



**ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITIES
PROGRAM**
THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Practice of Improving Job Quality

Views from the Field

Maureen Conway, The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program
with
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About the Economic Opportunities Program

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. For more information, visit aspeninstitute.org/eop.

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Abstract

As unemployment rises and the low quality of many “essential” jobs becomes more and more apparent amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it has never been more urgent to ensure that work truly works for everyone. This paper is based on a survey of organizations about their efforts to improve job quality, which was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. It is also informed by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program’s longstanding work to illuminate the implementation of economic opportunity strategies in communities across the United States and to support effective practice.

Many organizations across the US — more than two in three of those responding to our survey —work on a wide variety of elements of job quality within their own organizations, and one in four work to improve the quality of jobs beyond those in their organizations. Respondents noted that gaps in data availability or accessibility, staff capacity,

funding, stakeholder buy-in, public policy, and employer engagement presented challenges to their efforts to improve job quality, both within their organizations and in their communities. They are eager for more tools and resources to support their efforts. Information about effective practice and increased financial support for job quality work could encourage organizations at every level to make improving job quality a priority in their work.

Understanding the perspectives on job quality of a diverse set of organizations that are concerned about economic opportunity, and the barriers and opportunities that they see to improving the quality of jobs for a variety of different types of workers, provides insights into how local efforts can contribute to the important national goal of improving the lives and livelihoods of working people and building an economy that works for all.

The Precarious State of Work and Workers in America

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the world of work like no other event in most of our lifetimes. Tens of millions of Americans are out of work. Business owners large and small are navigating the threat or reality of closure. Many workers are now expected to work from home, but they may be doing so while caring for children who are expected to learn from home or managing other adjustments and disruptions as their home becomes their workplace. Others deemed “essential” continue to report to workplaces, adapting to new procedures and very real concerns and uncertainties about their health and safety at work. The upheaval to lives and livelihoods has been sudden, unprecedented, and overwhelming.

Even while US GDP was robust, stock markets were soaring, and labor markets were tight in the weeks and months before the virus emerged, our economy was far from healthy. Too many Americans worked a full-time job and still didn't earn enough to pay the rent or the grocery bill. Too many went to work sick because they weren't allowed paid time off to recover and couldn't afford to miss a paycheck. Too many didn't have a work schedule reliable enough to plan for child care or enroll in higher education or training. Too many were stuck in low-wage jobs with nothing left over for savings because they were not given opportunities to advance. And now, these Americans — the line cooks and restaurant

wait staff, hospitality workers, Uber drivers, and more — are the ones most likely to be on the unemployment lines.

Adding acute crisis to age-old injury, too many of the workers in these low-wage, limited-benefits, unstable jobs are Black, indigenous, and Latinx. At every level of educational attainment, Black Americans have historically seen higher unemployment rates and lower earnings compared with White Americans — showing that inequality in access to an excellent education does not fully explain the disparities. These income gaps have long-lasting implications for workers of color and their families. According to recent research by the Cleveland Fed, low-wage work is a significant driver of the racial wealth gap.¹

There's a risk that a post-pandemic recovery will not fully restore lost jobs, or that those jobs will be no better than, and perhaps even worse than, the ones we lost. In the wake of the Great Recession, retrenching businesses cut so-called “middle skill” jobs, stepped up outsourcing, replaced workers with cost-saving technology, and increased education requirements for the jobs that remained — relegating millions to lower-wage jobs with little if any pathway out.² Even as the fortunes of upper-middle-class, college-educated, often white workers and families rebounded, many others were left

¹ Dionissi Aliprantis and Daniel Carroll, *What Is Behind the Persistence of the Racial Wealth Gap?* (Cleveland, OH: Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, February 28, 2019), <https://www.clevelandfed.org/newsroom-and-events/publications/economic-commentary/2019-economic-commentaries/ec-201903-what-is-behind-the-persistence-of-the-racial-wealth-gap.aspx>.

² Annie Lowrey, “The Great Recession Is Still with Us,” *The Atlantic*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/great-recession-still-with-us/547268/>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2010/09/in-defense-of-outsourcing-in-the-recession/63039/>.

behind with no room to recover if another crisis hit. And now it has.

Unfortunately, the coronavirus arrived as our country was finally beginning to reckon with what to do about the crippling economic inequality that has emerged over the past four decades. The role of work, as the center of most Americans' daily lives and livelihoods, is central to that challenge.

This Survey and COVID-19

We gathered this data at the very height of the economy, in the final months before the COVID-19 pandemic when the labor market was largely seen as tightening and conversations about quality jobs and stakeholder capitalism were capturing ever-greater attention.

The economic realities have changed profoundly since then. The changes have likely had a strong influence on the operations and priorities of many of those responding to this survey — but the need for quality jobs has only grown.

Understanding the perspectives on job quality of actors in a variety of fields, ranging from business and economic development to worker organizing and advocacy, and the difficulty of and barriers to achieving quality jobs for all American workers, can give us important insights into how to advance work that improves job quality now and into the future.

Understanding Practices That Can Improve Job Quality

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) works with leaders engaged in a range of strategies to help people to access work, get better jobs, pursue opportunities for entrepreneurship and business ownership, and build livelihoods that allow individuals, families, and communities to thrive. We collaborate on a range of initiatives that seek to break down barriers that have kept women and communities of color from accessing quality economic opportunities.

Why We're Focused on Job Quality

In recent years, EOP has renewed its focus on job quality. The reasoning is simple. In the wake of the Great Recession, low-wage work grew and inequality widened. At the same time, the research of Raj Chetty³ and others revealed that economic mobility in America had declined. The American ideal that if you work hard you can support yourself and your family, and maybe help your children succeed, was not matching the American reality. Too many hardworking people had to rely on means-tested programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or Free and Reduced Priced School Meals to help their families afford the basics. Millions of others found they earned too much to qualify for any help but too little to make ends meet. The Working Poor Families project⁴ has been documenting the

challenges of low earnings from work for children and families since the early 2000s, and more recently the United Way has been documenting the growth in households with low earnings, which they refer to with the acronym "ALICE" for "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed."

The challenge of job quality intersects powerfully with the challenges of racial and gender equity. Women and people of color are disproportionately employed in poor-quality jobs, so the costs of low-quality employment disproportionately fall on women, children, and communities of color. Improving job quality is an important avenue to reducing racial and gender inequality and inequities.

Intentional Practice Focused on Job Quality Can Make a Difference

Our substantial body of work on [sectoral workforce development](#)⁵ strategies identified two key approaches to helping people connect to better employment: removing barriers to good jobs for low-income people and improving the quality of jobs in key sectors in which many low-income people work. More recently, in highlighting [Raise the Floor and Build](#)

³ See for example Raj Chetty et al., "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940," NBER Working Paper Series, December 2016. https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/abs_mobility_paper.pdf

⁴ See <http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/> for information.

⁵ Maureen Conway et al., *Sectoral Strategies for Low-Income Workers: Lessons from the Field* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, October 1, 2007), <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/sectoral-strategies-low-income-workers-lessons-field/>.

[Ladders](#)⁶ strategies, we have noted the ways in which these strategies are complementary, since the economic instability experienced by individuals employed in low-quality jobs is itself a barrier to pursuing the economic mobility afforded by higher-quality employment opportunities. Our [Gainful Jobs](#)⁷ work also has applied this framework to investigate the quality of jobs supported by microenterprise development organizations in the US. We have also examined the role of business technical assistance and economic development strategies in [encouraging quality jobs](#),⁸ and how business strategy and operational choices can improve job quality while supporting [strong business performance](#).

While much of EOP's work on job quality has centered on the role of workforce development or business development organizations, these organizations are part of a larger set of actors that influence labor markets and labor market outcomes. Recent work has explored the efforts of and connections among a diverse set of actors that can influence job quality. Through the Aspen Institute Job Quality Fellowship, EOP has intentionally collaborated with a range of innovators from across the country who focus on making jobs better for workers, including business leaders and advisers, investors, labor leaders, worker advocates, workforce development leaders, community development lenders, educators and policymakers.

This group of innovators demonstrated specific practices organizations can use to influence job quality. To expand on this understanding of job quality practices, earlier this year we surveyed representatives from the many organizations we have partnered with over the years that are concerned about access to economic opportunity, to better understand how they think about job quality in the context of their work — including the tools, resources, and perspectives they draw on in doing so. The results of that research show that there is powerful momentum for work to improve job quality — and yet still much more we must learn and do.

When the pandemic hit and the labor market cratered, many questioned whether now is the time to focus on job quality goals and practices. But the immediate and dramatic increase in food insecurity among the newly unemployed, the challenges of workplace safety in a time of pandemic, the crisis of racial justice, and the moral questions raised by the meager wages and dangerous working conditions of essential workers all underscore the need to improve job quality. The country cannot solve inequality, advance racial justice, or address the deep divisions in US society without making work work for everyone — which means that **now, more than ever, is the moment for everyone to strive for more quality jobs.**

⁶ Maureen Conway and Steven L. Dawson, *Raise the Floor and Build Ladders* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 2016), <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/raise-the-floor-and-build-ladders-workforce-strategies-supporting-mobility-and-stability/>.

⁷ "Microbusiness, Gainful Jobs," Aspen Institute, accessed December 4, 2020,

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/business-ownership-initiative/microbusiness-gainful-jobs/>.

⁸ Ranita Jane et al., *Genesis at Work: Evaluating the Effects of Manufacturing Extension on Business Success and Job Quality* (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 2019), <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/genesis-at-work-evaluating-the-effects-of-manufacturing-extension-on-business-success-and-job-quality/>.

About This Survey

This survey, conducted in January-February 2020 by the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program, was designed primarily to gather information about the tools and resources organizations use — and need — to support job quality practices. The survey was made possible with generous support from Prudential Financial and drew on Ford Foundation support for EOP's work. Responses informed the development of EOP's [Job Quality Tools Library](#),⁹ launched in May 2020, which offers tools, resources, and guidance to help leaders adopt practices to strengthen job quality in their own organizations, in the businesses they partner with, and across labor markets.

The survey also yielded insights into respondents' perspectives on job quality: whether it was a current area of focus in their work, discrete elements of job quality

on which organizations focus, and barriers or constraints they experience in addressing job quality. This paper explores these insights, to help understand the state of the field and to inform further research into the views and dynamics that shape job quality work.

Survey responses indicate widespread interest in and commitment to working toward quality jobs, with many organizations describing ambitious, forward-looking steps both to encourage other organizations to improve job quality and to strengthen job quality for their own employees. At the same time, respondents also reported that meaningful obstacles to action remain, from insufficient funding to the complexity of navigating challenging conversations with employers and other stakeholders.

⁹ "Job Quality Tools Library," Aspen Institute, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/longform/job-quality-tools-library/>.

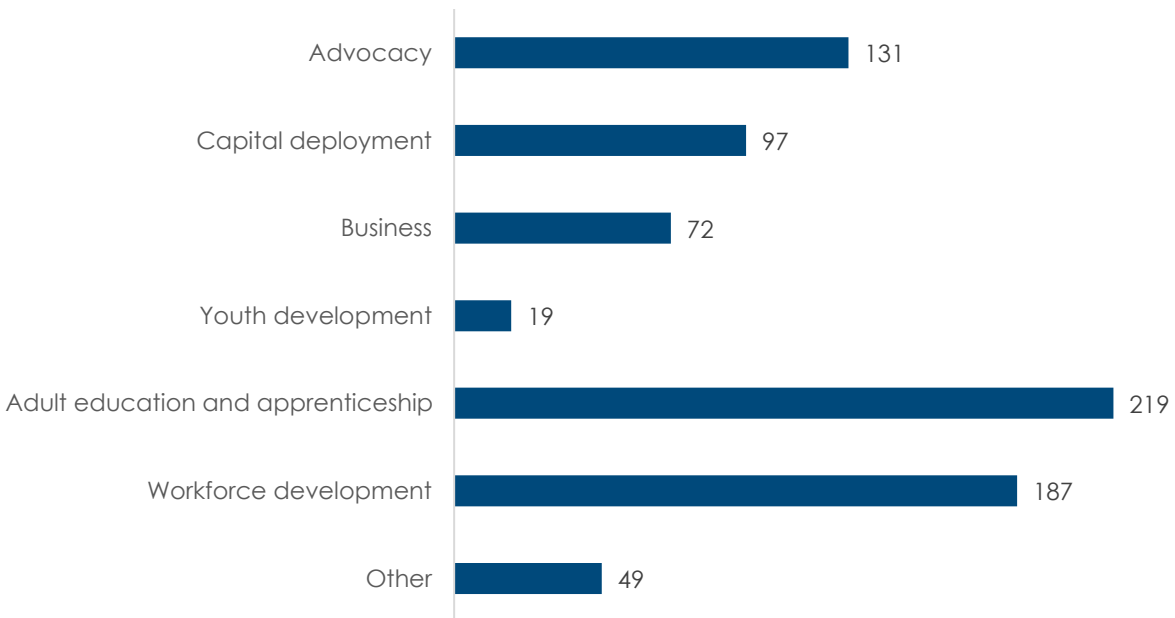
About the Respondents

More than 300 respondents from community economic development agencies, workforce development organizations, community development finance institutions, advocacy organizations, labor unions, social and cooperative enterprise organizations, and other organizations nationwide participated in the survey (see Figure 1).

Respondents are based across the country, with greater representation from the South and Middle Atlantic, Pacific, and East North Central regions (see Figure 2). We received responses from 41 states and the District of Columbia.

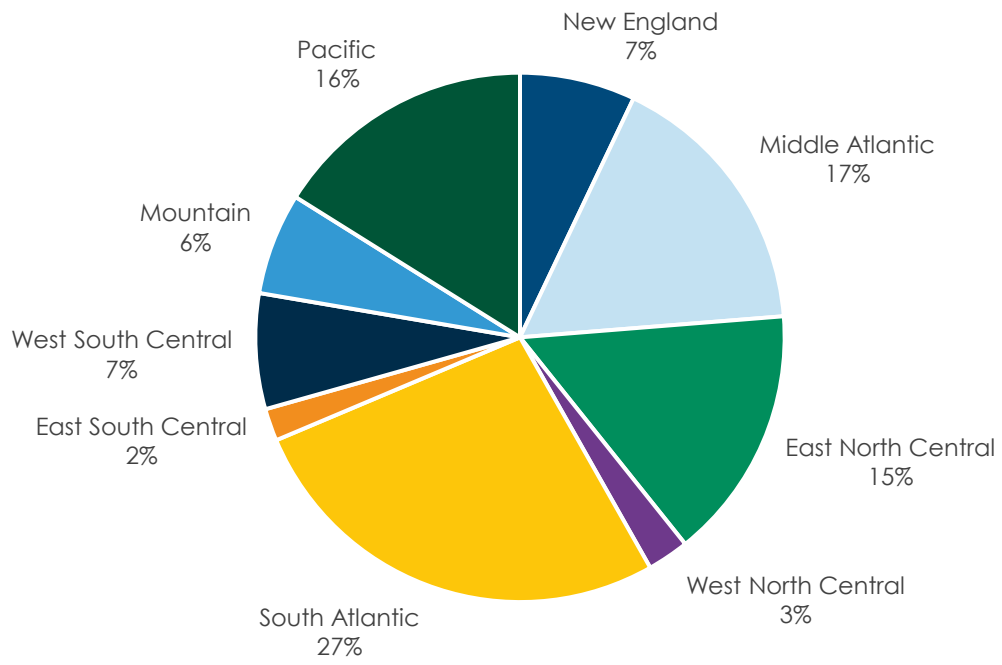
Respondents serve a wide range of populations, commonly including low- to moderate-income workers, youth and young adults, people of color, women, older workers, job seekers, and immigrants and/or refugees (see Figure 3). Respondents also serve workers across multiple industries, predominantly the hospitality, health care, and manufacturing sectors (see Figure 4).

Figure 1: Fields of Practice Represented Among Respondents



Note: Aggregated from subcategories. Respondents could choose more than one subcategory.

Figure 2: Respondents' Location by Region



Job quality encompasses a range of attributes that drive worker experiences, including wages, benefits, scheduling, legal rights, equity and inclusion, opportunity to build skills and advance, a supportive work environment, and worker voice. EOP's [Job Quality Fellows](#)¹⁰ [described](#)¹¹ job quality in this way:

“A quality job means one’s work is valued and respected and meaningfully contributes to the goals of the organization. It encompasses having a voice in one’s workplace and the opportunity to shape one’s work life, as well as having accessible opportunities to learn and grow. Quality work affords an individual the opportunity to save, to build the security and confidence that allows one to plan for the future, and to participate in the life of and see oneself as a valued member of a community.”

The goal of job quality work is not to move a worker out of a “bad job” and into a “good job.” Rather, it aims to improve the quality of the worker’s current job. Job quality work often requires a shift in mindset, from one that views jobs as a product of immutable market forces to one that recognizes that the nature and conditions of work are shaped by a variety of human decisions and actors, from business leaders to consumers to policymakers to workers

themselves. Viewing job quality as a product of human choices allows for envisioning the outcomes of different choices — and striving toward those better outcomes.

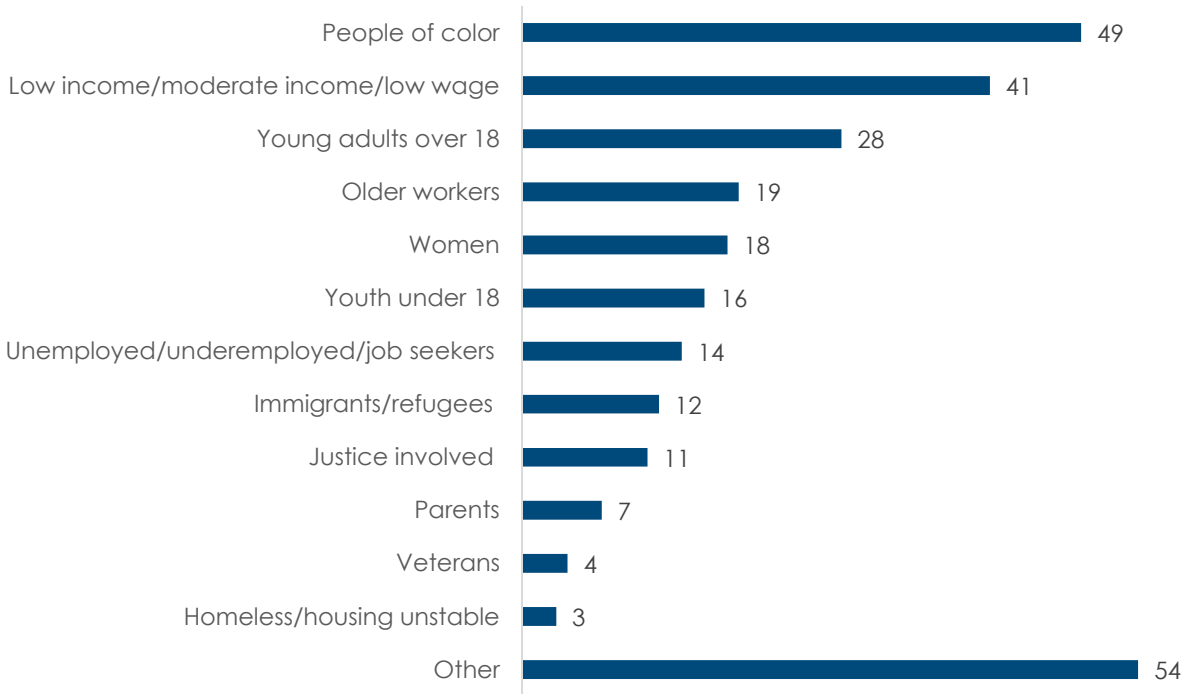
Job quality comprises many aspects of an employment situation, and thus it is difficult to neatly divide jobs into “good” and “bad” categories. In addition, different workers may have different life situations and financial needs and thus may make different assessments regarding the quality of a particular employment situation. Organizations may estimate their ability to address job quality differently depending on what element of job quality they prioritize, or they may prioritize different elements of job quality based on the needs of the constituencies they work with.

We intentionally did not include a strict definition of job quality in the survey as we hoped organizations would respond to the survey based on their own views, capacities, and priorities. Instead, we asked respondents to describe “how you think about job quality now as it relates to your work.” Respondent comments indicate significant variation in the definition of job quality organizations are using today — and in the extent to which they are working on or feel able to work on improving job quality. Below we share more about these findings.

¹⁰ “Job Quality Fellowship,” Aspen Institute, December 4, 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/economic-opportunities-program/job-quality-fellowship/>.

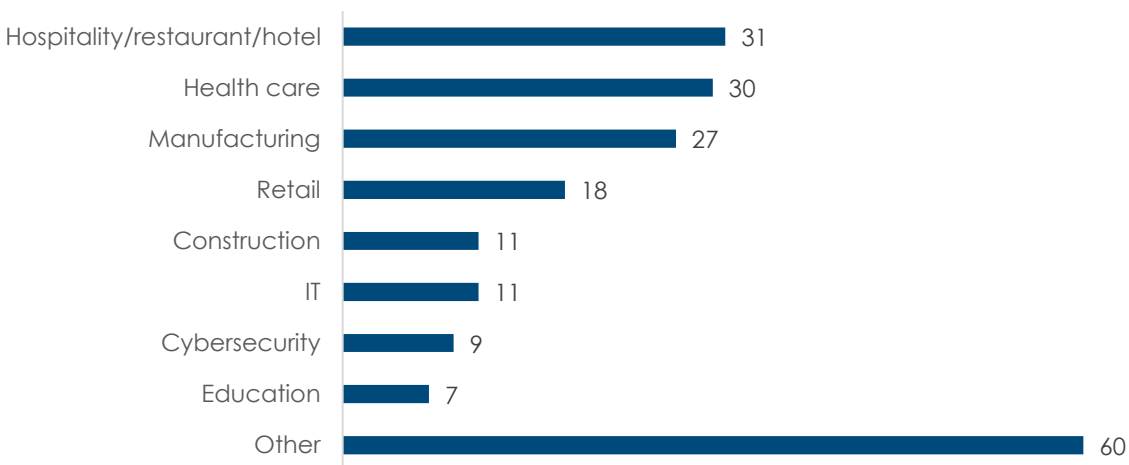
¹¹ Job Quality Fellows, Class of 2017-18, “Job Quality: A Statement of Purpose,” *Aspen Institute*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/job-quality-statement-of-purpose/>.

Figure 3: Populations Served by Respondents



Note: Chart shows the number of respondents coded as serving each population. Some respondents may serve more than one population. "Other" includes respondents serving the disability community, small businesses, LGBTQ community, contract workers, indigenous people, labor union members, and other populations.

Figure 4: Industries/Sectors Served by Respondents



Note: Chart shows the number of respondents coded as serving each industry/sector. Some respondents may serve more than one industry/sector. "Other" includes respondents serving the customer service, financial services, agriculture, transportation, call center, child care, and several other industries.

Our Findings

Key Findings

Many respondents are working on aspects of job quality, though respondents more commonly reported that they are working to improve job quality within their own organizations rather than working to influence the quality of jobs offered by companies or other organizations in their communities

Respondents across a variety of organizations reported using several different job quality tools and resources (many of which are now cataloged in EOP's [Job Quality Tools Library](#)), though pluralities of respondents — often majorities — indicated that additional tools are needed. Many respondents reported using published tools or resources in combination with “homegrown” tools designed by themselves or their organizations.

Job quality work was constrained by gaps in data, capacity, funding, stakeholder buy-in, public policy, and employer engagement even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasing dedicated funding for job quality work could help unlock existing staff capacity and encourage organizations at every level to make it a priority.

Over Two in Three Respondents Reported Their Organizations Are Taking Action to Improve Job Quality for Their Own Employees

There is clear momentum for action to improve job quality internally, with 68% of survey respondents reporting that their organization was currently taking steps in support of job quality for its own employees (see Figure 5). Respondents described a variety of approaches to internal job quality efforts, including strengthening wages and benefits; creating wage transparency; increasing advancement and career pathing; providing flexible schedules; conducting employee surveys; forming employee resource groups or other employee engagement activities; providing training/professional development; improving management practices; strengthening organizational culture, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices; and working with unions.

Organizations of all kinds reported putting in place multifaceted strategies to improve job quality for current and future employees:

- “We have looked at compensation already — and there is more work to be done to drive equity. We are also planning a learning journey to potentially change some things around our general compensation philosophy — taking a long, hard look at the outcomes of considering costs of living versus costs of labor. That has hurt us on lower-paying jobs — particularly in markets with high costs of living and high levels of immigration.” — a respondent from a government agency

- "We are focused on (a) building on-the-job, paid training opportunities for our employees and (b) deploying a network of career advisors/navigators to help employees connect to vital social services as well as to identify, plan, and progress toward professional growth." — a respondent from a nonprofit education and training and social service organization
- "We are in a second round of a staff engagement survey. Responses to the first one, three years ago, spurred changes related to career pathways, professional development, and authorship/attribution. We also have an inclusion and diversity committee that is taking a number of steps to both increase diversity within the organization and ensure that organizational culture is welcoming to all." — a respondent from a research organization
- "Access to information and choosing whom the company works with are part of job quality. For example, we operate our company with open books and profit-sharing. Also, each partner can veto a client or work they believe would

be counter to our mission." — a respondent from an economic development consultancy

- "My organization recently implemented published salary ranges. We are also beginning equity training." — a respondent from a workforce development organization
- "Since creating a position for Learning & Engagement Cultivator, we have created a manager training series, an orientation series for new workers, a hiring toolkit, and a Learning Map (that shows all the training opportunities, who might benefit, and describes them or lists learning goals)." — a respondent from a social enterprise

Organizations across the country are experimenting, learning, and strengthening their approaches to job quality for their own employees. These organizations can also be powerful forces for change in advocating for quality jobs in other organizations: among their clients, peers, communities, and others within their spheres of influence. Such externally focused work, however, is not nearly as widespread.

Despite Internal Progress, Action to Influence Job Quality in Other Organizations Remains Limited

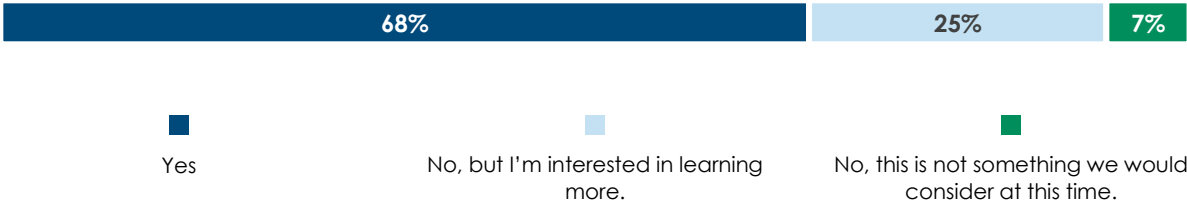
As Figure 5 depicts, the vast majority (93%) of respondents indicated that they were at least interested in learning more about job quality externally — a very good indicator of the growing momentum behind job quality. Yet only one in four (25%) reported that their organization had “an articulated view on job quality and a strategy to use our resources to improve job quality” in their work with *other* organizations.

While a disproportionately higher percentage of organizations identifying as “advocacy,” “worker advocacy,” “worker voice and engagement,” and/or “labor

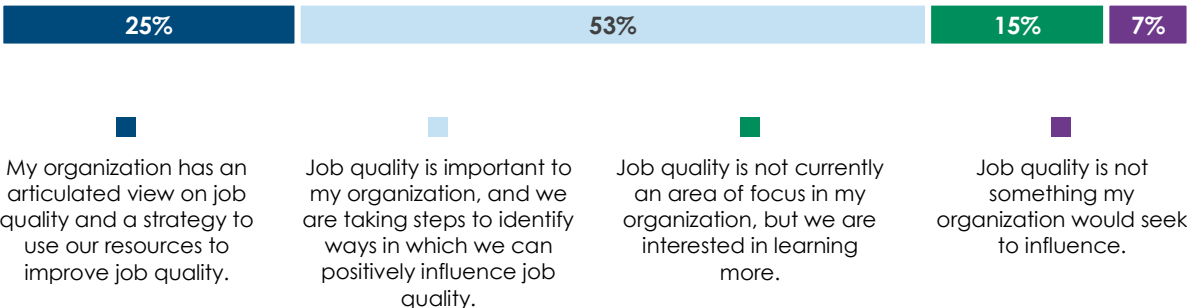
organizing” reported concerted efforts to improve job quality in other organizations, encouragingly, respondents from organizations of all kinds were engaged in this work — from small businesses to investors to policymakers to workforce development organizations. Also encouragingly, an additional 53% of all organizations responded, “Job quality is important to my organization, and we are taking steps to identify ways in which we can positively influence job quality” in partnering with other organizations — suggesting pent-up energy for efforts to influence job quality externally.

Figure 5: Proportion of Respondents Engaged in Job Quality Work

Are you or others in your organization taking steps to address the quality of jobs for your organization's employees?



Which of these best describes how you think about job quality now as relates to your work with other organizations or companies?



Respondents' characterizations of job quality varied widely, with some citing several different attributes and others focusing on only one or two, often wages alone or wages and benefits. Respondents who identified their organization as having an articulated view and strategy on job quality in their external work were more likely to comment that job quality covers a wide range of elements, and that they are expanding their view on the aspects of work that influence the quality of a job. For example, one respondent whose

organization has "an articulated view" of job quality wrote that "the focus on job quality has mostly been on wages, benefits, and proximity to home, but we are now expanding that to include things like career advancement opportunities and risk for automation." In contrast, those whose organizations are interested in job quality but have not yet taken active steps were more likely to report only one or two elements of a job as relevant to assessing job quality.

Many Report Work on Elements of Job Quality, But No Overall External Job Quality Strategy

Respondents were asked whether they currently seek to influence specific components (see Figure 2) of job quality in their work with other organizations. As Figure 6 shows, at least 39% of respondents reported working on each aspect of job quality mentioned — suggesting that even respondents who did not report having an articulated view and strategy to work on job quality are nonetheless engaged in job quality work.

The only attributes currently being addressed by a majority (>50%) of respondents are skill-building and DEI. The prominence of skill-building likely reflects the large proportion of organizations that are primarily engaged in workforce development and related efforts. When asked what areas they are not working on now but would if they had appropriate resources and capacity, respondents most often mentioned policies/practices to support equity and inclusion and benefits provision (both 36%).

Figure 6: Elements of Job Quality Respondents Are Working or Would Work to Influence



Job Quality and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

We are mindful that job quality powerfully intersects with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion — a vitally important issue at work and in society overall, and an issue that has received heightened attention in the wake of late spring protests in the US surrounding the killing of George Floyd. Of all the populations respondents reported that they served, people of color was the most frequently cited group (see Figure 3). Notably, these responses were gathered in the first quarter of 2020. The response would likely be even more pronounced now, given the heightened recognition that many “essential” yet low-quality jobs are performed by people of color — and the increased level of awareness that systemic racism has restricted opportunities for people of color in the US for generations.

One respondent characterized their organization's “articulated view” on job quality as “to honor lived experience and treat people with dignity and respect. Do not have people [adopt] dominant characteristics to be successful in the workplace.” Another wrote, “We have heard from individuals who have had to ‘tone themselves down’ at work.” Still another wrote, “Job quality must have an explicit race equity lens. Often job quality is interchanged for race equity — it feels like an easier pitch to employers. And on one hand, it can be a strategy for getting in the door — if not done with an explicit race equity lens then we are not improving job quality equitably and people of color will continue to not reap the benefits of improved work conditions.”

A diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace is essential to job quality. Job quality work should contribute to addressing important equity issues such as racial and gender pay gaps, occupational segregation, inequitable opportunities for advancement, and factors that do or do not contribute to a supportive work environment or avenues for worker voice. This survey's results showed significant interest among respondents in tools and resources to support diversity, equity, and inclusion at work and an expectation that equity issues are essential to job quality.

Respondents occasionally used different terms to describe similar workplace improvement objectives. One notable distinction that surfaced in this survey was the choice of terms between “job quality” and “organizational culture.” One respondent who stated that their organization is neither seeking to influence job quality externally nor considering it internally wrote: “We don't specifically address ‘Job Quality.’ We vigorously address organizational culture. ... [Our] focus is on talent attraction, retention, and development and on the techniques, policies, and best practices that foster an

attractive working environment. Many of the statements listed above are elements inclusive of a comprehensive effort to create a quality work environment ... that attracts, retains, and develops people.”

This description of culture is strikingly similar to descriptions of job quality. At the same time, organizational culture — itself notoriously difficult to describe — could also be seen as a distinct element of job quality and organizational operations in its own right. Building a shared understanding of terms such as these would aid efforts to work across organizations on job quality goals.

Respondents Are Using a Variety of Tools — and More Are Needed

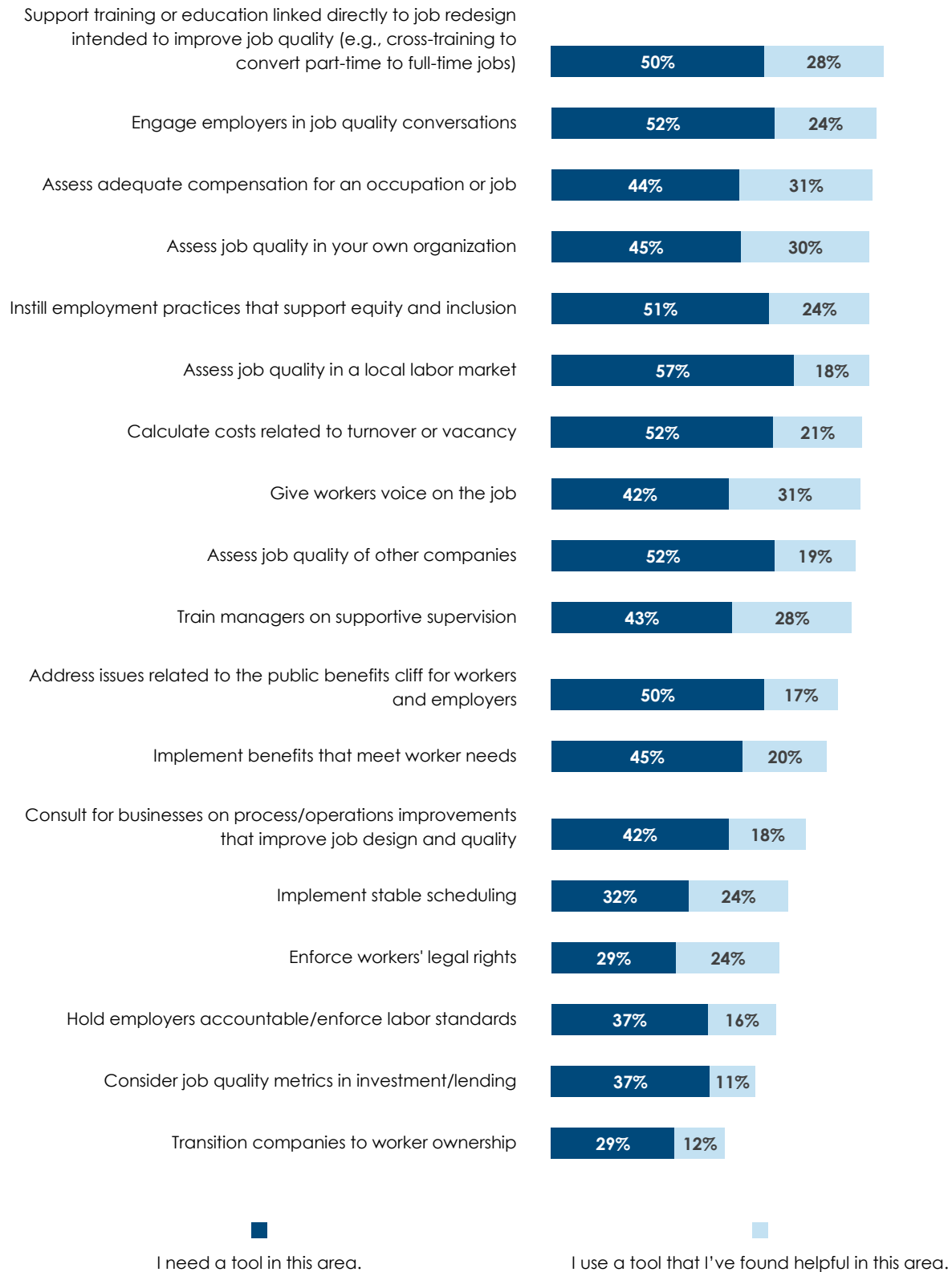
To inform the development of EOP's Job Quality Tools Library, we asked respondents to share whether they were already using, or needed, tools such as frameworks, checklists, instructions, guidelines, processes, and so on, to support their job quality work. As Figure 7 indicates, about one in five respondents is already using at least one such tool, with several citing the Institute's *Cost of Turnover Tool*, MIT's *Living Wage Calculator*, and the *Good Jobs, Good Business* toolkit released by Pacific Community Ventures. Respondents reported using a mix of external and "homegrown" tools, with many noting that they or others within their organization have developed their own employee surveys, training modules, or other resources.

The most commonly needed tools from among the list — cited by 50% or more of respondents — include resources to assess job quality in their local labor markets; assess the job quality of other companies; engage employers in job quality conversations; address diversity, equity, and inclusiveness;

calculate costs related to job turnover or vacancy; address public benefits cliffs, and use job design to improve job quality. One respondent wrote: "I have found there is little public data that an employer can use to gauge the quality of their jobs. A tool that employers can use to gauge their quality and then talk about how they compare with industry standards would be helpful in showing my clients how investing in job quality can make them more competitive and increase their profits."

A few respondents also highlighted their interest in tools to measure wealth-building among workers. One wrote: "This includes salary parity in business (e.g., highest paid to lowest paid) and profit sharing (and possibly others). In our market at least, we have a tremendous amount of economic activity and growth, but less and less of it is going to workers. For profit sharing in particular, we need a tool to quantify in terms of value (portion of company, portion of wealth accrual for workers) and to whom (senior partner, front-line staff)."

Figure 7: Tools in Use and Needed

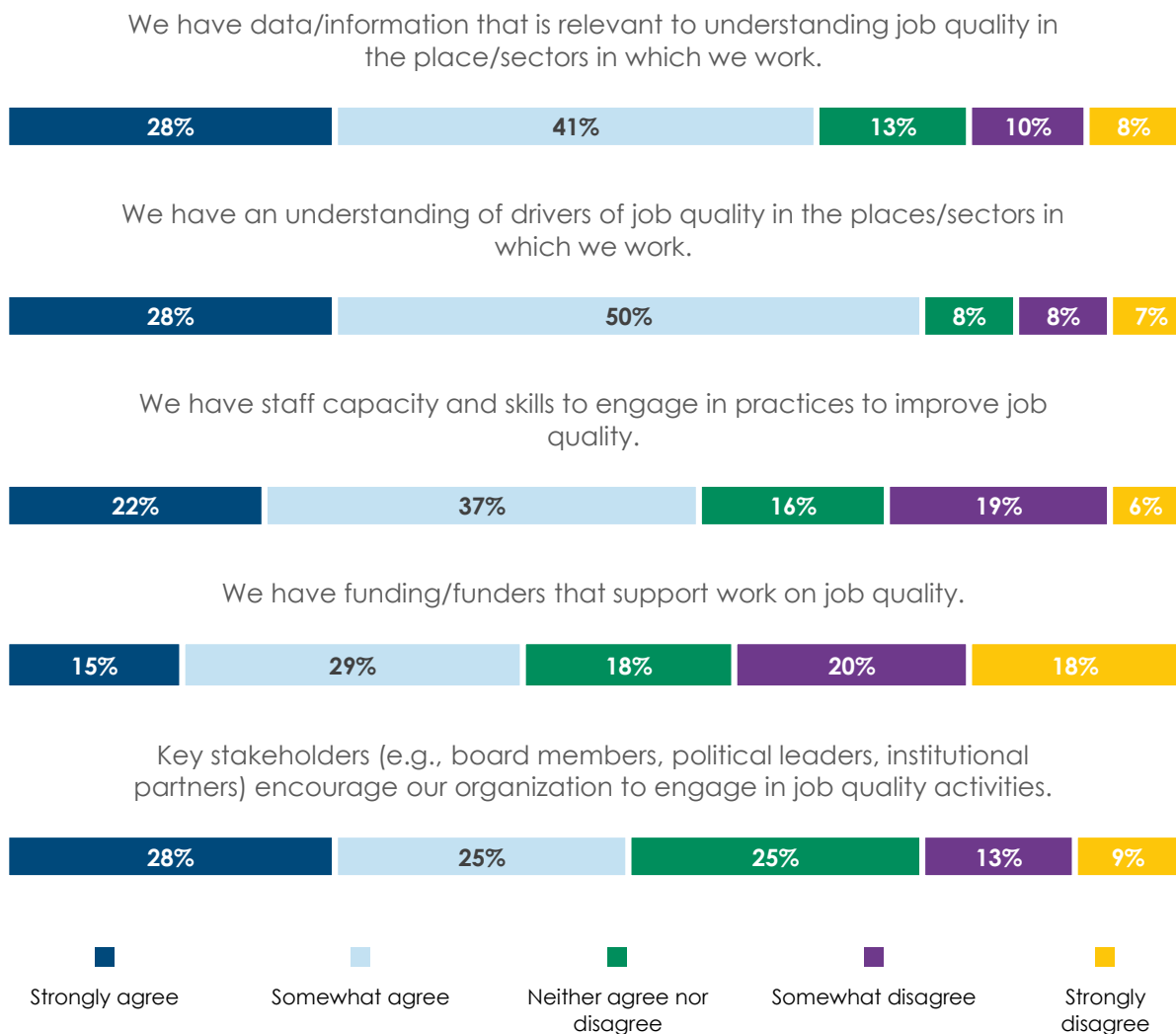


Respondents Reported Significant Challenges in Undertaking Job Quality Work

We asked respondents to report whether they agreed or disagreed that they had relevant data/information, an understanding of the drivers of job quality in the places and sectors where they worked, funding or funders supportive of job quality work, and/or the encouragement of key stakeholders to engage in job quality activities.

The responses, highlighted in Figure 8, paint a clear picture of both encouraging signs and clear structural and capacity challenges.

Figure 8: Barriers and Challenges



Data, Staff Capacity, and Current Skills

While strong majorities of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they have the understanding and information they need, the survey data points to a notable gap: Over 78% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed they have an *understanding* of the drivers of job quality, versus only 69% of respondents who strongly or somewhat agreed they have the *data* they need. Closing the data gap would likely have the added benefit of helping organizations refine their job quality strategies and better assess their capacity and funding needs. Yet this is often easier said than done — and better data collection and systems, in turn, require dedicated funding and added capacity.

Further, while over 69% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed they have the data about and understanding of drivers of job quality they need, only 59% strongly or somewhat agreed that they have the needed staff capacity and skills to work on job quality (a 10-point gap). One respondent surfaced a nuanced challenge with data collection: “A lot of nonprofits tell me they feel like it’s pretty invasive to keep asking people how much money they’re making. They’re learning how to do that by using surveys so that it can be more anonymized and people feel much more comfortable, and also by explaining to people why this is important — helping them see that telling the story of their successes is going to help their community.”

Demonstrated Commitment From Internal Leadership and External Stakeholders

Unsurprisingly, internal dynamics also influence job quality work. Many respondents highlighted the consistency — or lack thereof — between their organizations’ public-facing stance on job quality and internal policies and practices. One respondent wrote: “As we strive to engage other business leaders in understanding the importance of job quality — and what factors contribute to this — we actively work to ensure we’re supporting quality jobs and work inside our own organization through better career pathways, competitive wages, and highly supportive benefits. We understand as well that organizational culture plays a part in job quality.”

However, other respondents are not experiencing this same consistency of focus. One wrote, “We work on quality of jobs in our client communities, but we don’t focus on quality internally.” Another simply said, “We don’t practice what we preach.” One leader suggested that funders could make a powerful impact by holding their grantees accountable to higher internal standards of job quality, writing: “How might philanthropy set a job quality expectation among its grantees? How might grantees be encouraged to pay a living wage and/or demonstrate pay equity within their organizations?”

Respondents also noted that job quality efforts, as with any organizational change initiative, are significantly more effective when they have visible support and buy-in from senior executives and external stakeholders. Several comments spoke to the importance of ensuring that job quality is

clearly included among the stated priorities of an organization's leaders. One respondent wrote: "If it is new for a person to be given responsibility for leading the organization on activities meant to improve job quality, then that person needs access to an executive-level person to help guide the work and also compel others to

respond. A coordinator role cannot work successfully without the active engagement of the organization's managers." Further, just 53% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their stakeholders clearly support their job quality work. One wrote, "I wish our board pushed us more."

"We have had a hard time engaging with foundations on job quality — many are focused on race/diversity inclusion, which is so important, but we worry programs are just allowing more people of color/women/immigrant/etc. workers to get BAD jobs. There is a hesitancy in foundations to work with employers on employer practices — we have to work with employers or jobs will not get better."

Funding Gaps

Only 45% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they have funding to support job quality work, or funders committed to providing that support — a 14-point gap when compared with staff capacity, and a 24-point gap when compared with respondents' understanding and data. Increasing contributed and earned funding focused on job quality could have an immediate impact in organizations that are already staffed to do this work, and a medium-term impact in organizations with the data/knowledge but not yet the capacity, assuming funding allows for capacity-building.

In some cases, organizations' own charters and current performance requirements may limit their flexibility to seek job quality-related funding. Many respondents' organizations are likely charged primarily with helping constituents find a job, and are held accountable to those outcomes but not to outcomes related to the qualities of those jobs. One respondent wrote: "As a local workforce innovation board, we are held

accountable for outcomes such as job placement, wage, job retention, and training expenditures. Improvements in job quality in our local area are highly desirable insofar as it would benefit these outcomes. However, we don't currently have dollars devoted to achieving job quality outcomes directly." Another wrote, "Often we are simply happy that job seekers gain employment. Period."

Some funders may be focusing on individual elements of job quality without locating those initiatives within a broader framework or strategy. One respondent wrote: "We have had a hard time engaging with foundations on job quality — many are focused on race/diversity inclusion, which is so important, but we worry programs are just allowing more people of color/women/immigrant/etc. workers to get BAD jobs. There is a hesitancy in foundations to work with employers on employer practices — we have to work with employers or jobs will not get better."

Additionally, organizations whose earned revenues are connected to consulting engagements with businesses and entrepreneurs may have trouble persuading these clients to pay for advice on how to improve job quality. A respondent whose organization provides consulting and economic development services to small business owners seeking to exit their business and/or transfer ownership to employees wrote: "Promoting job quality is fundamental to our work, but few clients want to pay for it as a service. We tend to work it into other areas as part of our recommendations. For example, I have been telling manufacturers improving job quality will help address cybersecurity weaknesses that arise from careless employees — the number one cause of cyber breaches."

Building a business case that inspires employers to make up-front investments in improving job quality, especially when those investments include advice on how to make needed operational and cultural changes, remains a challenge — one underscored by the 52% of respondents who reported needing a tool to engage employers in job quality conversations.

The Business Case

The perception that quality jobs are a luxury too expensive for some businesses to afford persisted even before the economic crisis provoked by COVID-19. For some employers with limited cash and tight margins, investments in job quality could feel like spending money they don't have. One employer wrote, "We want to work on improving job quality for our employees but lack the resources to do so, or fear that certain job quality steps would cost the organization at a time when we don't have many resources."

Another respondent pointed to broader economic issues that employers may feel constrain their ability to act, writing, "Particularly in low-wage industries like retail and restaurants, we're often encountering particularly smaller and local employers who report that they can't find reliable, qualified applicants for their positions, but feel unable to adjust their pay and benefits because of tight profit margins, predatory landlords that drive up rents and refuse to make repairs, and the need to keep price points low for lower-income customers."

For other companies, the bigger hurdle seems to be demonstrating that they would receive a meaningful return on investment in quality jobs for their employees. One respondent wrote that "many businesses we serve do not see the value in quality and commensurate pay structure." Still another survey respondent wrote that "working with harder-to-serve populations (as we often do) makes job quality conversations with employers more complicated."

While these respondents did not elaborate, their comments raise questions. To what extent do employers' perceptions of the needs and constraints of their employees affect their beliefs about the job quality attributes their employees need or deserve? Especially now in light of the wave of anti-racism actions underway across the US, how are employers reflecting on implicit bias that may affect how they and their management teams perceive the needs and circumstances of workers of varied races, ethnicities, gender identity or expression, or other lines of difference?

A respondent hailing from local government succinctly captured the difficult position employers may face: "It's often too much for people to take in. If [employers] acknowledge how much the model doesn't

work, and how much their ability to be profitable relies on jobs that don't work for precisely the people who would be willing to take them — does their whole business fall apart?"

In the end, several respondents hoped employers would assume more responsibility for creating quality jobs. One commented, "It seems like the accountability needs to start with the employer for our systems to work, and right now they are seen more as the end customer [of workforce systems] and are not ultimately held accountable to having jobs that are actually workable and livable." Another wrote: "We continue to hold up a narrative about the importance of the right 'business message' and don't expect [businesses] to really change. ... We want to see change in how employers are operating and there seems to be limited appetite for taking that on."

Visionary companies are already leading with the confidence that quality jobs will, in fact, fuel business outcomes. A respondent from a co-op wrote: "It's very expensive and time-consuming to set up a business the way we have set up [our organization]. However, we look at it as an investment in our future. We don't hold grand illusions that people will stay with us forever, but we do hope that by providing a space for people to better themselves, that [our organization] will benefit, even if it isn't clear yet how."

Policy

Public policy challenges also stand in the way of improved job quality, particularly for workers' wages. One respondent cited "the overall economy; employer health care costs; insufficient reimbursement rates for health care, early education, and social service jobs; and a local marketplace that employers think won't support a living wage" as "significant impediments" to job quality, illuminating the degree to which low wages can be driven by lower levels of public funding.

Policy considerations also affect workers' ability to accept quality jobs when changes in their earning levels could dramatically affect their ability to access other needed supports, such as child care assistance, health care coverage, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, or housing.¹² Of respondents, 50% said they need a tool to help address issues related to these "public benefits cliffs" for workers and employers.

As noted above, policy also shapes the mandates of federal, state, and local agencies seeking to tackle job quality, and as such affects the availability of resources to dedicate to these efforts. When agencies' briefs are limited to measures of success such as job placement and retention, their ability to engage in a more holistic approach to job quality is necessarily limited. These constraints may stem from public perception as well as public policy. One public sector respondent wrote: "While our organization would like to do work on job quality, the business community and

¹² Brittany Birken, Erin Moriarty-Siler, and Roxane White, "Reducing the Cliff Effect to Support Working Families" (Ascend: The Aspen Institute, Washington, DC, April 23, 2018), <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/reducing-the-cliff-effect-to-support-working-families/>.

local interests associate the conversation with something that is either political or belonging to labor. We need more stakeholder buy-in, a strong business voice, and a sense of the economic imperative to move the needle.”

The policy landscape also offers interesting ideas about how the public and private sectors could collaborate with workers to create more sustainable systems, especially in labor markets and industries where workers tend to hold multiple jobs. One respondent asked: “Why couldn’t all three of [a worker’s] employers pay him the exact same wage for the same work? Why couldn’t all three employers contribute proportionally to a health care fund that exists for everybody in the industry, based upon how many hours he works for them? And why couldn’t all three employers, or all the employers [in this industry], be able to look to some sort of body as a way to

organize workforce matters? And why couldn’t that workforce body provide training and career pathway work to help enable people to move upwards in their life? That’s the sort of thing I think ought to work: Some entity at the center of the labor market that organizes the supply side and the workforce kinds of things and also sets basic standards and obligates all employers to them.”

This form of sectoral bargaining, or other multisector partnerships such as community benefits agreements, may be useful innovations to explore arrangements that are mutually beneficial to workers, employers, and the broader labor market. As another respondent wrote, “So often we have [the] private sector blaming [the] public sector or vice versa for issues (like continued poverty) and not a collaborative cross-sector approach.”

More to Learn

The more we can understand about the individual, social, and economic forces that combine to encourage or stymie job quality — especially in this uncertain moment — the greater the momentum for change. This survey points to much more that we could learn through follow-on research; internal inquiry within organizations; and local, state, and national dialogues. For example:

- **What inspires organizations to act?**

One in four survey respondents reported that their organization works to influence job quality with business clients or other organizations beyond their own. What led these organizations to begin taking these steps? Was it part of their mission or mandate, a decision by senior leadership, or a response to calls to action from their employees? Did external stakeholders or the availability of funding play a role in moving an organization to action?

- **Why are some organizations focused on improving jobs in their communities, but not within their own organization?**

Was this a conscious choice or the result of limited resources? What barriers, if any, exist to launching such work internally? What tools might these organizations need to support internal work that are distinct from those they may use in their external work?

- **How can organizations better use data and storytelling to highlight the importance of job quality for worker and community well-being?**

What information about workers' lived experiences might other

stakeholders in a local workforce system — employers and trade associations, funders, elected officials, and community-based organizations — not fully realize? What kinds of data or stories are especially compelling to different audiences, and who are the most compelling messengers? How are organizations making the case to workers that their stories can help fuel change? How could better data collection and data systems illuminate the intersectional and overlapping challenges workers may face — for instance, trade-offs between accepting a full-time job with no benefits versus a part-time job with benefits?

- **What do employers need?**

What are the main barriers to strengthening aspects of job quality that employers experience? What might they need to know — about the return on investment of such measures, about their employees' circumstances and needs, or about their local labor market — to feel comfortable taking such steps? What job quality-related services, such as consulting to help identify process improvements, supply chain efficiencies, strengthened management practices, or other operational changes, might businesses find valuable if offered by local workforce nonprofits or consultancies, and how can tools and best practices to offer such services be made more widely available?

- **What can funders and investors do?**
How are funders choosing to use — or not use — their voices and power as conveners, thought leaders, and influencers to convey that job quality is an essential aspiration for the future of work and an important focus for workforce and economic development? In what ways are funders holding their grantees

accountable to job quality standards within grantee organizations? How could additional resources be made available to support capacity-building, the development of additional tools and resources, or work on less common aspects of job quality such as flexible schedules?

More to Do

At its heart, job quality work is about advancing human dignity and well-being. A better-quality job can mean being able to read to your children in the evening rather than heading out the door for a second shift, or getting the chance to do work you love without sacrificing your health or your finances. It can mean clocking in each day without fearing for your safety, or that you could be the target of bias or discrimination. It can mean opportunities for learning, growth, and economic mobility — a pathway out of constant economic insecurity, anxiety, and stress.

A quality job can mean independence, security, and dignity. Every one of us deserves a quality job — and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it inescapably clear that too many Americans still don't have one.

The people who harvest, process, and prepare our food, who care for us when so many of us are sick, who teach our children, and who package and ship our goods are too often the very people who can't afford to feed their own families, who can't afford

to stay home from work when they themselves fall ill, who don't get enough time to spend with their own children, and who can't afford to buy what their family needs.

This is a moral crisis, but it's also an economic one. A successful economic recovery depends on robust consumer spending — but tens of millions of consumers aren't earning enough to be able to spend.

We hope you'll be inspired by the leaders whose work we celebrate here and will continue to learn, explore, and take action in pursuit of quality jobs. EOP's [Job Quality Tools Library](#), which was informed by this survey, is a helpful starting point to guide your next steps, whether you are considering ways to improve the quality of jobs for your own employees or deciding how best to advocate with others.

This is some of the most exciting and most urgent work any of us can do for our families, our communities, and our nation, and there is so much opportunity ahead as we rebuild.

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