to support our team through this moment. The pandemic has lots of levels of stressors, and our team was not excluded from that. There was also this really intense call for racial justice in a city that wants to be on the forefront of that call, and so how to support our team in the context of the world we are living in. Then the third was how can we just emerge better from this? There is no going back to a normal, so how can we just emerge stronger?

So the reality is we've been focused on the number one priority, which is generating revenue to stay open. So to do that we opened the Beer Garden in July, reservation only, very limited capacity. We used to do a ton of catering, and private events, weddings, which are not a thing in 2020. So we had to pivot to do what we call neighborhood truck stops. So we ask neighborhoods to host our truck and gather their neighborhoods in theory to have about 100 guaranteed pre-ordered pizza sales within a neighborhood, so that has been really great.

We're going to be back to a winter farmer's market, which we haven't done in two years. The idea has really been this fall to generate as much revenue as we can so that we can sustain ourselves through the winter and ideally keep the entire team we have left employed and reduce as few hours as possible.

To the second point of how to support our team during that, we've been trying to just be as transparent and honest as we can about what we can promise, what we can't. I think one of the big things was committing. Whatever hours we gave you, we committed to you got those hours because we know that everyone was in a financial precarious situation. We did a lot of just checking in one-on-one, seeing how people are feeling, where their pulse was during any given moment, and I think just also being

flexible and realizing that no one is operating at 100% still, right? Everyone is still in a little bit of a challenging spot, so kind of allowing for forgiveness of ourselves and of our team.

We had to get creative at a lot of problem-solving. One thing is we didn't have money to solve problems, right? We're going for a break even at best, and so transportation was a challenge for our team. Most of them previously took public transit and they didn't feel safe doing that, so they were transitioning to bikes. The best solution was to hop in our car and we would drive them because it's just COVID is illuminating a lot of the inequities that just exist in our city.

We tried to do lunch trades for a while. So we would trade team meals with other restaurants just to spice it up. So instead of doing a team meal where we bought a team meal we would go to a neighbor restaurant and say, "We'll give you pizza if you give us whatever you got." So that was a way to just kind of boost morale and it was an exciting thing.

The third of how we emerge better has unfortunately again put on the back burner right now. If we can make it to the imaginary deadline of April 1st, when the sun will shine again and people will do outdoor things with our entire team, with minimal to no hours reductions that's going to be a huge win for us. So that's kind of where our focus is with knowing that the other things that we want to do and need to do aren't going away, but they're a little bit back burner.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:23:01)

Yeah. Shawn, let me ask you to sort of talk through your experience during this time. What was it like running Connie's through this pandemic time for you? What has it been like?

Shawn Parker (00:23:18)

Certainly. So looking back now it's not as bad as it was when we were actually in the moment. When things first happened, and I'll never forget because we closed all of our locations on my birthday. So March 17th I was planning to spend a birthday like I do every other year, and we're getting calls from the management teams of the markets that we're in, because we're in three different markets currently, advising us that we need to actually close.

So looking back now I'm a lot more calmer than I was back then. I mean, at that moment we were frantic. Khari and I, my business partner, we just went into react mode. We closed all of our locations, we were giving supplies to our team members and telling them to clean up and cook as much food and you want, and whatever else we don't cook, take it home to your friends and family, because we had no idea when we would return. Luckily, a couple of days after that we were able to work with the management team in our Broadway Market location down here in Fells Point to reopen in more of a carry-out, drive by, you will capacity.

So what we did was each individual vendor that's inside of Broadway Market had their own door. Luckily we have these lovely French patio doors that were installed when the building was renovated. So each vendor here took a door and that was our quasi restaurant, that was our takeout window. The entire Broadway Market turned into a back of the kitchen, where everyone was running around, doing their thing, but to the customers, the customers had no idea that we were in the back doing all that. They just received the finished product.

So we closed two of the three locations and this worked out of Broadway Market. We were open initially 12 hours a day, from 9:00 to 9:00. We gave our team members the opportunity to work double shifts to limit some of their interactions by taking the bus to and from work. We also had to drop some of them

off. Those that weren't comfortable taking the bus or public transportation we would actually take them home after their shifts.

Luckily, kind of how what Laura mentioned, we were awarded some PPP funds, which helped bridge a little bit of the gap in terms of funding, but a lot of things in terms of what we did for our team members, a lot of things we were already doing prior to COVID. So we were always wearing gloves throughout the day, hats and hairnets and things like that. We did do a giveaway, a mask giveaway. So we have our branded masks that we gave to all our team members, but we also realized that in order to protect our team members we also had to protect the public. So we did a mask giveaway to anyone in the area that needed one to come down free, without any purchase of our food, could have a free mask.

I think that's the bulk of what we did. Like I said, right now it's a lot easier, a lot more calmer than it was back then, but at the moment it was pretty hectic.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:26:12)

I'd love to hear you talk about one more thing, which is how you've communicated with your workers during this time, because I know you've been really thoughtful about that.

Shawn Parker (00:26:20)

Definitely. So for us, communication is extremely important. All the team members have my phone number. They call any time of the day. We have an internal messaging system that we use. So if there's any questions, if I can't get to it immediately, the other team members on the team will respond. So we have that.

Additionally we're also working on an app, an internal app that our company is working on, which will help manage some of the tasks that we have. It can also be used for communication as well. So between the app that we are working on as well as the apps that we've been using since shortly after we started, the team members are able to get in contact with us.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:27:00)

Allie, I want to turn it back to you. I know we have a lot of workforce professionals in our audience today, and I know they're interested in learning how you go about building relationships with small businesses. So what advice would you have for them about how to do this, particularly in the current pandemic environment? What steps do you take to build these relationships with Well Crafted and with Connie's?

Allie Busching (00:27:23)

Sure. So I think that sometimes there's this fear among workforce development providers about really broaching issues of inequality with our employer partners, because of course we want to be able to maintain those good relationships and ensure that we can help our clients seek future opportunities with them. But what I really found inspiring about working with small businesses is how receptive so many business owners like Laura and Shawn are to these messages around job quality, and how much they really care about the communities that they're operating in and the workers that are a part of their team.

So I was introduced to Laura and Well Crafted after they had just received a Kiva loan to grow their business. What I heard from all of the co-owners reiterated over and over is that as we see our business grow, we want to make sure that all of the members of our team who have been instrumental in building that are going to be able to share in our success. With Connie's I was really impressed by their focus on creating good local jobs for youth in their community and then really partnering with them to explore what are your passions, what are your careers goals, and how can we support you to take the steps that you need to get there.

So these companies are both a great example of small businesses that already were fully in this mindset of investing in their workers and just maybe needed some more, didn't always have the time, or tools, or resources to be able to take the steps that they wanted to be able to. So they came to us to just gain a little bit more concrete support for that.

I think that that's a really critical role that workforce development can play, in really being able to comment and partner with small businesses and bring in expertise to be able to create the structures and systems of support that are going to of course serve the needs of workers but also be able to create a more engaged, productive, and skilled workplace that are going to help small businesses succeed over the long term as well.

So I think in approaching these conversations with small business owners it's really important to keep the needs and interests of workers at the heart of what you're doing, but not to forget to show that you also care about the success of the business as well. So we really try to approach all of these conversations by first really listening and trying to appreciate as much about the entire context that the business is operating within, and then really try to tap into the goals that a business has articulated for themselves to be able to connect specific job quality strategies and employee investment ideas to how they can be compatible with those goals, and even help leadership to take a little bit off their plate to be able to advance them. I think it's really important as well, and through efforts like PCV it's been really valuable and the Pacific Community Ventures toolkit and advising partnership. It's been really valuable to be able to bring in other kinds of business development experts. Folks that can provide access to capital, or legal services, or procurement opportunities. Not just to provide a little extra incentive for small businesses, but also to be able to position job quality within this more holistic plan for long-term business development.

I think one more thing I want to add really quickly is that especially during the pandemic small businesses are under so much more increased pressure, and have all of this stress to do more on even tighter budgets. So even the most motivated small business owners are not going to be able to make all the changes that they'd like to see happen overnight. So it's important in approaching these relationships to come at it with a lot of patience, and creativity, and flexibility, to make it as easy as possible for business owners to start taking the steps that they'd like to around their employee investment goals, but really focus on building those long-term relationships so that business owners know that they can trust you and come back to you for support when they're able and have the capacity to make those deeper investments.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:31:49)

That's really helpful. Shawn and Laura, I'm curious if there's anything either of you would like to add about how and why you started working with Allie and with Civic Works and why it's helpful for a small business to partner with a workforce organization.

Shawn Parker (00:32:07)

Yeah, so I guess I'll get started on that one. So actually another community organization referred us to Allie. We wanted to make sure that we had a pipeline program for our team members. We interact with a lot of business owners across the city, and we realized that they had needs just as well as we do. 90% of our team members don't want to be in food service, however it's a low barrier to entry, which is why a lot of folks come. So we wanted to create kind of a win-win situation with our team members and give them opportunities with other business owners that need workers. So we wanted to help people get skills and then within six to 12 months, depending on their performance, they can at least get an interview elsewhere, one of the other businesses that we connect with. So that's how we ultimately end up connecting with Allie, through the interest that she offered us the opportunity.

The initial reason we were interested with working with Allie is that we're constantly pushing our team members and we wanted to give them better opportunities. We had I think one manager prior to working with Allie, and we since then have promoted two other team members to become managers as well.

Laura Wagner (00:33:11)

I think similarly to Shawn, when you become an entrepreneur you are a default manager, right? As an owner you become a default manager, whether you planned or not. So I think one of the initial things that drew us to Civic Works and Allie was this idea of management training, that we knew we were doing okay but that we could do better. So that was one of the things, not only for us, but for the leadership within our team. Also, Allie helped us to do an employee engagement survey, which was really valuable in the sense that for it to be done by a third-party, right? So we knew a couple things. One, that if we created and administered a survey it would not be the most accurate or representative of how our team actually felt, and also that we would nitpick over all the little things. So Allie was able to not only help us to conduct the survey but to kind of help us summarize the results, and then we were able to work with our business mentors on how to address things that were challenging or how to continue to do things that we were doing well.

I think the other really valuable thing was to have business mentors from outside our immediate circle. So you tend to create this business leaders community circle, but they tend to be people just like you who are doing the same things. So to have people have an outside perspective on your business was really valuable and they were really helping us to think about how to think of business growth not in terms of revenue but in terms of how we can pathway our team along that growth in a way that they can grow with us. I just think it's really ... I can't speak enough to, it's intriguing to think about that when we started this process about employee engagement and wanting to retain employees, it was an employee market, right? It was at this time in which everyone wanted, it was very hard to hire because it was an employee's market, and so job quality was important for business, right? Because I was competing with every other business. Now, as we continue to go into an economic recession, and it very potentially will become an employer's market, I just feel like working with businesses to continue to promote job quality is going to be even more important because it's still good business and it's still good ethics to maintain that job quality, even if you in theory have the upper hand in the hiring.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:36:11)

I'm really glad you both raised sort of how you're thinking about pipelines and pathways because this theme came up in a number of questions that were raised by registrants before the webinar. This question around sort of how you think about upscaling and advancement when you have a small team as a small business, and I think you've both been very deliberate in how you think about this and creative, and appreciate how you're both thinking about that.

Laura, you took us where I was hoping to go next, which is about how and why to prioritize job quality at these uncertain times. So Shawn, I want to start with you on this question. What do you see as the business benefits of investing in your workers? How does supporting your workforce contribute to business survival in this challenging moment?

Shawn Parker (00:37:07)

Thanks Jenny. I know it sounds so cliché, but literally the team members are the backbone of our business. When we first started myself, my business partner, and our mom were the three individuals that worked day in and day out. We realized shortly after starting that we could not do this alone. There's no way we could have multiple locations with just three people because I can't work the front and the back. So the reason why we focus so much on our team members and the reason why we've been pushing them so much is because we realized that most team members, the reason why they don't do good is not because they're not capable, it's because they don't have hope. It sucks to say, but it's the truth. It's not intelligence or schooling, it's that they feel like they're not good enough. The folks that we get, we realize that they're good regardless of where they came from. They're doing amazing, they're amazing folks, but it's hard for them to see that in themselves. Everyone certainly has value.

So when we hire someone, the first thing we do is we ask them what are they interested in. We tell them, "If money wasn't involved, what would you want to do?" Because nine times out of 10 it's not food service. So our team is very passionate about miscellaneous things. We have folks that want to be hairstylists, we have folks that want to be engineers, we have folks who want to be doctors, and in this present moment they are working at food service, but we realize that they can be a lot greater if they choose to.

So after the COVID shutdown most of our team members actually came back, and it was primarily because of the support that we gave them, both before and during COVID. The majority of our team members truly want to be here, even though some of them had the opportunity to get on unemployment and things like that, or maybe their families were supporting them. Most of our team members truly, truly wanted to be here, and that's based on the environment that we created prior to COVID. Even for our Delaware team members, those that were out of work for over six months, we were constantly talking to them once every two weeks or so, having chats with them, offering them any support that they could within reason.

So I would definitely say that's the bulk of the reason why, Jenny, that we feel as though our workers are really important.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:39:22)

How about for you, Laura? What do you see as the business benefits in investing in your workers, especially right now?

Laura Wagner (00:39:28)

Yeah. I think right now it's even more true. So right now we have seven team members outside of the four owners. Six of them have been with us for over two years, and they have been working day and out since COVID for sure, and we are at peak performance right now. So the part of the razor-thin margins is that everyone has to bring their A game every day. We're at peak efficiency in order to make it work. So to lose any of them at this time would be so detrimental because they are the most well trained, the most experienced that we have.

So from a business perspective, the concept of hiring and training a new person, and getting them from zero to 60 in a short period of time feels very daunting but also just not only a lot of work but a lot of time and money that we would have to spend. So right now it's just the most essential time to maintain our employees.

Also, I think one of the things too in terms of incentivizing safety is that they feel invested in our business, right? So safety is just as much about your behavior at work as your behavior outside of work. So much of that is them understanding how essential we are to the team, right? So we all have to keep up our utmost safety to keep our business open and we all know that we depend on each other for that. So I think that has been a really essential thing as well.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:41:21)

Allie, why do you think it's important for workforce organizations to focus on job quality right now, even as they may be struggling to connect unemployed people to work?

Allie Busching (00:41:31)

Yeah. So obviously workforce developers are in a really difficult position right now because we're trying to balance the financial needs of the job seekers that we're working with who are facing widespread unemployment and displacement, but also balancing that with grappling with these new risks and threats to health and safety, and just overall wellbeing. But I think that not only our responsibility to advocate for our clients, but maybe it's more important than ever to be continuing to lift up these conversations around job quality. I think particularly as workforce development providers we're in this really unique position to be sort of a liaison between businesses and workers and be able to sort of communicate and lift up the needs of both.

So one of the things that I found really helpful in working with our small business partners has been to really be able to sort of expand and talk a little bit differently about what job quality can look like. So of course things like wages and benefits are really important, and we don't want to forget about those, but particularly for small businesses, like Laura mentioned, that have to be operating on these really tight budgets and have all of these new constraints. The start of an employee investment strategy can look like giving workers more power in decisions that are being made about the business operations or the health and safety policies that are being put in place, or even in how those tight financials are being spent through things like open book management. Or it could be adapting scheduling, like Shawn mentioned, to create more flexibility to allow workers to meet new caregiving responsibilities or address new transportation challenges.

For those businesses who are doing well right now or do have more means to be able to invest in their workers, your people are going to remember how they were treated during this time of crisis and how you responded. So those employers who really double down on their workforce investments are going to see long-term gains in increased loyalty among workers, and retention, and productivity. So I think that overall COVID-19 has really shown a spotlight on how all of our systems are failing frontline workers, from rising inequality, and the wealth gap, to continued and perpetuated disparities and discrimination against people of color in the workplace, and the inability of many workers to access affordable and reliable mental and physical healthcare. But at the same time we see more and more people across the country who are really paying attention to the experiences of essential frontline workers in industries like food services and retail.

So we have this choice where we can either sort of continue allowing this really challenging economic time to further erode the working conditions of frontline workers and allow more and more businesses to go under, particularly small businesses, or we can use this as a catalyst and really recommit ourselves

and push our local leaders to reinvest in the types of policy solutions and systems of support that are going to meet the needs of frontline workers and small businesses and to be able to reshape our systems in ways that create more broad-based prosperity for all.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:45:14)

That is such a powerful point. One of the questions that's come in from a few different audience members I think really connects nicely to that. It's about what they can do to support small businesses during this time, either as customers or as advocates for stronger public sector support. So I want to start with you Laura and ask what supports do small businesses need to survive and thrive right now?

Laura Wagner (00:45:45)

Yeah. I mean, I think winter is looking a little daunting for a lot of your local food businesses who have depended on outdoor spaces as a main source of revenue. So I would challenge customers and just people in general to think about where they vote with their dollars and to know that where you shop now is what's going to emerge. So just to be really conscious about if and how you spend your dollars and do so in a way that are the businesses that you want to be there after the pandemic. Then also maybe take some time to think about do you know how their tip structure works, do they know how the pay structure works, do they know the job quality of those businesses. So to really kind of take some time to think about that, and similarly kind of going along tipping and the votes that consumers can make is to think about it's very challenging in a tip industry to eliminate tips because people are so accustomed to the prices plus tips, right? So just to be a conscious consumer and thinking about how prices may vary because of tips or no tips, and that that really directly affects the workers and therefore the economy, right? Your neighbors, so just to be aware of that.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:47:32)

Shawn, anything you want to add to that?

Shawn Parker (00:47:38)

No, everything Laura said was amazing. It's very relevant to what we do here at Connie's. Kind of how Laura mentioned, the tip structures, our team members they're all paid a fair wage, but tips are something that they really, really look forward to. I feel like some folks don't emphasize as much in the carry-out capacity as opposed to sit-down, dine-in restaurants. So tips are major for us. Also support in terms of technology. I'll be very transparent here, I was talking to a couple of my team members the other day, and I didn't realize how many of them are utilizing their phones to type papers or to do the miscellaneous activities that we ask them to do here at work. Going back to the fact that yes, we are a restaurant and we are operating in the food space, but we also consider ourselves to be somewhat of a startup, so everyone here does everything. So our cook is also helping with street team, our cashier is also helping with marketing. So one of the biggest areas of support that I would actually say that our business needs right now could use is more technology for our team members, so iPads, laptops, things like that. That's one thing that we're really pushing to get all of our team members right now.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:48:51)

Allie, I want to toss you the sort of policy piece of this question, which is around how people in the webinar can advocate for stronger public sector support? Do you have thoughts about that?

Allie Busching (00:49:04)

Yeah. So first of all, I do want to do a little bit of a shameless plug, that kind of building on Laura's point and Shawn, that if you want to get out and support small businesses this holiday season, we live in the Baltimore region. We've developed a new mobile app. So if you're not comfortable going in and asking, "How much do you pay your workers?" Or, "What are your tipping policies?" You can find this list of businesses that have been vetted as sharing these values. So you can use whatever App Store you use, Good Business Works Baltimore, so that's a really easy place to start. But I think in terms of policy solutions there's a lot happening at the national level, but also with the local levels. I think you want to not forget about what your city and your state can do to create investments in local businesses. What I've been hearing from a lot of businesses is that there's this idea that there's all of this money that everyone is getting, but it's important to remember that a lot of these big federal programs have still been inaccessible to a lot of small businesses, that funding gets used up really quickly.

So it's important to be contacting your local legislators and kind of tracking what's going on at the federal level, and contacting those folks as well to support additional funding through programs like the Paycheck Protection act that's going to help both workers and businesses. Baltimore has developed a lot of really creative policies and programs at the city level to advocate for support for small businesses as well. So I think it's continuing to look at multiple levels and finding ways that we're not forgetting to continue to invest in small businesses during the pandemic.

I saw another question, I hope it's all right for me to jump into that. But someone asked about the \$15 minimum wage, which I'm sure is a very contentious issue at this time, but I just want to say yes, I think that that's a very important policy to pass. That the value of the minimum wage has really eroded over time and is not sufficient to meet an individual or a family's need, but at the same time we also need to be investing in supports for small businesses to be able to meet that. So it can be challenging, especially right now to maintain and raise wages on a really limited budget. So we need investments from our local governments and our federal government to be able to make that accessible and sustainable for small businesses as well.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:51:49)

We're getting many terrific questions coming through, so we'll try to get to as many of these as we can. I'm going to start with a couple of questions for our two business owners. Are there strategies you're using to retain workers during the pandemic, and when you've had to downsize, have you thought about layoffs, versus furloughing, versus reducing staff hours?

Laura Wagner (00:52:16)

Yeah. So when we first knew we were going to be reducing hours and reducing team size it very much so went into one-on-one conversations with each team member in terms of what was the best option for them, because what we could do was to lay out the options and make sure they had all the information of what was unemployment going to look like at that time, what would a furlough mean, what would a layoff mean, what would hour reduction mean, and just really help to give them as much information as possible. None of them were great choices, right? None of them were you get to do exactly what you've been doing for the past year. But that people could then make some choices based on what they needed for their lives. Luckily that worked out well for us and the numbers fell into place in terms of how we could balance our team, but we were grateful that that was what we were able to do, is to have honest conversations with our team about the options.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:53:31)

Anything you want to add to that, Shawn?

Shawn Parker (00:53:33)

I was going to say yes, similar to Laura. We were just very transparent with our team members, similar to what we are at all times with our business. We just kind of let them know what we were faced with, which was a little difficult because we were kind of playing it by ear in a lot of ways, but we still have to keep the confidence up to them and let them know that we are here for them and that we are taking control of this situation. So our Delaware location was tough because it's a little over a hour away from Baltimore, but our two Baltimore locations we gave all of the team members the opportunity to come to work. So we didn't start with any layoffs. It was more so once we ... Well, actually I need to step back for a second. Once we reopened the Broadway Market location we welcomed all the team members in Baltimore to come to work. Some of them realized that they weren't comfortable working throughout these times. Some of them used this as a opportunity to go on and do other things. Surprisingly enough, we actually hired more people in the midst of COVID because the demand grew and the team members that we had, the workload was so much to where they were working way too many hours and they needed some time to relax.

So for us we certainly spoke to them when it all first happened, gave them the opportunity to come back to work for as little as many hours as they needed to, and in the midst of all that we ended up hiring more folks.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:54:56)

Great. Allie, I'm going to turn to you and ask, how can other workforce organizations get started implementing these types of job quality strategies and reaching receptive businesses? What's the first step?

Allie Busching (00:55:13)

Well, it's a good question. I think something that has been really valuable to us is being able to connect with other workforce development providers. So through forums like the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, community of practice, and local communities of practice like the ones that are led by Associated Black Charities around racial equity and inclusion. It's really important to kind of share that expertise and kind of learn what other folks are doing and be able to kind of take a coordinate strategy, because if you have only one workforce organization talking about job quality, then it's easy to say, "Okay, well we just won't work with that one, or they're the difficult one." But I think really incorporating this into your hiring strategy and being able to learn how to approach this and kind of speak the language of business in some ways.

I think that this can be sometimes a really tense conversation, particularly for small businesses who are really trying hard, but it feels like it's all or nothing, like I'm good or I'm bad. But being able to kind of really come in, and work with the business, and understand what that business needs and be able to use the experience that you have and the expertise that you have from training and building skills among workers, and that insight that you have into what workers need and what is going to be valuable to them to feel supported in the workplace can be really useful to businesses. If you approach it in a way that is helping them to solve problems that are coming up or work towards the goals that they already have and incorporating that as sort of like a long-term partnership perspective, I think that it can be really valuable.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:57:05)

A question for the businesses about training. As you've been pivoting, how are you training workers to learn new skills, particularly given your limited resources? Shawn, do you want to start?

Shawn Parker (00:57:22)

Yeah. I actually was just sitting here thinking about that one. A couple of things. So our business model in general is very straightforward, unlike many other businesses where there's two and three week training. We've simplified our business in such a way that you can literally take someone off the street and within a hour or two we train them to work at our organization. So I would say we kind of put the work in on the front end, so that as we bring new folks in they're easily trained. Also, with the team members that we've promoted from within and we made them managers, they're kind of doubling down on the training. So they're working alongside with our new team members to reinforce any training that they teach them.

Laura Wagner (00:58:06)

So I would say there's two things. One, we started doing a lot of more peer-to-peer trainings. So we're trying to minimize having a large group, right? So it would be that so for an example, one new thing that we started was having a sourdough pizza dough instead of using yeast. So what it would be is that I would train this person, they would check it off, and then they would train the next person, so that it was minimizing the number of people having to interact, but it was getting everyone the training, but also really empowering for our team, and a better way to learn is to have to teach someone else. So that was really successful.

The other thing I would say is for example Good Business Works offered up a management training. As good business owners, we really wanted to be able to pay our team if they wanted to attend, but we also knew we didn't have just eight hours of money just to pay them. So what we actually did was say if you take the training, one of the owners will take one of your shifts. You will get paid for the shift. Like the training was a Monday, Tuesday, we're closed Monday Tuesday, so if you have a shift on Saturday I'll take it, you'll get paid for it, and that was our creative way to be like, "We want you to get paid, but just the cash flow is tight." So it's just been a lot of creativity to see how we can make it happen.

Jenny Weissbourd (00:59:47)

So another question we've gotten a few versions of is, what's been the biggest barrier for both of you to implementing job quality strategies, and do you have advice to other small businesses about how they could move beyond these kinds of barriers? And Allie, you may have thoughts about this too, having worked with a number of businesses that are trying to make job quality improvements in terms of sort of trends you've seen in barriers.

Laura Wagner (01:00:26)

I would say, and I think some of it is also getting out of our own ways. Allie said if you have this traditional idea of benefits that you want to offer your employees. Yeah, so health insurance is a huge one. We have tried to think about it multiple different ways of how can we get health insurance and it's still just more cost effective for them to get it on the Exchange at this point. So that's been a huge barrier for us. So yeah, so some of it is just being like, "Okay, that's not something that's an immediate thing we can do, but we will keep it on the list and we can keep working towards it." Just because it's a huge thing in our world. So I think that has been I think one of our greatest challenges so far.

Shawn Parker (01:01:19)

I would say for us one thing we've done, we've tried to find different ways to incentivize our team members while also accomplishing the goals. So more recently we noted we needed a marketing video for our company. So we employed our team members to make a video. It had to include our location, our social media handles, any information that they wanted included about themselves, the hours, the menu, different things like that, and we made it like a competition. So there's first, second, and third place. They're using the resources that they already have here in terms of their cellphones, the signage that's already here. So basically we're taking our business needs and we're kind of attaching fun ways, almost like games or structure that we could do so that they benefit as well as us benefiting, and it also connects them a little bit more to the business.

Jenny Weissbourd (01:02:15)

Allie, anything you want to add?

Allie Busching (01:02:20)

I think just Laura and Shawn make really good points, but I think some of the barriers that I've seen come up are both sort of a lot to do with the way that our systems and structures are designed. So there is some of this mindset piece, but I think that it's also sort of the way that we've shaped some of these industries, particularly restaurants that rely on tipping, and that's just sort of a natural thing that consumers come to expect. That I think as Laura sort of talked about, that if you're eliminating that and raising prices, is that going to detract customers or is that going to be ... So there need to be sort of these intermediary steps and support from in educating the public about what that looks like and in being able to support businesses to transition to these job quality models. I think something that's come up a lot in Baltimore is just how fickle the cost of rent and development can be, as neighborhoods are sort of rapidly changing. In some cases it can be really hard for small business owners to stay afloat amidst that.

So I think a barrier sort of at the city level can be really being able to balance and budget for all of your costs over time if you don't own your space, or if you're in, like Laura or Shawn, this collective space that may kind of change over time.

So I think that those are two really important, and then of course there's always individual barriers that you're seeing come up for small businesses, but I think something that both Laura and Shawn mentioned was this barrier of transportation. So if people can't even get to your place of work safely or in a timely way, there's data that shows that the average commute for Baltimore City workers is about 90 minutes. So that's a pretty big burden for someone who is working in a frontline service industry position, and we have still really widespread neighborhood segregation. So of course that burden is falling disproportionately on low income, black and brown communities. So I think being able to create a more affordable and equitable transportation system is really key in being able to not only help workers get their foot in the door in a job, but be able to advance into higher level positions and advance in their careers as well.

Jenny Weissbourd (01:05:02)

Yeah, that's a critical point. We've seen a few versions of a question around sort of what can employers do given that they're really resource constrained right now. So what do you see, Laura and Shawn, as two to three job quality priorities small businesses with limited resources could realistically begin to implement right now?

Laura Wagner (01:05:38)

So simple low resource or no resource things, I guess. Is consistent clear scheduling and hours. I think that this service industry in general is known for inconsistent unguaranteed hours, so I think that that's something that we've been pretty committed to throughout the pandemic, is this idea that there's a lot of unknown. So we'll create as many knowns as possible. So I think that has been one thing that our team has really appreciated. Then I think two is just maintaining those relationships and friendships. I think that our team is closer than we've ever been, right? So the ironic thing or the interesting thing I keep thinking about is that in this world you didn't necessarily get to pick the circle, your pod, right? So our kitchen family, that's our pod. That's who we interact with, so making that the best pod it could possibly be, right? Would our team necessarily pick me to be the person, the one of eight people that they get to interact with? Maybe not, but just trying to make that the most positive space because that's the reality that we're in. So if they're not going to get to see their family, or maybe their best friend, or the people that they really want to see, just making that pod be great. So I guess those would be my top two things that I can think of off the top of my head.

Shawn Parker (01:07:14)

Yeah, and I would say similar to Laura, flexible schedule. So we have a no questions asked leave policy. I issue the schedule once a week, and as long as our team members request time off or update their availability prior to the schedule going out, they generally get the exact schedule that they want. If they want to take off for a couple of days or a week, if they only want to work the evening shift. Luckily we found a way that we're able to pretty much accommodate all of those requests.

Also, I would say communication. That's one thing that all of my team members know, and I call them team members because we're a team, we're not necessarily owner versus employee. One thing that all of my team members know is they can come to me and talk to me about anything, and I also talk to them about everything. So I started to add more value into some of our communications. So more recently I really honed in on things like I'm buying a house, I'm investing in stocks. I mean, not going too deep into it right now, but the stock market went down back in March, but even though that was uncertain times, that was when I was pushing on my team members to say, "Hey, invest your money, invest your money. You can't go anywhere right now anyway, everything is shut down, so as you're getting paid invest your money. Here's how you go about doing that, here's the potential benefits, here are some of the results of doing that." So for us, I would say flexible schedules and also kind of giving them more than just the typical we're talking about chicken and waffles today. We're going to talk about everything outside of that. So we're using some of the down time that we have, because we do have quite a bit some days, to actually talk about some of the things outside of the normal day-to-day work.

Jenny Weissbourd (01:08:58)

Allie, I have a question here for you. How many businesses does Civic Works engage in this way and what's the scale? What's the universe of businesses like this in the region that could potentially be engaged?

Allie Busching (01:09:11)

So I think that the universe is probably unlimited. Our goal is really to be making this sort of employee investment strategy and this focus on connecting good jobs with business success just a norm of doing business in Baltimore. But right now we have about 30 businesses across the three sectors that we work in who are recognized in the Good Business Works directory and that's growing all the time. So if you have

a business you want to recommend, give us a shout. But we probably have about double or triple that that we've touched in some way. With small business owners we don't necessarily have a monthly meeting that everyone can get together and attend at the same time. So we're doing all kinds of different programming in order to be able to reach businesses sort of both one-on-one, working on individualized goals, bringing businesses together to share expertise with one another through our peer network, and also as Laura mentioned through some of the special trainings that we'll offer around leadership, or employee engagement, or other kind of special topics that come up as we're meeting with business owners.

So right now we're really trying to lift up these stories and provide some examples of how businesses can get started on this pathway. This is a challenging time to be starting to think about job quality, but I think it's also a really important time and a lot of people are paying attention to that, as I mentioned earlier. So we just want to be able to partner with as many businesses as possible to help them kind of think through what that can look like in their own business.

In addition to retail and restaurant, Civic Works has been working for a long time in green construction industry. We have some really deep partnerships with companies in solar installation and weatherization, and other suite of home improvement industries. There's a whole unique approach to looking at job quality in those sectors as well.

Jenny Weissbourd (01:11:28)

Shawn, I'm going to ask you one quick question then hand it to Tom to ask a closing question before we wind down. But we've had a lot of interest in the pipeline program that you described. So wondering if you can say another word about that, but in particular somebody says, "I love Shawn's model of positioning workers to move into other jobs in other businesses, however six to 12 months sounds like a very short time for employees to turn over, especially if the business is investing a lot in its employees. So the question is, do you believe the investment in job quality yields a sufficient return on investment given the short tenure among the workers?"

Shawn Parker (01:12:06)

Certainly, Jenny. Khari and I have talked a lot about this in terms of the time. Being very realistic I would say in the restaurant industry, at least in what we've seen, three months is a win. We have some folks that are coming in and after a month they have so many other things going in their lives, whether it's transportation coming to work, or family structure, sometimes it's hard just getting a month out of some of our team members, a solid month. So for us, to go six to 12 months, we feel as though it should be rewarded, and it's not to say that they will move on, but at least to start gearing them up in being prepared to move on to the next opportunity. Sometimes just having that interview, whether they get it or not, just having the interview kind of shows them that there are other opportunities out here outside of just what Shawn is telling them every day, the things that they could do. So six to 12 months it does sound a little short in most industries where folks, workers are there for maybe two to five years, but I feel as though in the restaurant industry six to 12 months is long-term.

So what the pipeline project is, is that we have individuals that come to us. Most of them do not want to be in the restaurant industry. So let's say it's someone that wants to own a spa or a nail salon. They work with us, and a lot of the skills they learn here are transferrable. So working with the cash register, doing the marketing, doing the payroll, all those types of things are transferrable to other types of businesses. What we're hoping is that while they're here they do an excellent job with us and that we'll train them and that we'll recommend them to go elsewhere, whether it's connecting them with organizations like Civic Works or small business lending programs throughout the city, or even leasing reps, folks that we've met when we were looking for spaces for us to expand to. So we're hoping that by them coming here,

staying here, doing a great job they'll build the confidence and they'll also make the connections to go elsewhere. Rather than them just leaving and going to another food job, which most of them would do if there is no incentive for them, they'll leave and actually go on and do something that they truly want to do and actually follow their passion.

Tom Strong (01:14:21)

So this has been an amazing conversation. I've been listening really quietly but intently on it, and I really appreciate everything that y'all, Allie, and Laura, and Shawn have had to say. I'm going to ask one closing question, which of course is a big one, but I'll ask you to answer in just 30 seconds, since we're almost out of time. We focused this entire conversation on what's happening in the pandemic, but if you think beyond that kind of magical date of April 1st in the spring, maybe things are coming back to normal. Laura and Shawn, I'd be really curious to know what is your vision for what your workforce could look like in the future and what you would love to see in terms of your workforce, not even just spring but maybe five years from now?

Shawn Parker (01:15:06)

So if you want, I can actually start off on that one. So we've taken a moment and we've kind of slowed down some of our expansion, but ultimately we want to have a Connie's in every major city throughout the US. We want to have what we consider a affordable franchise. So we're hoping that the team members that are currently with us or future team members will be the ones that we actually franchise out to. So what we're hoping is that in the coming months and years as we expand, we will take our current team members and either make them managers or ultimately make them franchise owners of the locations that we expand to prior to going to outside folks. We're also hoping that the team members we have here, fingers crossed we can get laptops or iPads for all of our team members so that they can either further education if they're not interested in staying in this world, or they can continue to assist Connie's and the work that we do.

Tom Strong (01:16:04)

Love that. Thank you, Shawn.

Laura Wagner (01:16:08)

So I'd say one thing that we were starting to dip our toes into a little bit before, but now it's on pause but we would love to get back to is kind of just like alternative pay structure and profit share models, employee ownership. What do those different models look like? How can we make them a reality for our business? Then the second thing is really to work on our diversity and racial equity. Of our seven team members, three are people of color, four are not. So in order to reflect the demographics of Baltimore our next nine hires would need to be people of color, and we are very far from hiring nine people, but that would be the goal, is that we can really not only expand through hiring but also expand our leadership to be more diverse and reflective of the city of Baltimore, for sure.

Tom Strong (01:17:02)

Awesome. Thank you so much, Laura.

Jenny Weissbourd (01:17:04)

Thank you again to Tom and the National Fund team for your incredible partnership in this work, to Gayatri, Allie, Shawn and Laura for joining us today. This was such a great discussion, and it really underscored why it's so important that we all do our part to support small businesses and their workers to weather this pandemic, so thank you.

Tom Strong (01:17:25)

Thank you to Aspen for hosting this panel. It's been fabulous to be a part of, and I'm really excited to see how this work moves forward.

Jenny Weissbourd (01:17:33)

Appreciate my Aspen Institute colleagues for their support organizing, and thanks to all of you in the audience for joining us and sharing your questions and comments. Please take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey, which will pop up momentarily. Thanks again to all of you, really appreciate this conversation.

Shawn Parker (01:17:48)

Sure. Thanks everyone.