Centering Worker Voice in Employer Engagement and Program Design

A Guide for Workforce Organizations

Beta Version

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Introduction: About This Guide

For more than 25 years, the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program has explored sector-based workforce programs through applied research and evaluation. We frequently conduct focus groups and interviews with frontline workers and managers to gather information about their experiences at work and their ideas about workforce practices that can help workers and businesses thrive.

In recent years, many workforce organization leaders have expressed interest in learning how to conduct their own worker-focused research and have asked for tools to help them build worker input into design and delivery of programs and business services. This is because both workforce providers and many business leaders recognize that workers hold unique expertise and experiences related to business operations, training needs, and process improvements that could enhance retention and business performance. In response, we have developed two tools: this guide to conducting worker focus groups, and a tool for conducting worker surveys. We hope that these tools are helpful to workforce organizations seeking to tap into worker knowledge and to listen and respond to the ideas, needs, and aspirations of frontline workers.

This guide is based on practices we have developed over our years of conducting research. It is intended to help workforce development professionals partner with local businesses to conduct applied research with frontline workers. While there are many ways to gather worker input, this guide focuses on semi-structured focus groups to learn from small groups of workers.

This guide is a work in progress, and we look forward to hearing your feedback. We are currently conducting pilots with workforce organizations and employers in California, Colorado, and Georgia, where workforce professionals are leading worker focus groups and supporting employers to make job quality improvements. These partners have already made important contributions to this guide, and we plan to continue updating it to reflect their experiences and lessons learned. However, given the number of requests we have received for this resource, we are publishing the guide in beta form so that other workforce organizations around the country can build capacity. We encourage you to share your input to strengthen the guide.

Licensing

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Workforce service organizations can use this guide to:

- **Build capacity to work differently with businesses**, adopting a role as consultative and strategic partners who gather information about workplace practice changes that could help employers attract and retain talent to stay competitive. We've seen that listening to workers' concerns has spurred some employers to make meaningful policy and practice changes, such as raising wages or reducing credential requirements to promote internal advancement.
- **Help an employer learn about root causes of workforce challenges.** For example, examining human resources data can tell a business leader that retention for women workers is lower than for men. Qualitative data collected directly from workers may shed light on why this is the case.
- **Adapt strategies and policies based on increased understanding of the experiences and priorities of local workers.** Most workforce organizations use local labor market data to inform strategy and programming; worker interviews provide complementary data to paint a fuller picture.
- **Become stronger worker advocates with employers and policymakers.** Centering the experiences of entry-level workers can help providers understand and empathize with workers' concerns and better represent their perspectives with influential stakeholders.
- **Design programs and services that strengthen relationships with businesses.** For example, gathering information about workers' training and educational goals or input about their supervisors' ability to provide constructive feedback can help providers strengthen their training, supplemental supports, or coaching services.

The guide is organized into six sections and an appendix:

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for businesses, workforce service organizations, and frontline workers. We recognize the many barriers to forging employer relationships and interviewing workers in the current environment. At the same time, we are hearing from business and workforce leaders that it has never been more important to get direct feedback from workers about their experiences on the job and to respond to their health, safety, and financial needs. We encourage you to adopt and adapt the pieces of this guide that work for you, given your current priorities and capacities.

Drawing on Worker Voice to Inform Strategy: San Diego Workforce Partnership

The San Diego Workforce Partnership conducted focus groups with frontline workers in the retail sector to understand their priorities and pain points, and used learnings to inform its regional plan. The workers interviewed shared that unpredictable schedules were making it difficult to earn sufficient, regular income and were leading to high turnover. In response, the Workforce Partnership began holding conversations with employers, policy organizations, and the San Diego City Council about the role of stable scheduling in strengthening worker retention and economic mobility. This has influenced local hospitality employers to change practices and local government officials to draft stable scheduling legislation for consideration by City Council.

Prioritizing Equity in Worker Research

Research inevitably involves power, as the researchers conducting focus groups shape the questions asked, select informants, and interpret results. It's important to recognize that research has the potential to perpetuate structural inequity if it is based on biased assumptions about informants.[1] But if designed carefully and with an eye toward inclusion, focus groups with frontline workers can help to redistribute power by giving workers a voice in the programs, systems, and jobs that shape their access to economic opportunity.

At the Economic Opportunities Program, we are constantly learning and asking questions about how to advance race, gender, and class equity through our research. For example, we regularly use a racial equity impact analysis tool to review and improve our research approach, including objectives, data collection, and analysis. In the sections that follow, we have incorporated several of the practices that we use to prioritize equity in research. We welcome feedback about strategies to make research more inclusive.

I. Building the Business Case to Employers to Strengthen Worker Voice

How do you begin a conversation with your employer partners about your interest in interviewing workers? You will likely want to approach a business contact that you already have a relationship with and has expressed a workforce challenge. Depending on the size of the business, this might be an HR leader, a store manager, or a small business owner. Ideally, this person will become an advocate for your worker engagement and serve as a primary point of contact throughout.

In many cases, you can suggest worker research in direct response to your business contact's questions or concerns. Start by asking questions about talent practices and listening to any pain points that come up. For example, is this business having challenges with absenteeism or high turnover, or difficulty attracting new employees? You can explain how research with frontline workers can provide new information to get to the bottom of the challenge and improve business performance. We find that employers appreciate hearing how this form of research can support stronger retention, engagement, and productivity, and how worker interviews can provide helpful insights about how to attract and advance a diverse pipeline of workers.

Some businesses may be nervous about what they will hear from their employees, and whether they will be able to adequately respond. You'll want to indicate that you will provide guidance about how to communicate

[1] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/160940691101000407

findings to workers so that they feel heard and valued, and how to take practical action steps to respond to feedback where feasible and appropriate.[2]

Some workforce providers have told us that they do not feel well-positioned to engage employers in conversations about their business practices. We like to remind them of the expertise they bring to these conversations: workforce providers have a window into jobseeker and entry-level worker perspectives and experiences, including their aspirations, assets, and the challenges that can stand in the way of their success on the job. As trusted external partners, workforce organizations are well-positioned to access candid input from workers, interpret it thoughtfully, and provide guidance to business leaders about how they use worker input to design jobs and workforce practices that support worker wellbeing and business success. We encourage workforce providers to hone and own this valuable expertise.

Here, we lay out five benefits of worker research that businesses have shared with us to help you build your own business case.

1. Improve worker engagement and retention

Businesses have an interest in listening to employee input because elevating employees' voices and changing workforce practices to meet their needs can increase employee engagement and lead to operational efficiencies that improve productivity and the bottom line. Research shows that a majority of workers expect to provide input to improve the business process and product as well as their own job, including conditions of employment, organizational values, benefits, and compensation.[3] Engaged employees tend to be more loyal to the company, stay longer, and can grow into leadership roles. This reduces the cost of turnover and the need to hire external workers who may face a steeper learning curve.

2. Leverage frontline expertise to improve performance

Employees on the frontlines are typically closest to on-the-ground business operations, and therefore hold unique expertise. For example, healthcare workers hear directly from patients about their needs, retail workers get customer feedback about product offerings, and manufacturing workers run the machines and execute the processes that create new products. These workers often have ideas about new product or service offerings, or process improvements that can strengthen operations. Providing opportunities for input can bring these innovations to leadership.

3. Strengthen your business' reputation

In the wake of COVID-19 and deepening calls for racial justice, all eyes are on employers. Many are looking for innovative ways to gather real-time feedback from their employees about health, safety, equity, and inclusion. When workers don't feel heard, they may turn to online outlets like Glassdoor or even the media to express frustrations, which can be damaging for an employer's brand. In contrast, employers that engage their workers on these timely topics can earn trust and loyalty from employees and customers. Businesses need creative listening strategies to get more frequent and better input from frontline workers.

4. Humanize the data

Research by practitioners and intermediaries can complement other types of data to provide a broader and more nuanced picture than a numerical survey or HR metrics can capture. As HR leaders have shared with us,

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[2] https://hbr.org/2016/01/can-your-employees-really-speak-freely; https://medium.com/culturati/ethan-burris-measuring-benchmarking-employees-voice-innovation-creativity-and-diversity-8c1f4da6d6a7

[3] https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/a-new-survey-takes-pulse-worker-voice-america

qualitative research puts a human face on the data and can better illustrate the complexities of a worker's experience and drive buy-in in the C-suite.

5. Leverage a third-party perspective

As an outside entity, you are adding value to the business by bringing a fresh perspective and gathering candid feedback the employer might not otherwise have access to. This feedback allows employers to get a pulse check on how its worker programs and policies are actually experienced by staff. Particularly in large organizations, implementation of new rollouts can go differently than anticipated. It can be hard to assess if information is getting to frontline workers and how it is being perceived.

As you make your pitch to your business partner, you will want to acknowledge up front that the employer may have questions about confidentiality and be prepared to talk about what you plan to do with information you gather. You will also want to align on objectives to help focus the questions you ask workers and maximize benefits for your own organization and the business. You may find it helpful to jointly develop a formal partnership agreement that names common objectives, outlines confidentiality expectations, and defines deliverables. From the outset, you should express to the employer that they will gain more from the research engagement if they communicate with workers about what they took away from the interviews, and practical steps they plan to take (or discussion about limitations to doing something workers requested) in response to feedback.

II. Planning Focus Groups to Gather Frontline Worker Input

How to Set Up Interviews

Once an employer has agreed for you to conduct research with workers, it is time to make a plan:

- **Create a timeline and workplan.** Consider seasonality for the business and annual budget timeline. Ask employers about their fiscal year calendar and arrange research at the times when they can be most available and responsive to learning.
- **Schedule focus groups.** Find a time and a place that is convenient for the workers, such as a quiet break room. Most interviews should be no more than an hour and scheduled in a way that is respectful of employees' work obligations.
- **Plan to protect worker confidentiality.** This will lead to more candid, helpful feedback. Be thoughtful about power dynamics as you determine who will be in the room during the interview.
- **Compensate workers for their time and thoughts.** The employer should provide pay for the duration of the interview. In addition, if the interviewing organization has funds available, gift cards, refreshments, or other incentives can be a thoughtful thank you for participation. Compensation and gift cards should not be tied to how much the participant talks or denied if they decide not to answer questions. If workers are being interviewed outside of work hours, consider providing childcare.

We often conduct focus groups, a research method in which several workers are interviewed at once, to gather a wider variety of perspectives in a limited time. Focus groups can be advantageous because often participants will build on each other's comments. However, it is best to limit the number of focus group participants to no more than five or six people so that everyone has a chance to share their perspective. It can be helpful to organize focus groups so that they are composed of workers of the same position or level to maximize comfort in sharing feedback.

Prioritizing Equity in Focus Groups

You'll want to be thoughtful about setting up focus groups in ways that foster equity and inclusion. One important consideration is whether the workers selected to participate are representative of the demographics of the larger workforce. For example, if you are partnering with a business whose entry-level workers are disproportionately women of color, you will want to make sure you have robust representation of women of color in the interviews to speak to the range of experiences impacting the workforce.

Where possible – and particularly when the employer is open to exploring research questions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion – you might consider building focus groups with participants who share similar identities to encourage candor and comfort. It can be helpful if staff members conducting the focus group are reflective of the frontline workforce in terms of race and ethnicity, gender identity, age group, and other identities. As your organization makes plans to staff each focus group, you may want to ask about the English language proficiency of the workers you will be interviewing, and conduct focus groups in the language(s) that the workers are proficient using, where possible. You will also want to ensure that meetings are accessible for all workers.

If the opportunity presents itself, engage a subset of the workers you will be interviewing in planning the research design. This may include engaging a subset of the workers you will be interviewing to help develop questions and design the focus group format (including where focus groups will take place, when, who will participate, and how workers will be compensated for their time).

Finally, before you begin developing questions and facilitating focus groups, consider reflecting on your own identity and experiences, and how these might influence the questions you ask and how you interpret answers. Try to learn about the contextual factors that may impact the subset of workers you will be interviewing, such as a history of occupational segregation in the local labor market that has confined workers of color to lower wage industries and jobs. A growing body of resources provides practical tips on holding culturally responsive focus groups, embedding an equity perspective in research, and reducing research bias by confronting power dynamics. This reading and reflection can help prepare you to foster an affirming environment.

III. Developing Focus Group Guides

Pre-Interview: Developing Questions and Interview Protocols

To prepare for an interview with employees, draft an interview guide to structure your conversation. Although the interview may not follow a specific script – and oftentimes the most fruitful conversations won't – it is helpful to know which questions you really want to get to before you run out of time at the end of the interview. An interview protocol for workers typically includes introductory and consent information (described below) to go over with workers before getting started, background questions to get to know them, general questions about their work experience, tailored questions based on your goals for the discussion, and some final reflections. This framework should be customized for the interviewees given what you already know and what you would like to know.

Consent Language

At the beginning of an interview, it is imperative to receive verbal and written consent to participate and to be recorded. Below is a script you could use alongside a written document that participants sign and that you save for your records:

> *We need your consent to participate in this discussion. Before we begin, let's review the consent form.*
>
> [Provide each participant two copies of the consent form, read it aloud with the participants, and ask them each to sign a copy. Each participant also keeps a copy].
>
> *Thank you. Do you have any questions for me?*

Before we begin, we'd like to let you know that any information you provide us today is confidential. We will not personally identify you with any of the information you provide. And we ask that you not talk outside this room about what others say here. But we can't guarantee that others will keep things confidential, so we want to make sure that everybody understands that.

We would also like to record the conversation to help with notetaking. This audio recording will not be shared with anyone outside of our team. Also, please know that you can ask us to turn off the recorder at any time if you would prefer to talk about something and not have it recorded. Is it all right with everyone if we record?

{Proceed with recording if all agree}

Gathering Demographic Information

It is helpful to capture demographics of interview participants to inform research so that these identities are not assumed or inferred by the interviewer. Consider adding optional questions to the written consent form to capture gender identity, race and ethnicity, age, disability status, and other pertinent identities.

Development of Interview Questions

Interviews typically include questions around the interviewees' background and work experience, followed by questions related to your specific research objectives, and a set of reflective closing questions. We suggest working with the employer – and when possible, employees – to prioritize areas of interest. We offer a set of sample questions in the appendix but encourage you to develop customized questions based on the specific objectives you have established with your employer partner.

Tips for Conducting the Focus Group

If interview participants consent, recording the conversation on a recording device or even a phone can free you to stay engaged by minimizing the need to take notes. Be sure to explain that recordings will not be shared with the employer. When the employees enter, introduce yourself, offer your contact and organizational information, and share the objectives for the conversation and consent language. Pause after introducing yourself and your objectives and ask if the interviewees have any questions for you. This can also be helpful to do periodically during the interview to give space for participants to ask any clarifying questions.

Set expectations and norms from the beginning of the conversation – let participants know how long the interview will be and that it is completely voluntary. Be sure to explain how the research will be used and who will see it. Your goal should be to make participants feel comfortable and encourage open input.

We often begin an interview by encouraging all participants to chime in and creating space for varied perspectives. Some comments that may be helpful to facilitate the conversation include:

- "Since there are [number of people] of you here for the discussion, it's natural that some of you are more talkative than others. Since we only have [amount of time], I might ask a more talkative person to hold off at some point to see if others want to chime in. So please understand that I would only do this because I'm interested in what everybody has to say."
- "Another important thing is that we are not trying to reach a consensus or agreement about what we talk about in this group. You may have different experiences and knowledge about the same things. We want to hear everybody's viewpoints."

Post-Interview: Follow-up with Workers

After the interview, thank participants for their time and give them the opportunity to ask clarifying questions about the research process and how the information they shared will be used. If you've discussed follow-up steps with the employer, share expectations for the timing of any next steps (e.g., when the employer is planning to communicate about findings).

IV. Reviewing Data

After completing interviews, we transcribe audio recordings from interviews. There are programs that transcribe for you or that simplify the process (Rev.com or oTranscribe.com). We recognize that resource and capacity constraints may make it difficult to complete full transcriptions. Another option is to have a colleague in the room during the focus group taking detailed notes. In any format they are captured, it is critical to make sure that audio, transcripts, and/or notes are stored safely to preserve confidentiality.

Some qualitative researchers use codes and labels to organize themes and create personas.4 This may be helpful if you have sufficient resources, a long timeline, and/or a very large set of interviews, but it is not necessary in order to glean helpful findings from focus groups. When we are partnering with a workforce organization to conduct this kind of research, we start with four more simple steps:

1. Sort by theme

To begin your analysis, read transcripts to refresh yourself with what was said during the conversations. As you review, look for themes that come up several times or perspectives that are important to surface even if they are outliers. Go back to your original research questions or areas of interest, such as workplace culture, training, etc., and organize what you heard from interviews using these themes. For example, did several workers note that onboarding was chaotic, or that the company's mentorship program has helped them learn about career opportunities? Jot down bullets and compile quotes that capture these trends.

During this thematic analysis there will likely be other topics that surface that were not central to your research objectives. You can continue to use themes to organize any additional data that is relevant. Once you have reviewed and put the data into thematic "buckets," review each one, again with an eye for patterns of feelings or thoughts (e.g., "I didn't know we had X benefit"). It is also important to consider outlier perspectives.

2. Capture key quotes and recommendations

It can be helpful to capture quotes from employees to communicate their thoughts in their own words – but it is essential to ensure these are fully anonymized. This means not only removing employees' names, but also any information about their positions or any other potentially identifying information.

Some workers may have offered up action steps they would like their employer to take. Consider including any practical suggestions from workers in your summary document. This can help make the information more useful to the employer, offering potential steps they can take to move forward.

3. Consider equity and inclusion in your analysis

In addition, consider how data may be impacted by who was in the room and how this may create shortcomings. Be honest about this and how bias can come into play. For example, if you were not able to get a representative group of workers, or managers were in the same focus group with their supervisees, it may impact the integrity of your data.

Consider whose voices are being elevated – is it equitable? There is often a tendency to listen to the most talkative voices in focus groups. Are you sharing the concerns of the most marginalized workers? Those can

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[4] Learn more here: https://edtech.worlded.org/persona-development-as-a-research-tool. There are some free software applications, but most require a license or subscription. Some popular options are Dedoose and Atlas.ti

often be the "outlier" comments – so make sure you are including their voices (but not in a way that makes them identifiable).

If you interviewed a sufficiently large and diverse group of workers to do so without risk to worker confidentiality, you may want to disaggregate the data by gender, race, and other dimensions of identity to understand how experiences differ.

Finally, where possible, look for opportunities to vet findings through research participants. For example, ask a group of worker representatives to review your findings and help co-construct implications.

V. Communicating and Using Findings

How to Share Information Back with Employers

To share information back with the employer, consider organizing the employee feedback by topic and summarizing the emergent themes from the interviews conducted. It can be relevant to include if some workers disagreed or if there wasn't consensus around the employee feedback. Sharing the nuance of perspectives can help employers understand the range of views held by employees and can inform how policies and changes are implemented.

When structuring the overview of employee feedback, aim for a digestible format such as a PowerPoint presentation or set of bullets that elevates the positive aspects shared by workers as well as the opportunities for growth. Highlighting what is working well will help balance the feedback and increase responsiveness to the information shared.

Ensuring the anonymity of findings is essential. Consider the size of the workforce and how many people you interviewed – will the employer be able to tell who shared which comments? If so, minimize or edit quotes from interviews so that they do not contain personally identifying information. If there are other data points such as survey results, consider integrating those to complement what workers share during the interviews.

You will likely want to offer a debrief meeting or call to talk through what you heard and provide resources to help the employer think about responsive practice changes. For example, if workers expressed that additional soft skills training could boost their engagement and productivity, consider talking with the employer about how your organization's training programs could help. If many workers said that bus schedules make it hard to arrive to work on time, you might talk with the employer about whether shift start times could be adjusted to better match transit schedules. If workers share their desire for a more equitable workplace, talk with the employer about hiring, advancement, and retention strategies that increase and support diversity. Our Job Quality Tools Library includes actionable tools and resources that you can share with employers to help them strengthen a variety of workforce practices. Providing this kind of guidance can help employers interpret what you learned from the interviews and take concrete steps to address worker input.

Following up With Workers and Acknowledging Feedback

Talk to the employer about how they plan to communicate findings and changes to ensure that workers know they were heard. Emphasize that workers will especially appreciate hearing any tangible actions that result from their input. Remind them to use culturally appropriate communications, and to communicate in a variety of ways so that all workers who participated are made aware of next steps. Encourage the employer to set up ongoing feedback loops, including engaging workers in decision-making and planning based on findings. If the employer opts to make significant policy and practice changes, consider conducting follow-up research – perhaps in 6 months or a year – to learn about impacts on workers and the business.

You will want to encourage your contact at the company to share lessons learned with others who have influence and may be interested in understanding how workers view the company and which policies and programs are working well. This may include HR leaders, other business leaders (e.g., in operations or finance), or frontline managers.

VI. How to Make Your Research Responsive and Flexible in the Age of COVID-19

Be mindful of the context in which you may be doing this research. Businesses are facing enormous demands on their time, navigating operational changes to adhere to social distancing requirements, and in many cases struggling for survival. Workers may be putting their physical and mental health at risk by coming to work each day. How will you make research responsive to the current needs of workers and businesses, while recognizing the constraints on their time and capacity? For example, some businesses may seize the opportunity to gather input from workers about the supports they need in this difficult time. Other employers may want to ask essential workers about their health and safety concerns, and how operations can be tweaked to help them feel safe coming to work.

Conducting research remotely may be an option during this time, if workers have safe, reliable technology access at home or through their employer, and are comfortable participating from their homes. If you would like to conduct research remotely, there are many platforms that allow you to facilitate a conversation with single or multiple participants, such as Zoom, Jitsi, Signal, Google Meet, Teams, and Mural. Interviews with individuals can certainly be conducted via phone, especially when participants may have limited digital access or concerns about privacy.

If you are conducting interviews with essential workers that are on the frontlines, they are likely under a high amount of stress. Some important considerations for research during this time are:

- **Meet participants where they are** and use communication approaches that work best for them rather than asking them to access and learn new technology.
- **Be transparent** about why you and the employer are interested in learning their perspective, and how the information could be used.
- **Build in time for trust-building and connecting.** During in-person meetings, this often happens informally. In a virtual meeting, making space for building relationships is important, particularly since workers are trusting you with their opinions and perspectives. Make time at the beginning for a quick icebreaker (e.g., share who is your favorite superhero). Make sure participants feel comfortable stepping away if they need a quick break.
- **Don't assume that everyone understands the technology.** Technology access is a huge challenge, and people may have different internet bandwidths and connectivity. Take time to walk people through how to use the virtual platforms and their features, since everyone may not be coming from the same starting place. Consider building in time just before the focus group for a 5-10 minute "tech check" to troubleshoot any technology issues.
- **Prepare several back-up plans.** Have a Plan B if your chosen technology platform does not work, such as shifting to phone interviews.
- **Consider confidentiality and security issues when collecting data virtually.** Evaluate how confidential the data is and through which mode it should be shared.
- **Be cautious that access to technology doesn't exacerbate power dynamics.** Ensure that you are including everyone's voices and making accommodations for those that have less reliable technology access.

- **Be considerate** of the stress everyone is going through right now, from frontline workers to HR leaders to workforce staff conducting interviews. This is especially important when engaging participants who might be facing multiple hardships: loss of income, childcare burdens, health worries, and more.

Appendix: Sample Questions for Interview Guides

Below, we share some of the kinds of questions that we typically ask in focus groups with frontline workers, including general questions that help participants feel comfortable and build context, and specific questions that can help address the particular research questions that are top of mind for the employer. The bank of questions below includes far too many lines of inquiry for one hour-long focus group, but you can pick and choose questions or use the list to generate ideas for new questions. As a rule of thumb, make as many of your questions as possible open-ended, meaning that a question cannot be answered with a simple Yes or No.

Background Information

The initial questions in a focus group should help you get to know the participants and make them comfortable. Based on their answers, you may want to ask follow-up questions to probe further. These initial questions could be very helpful context for perspectives shared later in the interview.

Sample Questions:

- What is your current position?
    - Have you held other positions at {company name}? If so, what were they?
- How long have you been at {company name}?
- What is your job experience prior to coming here?
- Do you currently have any other jobs?
- Are you currently in school? What is your educational background? (Depending on your learning goals, you may want to ask about full educational history, including degrees not yet completed)
- In addition to work, what other responsibilities are you juggling in your life? (e.g., childcare or other caregiving responsibilities)

Overall Work Experience

After asking background questions, proceed to general questions about employees' experience at work. Responding to these types of questions could take up a significant amount of time so you will want to think carefully about your learning goals and prioritize the questions that you are most interested in hearing about.

Sample Questions:

- What are your job responsibilities? What do you do during a typical shift?
- What are your favorite things about working at {company name}?
- What do you wish was different about your job?
- Who does well at this company and in this job (what types of experiences, expectations, personalities)?
- Why have you stayed at {company name}? What makes you want to keep working here?
- How long do employees typically stay? What do you know about why people usually leave? Why they stay?

Tailored Questions

After asking background and general work experience questions to set the stage and help participants feel comfortable, you should shift to more specific questions that address the core objectives of your research and the employer's interests. These questions should be informed by advance conversations with the employer. It could also be helpful to conduct online research to learn about the company and its practices. This section will vary depending on the objectives of your employee research. Below are sample questions for several topics.

Hiring, Onboarding, and Training

- How did you hear about this job? What was the application process like? Why did you decide to take the job?
- Do you have a formal (written) job description? Does it match your actual responsibilities?
- What was your onboarding experience like?
    - What kind of communication did you have with your employer in anticipation of your first day of work?
    - Once you began working, what was the structure of onboarding?
- Is there anything you wish you had been trained on before you started? Something that would have helped you onboard more successfully?
- What kind of training is available to you?
    - Are there other kinds of training you wish you could have? What type of training?
    - Is training available in a language you speak fluently?
- Do workers at your company have access to English language learning support?

Career Advancement Opportunities

- What are your professional goals at {company name}?
    - Do you see yourself working here for another 3 to 5 years? Do you have other career goals?
- Do you feel that your job at {company name} is preparing you to meet your career goals? In what ways yes? In what ways no?
- Do you feel that you currently have opportunities to utilize your skills and abilities in your work?
- What do you know about promotion opportunities at {company name}? What do you know about requirements to advance?
    - How have you learned about these opportunities?
- Is there anyone at work who encourages you to consider training or promotion opportunities? Who does this? In what ways?
    - Is there a formal mentorship program available at your workplace? What's it like? Do you have a mentor?
- Do you know how furthering your education could connect you to new professional opportunities? What types of opportunities? What kinds of support does {company name} offer to pursue education, such as a tuition assistance benefit?
- Is there a process for transitioning from part-time to full-time? What do you know about the requirements? What do you know about how likely this is? How long does it typically take?

Workplace Policies and Benefits

- Is your wage enough to cover your basic living expenses? [If no: is this because the wage is too low or because you can't get enough hours? Both? Some other reason?]
    - If you are an essential worker, has your employer started offering additional compensation since the pandemic?
- Are there any raises structured into your company's wage policies (e.g., a bump in wage at 90 days)? How does this work?
- What benefits are employees provided? Who's eligible? When do they start?
    - Who has access to paid leave at {company name}? Health insurance? A retirement savings account?
    - In what ways are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the benefits provided?
    - Has your employer provided any additional benefits given the COVID-19 pandemic? What types of benefits? (e.g., telehealth, mental wellness benefits, transportation benefit)
- How did you learn about the benefits {company name} provides to employees? Who do you ask if you have questions about how benefits work?
- Do you know how your wages, benefits and opportunities for wage increases compare to others in this industry or in the local area?
- What is your work schedule? How many hours a week do you work?
    - How do schedules get set and by whom? Does the company use any kind of scheduling software or shift-swapping app?
    - Would you like to have more hours? Does your schedule change from week to week or is it pretty regular? How far in advance do you receive your schedule?
- How do you get to work? How long does it usually take? Does your commute ever make you late or cause you to miss work?
    - Do you have a safe way to get to work during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Utilization of Benefits

- Do you use or have you ever used {company name}'s {name one specific benefit, e.g., health insurance, tuition assistance, financial coaching}?
    - [If so] what's been your experience? Is it simple or complicated? What would make it better for you?
    - [If not] what do you know about the program? What do you know how about the application process and the program work? Is there a particular reason why you haven't used the program?
- How is/was information about the program given to you? Is information about the program available in different formats or languages? (e.g., website, workplace posters, flyers, email, text)
    - Is it easy to get answers to your questions about the program? Why? Why not?
- What kinds of things get in the way of accessing this benefit?

    - Do you have recommendations for ways {company name} could help with some of these? Do you think more people would participate in the program if {company name} did [name one of their recommendations]?

Supportive Work Environment

- In what ways do you feel like your opinions and ideas about your job and company practices are valued by {company name}? How do you share them? With whom? Has this changed over time? In what ways?
- How would you describe the company "culture"?
- What's your relationship like with your manager? Do you see him/her/them every day?
- How often do you get feedback about your performance from him/her/them? Is it informal and ongoing or mostly during formal performance reviews?
- In what ways does this company support diversity, equity, and inclusion?
    - Are there trainings focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion?
    - Is cultural experience or expertise valued at this company?
    - Are there employee resource groups to support diversity, equity, and inclusion?
- What are some accommodations your workplace has made for employees with disabilities?

Conclusion / Reflections

To conclude the interview, it can be helpful to leave time for interviewees to share parting thoughts and offer any additional comments they may not have had a chance to share yet. Make sure to leave space for each worker to share their reflections if you are conducting a focus group with multiple participants.

Sample Questions:

- If you could make one or two simple changes to improve your work experience, what would they be?
- Is there something {company name}'s management could do differently that would make you more interested in continuing your career here?
- Would you recommend this job or company to a friend or family member? Why or why not?
- Is there anything else you think we should know? Anything else you would like to share with us?

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