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PROGRAM**

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FIXING WORK: Lessons From Job Quality Practitioners

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Executive Summary

Too few workers in the United States today are in high-quality jobs that provide economic stability, economic mobility, and an equitable and respectful workplace. [Polling](#) has found that nearly a third of all US workers — and the majority of those making less than \$50,000 a year — run out of money by the end of each month.¹ Almost half of adults do not have enough [emergency savings](#) for three months' expenses.² For [low-income workers](#), benefits, like health insurance, paid leave, and employer-sponsored retirement programs, are far from universal.³ [Forgoing medical treatment](#) because of the expense is all too common.⁴ Moreover, even if employers offer time off, [most workplaces](#) have a culture that is unsupportive of taking leave: The US is one of only six countries that does not guarantee any form of paid leave under law.⁵

The impact of low-quality jobs is felt beyond the workplace — and beyond the workers themselves. Poor job quality means shorter, less healthy, and more stressful lives for workers.⁶ It means less time with loved ones. More than [8 million people have more than one job](#). One study even found that increasing the minimum wage [significantly reduces](#) the rate of suicide among adults with a high school education or less.⁷

Our economy is built by the labor of people and raising job quality means recognizing the dignity and worth of their contributions. Too often, employers treat labor as a race to the bottom even though better job quality is associated with [better outcomes for business](#) as the work of Zeynep Ton at MIT has demonstrated. Jobs that were once pathways to middle-class security, notably those found in the trucking and manufacturing industries, have crumbled in quality in recent decades. Manufacturing workers now earn [less than the private sector average](#),⁸ with [meatpacking workers](#) — once a heavily unionized industry — making less today than in the 1960s, after taking inflation into account.⁹ Care and restaurant work occupations are expected to [grow the fastest](#) this decade, yet they are defined by low pay and in-

1 John Gerzema, "America This Week: Wave 190," *The Harris Poll*, October 18, 2023, <https://theharrispoll.com/briefs/america-this-week-wave-190/> (accessed May 9, 2025).

2 Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2022*, May 2023, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2023-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2022-expenses.htm> (accessed May 9, 2025).

3 Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Kim Parker, *How Americans View Their Jobs*, Pew Research Center, March 30, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/30/how-americans-view-their-jobs/>.

4 Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2022*, May 2023, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/2023-economic-well-being-of-us-households-in-2022-expenses.htm> (accessed May 9, 2025).

5 American Psychological Association, *2023 Work in America Survey*, October, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-in-america/2023-workplace-health-well-being> (accessed May 9, 2025).

6 Erin Graves, "Job quality toward an inclusive economy: A critical review and reassessment," May, 2023, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/job-quality-toward-an-inclusive-economy-a-critical-review-and-reassessment.aspx> (accessed May 9, 2025).

7 William H. Dow, Anna Godøy, Christopher A. Lowenstein, and Michael Reich, "Can Economic Policies Reduce Deaths of Despair?," *NBER Working Paper Series* No. 25787, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25787> (accessed May 9, 2025).

8 Katelynn Harris and Michael D. McCall, "The Relative Weakness in Earnings of Production Workers in Manufacturing, 1990–2018," *Monthly Labor Review* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), December, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2019/article/earnings-of-production-workers-in-manufacturing-1990-2018.htm> (accessed May 9, 2025).

9 Amanda Silver, Sarah Day Kalloch, and Zeynep Ton, "A Background Note on 'Unskilled' Jobs in the United States – Past, Present, and Future," *Teaching Resources Library* (MIT Sloan School of Management), June, 2021, <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/teaching-resources-library/a-background-note-unskilled-jobs-united-states-past-present-and-future> (accessed May 9, 2025).

sufficient benefits.¹⁰ Although many people perceive low-quality jobs as a stepping stone, most workers in low-wage work will remain stuck in these jobs.¹¹

Tackling job quality is essential to addressing the lack of economic opportunity in the US. Increasing our awareness of job quality issues and the strategies that address those challenges is urgently needed. In this publication, we discuss our findings from interviews we conducted with leaders from around the country who are engaged in efforts to improve work.

Research Overview

For this report, the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) staff interviewed 22 practitioners about their experiences working to improve job quality in the field. This emerging field of practitioners, among them workforce development organizations, labor organizers, impact investors, worker centers, industry intermediaries, government agencies, employee ownership advocates, and others, were chosen because they have a focus on improving jobs and fixing work. Their work encompasses approaches to job quality that seek to improve the pay, benefits, scheduling and working conditions of existing jobs.

Practitioners described how they define job quality, the motivations for their work, their strategies, the role of race and gender equity in their approach, and how their organizations engaged in partnerships. Their successes, challenges, and lessons learned inform EOP's recommendations on job quality practice that conclude this report.

How Is Job Quality Operationalized in the Field?

Practitioners define job quality in formal and informal ways that are tailored to their context, including relationships with workers and businesses. Defining job quality helps practitioners effectively identify their goals and potential strategies and provides a basis for evaluating job quality among worker populations and companies with whom they work. Worker voice is key to shaping the way organizations define job quality, shedding light on elements that might be absent from other frameworks as well as emphasizing the elements most valued by workers.

Race and gender equity are often deeply embedded in the work of organizations focused on job quality. Organizations noted that entire occupations where bad jobs are the norm have historically been filled by workers of color and women and that the steering of people of color and women toward those jobs continues. Some organizations, like those that organize workers, have deployed resources in a manner that acknowledges the overrepresentation of women and people of color in the lowest-quality work to overcome long-standing stereotypes about the value of those workers' labor. Job quality practitioners have also helped business and industry partners understand the importance of equity in maximizing employee and firm success.

Practitioners mix and match tactics, according to their expertise and unique contexts, to improve job quality. Tactics that interviewees use include the following:

¹⁰ Erin Graves, "Job quality toward an inclusive economy: A critical review and reassessment," May, 2023, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/job-quality-toward-an-inclusive-economy-a-critical-review-and-reassessment.aspx> (accessed May 9, 2025).

¹¹ Marcela Escobari, Ian Seyal, and Michael Meaney, "Realism About Reskilling: Upgrading the Career Prospects of America's Low-Wage Workers," Workforce of the Future Initiative (Brookings Institution) December, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Realism-About-Reskilling-Final-Report.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2025).

Worker organizing — Supporting workers joining together to build collective power to influence job quality and their quality of life.

Community organizing and other coalition building — Organizing critical nonworker stakeholders, such as community members, consumers, high-road businesses, and others, to advocate for job quality.

Legal agreements, co-enforcement, and litigation — Using legal agreements, such as community benefits agreements, to improve job quality standards. Other legal strategies include helping enforce labor law and using litigation to address legal violations that diminish job quality.

Research — Developing and synthesizing data, information, and evidence that illustrate job quality challenges and successes through the experiences and outcomes of workers and businesses.

Policy development and advocacy — Influencing federal, local, and state policies that affect workers' job quality and firms' ability to provide quality jobs.

Demonstrating high-road employment — Operating or promoting a business model to demonstrate that good jobs in a particular industry can be achieved.

Employee ownership — Advancing workers' ability to own part of or all of a firm, often resulting in greater power and influence over job quality and working conditions.

Training and education — Efforts that improve workers' job satisfaction, safety, participation at work, opportunities to advance, and knowledge of their rights.

Business coaching — Advising and coaching firms on job quality improvements for their workforce.

Financial incentives — Providing businesses with financial incentives and support in adopting job quality improvements.

Grantmaking — Philanthropic investments in strategies that improve workers' jobs and support high-road employers.

What Barriers Do Practitioners Face?

Job quality practitioners are engaged in the difficult work of systems change that poses several challenges.

The skills narrative continues to dominate the discourse on improving economic opportunity. The narrative that workers' lack of skills is to blame for poverty and a lack of economic opportunity, and that job training and education are the primary solutions, is hard to overcome for practitioners focused on job quality. Job quality practitioners often encounter a funding and policy environment focused more on training and placing people in low-paying jobs with insufficient focus for the quality of the jobs themselves.

Changing individual businesses' job quality practices is challenging. Some businesses are not receptive to improving job quality, and others worry that doing so will put them at a disadvantage and make them less competitive with their peers. Businesses may see proving better benefits and pay as a trade-off with profitability.

Public awareness of the importance of job quality is low. A lack of public knowledge about what work in some sectors and occupations entails can make it difficult to catalyze change and can reinforce a harmful

narrative that low-paid jobs are unskilled. Even though the COVID pandemic revealed the pervasive nature of poor job quality, the public and policymakers still do not seemingly grasp how widespread the issues are across the economy and the devastating effects it is having on families and communities.

Organizing workers on the ground is difficult, despite record-high public support for unions. Weak labor laws make worker organizing difficult. Interviewees in the South noted that the region lacks a strong culture of organized labor, and some workers — both in the South and elsewhere — do not know what labor protections they are guaranteed.

Measuring the impact and outcomes of job quality strategies is not always straightforward. Tracking impact is crucial, but measuring progress varies based on organizations' goals, strategies, and relationships. Organizations also face challenges such as limited capacity, the availability of data from businesses, and the pressure for short-term results while pursuing long-term efforts where progress is harder to measure.

Funders and philanthropy have not yet embraced the importance of investing in job quality. Job quality work is new to many funders, and funders often still tilt their investments toward initiatives that focus solely on increasing workers' education and skills while ignoring opportunities to invest in worker power and the capacity of organizations focused on job quality. The South, where job quality and equity challenges run deep, is under-resourced and needs more support if we are to address job quality nationwide.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Listening to workers is essential. Workers' perspectives are critical for organizations to most effectively improve workers' lives and is crucial when seeking to define what an organization means by "job quality," which is often important in helping develop and implement strategies for the job quality issues workers want addressed.

Develop or adopt a definition of job quality for your context. A definition can help organizations, and their partners understand the vision of their work and can be a useful tool in helping organizations think about metrics, benchmarks, and progress.

Practitioners must be able to frame their message on job quality. Using strategic communications and combining data and persuasive storytelling to make the case for good jobs to businesses, policymakers, and other stakeholders is required.

Improving job quality requires a collaborative approach designed for the long term. Creating a coalition of organizations that have varied specializations — for example, policy advocacy, research, and worker organizing — is vital for system change. A diverse coalition is better able to respond to opportunities when they arise, as different opportunities to engage in job quality require different organizational capacities.

Find a place to get started. Job quality work is long term and complex, but all organizations committed to economic opportunity can play a supportive role. New practitioners should engage with experienced organizations to learn about the issues and determine where they may play a role.

Recommendations for Investors and Policymakers

Funders should work in partnership with grantees to build the metrics and assessment frameworks needed to facilitate greater investment in job quality work. Realizing job quality improvement is a long-term endeavor, and identifying intermediate outcomes can be difficult. At the same time, funders

need some method of understanding what organizations achieve with their funding and often want data and information about outcomes that can contribute to field learning. Funders should work with grantees to build assessment and measurement practices appropriate to job quality work and should pursue true partnership with grantees as they mutually learn how to address the long-standing systems that have perpetuated low job quality.

Investing in worker power and job quality infrastructure is vital to transforming opportunities for working people. Strategies that elevate and validate workers' experiences and that engage workers as agents in addressing their workplace challenges are vital to building systems that respect work and working people. Building capacity for organizing, coalition building, and strategic communications requires investment and patience, as progress in these areas is often not regular and steady and may require significant periods for capacity building before yielding fruit.

Strategies to support worker skills cannot succeed without investments in worker power. Policymakers and investors have prioritized job training and education, but investments in skills alone is limited to helping a relative few advance in the labor market. Complementary investments in job quality strategies are essential to ensuring workers' skills are adequately rewarded and reducing the proportion of low-wage, low-quality work in the economy. Workforce organizations need support to align job quality with skills development and deepen worker engagement.

Recommendations for Researchers

Find opportunities to partner with job quality practitioners. Researchers have an important role to play in providing research capacity for practitioners so that they have the information they need to identify and address the job quality challenges present.

Continue to raise awareness about job quality. Currently, there is no significant job quality measurement infrastructure in the US. Researchers can play a role in helping build this infrastructure and raising the public's consciousness about the challenges we face when it comes to ensuring all jobs are good jobs.

Conclusion

The field of job quality practice is still emerging, with many organizations just beginning to define job quality, develop data systems, and experiment with new strategies. Economic conditions, such as worker shortages and technological development, create both opportunities and challenges for job quality efforts, requiring practitioners and funders to be adaptable. Although the challenges of job quality work are significant and the field is still developing, the moment has come to fix work. Job quality strategies, which focus on transforming industries and workplaces, offer what many have long sought: a scalable path to improving economic opportunity for workers and communities. Our hope is that every stakeholder interested in improving economic opportunity finds inspiration in the work of those organizations featured in this report and will find a way to contribute to building an economy where all jobs are good jobs.

Introduction

The town of Immokalee, in Florida, with a population of about 28,000, the majority of whom are Latino or Black, is known as the tomato capital of the United States. Not long ago, Immokalee and the Florida tomato industry were known as “ground zero for modern-day slavery.” Tomato workers in Immokalee have experienced forced labor, physical and sexual abuse, exposure to dangerous chemicals, wage theft, and other horrendous working conditions. Today, working conditions for tomato workers are much better in Immokalee. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ (CIW) efforts on worker organizing and training, consumer and policy advocacy, and legal action have helped transform the industry into what some say is “the best working environment in US agriculture.”¹² As the result of decades of organizing and advocacy, the Coalition has been able to establish legally-binding agreements with multibillion-dollar food retailers that purchase tomatoes, such as Walmart and McDonald’s, that require the farms that grow their tomatoes to pay better wages and agree to a code of conduct based on human rights.¹³ Almost 14 years after launching, the Fair Food Program (FFP) that established these agreements now protects tens of thousands of farmworkers harvesting dozens of crops in 20 states and 3 countries, including Chile and South Africa.¹⁴

The Coalition is one of many organizations in the US that are working to improve job quality. These organizations include labor unions, worker centers, community-based organizations, community development finance institutions (CDFIs), workforce and economic development organizations, employee ownership advocates, and impact investors. The organizations use a variety of strategies to increase wages, expand benefits, improve workplace safety, elevate worker voice, and address discrimination.

In 2014, in partnership with Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute (PHI), the Aspen Institute’s Economic Opportunities Program coined workforce development approaches that tackle job quality as “raise the floor” strategies and defined them as distinct from — but complementary to — “build ladders” strategies. Build ladders strategies focus on facilitating economic mobility by helping people leave low-quality jobs, often through participation in a training or education program that provides skills and access to higher-quality jobs.¹⁵ “Raise the floor” or job quality strategies are distinct in that they are not trying to facilitate economic advancement by having someone leave a job, but rather by working to improve the quality of the job itself. Thus, the success measure for job quality strategies is not whether an individual has attained a credential or degree or has improved their earnings, but rather whether a business or an industry has improved wages and working conditions for an occupation or sector.

Today, a large part of the work and investment in the US to address poverty is focused on building ladders through training and skill-building opportunities. This work is critical to helping individuals gain access to better opportunities. Skill-building strategies are of course essential as well to ensure businesses have the

12 Noam Scheiber, “A MacArthur ‘Genius’ on Overcoming Modern Farm Slavery,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/business/economy/macarthur-genius-greg-asbed-ciw.html> (accessed May 9, 2025).

13 Coalition of Immokalee Workers, “Campaign for Fair Food,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://ciw-online.org/campaign-for-fair-food/>.

14 Danya Harpster, “From a Church Room to Half of the U.S., the Fair Food Program Is Expected to Grow Considerably,” *WGNU News*, June 18, 2024, <https://news.wgcu.org/agriculture/2024-06-18/ciwexpansionwgucudepth> (accessed May 9, 2025).

15 Maureen Conway and Steven L. Dawson, “Raise the Floor and Build Ladders: Workforce Strategies Supporting Mobility and Stability,” *Aspen Institute*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/raise-the-floor-and-build-ladders-workforce-strategies-supporting-mobility-and-stability/> (accessed May 9, 2025).

talent they need to innovate and be successful. But it is clear today that an unbalanced focus on building ladders will not solve poverty, lack of economic mobility, and the poor working conditions and jobs that contribute to those issues.

Today's economy presents a unique challenge. Fifty percent of the top 10 jobs projected to have the most openings over the next decade have a median pay of less than \$40,000 a year.¹⁶ Home health and personal care aides, the job with the largest number of projected openings, only pays a median of about \$30,00 per year.¹⁷ Although wages have risen in the past few years, the impact of decades of wage stagnation continues to ripple throughout our economy. Unstable and unpredictable scheduling, common in the retail industry, affects workers' economic security — as does the limited number of hours some workers are given. More than 4 million workers desire full-time hours but are employed part time.¹⁸ One in five workers still lack access to paid sick leave, and nearly one in four do not have paid vacation.¹⁹ And one in 10 working-age adults lack health insurance,²⁰ especially frightening considering that at least 3 million private sector workers are injured or become ill on the job each year.²¹ The prevalence of poor-quality and low-wage jobs often affects women and people of color disproportionately.²²

The high number of low-quality jobs in the US makes workforce development and job training efforts difficult. With fewer quality jobs to train workers for, many training programs that are funded and measured based on job placement end up training and placing workers in jobs that offer no path out of poverty. Workers who received services through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act adult program [earned a median of just \\$8,272](#) in the second quarter after exiting the program, about \$33,000 per year or \$15.91 per hour. Black and African American workers served through the program earned a median of \$7,462 in the second quarter, which comes out to less than \$30,000 per year.²³ Many participants in job training and education programs also need to work at the same time and are already employed in low-quality jobs. The lack of security these jobs afford makes it exceedingly difficult for these workers to remain in and successfully complete these programs.

Decreasing poverty at scale means improving the quality of available jobs. The health of our economy and our society depends on improving job quality. Improving jobs is also necessary for making sure our workforce development system works so that businesses have the talent they need and workers have the opportunity to advance into other industries or careers if they choose. And improving job quality is needed

16 Jobs with the most openings include those with the highest number of openings from a combination of new jobs being added and replacements from turnover and retirement. The fastest growing jobs are those expected to have the highest percentage increase in employment.

17 "Most new jobs" *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/most-new-jobs.htm> (accessed May 9, 2025).

18 "The Employment Situation – January 2024" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_02022024.htm (accessed May 9, 2025).

19 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Introducing new Excel tables for employee benefits," September, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/ebs/fact-sheets/introducing-new-excel-tables-for-employee-benefits.htm> (accessed May 9, 2025).

20 Rachel Lindstrom, Katherine Keisler-Starkey, and Lisa Bunch, "Health Insurance Coverage of U.S. Workers Increased in 2022," *U.S. Census Bureau*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/health-insurance-coverage-for-workers.html> (accessed May 9, 2025).

21 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "2.8 Million Workplace Injuries and Illnesses in Private Industry in 2022, Up 7.5 Percent from 2021," *The Economics Daily*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2023/2-8-million-workplace-injuries-and-illnesses-in-private-industry-in-2022-up-7-5-percent-from-2021.htm> (accessed May 9, 2025).

22 Jasmine Tucker and Julie Vogtman, "When Hard Work Is Not Enough: Women in Low-Paid Jobs," *National Women's Law Center*, July, 2023, <https://nwlc.org/resource/when-hard-work-is-not-enough-women-in-low-paid-jobs/> (accessed May 9, 2025). Jessica Shakesprere, Batia Katz, and Pamela Loprest, "Racial Equity and Job Quality," *Urban Institute*, September, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104761/racial-equity-and-job-quality.pdf> (accessed May 14, 2025).

23 U.S. Department of Labor, *PY 2022 WIOA National Performance Summary, Employment and Training Administration*, July 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/Performance/pdfs/PY2022/PY%202022%20WIOA%20National%20Performance%20Summary.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2025).

if we are to live up to our values and ideals of America being the land of opportunity. To do so, we will need to raise the floor and support the organizations that are attempting to improve job quality.

The field of organizations working on addressing job quality is diverse. Labor unions have traditionally and historically led the fight to improve job quality. Newer labor organizing and advocacy organizations, such as worker centers, have emerged in the past few decades to help build worker power and improve jobs. Other organizations, such as some of those involved in workforce development and community development finance, have only recently engaged in job quality work after realizing their mission could not be achieved unless job quality was addressed. Many organizations and institutions, however, remain on the sidelines of job quality, unclear or uncertain what their role should be.

The scale of the job quality problem will require a heightened awareness of the issues and potential levers for change. In this publication, we present what we learned from interviews with leaders of various types of organizations around the country working to improve job quality. We hope this information will be useful for various audiences. Community-based organizations, CDFIs, workforce and economic development organizations, local government agencies, and others working on poverty and economic mobility will gain insights into different job quality tactics and frameworks. Philanthropy, private investors, and policymakers will better understand the work of organizations tackling job quality, why it is important, and how they can best support it. Ultimately, we hope this research can move people to act, no matter what institution they are part of, and to join the coalition of actors aimed at ensuring every job is a good job.

Research Informing This Publication

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program has a 30-year-plus history of examining the challenges of work and economic advancement in America. Since the 1990s, we have been committed to identifying and advancing the ideas, policies, and strategies that improve economic stability and open avenues to advancement for low- and moderate-income workers in the US. During the early years of our work, we documented and developed the field of [sectoral workforce development strategies](#), a systems approach that focuses on changing a particular industry or set of industries within a labor market to support the success of workers and businesses together.²⁴

In the early years of our sector strategies work, we identified two approaches, one set of strategies focused on training and developing workers' skills to help them advance into better jobs and another focused on improving the jobs in industries with low job quality where pay, benefits, scheduling, and workplace conditions are substandard.

Throughout the early 2000s, we conducted applied research and learning demonstrations into sectoral strategies. We authored studies on raise the floor and build ladders approaches, including profiles of organizations such as [Cooperative Home Care Associates](#), a worker-owned cooperative aiming to improve the quality of jobs in homecare, as well as organizations like [Focus: HOPE](#), an organization in Detroit helping workers of color train for and access manufacturing jobs they had historically been excluded from. We facilitated nine national Sector Skills Academies that brought leading practitioners together over the course of a year to engage in peer learning and self-reflection to drive their work forward.

Although sectoral strategies had two different approaches, the focus on training and developing workers' skills became more of a focus for those in workforce and economic development but also for policymakers and philanthropy. As the recession of 2008 and 2009 hit, we began to see in the following years that the long-standing relationship between employers and employees was fundamentally shifting to put more risk on workers through nonstandard arrangements. A contributing factor was the rise of the fissured workplace, as David Weil coined it, whereby firms outsourced work to independent contractors and staffing agencies.²⁵ It became clearer to us that a deeper focus on fixing work and improving job quality was needed. Education would not fix the structural and systemic poverty and inequitable economy we saw.

Over the past decade and more, our work has focused on job quality. A foundational piece of our work on job quality dates to a paper published in 2014 titled [Raise the Floor and Build Ladders](#),²⁶ in which we defined the build ladders and raise the floor approaches.

Our work has grown in other ways too. We have hosted several dozen public conversations in the past decade that have brought together policymakers, practitioners, funders, business leaders, researchers,

24 Maureen Conway, Amy Blair, Steven L. Dawson, and Linda Dworak-Muñoz, "Sectoral Strategies for Low-Income Workers: Lessons from the Field," *Aspen Institute*, September 30, 2007, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/sectoral-strategies-low-income-workers-lessons-field/> (accessed May 9, 2025).

25 David Weil, "The Problem," *The Fissured Workplace*, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.fissuredworkplace.net/the-problem.php>.

26 Maureen Conway and Steven L. Dawson, "Raise the Floor and Build Ladders: Workforce Strategies Supporting Mobility and Stability," *Aspen Institute*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/raise-the-floor-and-build-ladders-workforce-strategies-supporting-mobility-and-stability/> (accessed May 9, 2025).

labor organizers, and others to examine the job quality challenges we face and ideas for change. We have looked at issues such as the minimum wage, workplace safety, benefits, scheduling, discrimination, on-the-job training, labor law reform, employee ownership, job quality for youth, as well as issues within specific industries such as retail and restaurant work. We have profiled many companies with high-road employment practices in recent years, as well as organizations that are tackling job quality.

In 2019, we [surveyed a variety of practitioners](#) about their job quality practices. Since then, we have seen a rising interest in job quality work among practitioners as they look to become more involved in fixing work. But common challenges such as funding and policy are still present.

We have also graduated three classes of national leaders from the [Job Quality Fellowship program](#).²⁷ Recently, we launched the [Job Quality Center of Excellence](#), which provides case studies, tools, research, and other resources to help advance this work. And we are currently engaged in a three-year learning demonstration aimed at understanding how business advisors at community development finance institutions (CDFIs) can influence the job quality practices of small businesses.

This project and the interviews we conducted are a direct extension of more than 30 years of work that we have done and continue to do at both the local and national levels to build understanding and galvanize action to address the challenge of economic opportunity in America.

Recognizing the Contributions of Labor Unions

The contributions that unions and labor organizing have provided to this body of work before we arrived at this present-day conversation are important to recognize. The language of job quality is relatively new, but the work is certainly not. Labor unions' efforts to organize workers and achieve collective bargaining have been at the forefront of this work for more than a century and have led to the most substantive and important changes to workers' wages and working conditions. Although worker organizers and unions might describe their work using different language, the goals are the same as what we discuss here, using all the tactics available to us to improve the jobs and quality of life of workers.

27 Aspen Institute, "Job Quality Fellowship," accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/job-quality-fellowship>.

Methodology

Our research team, in consultation with our partners and networks, identified a list of organizations focused on job quality, with special attention to making sure we had diversity in organizational type, geographic location, and job quality strategies used. We chose a mix of organizations that were newer to job quality work versus those with more experience and longer-track record of accomplishments. We also drew on respondents from our job quality survey as well as participants from our Job Quality Fellowship to recruit participants for interviews.

To this end, we identified and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 organizations of various types around the country in 2022 and 2023. Interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and explored a range of issues, including how organizations defined job quality, the motivations behind their work, the strategies they used, how race and gender equity fit into their work, partnerships, successes and challenges, the lessons they learned, and recommendations for others looking to positively affect job quality.

We coded qualitative data from the interviews to identify themes and patterns that we noticed across interviews. In addition to presenting the themes and findings from the interviews in this report, we draw on our previous research, experience, and observations of the job quality field to add context to this report.

Description of Interviewees

Table 1 provides an overview of the organizations interviewed for this project. For each organization, we spoke to someone who could tell us about the history, overarching strategy, and outcomes of their job quality work as well as what lessons and guidance they have for moving the work forward. Typically, our interviewees held a director title, for example executive director or policy director.

For each organization, we indicate their location of influence and a brief description of their work. Where initially we tried to categorize the organizations further such as by institutional type, some organizations are difficult to categorize. For example, while trying to make sure we had a sample that included people from different kinds of geographical landscapes, we created categories such as “urban” or “rural.” However, organizations like Coastal Enterprises work throughout the entire state of Maine, which includes doing focused work in both kinds of communities. Additionally, many of the organizations fit into the other organizational types. In fact, part of what makes some of these organizations exceptional and effective at improving job quality is that they can defy categorization in many respects.

TABLE 1

Organization	Location of influence	Organization description
Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute	27 states across the US	Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute focuses on improving job quality for direct care workers through workforce interventions, training, working with employers to create more supportive workplaces, and working at the local state and federal levels to advance policies that help create higher wages and better job quality for direct care workers.
Hot Bread Kitchen	New York City, NY	Hot Bread Kitchen creates economic opportunity through culinary job skills training, food entrepreneurship, and an ecosystem of support for individuals who face barriers to meaningful careers. The organization partners with a network of good food employers that offer flexibility, training, and opportunities for career and personal growth. They connect participants in their food career program with quality jobs in the food industry, including roles as bakers, cooks, servers, and kitchen managers.
Colorado Workforce Development Council	Colorado	The Colorado Workforce Development Council is a governor-appointed, public-private partnership with the purpose to advise, oversee, and integrate the work of the Colorado talent development network. The council's mission is to enhance and sustain a skills-based talent development network that meets the needs of employers, workers, job seekers, and learners for today and tomorrow.
Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College	Orangeburg and Calhoun counties in South Carolina	Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College is a community college that provides relevant training and education in a safe, diverse, flexible, and inclusive environment that promotes success and self-reliance for students and fosters economic development for the region they operate in South Carolina.

Project Equity	National	Project Equity helps businesses transition to employee ownership, securing liquidity and a fair sale price for the owner while helping employees build equity and a solid career path. They also work with other leaders in the field to advance policies and practices that scale employee ownership across the nation.
ARISE Chicago	Chicago, Illinois	ARISE Chicago is a worker center that partners with workers and faith communities to fight workplace injustice through education and organizing and advocating for public policy changes.
Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center	Illinois	The Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center is a manufacturing industry intermediary focused on improving manufacturers' performance in the Illinois manufacturing workforce. They provide support and break down skills and opportunity barriers.
ReWork the Bay	Bay Area California	ReWork the Bay is a collective table of leaders working in the fields of philanthropy, education and training, business, and economic justice. Their focus is on increasing the number of and access to quality jobs as well as increasing the availability of support systems to address basic needs that facilitate workers' ability to work.
Coastal Enterprises	Maine	Coastal Enterprises is a CDFI that works to build a more equitable economy by focusing on growing good jobs, livelihoods, and small business ownership while advancing a just transition to a climate-resilient future.
HCAP Partners	Southern California	HCAP Partners is a provider of mezzanine debt and private equity for underserved, lower-middle market companies throughout the United States. HCAP is an impact investor that is focused on improving job quality for frontline workers in ways that enhance business performance through its operational impact framework, the Gainful Jobs Approach™.
Employment Equity Learning and Action Collaborative	Detroit, Michigan	Employment Equity Learning and Action Collaborative is a learning collaborative in the University of Michigan School of Social Work that seeks to promote employment equity and economic opportunity for Detroiters through the creation of action-oriented work groups and research.
United Domestic Workers	California	United Domestic Workers is a union of more than 170,000 home care and family child-care providers in California. They fight the systemic injustice of care work historically being left out of labor protections provided to other fields through collective worker power.
Coalition of Immokalee Workers	The Fair Food Program farms operate in 20 states in the U.S., Chile and South Africa	The Coalition of Immokalee Workers is a worker-based human rights organization fighting human trafficking and gender-based violence, including sexual assault, at work. It is also recognized for pioneering the design and development of the worker-driven social responsibility paradigm, a worker-led, market-enforced approach to the protection of human rights in corporate supply chains.
The Industrial Commons	Western North Carolina	The Industrial Commons starts and incubates member- and community-owned businesses to erase generational poverty and build an inclusive economy for all Southern working-class people. They also work with manufacturing companies in their industry networks to support their job quality improvement efforts.
ICA Fund	San Francisco Bay Area	ICA Fund is a venture capital certified CDFI as well as a nonprofit that uses tools of venture capital to catalyze value in missed markets and transform communities. They work with underinvested entrepreneurs to help them grow the value of their businesses and create wealth for themselves and their employees.
Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP BIG STEP)	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	WRTP BIG STEP is a workforce intermediary based in Milwaukee connecting traditionally disenfranchised people to quality career opportunities through a sectoral partnership model that includes students, workers, employers, and convening organizations.

Fair Work Center	Seattle, Washington	Fair Work Center is a worker center where workers come together across industries to improve their working conditions and quality of life through education, organizing, and enforcement.
The Labor Innovations for the 21st Century (LIFT) Fund	National	The LIFT Fund is a collaboration between philanthropists and labor movement leaders aimed at combining philanthropic dollars and the mission of labor to put funding where it will most effectively amplify the voices of workers and address working conditions.
United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770	Los Angeles, California	United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 770 is a labor union that represents 31,000 workers from the Los Angeles area as part of a larger network of UFCW unions. Members believe in creating workplace democracies where they are fully empowered to shape the conditions and the nature of their work.
Organized Power in Numbers (Previously Unemployed Workers United)	North Carolina, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona	Organized Power in Numbers (OPIN) combines tried and true organizing tactics with top-of-the-line data and digital tools to build worker power in the South and Southwest, and to level up campaigns that reach millions. We win for workers, their families, and their communities.
Restaurant Opportunities Centers United	National	Restaurant Opportunities Centers United is a worker-led organization that builds restaurant workers' power to advocate for livable wages and workplaces that are fair, safe, inclusive, and accessible; pathways for advancement; and equitable benefits.
Temp Worker Justice	National	Temp Worker Justice is an organization dedicated to addressing the issues facing the millions of temporary workers in precarious employment through staffing agencies. They provide research, education, on-the-ground organizing, and legal support to empower workers and workers' organizations.

The Language of Job Quality:

How Organizations Define Good Jobs

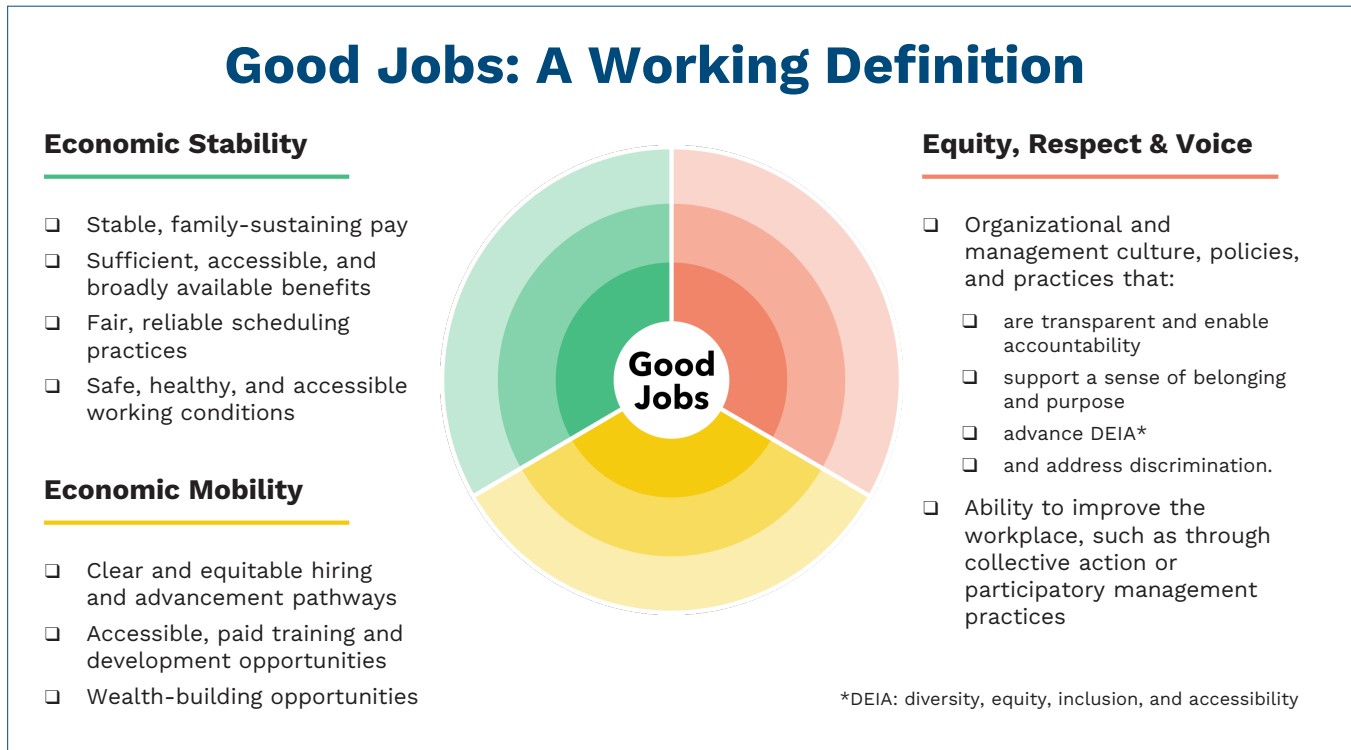
We investigated how organizations, those who explicitly view themselves as job quality practitioners, and those who do not usually see themselves as part of this field, define a good job. For some, the language of job quality is not yet comfortable; naming a job as “good” is easy, but naming a job as “bad” is more complex, carrying potential stigma. When we refer to a “bad job,” we do so to call out jobs that are low paying or insufficient in other ways in meeting the needs of workers, not to indicate that this work is not valuable or to place a value judgment on the workers who do those jobs. Job quality as a framework seeks to center the experiences workers have on the job and how jobs do or do not meet their needs. Further, job quality is a continuum — a wide variety of workplace policies, practices, and experiences may push a job further toward the “good” or “bad” end of that continuum. A perfect job does not exist, but job quality helps us understand the components of a job that make it better for workers and where to focus our energy in improving work.

In collaboration with the Families and Workers Fund, we have developed a working definition of a good job; while this definition was developed through extensive consultation with stakeholders in this field, we continue to build understanding of how others define this work. For the spectrum of organizations interviewed for this project, we wanted to understand what the term “job quality” means for them, as well as how elements of job quality show up in their work, even if they use different terms to define this work or are just beginning to view that work through the lens of job quality.

The Economic Opportunity Program’s Vision of Job Quality

The definition AspenEOP developed with the Families and Workers Fund as seen in Figure 1 rests on three pillars: economic security, economic mobility, and a workplace that fosters equity, respect, and voice. This definition holds that workers should have enough earnings and benefits to be economically stable, that they can grow and advance, and that their workplace is one that promotes dignity and equity.

FIGURE 1.



[Our Statement on Good Jobs](#)

The foundation of our definition of job quality is that all workers should have access to, and deserve, a good job — meaning a job that, at a minimum, meets their economic and social needs. As a framework for job quality, this definition focuses on changing the job, not people. The answer is not to move workers up the ladder of job quality, with the assumption that some workers must always be at the bottom and working a job that does not meet their needs.

Determining the precise metrics and benchmarks for what constitutes things such as family sustaining pay, or wealth building opportunities is often needed to operationalize definitions such as ours with workers and businesses. That work can be difficult and complex, but a definition helps start those conversations.

Despite differences in the language interviewees used to describe their work, we saw a broadly shared vision for what job quality, and improving jobs, requires and what it means for both workers and employers. In addition to differences in language, there are differences in priority, in part influenced by industry or place, but also influenced by which framework or theory of change the organization subscribes to, be that job quality or something else.

Organizational Job Quality Definitions

Our organizational job quality definition is purposefully broad to fit jobs across industries and geographies and to be a resource for a range of partners. This definition is meant to represent a shared goal. The definition may be too broad to be operationalized in the day-to-day job quality work of most organizations working in job quality — it lacks specificity for the workers, places, and employers affected. However, it offers a model for organizations to create their own customized, organizational definition of job quality. Starting from a shared framework in this definition, organizations can add detail and customization to fit their needs while staying aligned with each other and with the field. Several partners we talked to for this project have developed their own definitions of job quality. Of course, going through the process of creating such a customized definition can be time and resource intensive. When is having a customized definition helpful, and what should organizations keep in mind when creating a customized definition?

Of the organizations that have developed their own definitions of job quality, most developed these to more strategically target elements of job quality that are especially important for workers in their industries, sectors, or geographies. In addition, many of these organizations frequently work with businesses. Having an organization-specific job quality definition enables them to more effectively explain their work to these businesses and also provides a tool for evaluating job quality, a service several of these organizations offer their business partners.

Two organizations that have developed their own job quality definitions are PHI and Coastal Enterprises. Their definitions, seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3, are different and illustrate two approaches to creating a customized job quality definition. PHI's definition refers to five pillars of direct care job quality, which are quality training, fair compensation, quality supervision and support, respect and recognition, and real opportunity. Coastal Enterprises divides job quality into seven categories, which have obvious overlap with PHI's five pillars and clearly place different emphasis. Coastal Enterprise's Good Jobs Scorecard includes a living wage, paid time off, health benefits, retirement or wealth building, scheduling notice, performance reviews with opportunities for merit increases, and training and/or tuition access that positions someone for a promotion or wage increase. When discussing job quality in simpler terms, Coastal Enterprises uses three umbrella categories to summarize this scorecard: a living wage, basic benefits, and a fair and engaging workplace.

FIGURE 2.



[PHI's Job Quality Framework](#)

FIGURE 3.



[Coastal Enterprises' Good Jobs Framework](#)

PHI's work is focused on creating good jobs in the long-term care industry. Its definition is tailored to the specific circumstances and realities of direct care work, for example, highlighting supervision and support on the job. PHI has heard from direct care workers how important this is to them and has deep organizational knowledge in facilitating quality supervision, so it makes sense that this is highlighted in the organization's job quality definition. For other organizations serving workers in different industries, supervision

may be a less central priority and therefore not as explicitly named in a job quality definition. Coastal Enterprises, which advises small businesses in Maine across industries, has a broader definition that can translate across a wide range of jobs. The emphasis on basic benefits reflects the reality of their small business clients, who often struggle to put in place benefit programs as they expand. Although overlap exists between the definitions, there are differences in prioritization and in which components are grouped together.

In highlighting some components of job quality over others in their definitions, the organizations do not assert that some aspects of job quality are unimportant but rather that some are more relevant, urgent, or actionable for the work they do. For example, although PHI does not include benefits as a stand-alone umbrella category like Coastal Enterprises does, this is not because benefits are not a part of its overall vision for a good job. Rather, other components of job quality better describe the organization's current approach and focus. A representative of PHI at the time this research was conducted said, "We regularly interview direct care workers. Often, they won't bring up pay and benefits and number of hours right away. They'll first talk about just what it means to be ignored by their client's medical team. What it means for a family member to think that they're going to do everybody's laundry. It's these intangible levels of interpersonal disrespect that really stay with them." This prioritization of respect and creating a supportive work environment is clear in PHI's definition.

We also see this prioritization and highlighting of industry-specific aspects of job quality among organizations that focus on different business models such as those working with employee-owned companies. Project Equity is thinking about what good jobs are in the context of employee ownership, and their definition reflects this by including employee ownership as a stand-alone category, beside categories for financial opportunity, thriving workplace environment, and voice and agency. One reason Project Equity wanted to include employee ownership as its own category in their framework —instead of just discussing the impact of employee ownership on other job quality metrics in their framework — is that they view employee ownership as creating new pathways for improving job quality that often are not accessible at traditional companies. According to Project Equity, "Just the fact that you are now an owner opens up all of these other ways that you can influence job quality." Having employee ownership as its own category in the framework highlights its impact and potential for improving job quality, and it creates a working definition that fits Project Equity's work and mission.

Government agencies and bodies have also been more active in recent years in defining and operationalizing good jobs. The Colorado Workforce Development Council developed Colorado's job quality definition. Others, like the San Diego Workforce Partnership, are working at the city and local level to define job quality and integrate the definition into local economic and workforce development practice. Under the Biden administration, the Departments of Labor and Commerce combined efforts for the federal Good Jobs Principles, a big step forward for job quality as a field. While governmental action on job quality is not the focus of this research, which instead prioritizes practitioners outside of government, this increase in government support is promising and important—if it can be maintained.

Creating Job Quality Definitions with Worker Input

In discussing their definition of a good job, Organized Power in Numbers (OPIN), previously Unemployed Workers United, explicitly centers worker voice and how workers' own definitions of a good job are often left out of the conversation. For OPIN it was important to create a definition based on the experiences and needs of the workers they were trying to reach. Out of that came a three-part definition:

- A job that allows them to meet basic survival needs to cover their bills
- A job that allows them to have a good living, to move beyond paycheck to paycheck living and not just live to work
- A job with a sense of dignity and justice, where their voice is heard

OPIN emphasizes that workers need to be the ones creating priorities and definitions in job quality work, to create frameworks that work and to build a narrative that resonates.

One starting point for organizations seeking to develop their own definitions of job quality may be to take an existing definition, like the [Aspen Economic Opportunities Program & Families and Workers Fund definition](#),²⁸ and hold focus groups with workers. What parts of the definition resonate for them? What feels most urgent? What specific needs in their line of work, industry, or geography should be added for your organization's definition? See [AspenEOP's Guide for Leading Worker Focus Groups](#).²⁹

Informally Defining Job Quality

Other organizations articulated definitions of job quality that were less formalized. They do not have their own definitions or frameworks but talk about categories of job quality they consider important and prioritize in their work. Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United, for example, was still in the earlier stages of using job quality as a framework at the time of our interview. However, in discussing its approach and priorities, ROC United named job quality components featured in many other definitions, including wages, paid sick time, paid leave, and health insurance. It is also notably influenced by its position within the restaurant industry, referencing the need to enforce existing standards and reduce wage theft. Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College also does not have a specific job quality definition but touches on many aspects of job quality when discussing their approach to supporting students and employees, including living wages, opportunities for advancement, and benefits.

Although these organizations with less formal definitions do not use a specific job quality framework, there is significant overlap between the job quality elements they discussed and those centered in existing job quality definitions. Overall, there is agreement on what the components of a good job are and, when given the opportunity to talk about how they want to change jobs for the people they work with, organizations come back to the same ideas.

28 Aspen Institute, "Good Jobs Champions Group," accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/good-jobs-champions-group/>.

29 Jenny Weissbourd, Vivian Vázquez, Ranita Jain, Mohona Siddique, Amy Blair, and Yoorie Chang, *Centering Worker Voice in Employer Engagement and Program Design: A Guide for Workforce Organizations*, Aspen Institute, April 12, 2022, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/centering-worker-voice-in-employer-engagement-and-program-design-a-guide-for-workforce-organizations/> (accessed May 9, 2025).

For many organizations in this category who informally discuss job quality but have not decided on a framework or definition they subscribe to, we would recommend engaging in that decision process. By having a formalized definition, either by adopting an existing job quality framework or by creating their own organizational definition, organizations can be more specific when discussing job quality and when integrating job quality into their work. Having a formalized definition is also a helpful tool when educating organizational stakeholders on the importance of job quality and its relevance to the organization. Going through this process can also often lead organizations to look internally and examine their own job quality practices.

Resources for Creating Job Quality Definitions

Both interviewees with and without formal definitions reference other organizations whose definitions or resources have helped shape their understanding of job quality. Several organizations interviewed rely on the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](https://livingwage.mit.edu)³⁰ to ground their understanding of wages and compensation. Others reference frameworks come from the [Good Jobs Institute](https://goodjobsinstitute.org/),³¹ and the [Job Design Hierarchy](https://www.thepinkertonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Pinkerton-Papers-No6-Dawson-WEB-FINAL.pdf)³² created by Steven Dawson and published by The Pinkerton Foundation.

Alternatives to Job Quality Terminology

Some interviewees articulate their organization's approach to improving workers' jobs but do not use "job quality" as a term or framework or use it only in specific contexts. Organizations that consult or advise businesses may frame the challenges as being related to talent recruitment and retention or job design.

Organizations rooted in the labor movement, including unions and worker centers that rely on terminology related to working conditions and rights use other language too. Although the language these organizations use to describe desired outcomes for workers is different, the outcomes themselves largely overlapped with those articulated by organizations using job quality terminology. According to United Domestic Workers (UDWA), "Our work is cut out for us, but it's work that follows the trajectory of dignifying all care work and bringing it into what you would call job quality and I would call worker power." The tactics that organizations use to achieve their desired outcomes are different — the role of unions to organize workers and achieve binding standards are on way — but many practitioners we interviewed consider the desired outcomes to be the same.

For some organizations, when to use job quality language is a strategic choice. Leadership at ARISE discussed the terminology the organization uses for its different audiences; job quality terminology is useful during conversations with funders, but it is not how ARISE describes its work otherwise:

For us, job quality is not really a term or frame that we have been using. It wasn't organic to the way we saw the work. Terms like justice, dignity and power resonate with workers and galvanize organizing efforts. However, we have, in specific conversations, adopted that phrase or rhetoric, primarily with funders who have started to use it.... We do see it as useful in conversations, primarily with funders, as an alternative to what traditionally has been workforce development as a frame.

30 Amy K. Glasmeier, *Living Wage Calculator*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, <https://livingwage.mit.edu> (accessed May 9, 2025).

31 Good Jobs Institute homepage, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://goodjobsinstitute.org/>.

32 Steven L. Dawson, "Now or Never: Heeding the Call of Labor Market Demand," *The Pinkerton Papers*, Job Quality Series No. 6, September 2017), <https://www.thepinkertonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Pinkerton-Papers-No6-Dawson-WEB-FINAL.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2025).

Several organizations that operate within the labor movement expressed frustrations with traditional workforce development frameworks, which can, even inadvertently, place blame on workers for not getting the training or help to move into higher-paid jobs with better conditions. The job quality framework aligns more closely with these organizations' vision of improving working conditions because it emphasizes the need for good jobs for all workers and acknowledges the importance of changing jobs that fall short of workers' needs.

A few organizations also forgo job quality language in favor of language focused on broader rights and responsibilities. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers uses a human rights framework, in which creating good jobs is important but in the context of providing workers with legally binding protections, empowering workers to be frontline monitors of their own rights, and to access remedy when those rights are violated.

Many organizations that use language other than job quality terminology focus on legal protections and enforcement of labor standards, work that often comes with its own more specific legal vocabulary. Although legal protections and enforcement of labor standards are part of the job quality framework, these are less explicitly named in many of the job quality definitions we encountered. This is likely because job quality frameworks are focused largely on broader outcomes — the elements of a job that need to be improved — and not on the actions taken to achieve these outcomes or the stakeholders involved in achieving them. This dynamic helped shape the research in this publication, which aims to understand the different tactics organizations use to achieve job quality outcomes, as discussed in the subsequent sections of this report.

Why Organizations Focus on Job Quality

The organizations interviewed for this research focus on improving job quality for many reasons. Some are rooted in the labor movement and are continuing that legacy, whereas others are relatively new to this area of work, coming to it after observing various issues such as wage stagnation, the lack of a fair return for workers' skills, and the urgency of race and gender equity. For some, the focus grew out of something quite simple — listening to their worker constituents' experiences. Many organizations, of course, have numerous reasons for focusing on job quality, and motivations can change or grow as the work deepens. What is clear from our interviews is that all the organizations are committed to creating a fairer economy.

To Expand Worker Power

Labor unions and other worker advocacy groups, as noted earlier, have been engaged in this work for some time and have goals to build worker power. In California, unions, like UDWA and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 770, have long traditions and legacies that have carried forward to the present. Cesar Chavez founded UDWA, whereas UFCW 770 traces its origins back to the 1930s, when a group of grocery workers banded together to form a union. These organizations are motivated by efforts to rebalance the power between capital and labor. Worker power is the means by which job quality can be improved. The work of these organizations is determined by the voices of the workers they represent. A UFCW 770 leader stated, “Developing our priorities and our issues is worker led.”

To Combat the Recent Rise in Precarious and Low-Wage Work

Several interviewees indicated their organizational focus on job quality arose out of an increase in low-wage and precarious work in recent years. Focus group conversations with workers raised the awareness of Employment Equity Learning and Action Collaborative's (EELAC) and Hot Bread Kitchen of negative trends in job quality. Other organizations such as the HCAP Partners, an impact fund and growth capital provider to underserved businesses, saw the economy shifting too, with the rise of gig work “stripping away of benefits...outside of income.” In response, HCAP pivoted away from only thinking about job creation and began to center on job quality.

The prevalence of temporary worker subcontracting across sectors, which can reduce job quality, inspired Temp Work Justice to act. Traditional labor unions were unable to take on the unique challenge of organizing temporary workers, the organization found. Picking up on work undertaken by previous organizers and advocates, Temp Worker Justice positioned itself as a voice for this group of precarious workers. It has partnered with a network of advocates and funders from the beginning to have a national footprint.

To Make Skills Pay

Numerous interviewees noted a desire to ensure workers received meaningful compensation for their skills. This was a theme that cut across organization types, from unions to advocates to funders. Some workforce organizations recognized a growing need to focus on job quality because their job placement efforts were leading workers to low-quality positions. A leader at Hot Bread Kitchen remarked:

I think there was a lot of tension around some of the job placements that we made and not feeling like we were really in service of our members' interest.... And so we decided, well, maybe, we can actually do something to change these workplaces and make them better environments and relieve some of that tension that we feel internally around that.

Some organizations were motivated by a desire to combat the narratives about a “skills gap” and “lazy workers.” A clarifying moment for Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) | BIG STEP, came when the media reported that businesses could not find workers because no one wanted to work. An executive at WRTP explained:

It was so dissonant to what we were experiencing on the ground to hear that there were, first of all, no workers, which we know not to be true, and that people didn't want to work, which we also knew not to be true. And that really catalyzed us to start thinking about how can we change that narrative?

“Then we started talking about, this isn't about worker deficiency,” the executive at WRTP continued. “This isn't about, well, there's something wrong with people, it's something wrong with the market, there's something wrong with the job, with the employer.”

As a labor union, UFCW 770 has always been focused on job quality, but priorities shifted during the COVID pandemic. Its work on wages intensified due to hazardous working conditions faced by workers. The union secured for its members a pay raise of several dollars an hour, which meant that workers improved their housing and food security.

To Improve Worker Dignity, Human Rights and Quality of Life

Interviewees saw a need to improve working conditions to better support the quality of life of employees and their families. Practitioners described a need to create workplaces where workers are seen as whole people — as human beings with a set of needs and wants beyond the workplace.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, which initially advocated for the rights of agricultural laborers in the eponymous Florida community, organizes workers at the bottom of the food and other supply chains to advocate for job quality outside the traditional union framework. Work began in the 1990s in response to wage theft, safety concerns, and other labor and human rights abuses. In Chicago, ARISE began as a nonprofit focused on bringing together faith groups to build solidarity with organized labor. In the early 2000s, a new wave of immigrant workers not affiliated with labor unions began reaching out to them. “They were unorganized workers who were experiencing extreme forms of oppression and exploitation on the job,” according to leadership at ARISE. This motivated the organization to start a new worker center in 2002 focused on immigrant workers in low-wage sectors.

EELAC in Detroit put worker dignity at the center of its work following conversations and focus groups with workers. “Workers want a better relationship with their supervisors,” EELAC learned through focus groups. “They want to contribute” and have flexibility “because life is not easy, especially if you're a single mother.” But companies must “look at the whole person and care about that person.”

Several other interviewees described the importance of addressing workers' quality of life, including their family obligations. Workers need power and flexibility in setting their schedules, which affects their ability to take care of family members, for example.

To Promote New Economic and Workforce Development Strategies

Job quality is a means to strengthen communities and the local economies, explained some interviewees. Morganton, North Carolina, for example, was experiencing an exodus of its younger population. Founders of The Industrial Commons, who grew up in the community, saw that the traditional approach to economic development was not working for the region, with a low median income and a high poverty rate. The founders wanted to revitalize their community and create a more equitable economy that addressed generational poverty. They believe that combining the community's existing manufacturing and textile resources with local ownership, especially worker cooperatives, will build a stronger working class and regional economy that works for all.

The Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) realized that focusing on job quality is essential to the work of public-private organizations intended to strengthen economic development. In Colorado, CWDC had been tasked with filling gaps in talent, which were present even before the COVID-19 pandemic. To address talent shortages, CWDC focuses on “the actual design and the quality of the jobs themselves,” Renise Walker, Assistant Director of Systems Innovation at a leader at the CWDC stated. The Council's job quality work “sits at the intersection of workforce development and economic development,” Walker explained, “so part of what we would say, in Colorado, is that it's also important to be attracting and helping develop good quality jobs.”

Some organizations also see job quality work as a key part of workforce development, but one in which that focuses beyond some of the traditional measures of job placement. ReWork the Bay, an initiative hosted by the San Francisco Foundation, undertook a project, Building Worker Power in Workforce Development, that pairs worker organizers with workforce development organizations to ensure that students learn both job skills and how to assert themselves in the workplace to improve job quality.

To Strengthen Business Performance and Competitiveness

A new approach to economic development also often coincides with new ways to help businesses be successful. Alongside supporting worker well-being, some organizations focus on job quality in part as a strategy to strengthen business performance. IMEC found that traditional economic development alone would not realize shared benefits for businesses and workers and began integrating job quality strategies into its work. For IMEC, this means:

improving manufacturers' performance by reducing turnover through inclusive cultures and expanding talent pipelines. So we're committed to providing support, investing in, and also breaking down or taking down some of the skills and opportunity barriers that exist for the workforce.... Both from a competitive lens of the business as well as opportunity for the workforce.

Improve Race and Gender Equity

People of color and women make up a disproportionate number of low-wage workers and are also overrepresented among workers who face other challenges such as unstable scheduling. The leaders working to improve job quality interviewed for this report are widely cognizant of the equity issues, and many reported that equity drives their work and strategy. We take a deep dive into how organizations think about and operationalize equity later in this report.

Job Quality Tactics and Strategies

The organizations we spoke to demonstrate dedication to improving working conditions in the US. Job quality tactics are not a one-size-fits-all approach, however. Each organization has chosen a path toward addressing job quality based on various factors including its regional and industrial context and using the unique resources and expertise available to them. Through all our interviews, we received detailed accounts about what tactics organizations use, the reason for choosing these tactics, and what outcomes they have seen as a result.

We identified 11 tactics the organizations use to address job quality. Tactics are never operationalized alone but are part of a multipronged approach used in combination with other tactics. In some cases, our interviewees mentioned using tactics that blurred the lines among tactics or defied categorization altogether. The 11 tactics highlighted throughout our report are defined as follows:

TABLE 2

Tactic	How tactic is leveraged to support job quality
Worker organizing	Supporting workers joining together to build collective power to influence job quality and their quality of life
Community organizing and other coalition building	Organizing other critical stakeholders such as community members, consumers, high-road businesses, and others to promote job quality
Legal agreements, co-enforcement, and litigation	Using legal agreements, such as project labor agreements and community benefits agreements, to improve job quality standards; other legal strategies include helping enforce labor law and using litigation to address labor law and other legal violations that diminish job quality
Research	Developing and synthesizing data, information, and evidence that illustrate job quality challenges and successes through the experiences and outcomes of workers and businesses
Policy development and advocacy	Influencing federal, local, and state policies that affect workers' job quality and firms' ability to provide quality jobs
Demonstrating high-road employment	Operating or promoting a business or social enterprise to demonstrate that good jobs in a particular industry can be achieved
Employee ownership	Advancing the ability of workers to own a part of or all of the firm, often resulting in greater power and influence over job quality and working conditions
Training and education	Education and training efforts that improve workers' job satisfaction, safety, participation, and knowledge of their rights
Business coaching	Advising and coaching firms on job quality improvements for their workforce
Financial incentives	Providing businesses with financial incentives and support in adopting job quality improvements
Grantmaking	Philanthropic investments in strategies and efforts with the intent of improving workers' jobs and supporting high-road employers

Worker Organizing

The collective power of workers is one of the most impactful tools of the organizations we interviewed. Workers coming together to influence job quality is at once a tactic for raising awareness of the issue and a manner by which collective action can be taken to address them. Several kinds of institutions use this tactic, including labor unions, worker centers, and other worker advocacy organizations. Still, the structures and ways that workers organize within these organizations are varied. Direct actions, worker committees, and collective bargaining are just three ways that workers organize and often include other job quality tactics such as policy, advocacy, and legal strategies.

Labor unions such as UDWA and UFCW, in addition to some of the methods mentioned like collective action and policy campaigns, are also uniquely able to collectively bargain for legally binding solutions for workers. Different from nonprofits, labor unions are legal entities protected by federal law; therefore, the legal framework offered by workers' right to collectively bargain provides unique opportunities for change that other job quality strategies do not. Staff at UDWA, mentioned this responsibility of the labor union among all other approaches in the job quality field: "I appreciate job quality because it starts the conversation with employers, but it's up to us to organize, to win contracts, win higher wages, so that employers are contractually obligated, legally obligated, to pay better wages, and for there to be time off and health insurance. It's like a 'both and' approach."

Worker centers like ARISE Chicago, ROC United, and Washington's Fair Work Center organize workers outside of a traditional union structure. Without the right to collectively bargain with employers for better working conditions, they use other methods such as providing resources on workers' rights, running worker-led advocacy campaigns and actions, and occasionally pursuing labor violation lawsuits or other forms of legal action.

ARISE mentions an organizing win that happened at the height of the pandemic when a group of workers at El Milagro Tortilla factory were ravaged by COVID-19 and working overtime to keep up with production expectations. They organized through ARISE to address their working conditions. Through a work stoppage, a campaign that included workers from the factories conducting press conferences, as well as submitting complaints to various government agencies, workers won raises across the board, air-conditioning repair for the factories, and an end to the illegal practice of scheduling workers to work seven days in a row at one of the plants.

Organizations such as Organized Power in Numbers, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and Temp Worker Justice also organize workers. Through our interviews with them, we heard about a combination of methods, including protest, bringing workers' committees together to drive campaigns, and using research as a tool for building awareness as well as for organizing more workers.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers created their Fair Food Program (FFP), which partners with major retail buyers of agricultural products and legally binds them to buy preferentially from suppliers that comply with the program's Code of Conduct, which covers all aspects of workers' employment and employer-provided housing. The Coalition does not negotiate with individual growers or employers; rather they seek to enforce industry-wide standards for decent working conditions. The program also ensures that workers receive a Fair Food Premium, as a separate line-item bonus in their paychecks. From 2010 to 2025, workers received over \$50 million in bonuses, based on premium paid by the program's participating buyers according to Coalition staff. The Fair Food Standards Council (FFSC), the independent third-party monitoring organization of the program, maintains a database detailing all audits, worker complaints, investigations and resolutions carried out by the organization.

Organized Power in Numbers uses worker committees in local areas to steer the organization's campaigns. An executive at OPIN said, "The worker committee really becomes the heart and soul of the campaign. Those are the workers that we work with that are willing to speak to the media about what's going on, that are willing to speak to elected officials as we're pushing for policy change, which is what we're doing in Houston. And they're also the ones that we consult with about what our demands, what we can really do to make a difference. And we work with them to figure out what that looks like in each city."

Community Organizing and Other Coalition Building

Outside of organizing workers, many interviewees engage in and build coalitions to improve job quality among other stakeholder groups. At The Industrial Commons in North Carolina, for example, the organization is engaged in deeper community engagement efforts. Part of this work is targeted at youth and engaging them in thinking about the future of work in the community, environmental justice, and community development.

Some of the organizations interviewed have deliberate strategies aimed at organizing coalitions of employers with high-road employment practices. The Industrial Commons also organizes textile companies with shared values into networks that develop joint job quality standards and examine ways of collaborating with one another. Restaurant Opportunities Centers United has also developed a coalition of more than 1,000 high-road restaurant employers who can advocate for policy change and serve as a proof point that quality jobs can exist in the restaurant sector.

Consumers are another stakeholder group that some job quality organizations aim to engage in supporting their work. ROC United has developed various consumer-facing materials and communication strategies to encourage consumers to eat at high-road restaurants that provide good jobs and advocate for changes when they see restaurants taking the low road.

Legal Agreements, Co-enforcement, and Litigation

Job quality practitioners help enforce labor law and take legal action when labor law is broken. Staff at UFCW 770 succinctly put it, "Policy is just a piece of paper" without enforcement. The Fair Work Center, for example, appreciates the strength of state and local worker protections. But the Center sees a shortage of legal representation willing to take on low-wage workers' cases because "they're not worth enough money." The Center noted, too, that most enforcement is complaint-driven, not proactive, due in part to under-resourced government agencies. Some people feel the government is not looking out for them or they previously had bad experiences. The result is an unwillingness to raise complaints about labor violations, like wage theft.

Practitioners engage in litigation to ensure workers benefit from the labor standards they are guaranteed under law. The Fair Work Center hosts an in-house legal team that represents workers, focusing on industries where it finds labor standards underenforced. Funding from the city Office of Labor Standards is important to building out a labor enforcement ecosystem, explained leadership at the Fair Work Center. The office distributes several million dollars in funding to community-based organizations that perform outreach and education on labor standards. Doing so prepares workers to come forward when a violation occurs — a necessary first step for litigation. Similarly, ROC United houses a workplace enforcement program called Workplace Justice that works to ensure that employers abide by labor standards. The program counts among its successes the recovery of earnings lost to wage theft in the restaurant industry. ARISE

also views partnerships as an important part of its legal strategy, partnering with government agencies to pursue “co-enforcement” of local worker protections, such as paid time off and minimum wage laws.

Worker organizing often goes together with legal action, practitioners emphasized. It is necessary, explained ROC United and UDWA, for raising workers’ awareness of their legal rights and in the creation of labor laws. One goal of organizing, ROC United and ARISE agreed, is to enforce existing law and policy. In Michigan, for instance, ROC United used litigation to fight for a minimum wage increase. Despite voters approving a ballot initiative to raise the minimum wage, the state legislature attempted to weaken it, after the fact. In response, ROC United helped organize workers to act and become plaintiffs for the lawsuit.

Some job quality practitioners use proactive legal strategies to help improve jobs. These include project-labor and community benefits or workforce agreements during large public projects and investments. These agreements often affect large construction or development projects, helping set legally binding standards and goals related to hiring, wages, and other community outcomes. WRTP | BIG STEP in Milwaukee has played a key role in shaping and implementing these agreements over the past several years. The organization often serves as a first-source organization whereby contractors and unions work through WRTP | BIG STEP to identify, train, and hire local residents for community projects, ensuring that large investments benefit the community directly.

Using Market Power and Legally Binding Contracts to Enforce Labor and Human Rights Standards

Although not a union contract, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers uses legally binding agreements with retail buyers at the top of the food supply chain to enforce covered growers’ adherence to a set of labor standards for their workers. The Coalition works with buyers to set and enforce certain labor standards for the producers with whom they engage, with “market consequences” for violations. This is a proactive rather than a reactive approach, emphasized the Coalition’s representatives. There is a complaint line for workers, worker-to-worker education, and audits. “And so,” they explained, “it’s essentially a crowdsourcing process that chips away at all the problems over time by giving each individual worker the power of the buyers to identify problems...to complain about those problems and have them be seen through until it’s changed.” Asbed continued, “You have to change the economic incentive.... You have to make abuses cost something.”

Research

Research can be an invaluable tactic for getting a clearer picture of the inequitable dynamics potentially at play in a workplace or labor market. At Calhoun Technical College, leadership saw that manufacturers with whom the college partners were having difficulty finding and retaining workers, suggesting poor job quality. In response, the college commissioned a wage study, which found the manufacturers underpaid for certain positions. The college completed subsequent studies to monitor such trends, in the interest of giving employers the information they need to set their wages at a level that attracts and retains talent and to improve wages for graduating students. College leadership explained how this study proved effective: “That Advanced Manufacturing Consortium was a form of peer pressure...they were able to see firsthand how they compared to their peers in terms of salary and opportunity, and it forced them to make some changes.”

The college has also turned its job quality work inward. An executive at the college explained, “We knew that the salaries for our physical plant staff, custodial staff were too low. And for us, to be an institution of higher learning and have people not having a sustainable wage was an issue for us.” The college has raised wages as a result and has committed to continuing its internal job quality efforts.

Research that gathers information on the experiences and perspectives of workers is also an important aspect of this tactic because workers are closest to the problems this field seeks to address. EELAC, based at the University of Michigan School of Social Work, is a collaborative learning effort of member organizations in the Detroit region invested in promoting equity and economic opportunity. EELAC’s greater understanding of what it would take to promote equity and economic opportunity in Detroit came through conducting 13 focus groups with workers to learn about their experiences.

EELAC Learns from Workers

“The focus groups really tipped it for us in the direction of promoting job quality. When we heard from people about their goals and aspirations and what was meaningful in past work experiences and what they’re looking for in employment and a career, that’s what really nailed it for us. It was like an ‘a-ha’ moment. It turned our orientation from looking at how the system operates as a whole to looking at what we can do specifically to improve the conditions of the individual worker. Job quality was just that direct link to improving the well-being of workers...and we just saw it so clearly during those focus groups.”

This centering of workers’ perspectives in job quality research is a theme among those interviewed. In the case of UFCW, workers were involved at the inception of the research project. Staff at UFCW said, “If you want essential workers to be a part of your study, you need essential workers and the unions that support these workers to be at the design at the outset.... We can run all the models all day long, we can do all the lit reviews, and we can pull in all this theoretical framework and that’s all great and good, but everything has to be centered on workers first.”

Research can also be a collaborative effort. ReWork the Bay is an organization that works with a wide variety of partners to better understand the current state of job quality in their local area. They specifically cited partnerships with community colleges, workforce development boards, and worker organizers to survey workers, with the aim of better understanding their needs and building functional definitions of job quality that are based on workers’ experiences.

Temp Worker Justice also described research partnerships, collaborating with academics, policy experts, and worker advocates to conduct research that not only helps them learn more about workers’ needs but also helps them better understand the industries they work within and how legislation could be targeted to improve jobs. For organizations like Temp Worker Justice, who work in a more specific corner of the job market, research can be a vital tool; there is not as much existing data on temporary workers and conducting its own research arms the organization with evidence to use in addressing job quality.

Policy Advocacy and Development

Job quality practitioners, especially organizers, also involve themselves in policy development and advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. These organizations often provide a channel for incorporating

workers' voices into agenda setting and policy development. In addition, some practitioners educate businesses and workers about what new policies mean for them, following enactment.

Several organizations highlighted their role in setting a job quality policy agenda that is rooted in workers' experiences and fills gaps in current labor law, especially federal equal opportunity law and the Fair Labor Standards Act. Temp Worker Justice, ReWork the Bay, and ROC United each frame their work with a bill of rights. ReWork the Bay's bill of rights, called the Essential Workers Agenda, lays out four pillars on which specific local policy campaigns in the Bay Area will be built: paid leave, voice and respect, the right to organize, and training with pathways to quality jobs and advancement. The bills of rights crafted by Temp Worker Justice and ROC United, on the other hand, are intended to be legislative proposals for the state and federal levels, respectively. In each instance, however, practitioners engaged workers through surveys and interviews, incorporating their voices into the policy agenda.

In addition to setting the tone, practitioners seek to influence the crafting of regulations and policies. ROC United, for example, facilitated 2,000 workers submitting comments on proposed regulations concerning tipped worker scheduling and heat standards. A leader at ROC explained:

We provided workers with not a template, but sort of a sense of the type of comments that would be useful so that these were their organic comments that they're writing. We set up a space for them to put those comments down, put their names down, their contact information, and then we walked it over to the regulatory agencies so that it wasn't just going directly into the agency, but it was coming through us until we were able to organize those workers and to maintain contact with them, get them more involved in the organization.

Practitioners have differing approaches to undertaking policy work. UDWA, UFCW, and PHI, among other organizations representing historically marginalized workers, emphasize the importance of grounding work in an understanding of historical and political forces that resulted in the labor of some groups, notably women and people of color, to be undervalued. Coastal Enterprises, a CDFI, identified a need to educate businesses on the impact of new policy. For example, after Maine passed a paid leave law, the CDFI ran webinars explaining the policy and worked with businesses, especially smaller ones, to change their policies to help them comply with the new law. When Maine passed retirement savings legislation, Coastal Enterprises business advisors also facilitated workshops for workers to help them understand how to build financial wealth and separate sessions for employers on their obligations.

Finally, practitioners spoke of the importance of identifying policy windows and promising channels for intervention. Organized Power in Numbers, for example, targeted Harris County for a policy campaign on contracting because it believed that the progressive elected leadership of its government would be willing to take action to improve practices. OPIN believed establishing such standards in Harris County would be a steppingstone to improving contracting practices in the county's — and Texas's — largest city, Houston. The organization compiled a set of recommendations for the county, largely derived from conversations with workers, covering wages, anti-discrimination, transparency, and reporting on meeting federal equity targets in contracting.

The Importance of Strategic Communications and Narrative

Practitioners noted the importance of strategic communications capacity and the ability to share compelling narratives in their advocacy, coalition building, and worker organizing efforts. In the fight to win hearts and minds among the public and other stakeholders, job quality practitioners can bolster their work by building this capacity to counter the arguments of large businesses, industry associations, lobbying groups, and policy makers that may push back on the need to improve job quality. The UFCW saw a need to drive a narrative on the issues workers faced during the pandemic as opposed to letting the perspective of businesses dominate the discourse. UFCW staff explained that the union hired a crisis communication firm:

“...so that COVID was squarely centered around worker issues and what workers faced on the job and what their lives looked like outside the home — with so many people devastated with job losses — and around their priorities.... I think we did a really effective job at not allowing business and the business frame to proliferate. I’m really proud of that.”

Demonstrating High-Road Employment

Some industries and sectors with the lowest-quality jobs lack examples of high-road businesses that show quality jobs can be achieved. Without a high-road business example as a proof point, job quality advocates may struggle to gain support because no alternative to the low-road models is present. Organizations working on job quality often promote high-road business models with business partners that provide good jobs, and some have started social enterprise businesses in cases such as these to show that a different model that treats workers well is possible. High-road models can help demonstrate the return-on-investment of good jobs and motivate other businesses to make changes.

Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA), for example, launched in the 1980s to create decent jobs for people with low incomes working in home care. Today, CHCA is one of the largest employee-owned companies in the US. CHCA is known for providing jobs better than the industry standard with higher-quality training, employee ownership, and a range of workforce supports such as case management and assistance with asset building. As CHCA began, it launched its nonprofit affiliate organization, PHI, to focus more on research, policy advocacy, and regulatory and systems change within the industry. PHI also provides employer-based training and consulting to help home care businesses adopt better job quality practices. Because PHI’s work is informed and supported through the experience of CHCA, the organization has a strong understanding of the industry and real-world experience in how employers can adapt practices that make jobs better.

Employee Ownership

Employee ownership, including employee stock ownership plans, worker-owned cooperatives, and employee ownership trusts, have been associated with higher job quality. These different forms of ownership provide different opportunities for improving jobs, but overall, are a strategy that can help workers have more agency and voice in the workplace and achieve greater returns for their labor. About a fifth of the organizations we spoke with discussed advancing employee ownership as part of their approach. For a few organizations, growing employee ownership is their priority and focus, and they see it as the path to improving job quality.

Project Equity in California promotes employee ownership through various strategies. According to an executive leader at Project Equity at the time this research was conducted, “Ownership as the first piece brings with it all of these other things, kind of automatically, including voice and agency.” Project Equity’s employee ownership strategy draws on other job quality strategies. It conducts research on the benefits and challenges of employee ownership to educate practitioners in the employee ownership ecosystem. The research also supports education and advocacy work, which includes raising awareness of employee ownership to various stakeholders, including philanthropy, community-based organizations, and local, state, and federal policymakers. Project Equity works on the ground, providing technical assistance, financing, and other resources to start-ups, mature employee-owned companies, and businesses converting to employee ownership. They provide long-term support and consulting to organizations that have recently converted to employee ownership to help them continue to improve job quality and create or improve on creating participatory workplace cultures.

The Industrial Commons in rural North Carolina uses worker-owned cooperatives to advance a more equitable form of economic development in the region. The Industrial Commons currently has four member- or community-owned cooperatives it has launched or is incubating. These companies serve as examples of what a different approach to jobs can be in the textile industry. But the Industrial Commons also advises and collaborates with nonemployee-owned companies in the textile industry in the region, taking key principles from cooperatives such as worker participation and involvement, and collaborating with companies to adopt those into their workplace.

Other organizations do not solely focus on employee ownership but see it as an integral part of their job quality strategy. Organizations involved in business coaching or investment have woven employee ownership into their practices. ICA Fund, a community development finance institution with a mission to catalyze the growth of underinvested small businesses, promotes employee ownership through its investment practices. ICA Fund has been innovative in this regard, creating a financial tool, the [ICA Impact Note](#), that allows firms ICA has invested in to receive financial incentives when they achieve job quality milestones, including milestones that are co-created with the firm around employee ownership. The note is also used to promote professional development, shared management, and inclusion practices among companies they fund. By progressing toward predetermined goals, such as the diversity of company leadership and management, companies earn back their ownership stake from ICA.

HCAP Partners, a growth capital provider to lower middle market companies and Small Business Investment Corporation focused on impact investing, provides mezzanine debt and private equity to businesses interested in advancing a good jobs strategy to achieve business results, known as the Gainful Jobs Approach™. This approach also weaves in elements of employee ownership by promoting broad-based participation, which may include some form of employee ownership such as stock options or profit sharing. HCAP advises and works with its portfolio companies in finding opportunities to provide broad-based participation to employees.

Training and Education

Although workforce training efforts are often geared toward helping individuals develop skills to advance to a higher-paying job, job quality practitioners use training and education to improve workers’ current jobs. This type of training and education can focus on a variety of knowledge and skills. Safety training, such as Occupational Safety and Health Act certifications, help workers stay safe and avoid injuries. Training on safety and creating safe work environments is a core focus of IMEC.

Autonomy and the ability to succeed in one's job are important aspects of job quality and job satisfaction. PHI provides direct-care workers with a range of training so that home care workers feel equipped and have the confidence to manage the tough demands and challenges of care work. Home care workers with clients who have unique challenges due to issues such as dementia or diabetes can receive specialized training so they can be successful in providing customized and quality care.

Training in a firm's finances and performance such as open-book management can help increase workers' involvement in decision making and lead to higher engagement and satisfaction. The Industrial Commons provides open-book management training to workers to help them understand their role as owners and to equip them to play a larger role in shaping their firm's strategies.

Education on workers' rights and labor law helps support workers in knowing their legal rights and what to do when those rights are violated. The Fair Work Center in Seattle, for example, is contracted by the Office of Labor Standards at the City of Seattle to conduct outreach and provide "Know Your Rights" training. At ARISE in Chicago, the organization provides public education workshops on worker rights where workers can hear and learn from their peers about the violations they have encountered. This serves as an opportunity for workers to learn their rights but also an opportunity to help workers build relationships and organize for change. Labor unions such as UFCW 770 provide education on worker rights, the history of unions and organized labor, and issues of equity as part of their efforts to build solidarity, organize, and build support for policy change.

Some training to improve jobs and the experience of front-line workers is aimed at supervisors and managers. These trainings can include understanding diversity, equity, and inclusion practices, effective communication, participatory management, and supporting front-line workers.

Workforce Development and Job Quality Strategies

Most traditional workforce development strategies fall outside of our definition of work that improves job quality. Improving job quality is about changing the conditions of a job, whereas workforce development is often focused on giving workers new training or opportunities to seek out a better job. However, in interviews, we saw some convergence between workforce development and business coaching, especially from organizations that are trying to implement or improve training opportunities for workers by helping employers understand the importance of training. Interventions that seek to improve training may help employers better understand workers' needs, both in terms of career advancement and training but also in other areas of job quality.

EELAC shared one program where workforce development and business coaching are combined: "We are working with a health care partner locally where we're working with a cohort of incumbent workers and we're working on supporting their education attainment, their participation in training and apprenticeship programs, and their career advancement within the health system. In doing that, it's not just introducing an opportunity and plugging them into the training program, it's changing the culture of the health system so that it is supportive of employees' advancement."

Several interviewees also discussed apprenticeships as a way to improve job quality by creating stronger pathways to advancement. As an earn-and-learn model, apprentices can earn a wage while learning their trade or occupational skills at the same time, eliminating the trade-off many workers must make to work or go to school. WRTP | BIG STEP successfully implemented a state-registered apprenticeship that, as such, mandates an equitable pay scale, mentoring, continued education, and insurance, even if the apprentice is not a union member.

Business Coaching

Many interviewees work directly with businesses to improve job quality, taking on a coaching role themselves or directing businesses to external resources. Business coaching, as we observed in our interviews, can take several forms. Some organizations focus on one-on-one relationships with businesses, guiding them on specific practices and solutions for their workplace. Others work with larger groups of businesses, through one-time courses or ongoing engagement with a cohort of businesses. A few work with even larger groups and through intermediaries by partnering with industry associations who, in turn, provide guidance to businesses.

HCAP Partners' Job Quality Focus and Coaching as Part of Value Creation

"We provide these our portfolio companies with a detailed job quality program, the Gainful Jobs Approach™, that is core to our value creation activities and includes tools, data, resources, guidance, and coaching. The Gainful Jobs Approach™ helps our companies enhance their workplace practices and improve job quality in ways that support economic opportunity for employees and helps them execute on their plans for growth At the lower end of the middle market, many companies that don't have large HR departments, let alone a head of HR, and we are able to provide them with coaching and guidance to help them think about the quality of jobs at their business, alongside ongoing support and guidance to implement job quality improvements in ways that make sense for their specific business. And I think, if anything, our biggest win is being able to take this broad idea of quality job, distill it into six key attributes that are data-driven and actionable, and help our portfolio companies to implement enhanced workplace practices, and policies, and benefits and ultimately make a job quality focus a part of their culture, their decision-making process, and long-term strategy."

HCAP Partners and other interviewees are creating long-term job quality improvements through coaching and ongoing support. Their coaching approach is focused on building capacity and understanding among businesses, encouraging and enabling them to implement new policies and practices that improve jobs for workers. For some interviewees, this business coaching comes without strings, meaning that businesses are not necessarily incentivized to change their practices beyond the new information and tools they gain through coaching. For several interviewees, business coaching is only one component of their work and supports their main objective: to financially support new and small businesses.

Hot Bread Kitchen piloted a cohort approach to business coaching, bringing together a small group of similar businesses to work long term on improving business performance and employees' experiences at work. Of the program, Hot Bread Kitchen said, "We find that small business owners want to do the right things by their businesses and their employees. They don't always know what that is, and they don't always have the capacity or time to get there." As part of the cohort, businesses received help identifying challenges and solutions, as well as implementing, testing, and measuring new initiatives.

WRTP | BIG STEP is working on an even larger scale — instead of working one on one with businesses or a small cohort, it collaborates with local employer associations, like the Milwaukee Metropolitan Association of Commerce. WRTP | BIG STEP has found that employers are more receptive to the idea of improving job quality when it comes from within their industry, rather than from an outside organization, especially a nonprofit. "We've been trying to come up with different partnership models in which employer associations are activating their employer network and they're bringing in employers they know have good quality jobs and then they become the mouthpiece or mentors to other employers," said a leader at WRTP.

Financial Incentives for Businesses

A few of our interviewees contribute investments to businesses to promote positive job quality outcomes. Some institutions we have cataloged through our interviews include CDFIs that provide funding for businesses with the stipulation that the businesses will work to improve job quality for their workers and organizations that provide investment in companies that provide or are willing to work toward providing quality jobs for their workers.

Financial institutions such as CDFIs are uniquely positioned to support businesses in making job quality changes by providing them with technical assistance or business coaching as a part of the loan agreement. Coastal Enterprises, a CDFI serving Maine, assesses each business it considers loaning money on job quality and gives the business a job quality scorecard that is incorporated into the investment memo. The scorecard covers details such as statistics regarding current and projected jobs, the number of full-time and part-time jobs, the number of jobs added, and entry-level wages for those jobs. The assessment also has a section that covers qualitative questions such as “What are the top people-related challenges, and are we equipped to advise or act as a sounding board?” and “Do we think this business will report its outcomes annually? They continued, “We do not turn away an opportunity to invest in a business because they do not meet our job quality definition.... If the business demonstrates an interest in considering our mutually beneficial advice on how to improve job quality, while boosting business performance, that’s great.” After Coastal Enterprise decides to loan to a particular business, a business advisor works with that business to improve job quality outcomes in addition to profits.

HCAP Partners was one of the first fund managers to focus on improving job quality to enhance business performance and support economic opportunities for frontline workers. HCAP seeks out companies that are led by management teams with shared values and who will work collaboratively with HCAP on the Gainful Jobs Approach™.

The Gainful Jobs Approach™ is a key aspect of HCAP’s value creation activities to support business growth and success. The approach includes: a baseline job quality assessment to examine company workplace practices and job quality prior to investing, development of a Strategic Roadmap that documents company-specific job quality goals to be achieved over three to five years, active engagement and business coaching to aid implementation of job quality initiatives, including quarterly check-ins, ongoing measurement and analysis of job quality data to inform job quality improvements, and carrot agreements that provide frontline workers with cash bonuses upon successful exit so they share in the upside of the transaction. HCAP staff mentioned how helpful the Strategic Roadmap and goal setting process has been with portfolio companies in locking in values alignment and ensuring collaboration:

“We made the creation of the Strategic Roadmap a condition to investment close. You can’t get funded from us unless that’s in place. We have language in our term sheets as well as our loan and equity documents stipulating that companies will provide us with job quality data and collaborate with us on the Gainful Jobs Approach™. And we ask that our companies share their progress and report out on the Gainful Jobs Approach™ as part of company board meetings, to build accountability and create transparency on these efforts, just like with any other area of the business such as formalizing a go to market strategy, building out a sales and marketing team, strengthening the finance and reporting function, etc...”

Procurement and Public Spending Contracts for Good Job Providers

An important strategy that federal, state, and local government are uniquely positioned to leverage is using procurement as a way to promote good jobs given their spending power. The federal government is the largest purchaser of goods and services in the world, spending a record \$759 billion on contracts in Fiscal Year 2023.³³ Additionally, state and local governments spend more than \$3.7 trillion annually on procurement.³⁴ If this spending power went towards businesses that create good jobs for workers, the impact of this strategy on working people could be substantial.

Though none of the interviewees we spoke to raised procurement as a strategy, many concerned with job quality are seeing the opportunity. In Boston, the Mayor's office created a Cabinet for Worker Empowerment that uses procurement as a job quality strategy. Service providers that contract with the city must commit to an hourly wage of \$18.20 for their lowest-paid employees. Companies hired to do construction work for Boston have to agree that 51 percent of the workers they hire will be Boston residents, 40 percent people of color and 12 percent women. A history of wage theft is a factor in considering licenses for restaurants.³⁵ Like many cities, Boston had to consider what state and federal laws preempted what strategies they could prescribe to support workers.

Grantmaking

Institutions that contribute to job quality efforts by way of grantmaking or philanthropic investment are another form of financial investment in improved job quality outcomes. Philanthropic institutions have significant potential to make a positive impact on job quality though some may face legal restrictions in what they are allowed to fund.

The specific purpose of the LIFT Fund is to provide grants to organizations that advocate for workers' rights and conditions, whether that be through organizing, research, or facilitating partnerships among labor-oriented organizations. Staff and leaders from the LIFT Fund described its approach as being aimed at an entire sector rather than at individual organizations. Although the LIFT Fund cited numerous organizing wins among its grantees, it cited one of its major wins as whenever there is a successful partnership between a worker center and a union. Coming from two different organizing cultures, having different resources and different ideologies, creating a shared strategy to benefit workers is an achievement that contributes to future campaign or policy wins and brings the labor movement closer together.

33 U.S. Government Accountability Office, "A Snapshot of Government-Wide Contracting for FY 2023 (Interactive Dashboard)," *WatchBlog*, June 25, 2024, <https://www.gao.gov/blog/snapshot-government-wide-contracting-fy-2023-interactive-dashboard> (accessed May 9, 2025).

34 Kathrin Frauscher, "The Technology Path to Human-Centered Procurement," *Governing*, October 15, 2024, <https://www.governing.com/management-and-administration/the-technology-path-to-human-centered-procurement> (accessed May 9, 2025).

35 Carl Smith, "When States and Localities Disagree on Worker Protections, What's the Way Forward?," *Governing*, September 23, 2024, <https://www.governing.com/workforce/when-states-and-localities-disagree-on-worker-protections-whats-the-way-forward> (accessed May 9, 2025).

Factors Affecting Choice of Job Design Strategies

In our interviews and research, we noticed several factors can influence what job quality strategies organizations use and in which combination. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to improving job quality. What works in one place or in one sector may not work in another. The context and environment for job quality strategies are important.

Complementary Strategies

Many job quality tactics we outlined overlap or are inherently complementary. Research, for example, can be a foundational piece of many other strategies, including building effective worker organizing and advocacy campaigns. The worker center ARISE uses a combination of litigation, policy advocacy, and organizing strategies to affect job quality on a larger scale than if it were to focus on just one. Leadership at ARISE mentioned the limitations of litigation as a stand-alone strategy: “We had gotten very good at forcing employers to do things that they didn’t want to do to make a workplace more dignified, but we saw the limitations of doing that on an employer-by-employer basis...” They continued to mention how combinations of other strategies allow them to have a larger impact: “We see policy as a foothold, or a widening of space that gives us more organizing potential, and that’s a kind of virtuous circle between policy and organizing that we see.”

Organizational Culture and History

At least part of what organizations do to address job quality lies in their organizational DNA, history, and relationships with workers and businesses. Labor unions, of course, arose out of worker organizing and the fight for worker power. Worker centers have similar roots in organizing and in contesting job quality with employers.

Other institutions have legacies in working with and supporting businesses. Workforce development organizations and CDFIs, for example, have traditionally been positioned more as business-serving organizations. This creates opportunities to use strategies such as business advising, but it limits the use of other strategies such as worker organizing.

Organizational Capacities and Resources

Organizations also have different capacities, resources, and partnerships that affect what strategies they use. Although some organizations have in-house research capabilities, many organizations focused on job quality will partner with another institution, such as a university, to do research. Funding certainly is a contributing factor as well, as many workforce development institutions are funded to provide training and job placement support, whereas CDFIs often raise capital to help small- and medium-sized businesses.

Industry of Focus

The industry sector and the associated job quality challenges of the industry can also determine what strategies organizations use. Organizations working in industries such as restaurant work, where labor law violations such as wage theft are common, can necessitate legal action. Organizations working in health care, a heavily regulated industry, must often engage more in policy advocacy.

Geography

The geographical location and local context are other factors shaping job quality strategy. Different geographies not only have different resources to leverage, but they often also have different laws and regulatory systems to navigate. Organizations in the South and in right-to-work states where union density is low and the labor movement has been weakened, for example, must often take a different approach to building worker power and worker organizing. Organizations in areas with a strong labor history such as Milwaukee or in more progressive cities such as Seattle or New York, on the other hand, have a different set of strategies open to them. Some of the organizations interviewed for this project have been key in passing city labor laws that create higher minimum wages, stable scheduling and more.

Time and Changes in Context

The job quality strategies organizations use are also not static. They often evolve over time as victories are won, new challenges arise, and new resources, capacities, and partnerships are developed. Organizations that are just starting may also be more engaged in worker organizing or coalition building as they seek to get traction for their work. Policy victories can sometimes lead to more of a focus on legal strategies too, as organizations may then see a need to help support implementation and enforcement.

Equity and Job Quality

Workers' identities contribute to the experiences they have on the job. Not only are workers of color, women, and other minority workers often grouped in lower-paid jobs with worse conditions, workers often experience lower job quality than their peers due to identity-based discrimination. In a [2023 research report](#), the Urban Institute put new numbers to the long-standing reality of occupational crowding. After scoring occupations on job quality, the researchers found white men are overrepresented in occupations with higher job quality, while finding Black women and men, Latinx women and men, and white women are overrepresented in occupations with lower job quality. Restricting access to good jobs does not just affect the lives of individual workers. Inequitable access to good jobs negatively affects workers' families and communities — and our economy as a whole.

This reality and urgency were reflected in our conversations with interviewees. Many of the organizations expressed that equity is a foundational component of their work, whereas some others are still learning how to effectively incorporate an equity lens. Our conversations focused on racial and gender equity, but many organizations also talked about the importance of immigration status — especially as a tool employers can use to control or exploit workers — as well as the needs of workers with disabilities, older workers, workers who have been incarcerated, and LGBTQIA+ workers.

In the new context of 2025 where DEIA work is being attacked and dismantled, the urgency and importance of this work becomes even more important. The private sector and philanthropy will need to step up to do more to advance equity and equal opportunity in the face of efforts to end DEIA work in the public and private sector.

Historical and Political Context

Multiple organizations emphasized that having an equity lens requires an understanding of the historical and political context that shapes discrimination in the labor market. For them, this was not only about acknowledging the roots of poor workplace protections and working conditions, including roots in slavery and post-reconstruction policies, but also about how these systems continue to affect workers today. UFCW 770 summed up the impact of the historical context and its contemporary impact: “We cannot talk about job quality without talking about white supremacy and capitalism — and that interconnection — and racism.... It is the throughline, and until we address these things head on, we cannot talk about job quality.” Several organizations talked about building power and multiracial coalitions as the path forward, helping workers see each other as allies and understanding their shared experiences in working bad jobs.

Inequitable Access to Good Jobs

Interviewees discussed the forms of discrimination they see workers face; however, they emphasized that it is not just individual workers' identities that determine if they are steered toward worse jobs. Instead, many organizations are contending with entire industries that have historically been performed by workers of color and immigrants, where bad jobs are the norm and deeply entrenched. And, within industries, workers of color continue to be steered toward the worst and most dangerous jobs available.

Multiple organizations, including not just the care industry-focused UDWA and PHI but also LIFT Fund and Fair Work Center, discussed this dynamic in the context of care work, which is still an industry where women of color are the majority of the workers, including immigrant and migrant women. In addition, care work is often performed in isolation, making it easier for workers to face additional discrimination, on top of the low standards across the industry.

In some cases, businesses weaponize race to make it harder for workers to build solidarity and organize around their conditions. “In housekeeping and hotels, we’ve heard examples of how employers will put all the Latinx workers on one floor, all the Haitian workers on another floor, all of the white workers on another floor so they can pit these communities against each other,” according to the LIFT Fund. But interviewees also see a path forward to righting some of the wrongs in the service and care industries and seeing this work valued more fairly.

ROC United highlighted discrimination within the restaurant and food prep industries, where race, gender, and immigration status are often barriers to advancing into better jobs. Like care work, however, discrimination in these industries is not just on the individual level but also baked into the way the industry functions, with divisions in job quality between front- and back-of-house staff as well as along the spectrum of casual to fine dining. Interviewees note that the better the jobs get, the whiter and more male the workforce — a dynamic that is true for many professions and industries. Other industries that organizations call out as focus areas for eliminating discriminatory practices and creating equitable access to good jobs are farm work, jobs at grocery stores, jobs at small businesses, and work obtained through staffing agencies.

Organizations also detailed how they see individual workers face additional discrimination or heightened risk, beyond the industry-level conditions. Organized Power in Numbers shared the results of a race- and gender-matched pair testing trial they conducted at temp agencies in Houston and Nashville, in which they saw Black workers face additional hurdles while applying for jobs, such as being told to go online instead of being provided an application in person, whereas Latino workers were more likely to be offered immediate work and sent into harsh construction and warehouse environments. Women across the board were excluded from certain jobs, including warehouse and construction work, even if they expressed interest and qualifications. Instead, women were almost exclusively sent to cleaning and packaging jobs, as well as being subjected to harassment that men did not experience.

Several interviewees, including LIFT Fund and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, also highlighted how race and gender interact with immigration status, creating increased vulnerability for workers. For example, undocumented workers fear that businesses will report them to Immigration and Customs Enforcement if they complain about poor working conditions, whereas guest workers are entirely dependent on businesses sponsoring their visas and vulnerable to exploitation.

Impact on Organizations’ Work

The LIFT Fund summed up the importance of integrating equity into job quality work: “When we look at job quality, you can take a really agnostic or a race neutral or gender-neutral approach to it — and that doesn’t help workers that are at the intersection of various identities, that are being targeted for exploitation and discrimination.” For some organizations, integrating an equity lens to their work means reprioritizing limited resources to serve workers who are most in need of support. The Fair Work Center discusses this prioritization in its work organizing nannies, a profession where many immigrant women

and women of color are employed, as well as a sizable pool of white women, who are often US citizens and more affluent. Leadership at the Fair Work Center said that although white nannies are not excluded from their work, organizing immigrant women and women of color is where they direct their resources: “Who you invest in to build the base will inform what issues we’re talking about and then what solutions you think are responsive.”

Other organizations are also focusing on equity by devoting resources to marginalized workers, including ROC United, which conducts trainings for workers of color while trying to improve hiring, retention, and pay with businesses. UFCW 770 is working to establish apprenticeship programs for lower-paid grocery jobs often filled by women and people of color. And UDWA is working on conditions for care workers while trying to change narratives, and realities, in the industry: “We’re trying to shift towards care work as infrastructure work, for it to be valued on the same level as all the other industries in the labor movement in our country that are receiving state and federal funding. That... is how we reverse the ways that this work has historically been thought of.”

Funders are also thinking about how to target resources to promote equity. The LIFT Fund discussed its practice of providing general operating support instead of restricted grants to worker-led organizations and worker centers: “We trust the organization to use the funds that they need to use — rather than doing a more project-related grant that’s very restrictive, where we’re telling them how to spend the money.” Like the Fair Work Center’s approach, this practice placed emphasis on the lived experiences of workers and ensuring that they have a meaningful say in the design and implementation of policies and projects that are meant to address their needs.

Some organizations are translating the importance of equity in job quality work for other stakeholders, for example, PHI, which works with businesses. PHI is working to help their business clients better understand workers’ needs, including through education on DEI frameworks and the impact of discrimination on their workforce, as well as through employee engagement processes to help companies understand workers’ perspectives and needs. WRTTP | BIG STEP noted that prioritizing equity sometimes means drawing a line with external stakeholders. When approached by employers to refer candidates, WRTTP | BIG STEP is turning away employers that are not offering quality jobs instead of letting these employers use WRTTP | BIG STEP as a resource to get diverse applicants, when it would result in workers being in jobs that do not meet their needs.

Although organizations are focused on integrating equity into their core work, some are also thinking about its impact on their internal policies and processes. Two interviewees discussed internal hiring goals to ensure their workforce and leadership are diverse and reflect their local communities. One, Orangeburg Calhoun Technical College, noted that this is tied explicitly to its core work of educating students — that students need to see themselves represented in the college’s faculty and staff. Multiple organizations also mentioned the need to educate staff on DEI frameworks and on historical and contemporary systems of racism, sexism, and xenophobia. UFCW 770 said, “We’re intentionally setting ourselves on a path to become an anti-racist organization,” and the first step on this path was extensive education for staff to give everyone the foundation and language to engage fully in equity work.

Equity Data

Several organizations highlight the importance of better data collection to support equity work. This means not only collecting demographic data but also enabling disaggregation by multiple and overlapping identifiers to help see patterns and trends for how workers’ identities shape their workplace experiences.

Project Equity highlights that data collection that allows workers to self-identify is difficult because it is new to many businesses, and capacity building is needed to implement this practice more widely.

HCAP is also working on improving data and metrics that allow its portfolio companies to better understand how they perform on equity goals. This includes tracking demographic data for hiring and promotion to help companies understand how their policies and practices in this area manifest as trends in the data. To enhance equity-related data collection, HCAP leveraged the Global Impact Investing Network's IRIS+ core metric sets for job quality, racial equity, and gender equity in updating the employee and workplace practice data it collects from portfolio companies under the Gainful Jobs Approach. HCAP can disaggregate job quality data by race, gender, ethnicity, and income level and visualize findings through online dashboards that are available to each portfolio company.

The availability of equity data is also an issue of concern for CWDC, which uses its position as a government stakeholder to disseminate reliable data that other organizations can use to improve their work. Many organizations struggle to access reliable data disaggregated by race, gender, and other identities, and having access to more data gives CWDC the opportunity to share that with Colorado organizations working to improve job quality. "Many of our stakeholders are calling us asking, 'Can we get this disaggregated in that way?' So it's not transparent, it's not easy for them to find data and access it," said Renise Walker. Improving its own data sharing is one solution for CWDC, but it is also thinking about improving access to disaggregated data more broadly: "We release a talent pipeline report every year and are disaggregating content in part by demographic information because of the work we're doing around job quality. But I do think we need to give some more careful thought around how we are promoting — where are the sources of data that people can go to anywhere in the state and be able to access to get that level of detail?" Improving data access can help organizations and businesses understand how their practices improve equity and how their internal data compares to local, state, or national standards.

Barriers to Advancing Job Quality

Job quality practitioners shared several challenges they face in improving job quality. Interviewees described some shared challenges, such as the difficulty and complexity of systems change and equity work but also noted more unique issues they face because of their organization's position or their geographical region.

Difficulty in Changing Businesses' Practices

Some businesses resist overtures to improve job quality, at least initially. Corporate lobbying, which enjoys significant funding and strong organization, often argues that greater investment in workers will result in insolvency and staff reductions, observed ROC United. A survey by Urbane, cited by the ICA Fund, expands on observations from ARISE leadership. Small businesses that were more profitable tended to offer workers fewer benefits. Framed differently, profitability and offering benefits are seen as trade-offs because there is not yet an adequate framework for capturing the return on investing in employees.

Even companies that want to do “the right thing” on job quality worry that doing so will place them at a disadvantage, so long as their competitors remain stuck in their ways, explained a representative from ARISE. Some companies, especially those in precarious industries and small businesses, believe that they simply lack the capacity to improve job quality. ReWork the Bay has grappled with this dichotomy. They pointed out that it is too easy to think that foundations and businesses “are going to be really resistant to talking about worker organizing or to talking about worker power.” But the lack of capacity is real. So, too, is the fear that some elements of job quality, notably pay, and a company's bottom line exist in fundamental opposition, as previously described. Many smaller companies in the food industry were not in a place to raise wages after the pandemic, related staff from Hot Bread Kitchen, by way of example.

In addition, leadership at ARISE believes that focusing on minority-owned business development, while important, alone does not address job quality “because there will forever be way more workers of color than bosses of color.” The representative of ARISE continued, “If we are serious about lifting up entire communities, then we must focus on workers, who comprise the majority of any community.” Working for a company owned or operated by a member of an underrepresented group does not counteract “the competitive forces in low-wage job markets” that drive down job quality. “If you're a restaurant owner with a slim profit margin,” ARISE said, “you're going to exploit workers just to keep up with your competitors that exploit workers.” Any job quality strategies, including minority-owned business development, must include a worker power strategy to assure its success, ARISE believes. This is not speculation but rather what ARISE has learned from hundreds of negotiations with employers. “Owner identity did not make a difference,” ARISE said.

Although some companies acknowledge the importance of job quality, it does not always lead to action. ARISE lacks enforceable legal mechanisms for the good jobs commitments it has received from businesses because the agreements that ARISE's worker members reach with their businesses are not union contracts.” HCAP, a firm providing minority equity and debt financing, cannot mandate investments in job

quality, given it does not typically have a majority ownership or control of a portfolio company. HCAP staff stated that the investor nevertheless ensures the “companies [in which it invests] are led by a management team that is committed to its job quality thesis of investing in workers to support economic opportunity and drive business performance.”

Organizations that work to bridge the divide between workers and industry, EELAC and IMEC among them, recognize that the power to enact changes often lies with companies. EELAC has more than 60 members in its learning collaborative but few businesses. Consequently, it faces the challenge of attracting businesses’ attention and translating EELAC’s language on equity into one spoken by businesses.

Even when businesses make changes to job quality, these can be difficult to sustain. Changes in leadership, investor pressures, or changes in economic conditions can all lead to positive changes to job quality being reversed.

Lack of Awareness of the Importance of Job Quality

Public and political awareness is vital for advancing job quality. It is a question of narrative change to which, stated an interviewee from WRTTP | BIG STEP’s, “We do not have the golden answer.” Even with the COVID-19 pandemic bringing attention to the importance of care work, for example, PHI found that “deep misunderstanding” remains about what direct care jobs entail. Too often, the public assumes that providing care for those with disabilities, older adults, or others is a low-skilled occupation. This generalized ignorance remains pervasive, despite increasing demand for care workers, as identified by UDWA staff. Moreover, direct care work relates to “health care outcomes, social determinants of health, and the broader social fabric,” related a representative from PHI. But to the public, “These connections are just not clear.”

Leadership at Temp Worker Justice has witnessed firsthand the race-to-the-bottom dynamic caused by the rise of staffing agencies and noted there is not yet widespread recognition of its negative effects on job quality, despite the pervasiveness of temp work:

I don’t think about this industry positively at all and really saw ways that it sucked the life out of the community I grew up in. But I think that it’s misunderstood, and people don’t understand how big a role it plays in our economy and in really driving down job quality. And there’s a lot of attention to gig work, for example, which I think is well deserved and is something that should be paid attention to. But there’s likely far more workers in staffing agency appointments across a much broader set of industries. And we’re talking about major industries like manufacturing, and health care, and warehousing, and food services....

I feel like a big part of what we need to do is educate the public, policymakers, and people who are interested in this movement, like the labor movement, but also the social justice, and racial justice, and gender justice movements that this is something we need to have a lot more focus on.

Structural and Systemic Racism and Sexism in Job Quality

Interviewees observed that the demographic makeup of some occupations shapes assumptions about the value of workers’ labor, and career ladders may be defined by inequitable racial dynamics. A representative of PHI when this research was conducted stated frankly that providing direct care is still seen as “women’s work.”

It is still considered work that we assume women of color will be doing primarily. And many of those reasons have tied to clear policy decisions over the past 100 years that have limited the fair pay, inclusion, and other working condition protections for this workforce. And those stigmas still stick around. So that's what's helped depress the job quality in this field over time.

In food services, leaders at Hot Bread Kitchen explained, fewer women and people of color are seen in positions higher up the career ladder, even though the demographics are heavily represented in entry-level positions. The difficulty of dismantling these systemic and structural challenges is not lost on practitioners.

Moving Beyond the Skills Narrative

The skills gap conversation detracts from tackling the larger issues of job quality, according to some of those interviewed. The workforce development “deficiency narrative” — the theory that workers’ insufficient skills are the root of low wages and increasing their skills will boost their wages and job quality, broadly — is insufficient, noted a leader from ROC United. There must be a commensurate effort to build demand for good jobs in part by raising consumer awareness. Similarly, leadership from ARISE still sees too many programs interested in individual mobility rather than systemic change. The real barriers to improving job quality, practitioners explained, are a lack of market and policy conditions that reduce businesses’ incentives to increase wages and little understanding of job quality. But our narratives around a lack of opportunity and poverty often blame workers more, protecting the interests of the private sector that are often responsible for low wages and poor job quality. Putting the blame on workers also allows the government to shield itself from the responsibility it has to pass public policies that support workers.

The continued dominance of the skills narrative, and the policy and funding frameworks that accompany it, make it difficult for workforce development organizations to expand their scope beyond “upskilling” in individuals. As a leader at WRTTP | BIG STEP’s put it, there is an “employer deficiency.” Employers must change practices to raise the job quality floor. But the workforce development funding model demands that providers, like WRTTP | BIG STEP, still need to place workers, even if the jobs are lacking in quality. This can lead to a catch-22 situation, in which providing traditional workforce development allows organizations to apply for funding to support work on job quality:

If we count outputs, number of jobs, number of trainees, again, we’re perpetuating that system of “there’s worker deficiency, and we just need to do that and then quality jobs follow.” But it also forces us to beg employers, then, to say, “Well, we have to count this, please take them on.” And is it a quality job? Maybe. We might feel weird about it — might be, might not be — but we can’t do the work, we can’t continue to do the work, ironically, of pushing the job quality agenda, because we don’t have the funds. So we have to almost rob Peter to pay Paul in a lot of ways to say, “We know it’s not quite a quality job, but here, employer, take them. Take them because we need the numbers to count, so that we can apply for additional funding to do the work of job quality.” The system is a little backwards.

Worker Organizing Faces Headwinds

Interviewees described many challenges related to organizing workers, many of which point to the decline of unionization, worker organizing policies, and infrastructure across the country, particularly in the South. A [2023 Gallup poll](#) found that 61 percent of respondents believe that unions strengthen the American economy, the highest rate in more than two decades. However, popular support for organizing has not universally translated to concrete action at the ground level. An executive at one organization pointed to the “lack of a consciousness of labor” as a fundamental impediment to job quality work on the employee

side. This is especially true of places with less union density. Leaders of the LIFT Fund, also based in the South, saw things similarly. An anti-union culture has resulted in an environment where “you’ve got people who don’t understand their rights under the law.” Even in Seattle, despite the codification of a strong workers’ rights framework, observers from the Fair Work Center have found that a reactive, complaint-driven approach requires workers to already be aware of their rights.

Workers’ instability also poses challenges to organizing. For workers in survival mode, explained an executive of Organized Power in Numbers, practitioners must “understand what’s the priority and...balance that out.” Low-income workers’ poverty makes it difficult for them to organize action that pushes for better job quality. This was particularly evident during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Temp Workers Justice has found that workers with whom they engage often see their jobs as just that — temporary. The stigma attached to these jobs hinders organizing efforts. This, despite the entrenchment of temporary labor in many sectors, including manufacturing, health care, and food service, lowers the job quality floor.

Some interviewees believe connecting job quality to other issues is important for the success of worker organizing. A representative from UDWA emphasized that economic justice is connected to environmental justice, housing justice, and more. It is a point that rings equally true in the South. Another interviewee remarked, “We know that poverty is not going to be solved in our community by only focusing on jobs or only focusing on housing. We’ve got to do it all if we’re really going to bring about true transformation.” Representatives from the LIFT Fund have seen poor pay translate into increased workplace safety violations and, beyond the workplace, into low-quality public services resulting from a weak tax base. By lifting up these “bread and butter issues,” they explained, that practitioners can shift the “thinking about what it means to have a quality job all around.”

Measuring Impact and Data Challenges

Using data to track impact is important for organizations working to improve job quality, and they measure progress and success differently. How organizations measure progress is driven by many factors, including how they define job quality, their goals for improving the quality of the job, their strategies, and the partners and stakeholders with whom they work to create change. Because organizations tend to use a variety of strategies, they collect a wide set of data. For many organizations, the data is not only for reporting to funders; data provides meaningful insights that can drive change, strategy, and engagement. But despite a collective understanding of data’s utility, determining which data points to track and transforming data into narrative are familiar challenges among practitioners.

Some organizations lack the capacity to adequately collect and analyze data. Access to good data can also be a challenge. Organizations trying to influence business practices often struggle with data availability, particularly with small- and mid-sized businesses that may lack data infrastructure or see additional reporting as a burden. HCAP, which frequently works with small businesses, remarked on the bandwidth issue and the importance of reasonable data and metrics goals:

You can’t put a 400-question survey in front of a small business and expect it to go over well....Figure out ways to minimize the bandwidth people are spending on getting data because in many ways you want them to use that same bandwidth to actually be putting in place new policies, new benefits, thinking through how to help the workforce. Data is great, but it can be really burdensome, and it ultimately needs to be right-sized and actionable.

For workforce development providers, inflexible reporting requirements and difficulty converting extensive data into a clean narrative means that the status quo — measuring success by placements — remains dominant.

Finally, organizations doing the work often have long-time horizons for creating change. Identifying interim and short-term impacts can be difficult. Funders and investors, for example, encounter difficulty tracking progress for investments whose returns play out over the long term. This butts against what an executive from ICA Fund calls the “instant gratification mindset” of wanting to see quick returns. The ICA Fund invests in closing racial and gender wealth gaps. But “It takes three to five years for a small business to even become profitable.”

When a change happens, determining the role of individual factors can be difficult, and organizations may struggle to identify their contribution. Policy and legislative wins, for instance, are often the result of many different factors and stakeholder efforts.

Funding Philosophies and Restrictions

Interviewees talked about several challenges in raising funds to do job quality work. As noted, some of the challenge lies in a dominant narrative on worker skills that ignores or fails to fully recognize issues of job quality. A representative from WRTP | BIG STEPS noted, “We find that philanthropy generally gives from a lens of worker deficiency and not employer or employment deficiency.” Another interviewee echoed these comments, noting that most of the philanthropic funders “don’t have a worker justice or an economic justice portfolio. They’re just putting some of their workforce development funding into it. So, it’s still a very small share of the pie.”

Philanthropic funding priorities tend to be downstream of public and media awareness, according to some interviewees. Temp Worker Justice has found itself in competition with gig worker-focused organizations for funding, the latter benefiting from greater name recognition. Region matters, too. Organized Power in Numbers, in the South, does not benefit from “a strong ecosystem of local funders,” like California or New York organizations. This has pushed the organization to look to national foundations for funding, but worker organizing is often not a priority for these foundations.

Government funding in workforce development can also be challenging because it often just resources training and job placement and because restrictions often prevent supporting undocumented workers, who make up a large proportion of people in low-quality jobs. One more interviewee commented that public resources have also ignored certain industries, such as food and restaurant work. Although the interviewees emphasized different points, the lack of philanthropic and public funding support for job quality is a clear challenge for this field of practice.

Recommendations

To help address poverty and long-standing race and gender inequities, we know that we must fix work and the workplace. The US ranks among the countries highest in postsecondary educational attainment³⁶ but among the lowest of peer countries on economic mobility.³⁷ In the midst of a conversation about the future of work, we are often enamored with projections that millions of jobs will be eliminated by automation or that millions of better jobs will be created through technological advancement. What is less hypothetical today is that job quality is deteriorating, and some of the greatest growth we can expect to see in the years ahead is in low quality jobs. The organizations working to address job quality deserve more attention and more support if we are to reverse these trends and create an economy that works for all. The following are some of the conclusions and recommendations we have drawn from our interviews with the amazing people and organizations leading this work.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “International Educational Attainment,” *Condition of Education*, updated May 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cac/intl-ed-attainment> (accessed May 9, 2025).

³⁷ Miles Corak, “Economic Mobility,” *Pathways: The Poverty and Inequality Report 2016*, (Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality), <https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Pathways-SOTU-2016-Economic-Mobility-3.pdf> (accessed May 9, 2025).

Recommendations for Job Quality Practitioners

Listen to Workers

The experiences and perspectives of workers serve as a north star for job quality practitioners. Organizations exploring how they might engage in job quality or how they might improve existing efforts will find no better source of direction and input than the workers employed in low quality jobs. As we heard from some interviewees, there is often a disconnection in priorities among workers and practitioners. Having workers help shape your job quality agenda, strategies, and narrative not only will aid your own organization's success but also can help inform the efforts of policymakers, investors, researchers, and other partners to whom you are connected.

Incorporating worker voice is not straightforward or easy for some organizations. Not all organizations have trust and close ties with workers. Partnerships with other organizations that might be needed. For some organizations, the idea of letting workers help shape the agenda or strategy may be new and uncomfortable. Some organizations that have traditionally focused on responding to business voice may also struggle with tensions in how they balance and integrate worker voice into their strategy. While we recognize and understand these difficulties and challenges, we also hope organizations facing these obstacles see the value and necessity of workers' voices and perspectives in achieving the job quality changes workers want in their lives. We hope workforce development organizations and intermediaries remember the responsibility to have a dual-customer approach and to listen and respond to workers' needs with at least equal consideration to that of business partners.

Develop or Adopt a Definition of Job Quality for Your Context

In our interviews, we heard from organizations about the importance of defining job quality or a good job. A definition can help organizations, and their partners understand the vision of their work and can be a useful tool in helping organizations think about metrics and progress. Although AspenEOP has a broad definition of a good job that we developed with the Families and Workers Fund, organizations will find value in going through the process of defining job quality and building a shared understanding of the importance of job quality work to the organizational mission. By asking and examining questions such as what job quality components the workers and businesses an organization works with prioritize and what job quality looks like in different industries or communities, practitioners can gain deep insights into what job quality means within their unique context.

Given that there are many definitions and frameworks available, organizations can begin by reviewing a set of frameworks and considering which ones seem most suited to their organizations, and how they might be adapted to fit their context. We recommend organizations work to gather the input and feedback of the workers whose jobs they seek to improve. In addition, some practitioners may also benefit from developing a framework that helps their business partners identify opportunities for change. A framework that helps an organization begin to describe and assess the results of its job quality strategy can be particularly helpful in building internal and external support for the work. To assess progress, organizations will need to develop metrics and benchmarks alongside their definition to capture progress on job quality in areas such as wages, benefits, scheduling, and more.

Pay Attention to Narrative and Framing

Job quality practitioners collaborate and communicate with a range of stakeholders such as business and industry leaders, workers, elected officials, community members, faith-based leaders, and philanthropy. The art of persuasion and strategic communications are a core part of many job quality strategies. Framing job quality in clear, accessible ways that resonate with businesses and workers is especially important. But there is also no one size fits all to communicating on these issues.

Articulating the business case for good jobs is certainly important. But many business leaders also want to know how what they do will affect their reputation and standing in their community. Understanding and being able to communicate a moral and ethical case and how job quality affects workers' quality of life can also be important. Other important framing around the relationship between job quality and equity, why good jobs are good for democracy and civil society, the connections between good jobs and economic development, and more should be considered depending on the audiences engaged.

Data on job quality, including wages, benefits, and working conditions, is a necessary part of storytelling. And stories and experiences from workers and messaging from business leaders who champion good jobs are also key to communicating job quality strategies. Practitioners, as a result, must be well versed in different arguments and framing for why job quality matters.

Pursue Collaboration

As evidenced by the organizations interviewed in this report, efforts to improve job quality are complex and multifaceted. Organizations focused on job quality must often combine a variety of strategies such as research, worker organizing and coalition building, and policy advocacy. The capacity and expertise to do all this work are beyond any one organization; as a result, partnerships and collaborations are a necessity. Organizations starting their job quality journey often need strong relationships with workers as noted but may also need expertise in areas such as research and communications. Conducting an organizational assessment up front and talking to local organizations already engaged in job quality work, such as labor unions, worker centers, or researchers at local academic institutions, early on can help organizations determine how best to support job quality work in their region.

Recognize That Improving Job Quality Is a Long-Term Strategy

As many interviewees noted, job quality work often requires a long time horizon. The work is messy, complex, and ever evolving because it involves changing systems that are often entrenched and resistant to change and intertwined with structural inequities. For organizations new to job quality, it can often be difficult to know where to start. That is why worker voice is important as noted, but it is also important that organizations do not feel the need to tackle everything at once. We encourage organizations just starting out to start small. In addition to finding opportunities to tap into workers' perspectives, take time to understand the job quality landscape and challenges in your region and labor market. Talk to potential allies and partners about what they do and how you can be helpful. Find opportunities to engage in small initiatives or experiments as you hone your capacities in this area.

At the same time, we hope practitioners recognize job quality is a journey for businesses. Some businesses are intentionally bad actors that provide jobs they know are exploitative and of low quality. Changing the practices for those types of businesses that refuse to voluntarily change often requires different strategies, including worker organizing, power building, and policy advocacy. But we believe most businesses want to provide good jobs.

Business owners want to be respected and recognized in their communities. Some business owners and managers may not have good human resources or payroll systems and may not know jobs at their company are not of good quality or do not pay well enough. Many businesses face real constraints in what they can do in terms of pay and benefits. And small business leaders often face significant constraints on their time as they seek to keep their business running. Understanding these constraints and meeting business owners and managers where they are can help. Engaging them in reflective and open discussions about their challenges and finding opportunities for progress and improvement, even if those changes and progress seem small, can be a starting point in making additional changes to improve job quality.

Recommendations for Investors and Policymakers

Long-Term Investments Are Needed

Although job quality victories and policy wins can appear suddenly, they are often the result of years or decades of research, advocacy, and organizing. Improving job quality by changing business practices, public policy, and our public systems such as our workforce development system or our systems for labor law enforcement is the work of systems change. This work to address structural issues is familiar to those developing and implementing [sectoral strategies](#). These strategies and the solutions they offer necessitate strong relationships with a range of actors, deep industry expertise, and a range of organizational capacities that are not built overnight.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Program, for instance, was the result of nearly two decades of work. Efforts to improve policies to support home care workers at the federal and state levels have also taken decades of advocacy. The path to these victories is often unpredictable and progress can be hard to discern. Interim outcomes may come in the form of developing a new ally, winning a favorable comment from an influential local leader, or simply getting an important actor to return a call. The importance of these anecdotes and impressions of progress can be difficult to assess in the same way one might judge numeric reports of service outcomes. Thus, short-term outcomes are not always easily reportable in a standard format. Approaching job quality work with patience and a willingness to invest time in understanding this work in the context of a community can help an investor build a meaningful and impactful approach to job quality investing.

Currently this patience and understanding seems to be rare among the funders on which many job quality advocates rely. Annual or short-term funding cycles that philanthropy and other funders use can work against needed capacity building and the long-term strategies pursued by job quality practitioners. Multi-year grantmaking, a cornerstone of trust-based philanthropy, is necessary to tackle the formidable challenges of job quality. But trust-based philanthropy is also based on mutual accountability. Practitioners and donors should partner to identify performance standards and short- and medium-term outcomes that show progress is being made.

Invest in Worker Power and the Capacity of Job Quality Organizations

Workers' ability to organize, advocate, and negotiate the changes they would like to see in their workplace is often a foundational part of improving job quality. Throughout the interviews in this report, we heard repeatedly about the importance of listening to workers not only for crafting and driving strategy, but also for expressing respect to workers who so many experience as lacking in their working lives.

Yet, philanthropy has often steered away from investing in organizing and power building. As investors examine ways to strengthen job quality, it would be a mistake to not invest in the strategies that uplift the critical voices of workers who give this field direction.

Coalition building, community organizing, strategic communications, and partnership development are also foundational components of many job quality efforts. The data tracking and monitoring capacity needed to support this work can look different from that needed to support individual service strategies. Job quality practitioners may be working to develop systems to analyze labor market data to identify job

quality challenges and track trends over time, or to track the thousands of workers in their network and their various engagements with those workers, or to capture business partners' practice changes and successes. As noted earlier, job quality practitioners often also need to be able to effectively engage an array of constituents such as policymakers, business leaders, workers, and communities. Helping organizations focused on job quality build strong strategic communications' capacity is also critical for change.

Consider Balance and Alignment of Investments

Policymakers and investors concerned with economic opportunity have focused on job training and education. We encourage policymakers and investors to revisit the balance of these investments and to consider how dedicating more resources toward job quality strategies could help improve the efficacy of the investments in training and education. Investing in skill development strategies without investing in efforts that provide workers with the power, market conditions, and supportive policy environments they need to ensure skills are adequately rewarded is destined to maintain the status quo of a labor market in which there are simply too few good jobs to go around. Job training may help a lucky few move up but generally fail to move the needle on issues of concern, such as a region's economic mobility, workforce productivity, or family self-sufficiency.

Gathering practitioner ideas and investing in experiments to align job quality and worker skills strategies is a ripe opportunity for philanthropic investors that could support needed innovation and field learning. Helping organizations assess job quality challenges in their local labor market and among individual employers and encouraging them to consider opportunities to influence the quality of the jobs they train people for and place people in would be a valuable first step. Training workers on worker rights at the same time as occupational skills training is another clear opportunity to align job quality with worker skills. Organizations focused on skills are positioned to hear about workers' experiences on the job, and to share their perspective with companies who may be unaware of how the quality of their jobs is influencing both their employees' personal lives and their job performance. This information can also drive public policy where needed and help workers who experience labor law violations obtain legal guidance and resources.

Collaborate With Practitioners

Tackling job quality is difficult. Not only are practitioners seeking to unwind systemic inequity, as is the case with occupational segregation and the harmful exclusions of predominantly women and workers of color from important protections such as the Fair Labor Standards Act, they are also immersed in dynamic systems and labor markets where business practices and regulations are constantly evolving. Context also matters. Different industries have different challenges. Regions have different laws and labor protections, supporting infrastructure and institutions, and legacies and histories related to work and issues of gender and racial equity.

Investors and policymakers need to build relationships of trust with practitioners and seek to both learn from them and share perspective and information with them. Engaging in thought partnership with practitioners to understand the issues they address, the strategies they use and test, and how they think about job quality metrics and goals can support funders in building a strategic set of investments in job quality work that can be communicated to other stakeholders and can support the efficacy of their overall grant-making or investing strategy.

Recommendations for Researchers

Partner With Job Quality Practitioners and Support the Field with More Data

As noted in this report, research plays a vital role in improving job quality. But expertise in research is not a common capacity for many organizations. We encourage researchers at academic institutions, think tanks, and other policy and research organizations to pursue more collaborations with practitioners on the ground to better understand the job quality challenges workers face, identify the opportunities for change, and support these organizations' capacity to build their own data and evaluation systems.

Continue to Shine a Light on Job Quality

The US currently lacks a robust data infrastructure for measuring job quality. Although we have developed strong tools for measuring outcomes such as job growth and earnings, we lack good data on many other job quality elements. This can be particularly true for data in industries such as agriculture work, which is excluded from federal jobs data, and in sectors where workers are independent contractors or misclassified as such. Practitioners are often left trying to conduct their own studies and assessments. We hope researchers will continue to be a part of the coalition pushing for stronger public data infrastructure on job quality and will pursue all opportunities available to them to conduct research that shines a light on the challenges workers experience.

Conclusion

The Field of Job Quality Practice Is Still Emerging

As noted earlier, labor unions have a long history in improving work. But our previous research and interviews for this report reveal that the job quality field of practice is still emerging. Many interviewees conveyed that parts of their work are still in the early stages of development. Some are still developing a definition of job quality, are continuing work to develop data systems and metrics, or are experimenting with new ideas and strategies. CDFIs, chambers of commerce, community colleges, and others are among a new wave of organizations that are stepping into this work. As described in this report, these organizations use a variety of strategies. We are in the initial stages of understanding this practice, the roles organizations can play, and the core capacities they need for success in their work. As this field of practice continues to mature, we will continue to document its evolution and play a supportive role in building the field's capacity through research and tools, leadership development, and dialogue.

Changing Economic Conditions Require Practitioners and Funders to Be Nimble

Before 2025, the economy had by most accounts been booming since the COVID pandemic eased. This created an opportunity for job quality improvements in some cases as worker shortages have tipped the scale in workers' favor and made some businesses more willing to revisit wages, benefits, and other job quality considerations to help attract and retain staff. Yet, some saw new challenges arise during the economic resurgence. Despite much discussion of a "Great Resignation" among workers newly empowered to exercise agency in a tight labor market brought on by the pandemic, some practitioners found that the pandemic's effects on the labor market were not entirely in workers' favor. Leadership at UFCW Local 770 in Los Angeles saw grocery stores increase automation during the pandemic. This involved a push toward app-based delivery, which "siphoned off union jobs elsewhere, to third parties."

Some interviewees were also worried about the potential for an economic downturn. They worried that a weakened labor market would provide "a real way to pressure wages downward," one stated. Some noted that economic downturns can make it more difficult to engage employers in job quality. A representative from PHI when we conducted interviews, recounted how the pandemic increased "operational strain" among long-term care providers. It was common knowledge that they were losing staff, but there was an overarching belief that it was not the right time to talk about the role of job quality in that. At the time the research was conducted, Hot Bread Kitchen saw some "reluctance in...parts of the food service sector to have these conversations because they were in a mode of survival."

These dynamics require practitioners and funders to be nimble. The challenges and opportunities today can look different tomorrow. One interviewee noted, "We leverage different strategies in different moments." Another said, "I think we've got to take advantage of those swings of the pendulum when we get them," because, eventually, the pendulum swings back.

Job Quality Strategies Offer a Path to Scaling Economic Opportunity

Even though the field of job quality practice is still emerging, the potential of the field to deliver change is great. Various fields of practice aimed at improving economic security and opportunities for people with low and moderate incomes have long been challenged by the ability to scale what works. In fact, many have struggled to clearly articulate and define what scale even means. In workforce development, scale has been elusive. Practitioners, policymakers, and investors have wrestled with the challenge of scale and this question of what it means for decades. Is scale simply serving more people, or is it delivering population-level outcomes? If we agree it is the latter, then we can conclude that strategies and services aimed at individuals will not achieve that goal.

Because job quality strategies are aimed at transforming industries and workplaces for the benefit of all, the potential to affect workers and communities is larger compared to strategies that are targeted toward individuals, and the success stories of organizations interviewed for this report indicate as much. PHI's work to improve home care jobs through business coaching has supported thousands of workers, and its research and policy advocacy work have contributed to improvements for millions of home care workers. Labor unions such as UFCW and UDWA do not negotiate on behalf of individual workers, of course, but on behalf of tens of thousands. The same is true for the worker centers interviewed for this report who organize thousands of workers to push for change. Although supporting individuals to improve their education and employment is critical, job quality offers the scale those who have been working to address poverty have long sought.

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