



WHY FOCUS ON JOB QUALITY?

With this brief, Workforce Professionals Training Institute is launching the new name of our initiative, *Voices from the Frontline*. The new name and logo encompasses the *2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals*, this brief series, and a forthcoming array of publications, field engagements, and tools informed by and created for workforce professionals and their organizations.

In recent years, the workforce development field has begun the process of reorienting itself toward job quality as a measure of success, as the persistence of poverty, economic insecurity and income inequality in a time of record-high employment has underscored that not all jobs are created equal nor are they a one-size-fits-all pathway out of poverty. The focus of most job quality conversations has been on the clients served by the workforce development system, but as we developed the *2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals*, we came to see the issue of *their* job quality as a key area for exploration. Understanding job quality

in the workforce development field itself can shed light on employee turnover, morale and professional development, which in turn have an impact on outcomes for the system's beneficiaries.

We will take a deeper look at the evolving conversation around job quality and what it means for the workforce development system. In this brief, we will look at the emerging definition of job quality, and in the next brief, we will discuss job quality in the context of the workforce development system: what we already know about it, and what improved job quality in the field might look like.

“Though Americans in low-income jobs are less likely to be satisfied with their pay, they are no more likely than those in higher-income positions to place a singular focus on pay when rating the importance of job characteristics. In particular, those in the bottom 20% on the income scale are just as likely as workers further up the scale to value a sense of purpose, an enjoyable work experience and career advancement opportunities.”

-Excerpt from *Not Just a Job: New Evidence on the Quality of Work in the United States*

Figure 1:

Dimensions of Job Quality



Source: Rothwell, J. and Crabtree, S. [Not Just a Job: New Evidence on the Quality of Work in the United States](#). Gallup. 2018.

Defining Job Quality

Until recently, the most widely-accepted parameters for job quality were pay and access to employer-sponsored benefits like health insurance and retirement plans. In recent years, the conversation about what makes a good job has broadened and deepened, and established leaders like the Aspen Institute, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, Gallup and PHI have been joined by newer voices like the Good Jobs Institute in an expanding field of work focused on defining and measuring job quality.

While definitions vary, there is convergence around the idea that a good job is not just a job that pays well by some objective measure. Rather, a good job is one that address a worker’s general welfare and survival needs as well as their emotional needs for fulfillment, enjoyment, growth and control; see Figure 1 for the dimensions of job quality used in the Great Jobs Demonstration Survey, conducted by Gallup with funding from the Lumina Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Omidyar Network.

Given the stark income inequality in this country and the polarization of the labor market into low-wage

service sectors and high-wage “knowledge” sectors, it is tempting—or even logical—to think that the more subjective elements of job quality are only relevant to workers at the upper ends of the pay scale; those for whom the financial security of their job allows them to focus on other aspects of their work. In fact, the Great Jobs Demonstration Survey found that regardless of their income level, workers ranked enjoying their day-to-day work, stable earnings, and having a sense of purpose as more important than level of pay.

For workforce development professionals, including the frontline workers who manage job placement activities, this is a powerful lesson that any job can be a good job, regardless of pay, level of required experience, or industry. In fact, the framework for a good job developed by the Good Jobs Institute came from a study of companies exclusively in the retail sector with the finding that even within this industry—characterized by low wages and poor working conditions—some companies decide to offer good jobs. However, the top 10 percent of earners are more than twice as likely to report having a good job as the bottom 20 percent, according to the Gallup study.

Job Quality in the Nonprofit Sector

The majority of respondents to the *2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals* work for nonprofit organizations. In the Nonprofit Finance Fund’s 2018 State of the Sector study, 66 percent of nonprofit leaders said offering competitive pay was a top challenge and 59 percent said employing enough staff to meet demand is a top challenge.¹ These challenges are often traced to fundraising constraints, budget shortfalls and in many cases, funders’ unwillingness to pay more.

What often follows from these challenges are the related assumptions that nonprofit employees leave their jobs because of low pay, and that low pay is the trade-off that workers are willing to accept in exchange for having a job with purpose or meaning. There may be some validity in these assumptions. For example, 53 percent of respondents to 2012 *Deep in the Trenches* survey, the predecessor to the *2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals*, thought that pay and benefits were the reason that people left their

organization. Yet, 85 percent reported being very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their jobs, and the ability to have an impact on their clients’ lives was the overwhelming response for the source of job satisfaction.²

Yet, additional research on worker experience in the nonprofit sector points to other reasons for employee turnover: reasons that align with dimensions of job quality beyond pay and purpose. For example, a meta-analysis of workers in child welfare organizations found that aspects of the day-to-day work experience, such as stress and emotional exhaustion, and worker autonomy had medium to high influences on a worker’s intention to leave their job.³ Similarly, perceived organizational support, including whether an employee believes their employer values them and cares about their well-being, was found to be a consistent and robust predictor of turnover intention for nonprofit workers; perceived organizational support overlaps with the higher needs of belonging and recognition identified as elements of job quality by the Good Jobs Institute (Figure 2).

Figure 2:

Higher Needs of Belonging and Recognition

WORK MEETS HIGHER NEEDS

MEANINGFULNESS
Work itself and significance to customer

PERSONAL GROWTH
Learning, creativity, problem solving

BELONGING
Team, pride for working at the company, mutual respect

ACHIEVEMENT
Have autonomy, tools, time and resources to do great work

RECOGNITION
High expectations, feedback from others and job

WORK PROVIDES BASIC NEEDS

PAY & BENEFITS
Fair for the work and compared to others, meets needs

SCHEDULES
Stable and predictable schedules, adequate hours

SECURITY & SAFETY
Keep job if perform well, safe conditions

Source: Is It the Job or the Support? Examining Structural and Relational Predictors of Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intention for Nonprofit Employees. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 46(3), 652 –671. 2017.

Employing a broader definition of job quality gives employers a bigger toolkit when thinking about how to address issues like employee retention, professional development and organizational culture. Of course, so does asking workers about their experiences, motivations, and challenges, which is what our *2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals* is designed to do. The next installment of this series will consider why the issue of job quality for the workforce development frontline is particularly timely, what a quality job in the workforce development sector might look like, and how this would ultimately benefit the jobseekers who are the beneficiaries of the workforce system.

Talking about Job Quality in a Pandemic:

The 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals and our thinking about this series of briefs were developed in the pre-COVID-19 economy. We are now facing a recession of unknown depth and duration, with job loss at levels not seen since the Great Depression. In this climate, it is important to emphasize that a focus on job quality is not a luxury only afforded during times of low unemployment. On the contrary, the early weeks of the COVID-19 response have thrown into stark relief the unequal access to good jobs, especially in terms of differences in access to paid time off, health insurance, worker autonomy and safety, and the hard truth that hundreds of thousands of jobs deemed essential to the response to the crisis are in sectors where bad jobs are predominant. As we move into a period of high unemployment and, eventually, a recovery, it will be evermore critical to keep the conversation about job quality alive.

The 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce

Professionals explores the motivations of workforce professionals, their working environments and long-term career goals, and challenges they face. Findings from the survey and resulting recommendations will inform field-wide leadership of better strategies for worker engagement and satisfaction, and improved program performance.

The **Workforce Field Building Hub** brings together key leaders from across the interdisciplinary and diverse New York City and national workforce community to identify common issues and solutions to build and strengthen the field of workforce development. For more information, visit <http://thehub.workforceprofessionals.org>.

Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) increases the effectiveness of people, programs, and organizations that are committed to generating pathways out of poverty through employment. Our three-tiered approach – professional training, organizational consulting, and systems building – strengthens capacity at all levels of the workforce development system. For more information, visit <http://workforceprofessionals.org>.

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1 State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey. Nonprofit Finance Fund. 2018.

2 *Deep In the Trenches: Understanding the Dynamics of New York City's Frontline Workforce Development Staff*. Workforce Professionals Training Institute and Fiscal Policy Institute. November 2012.

3 A meta-analysis of turnover intention predictors among U.S. child welfare workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 47. 214-223. 10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.09.015.