

01. Context

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a **critical inflection moment in the way Americans relate to work**. Re-thinking the purpose of work and the role it should play in life fueled job changing, a rise in business starts, a resurgent labor movement, and left many business leaders and commentators struggling to understand these changing workforce and cultural dynamics. Customers and workers alike are gravitating toward businesses that prioritize job quality and afford employees respect, equity, and mobility.

The Crisis:

An estimated 44% of adult workers in the US, more than 53 million people, earn low hourly wages¹ and nearly 60% of workers earning low wages are employed by small businesses². Further, the burden of this low-wage, and low-quality work is not distributed equitably: **women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) workers are more likely to occupy these low-wage and low-quality jobs**. At the same time, small businesses are vital contributors to the economic and social health of communities across the country, and they face many challenges to their own survival and ability to thrive. The situation demands a new vision of economic success, in which **both small businesses and their workforce can thrive, and practical job quality strategies for small businesses that drive toward that vision**.

02. The Opportunity

Driving culture change to improve job quality within the small business ecosystem is critical to ensuring a more equitable economy and the success of small businesses themselves. The objective of this project is to identify strategies that foster the adoption of job quality elements (JQE) and the Good Jobs framework into the modus operandi for small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs). Our aim is to offer messages that are both universal for SMBs but also address rather than avoid the particular challenges faced by diverse SMBs with the power to drive economic equity in their communities. In order to accomplish this, we set out to:

- A. Understand SMB perceptions of job quality**
- B. Identify strategies to encourage SMB adoption of JQE**
- C. Define recommendations to involve financial intermediaries in the promotion of JQE**

03. Our Approach

Our approach is grounded in **identity-powered design, which aims to go beyond persuasion and education and define and actualize an identity for SMBs that prioritizes and practices JQE**. To maintain a focus on equity, our research design centered SMBs that disproportionately employ the people who have been systematically excluded from economic mobility and opportunity (i.e. BIPOC communities). This started with a broad research design, and narrowed down to focus in with each subsequent design phase. Specifically:

01. Metaphor Elicitation

Metaphor Elicitation (ME), which is a two-round qualitative design, where participants are asked to submit links to images and sounds related to key prompts, and then verbally discuss them.

02. Message Testing

Message Testing, in which we created five messages on the basis of our ME results. Then we used a survey experiment to test which of these five messages were the most effective at persuading SMBs and CDFIs of the importance of job quality.

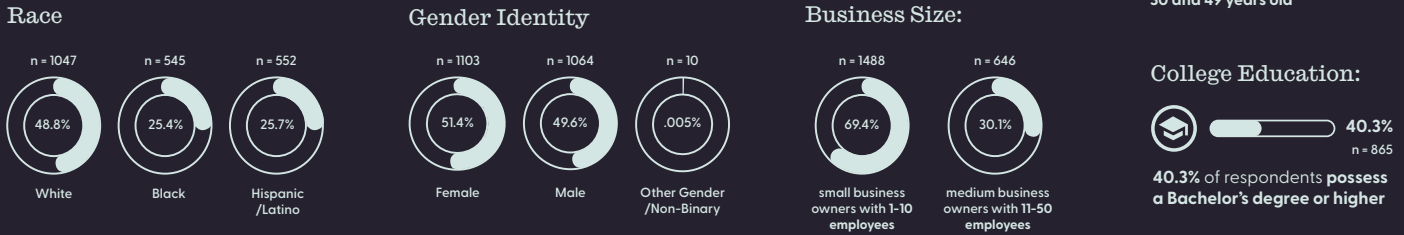
03. Content Testing

Content Testing, focused on the two most effective messages from Phase 2, disaggregated into four narrow messages, and expressed through visual implementations (fliers) to test the effectiveness of these real-world materials.

¹Meet the low-wage workforce | Brookings

²Low-Income Workers

People We Talked To:



04. Research Findings

Given our iterative methodological approach, our results are also built on each previous phase:

- 01. Metaphor Elicitation: Business owners struggle with feeling empowered in their businesses.** We found that business owners tend to start a business to feel autonomous and to have control over their lives. But they inevitably run into a series of challenges, one of which is attracting and retaining talent. They lament that employees are less dedicated to the business than they are and, in turn, they sometimes leave less room for implementing JQE. BIPOC SMBs in particular placed a strong value on status and community. These SMBs desire to use their businesses to connect with and provide resources for their community, yet failed to connect these values to JQE.
- 02. Message Test: “Autonomy and Control” and “Community Status” are the most effective messages,** and “Bottom Line” was the least effective message. “Autonomy and Control” highlighted how providing quality jobs would allow business owners to delegate day-to-day tasks to their employees. “Community Status” highlighted how providing jobs was good for business because of the good reputation it creates for the business in the community. “Bottom Line” framed employment as an investment that provides one with financial returns. Again, the former two were effective, and the “Bottom Line” message was detrimental to promoting job quality.
- 03. Content Test: “Community” is the strongest visual expression** among those tested, and visual representations of joy and collaboration were more effective than images that depict high status.

05. Research Recommendations

Highlight ties with the community.

Tell SMBs that being a business owner makes them important and influential members of their community. Highlight how having strong relationships with the community is good for business – because community members will support their businesses when needed. Emphasize that JQE is part of community relationships. When speaking with BIPOC SMBs, it is especially critical to highlight how JQE will enable them to both connect with and gain status within their communities.

Highlight autonomy and control.

Tell SMBs that hiring good employees is important for business owners to be able to focus on big-picture decisions for the business, and for business owners to truly achieve the autonomy that they desire. The best way to have everything under control is by providing good jobs so you can attract good employees you can trust.

Do not emphasize the bottom line when discussing job quality.

Talking about a business’ bottom line is important when helping that business succeed, but it is less than useful when trying to promote job quality. Over-emphasizing the bottom line makes business owners less willing to invest in their employees and less willing to provide job quality. This is because talking about the bottom line highlights a business owner’s economic limitations, which often leads them to think about cutting costs, and job quality can often be on the receiving end. While speaking about the bottom line is sometimes unavoidable, when promoting job quality focus on how it will promote a business owner’s status in the community and a business owner’s autonomy and control over their business.

Pay attention to visual elements of communications.

Particularly, images that highlight “Status” can be disagreeable among certain audiences. The “Status” message highlighted how being a business owner and a leader would strengthen one’s status in their community. The images associated to this message were found to be disagreeable among our audiences. While this message is still effective, we suggest one always makes sure to pair the “Status” message with happy smiling people interacting with each other and with the community.