



VOICES FROM
THE FRONTLINE

JOB QUALITY FOR NYC WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

DATA REPORT 4
MAY 2021



INTRODUCTION



A note to readers: The Voices from the Frontline initiative, led by Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI), seeks to shed light on frontline workforce professionals, the individuals responsible for preparing and connecting job seekers to employment. Data gathered through the 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals includes detailed information on the work environment, personal characteristics, employment satisfaction, and future aspirations of 362 frontline workforce professionals working in New York City. The 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals was conducted in January and February of 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, all data presented reflect pre-pandemic responses and sentiments.

To better understand how frontline workforce professionals have been impacted by the pandemic, WPTI, in collaboration with the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, is re-engaging this population throughout 2021 with additional surveying, focus groups, and other forms of data collection. As aptly noted by a nonprofit leader, “Even before COVID-19 this has been an underpaid and undervalued sector. There have always been issues about pay, benefits, and parity, which are now being amplified.” Stay tuned for more information.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workforce development field had begun the process of reorienting itself toward job quality as a measure of success, but the focus of most job quality conversations was on improving job quality for the clients - the *jobseekers* - served by the workforce development system, or working with employers to improve job quality. However, as Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) developed our 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals, we came to see the issue of job quality for the “workforce workforce” as a key area for exploration. We have employed a definition of job quality that goes beyond salary and benefits and includes social and emotional dimensions like personal fulfillment, recognition, and opportunities for advancement. While there is no universal definition of a good job, this definition reflects common elements from the growing field of work on defining and measuring job quality by involving established voices like the [Aspen Institute](#), the [National Fund for Workforce Solutions](#), [Gallup](#) and [PHI](#) and newer voices like the [Good Jobs Institute](#).

The workforce development system is under increased pressure in light of the pandemic and recession, which have disrupted and reshaped the economy and labor market, and disproportionately impacted the health and livelihoods of women and people of color. This crisis has laid bare the precariousness and inequalities of the low-wage sectors of the labor market, and has placed additional strain on unemployed workers. In this environment, frontline workforce development professionals will continue to be essential workers, called to respond to greater demand for services by job seekers, fewer jobs¹, and an increased sense of urgency around upskilling low-wage workers to enable greater financial stability and mobility. Our goal, in understanding job quality in the workforce development field itself, is to shed light on potential levers to improve worker well-being, reduce employee turnover, improve morale, and increase career advancement opportunities. These changes could improve the stability of the sector, which in turn can improve outcomes for the system’s beneficiaries - specifically the jobseekers it serves.



JOB QUALITY FOR FRONTLINE WORKERS



Our 2020 survey included a set of questions aligned with the dimensions of job quality as identified in the Good Jobs Institute's [framework for a good job](#) (see **Figure 1**) as well as the [Great Jobs Demonstration Survey](#), originally conducted by Gallup in 2019 (see **Figure 2**). Both frameworks for job quality incorporate financial and non-financial elements, with the financial dimensions focused more on stability and fairness than the dollar value of compensation or benefits, and non-financial elements capturing the personal and interpersonal dynamics of a job.

Figure 3 shows how the Voices from the Frontline survey questions align with some of the common elements from the [Good Jobs Institute's framework](#) and the [Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Survey](#), and the overall response rates. On the whole, two-thirds or more of respondents agreed with statements related to non-financial elements of job quality, with more than three-quarters reporting feeling connected to the mission of the organization and their co-workers, and able to exercise creativity and meet their clients' needs.

Questions about financial elements of job quality had more varied responses; of all the questions about job quality, respondents were least likely to agree that pay is enough to cover basic living expenses and medical insurance is affordable. However, in spite of these frustrations with wages and benefits, the sector does offer more stability than low-wage sectors like fast food and retail where unpredictable scheduling practices contribute to income volatility, and only 1 in 4 respondents worried that they could be laid-off in the next year.

Figure 1

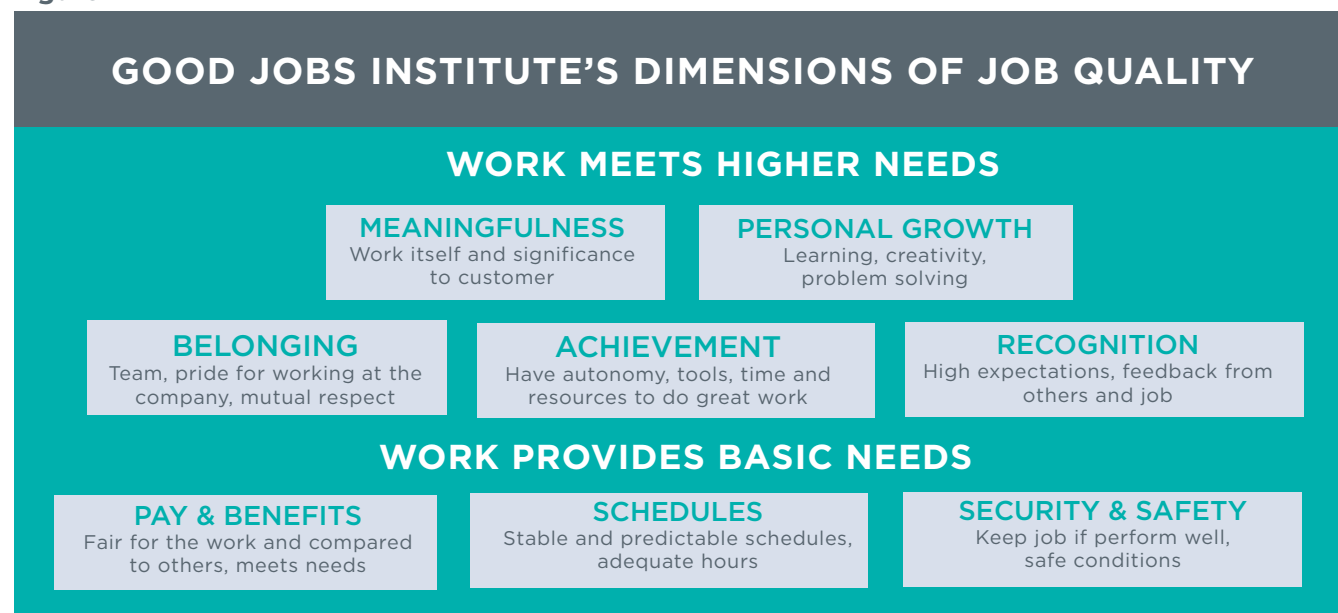




Figure 2



Seventy-four percent of survey respondents reported overall job satisfaction. This statistic might seem at odds with the lower rates of agreement about pay about some of the financial aspects of job quality. In fact, this aligns with findings from the [Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Survey](#), in which workers ranked enjoying their day-to-day work, stable earnings, and having a sense of purpose as more important than level of pay.² Nevertheless, getting better pay and/or benefits elsewhere was the top reason chosen for why survey respondents would leave their jobs, with two-thirds of respondents citing this as a reason.

Despite high overall job satisfaction, 57% of respondents said they were likely to look for another job within the next year, and 70% said they were likely to look for another job in the next three years. Job mobility is not necessarily a bad thing for the field, if experienced workers are being retained in the field, but it does come at a cost to individual organizations as well as the jobseekers they serve, in the form of lost productivity, added recruitment costs, and discontinuity of institutional relationships with clients and external partners including employers.

One necessary note about these responses is that they reflect a time before COVID-19, which has forced most organizations to operate remotely, in some capacity, for more than a year. We posit that aspects of job quality related to the day-to-day work experience may have suffered as a result--for example, feelings of connection to co-workers, or having enough time and resources to support clients--in the remote work environment. Perceptions of job security may have suffered as well. As a point of comparison, a follow-up survey by Gallup that looked at the impact of COVID-19 on job quality found a 12% decrease in the number of people who reported enjoying their day-to-day work.³ Our April 2021 follow-up survey is designed to understand the challenges that the ongoing pandemic has introduced to the workforce development field.

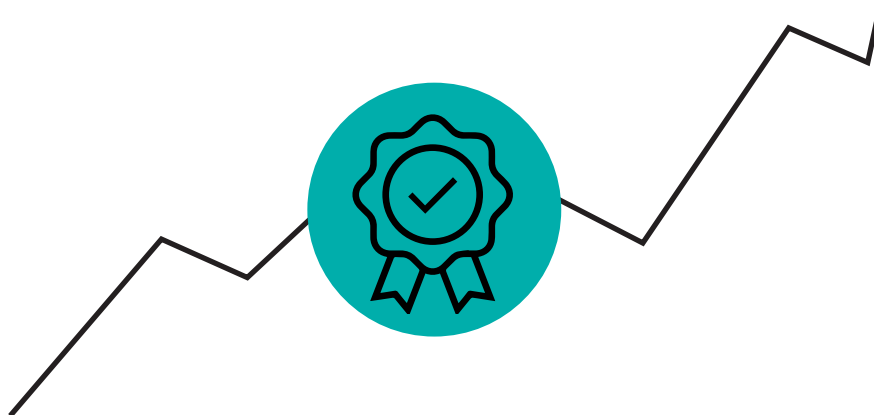




Figure 3

Pay + Benefits 	My take-home earnings are enough to cover my basic living expenses.	49%
	I participate in my organization's medical insurance and it is affordable.	55%
	I participate in my organization's medical insurance but it is not affordable.	23%
	The amount of pay I receive is consistent throughout the year.	86%
Schedules 	My work hours are predictable week-to-week.	83%
Security & Safety 	I feel emotionally safe at work.	73%
	I feel physically safe at work.	84%
	I worry that I could be laid off by my current employer within the next year.	26%
Career Advancement 	It is clear to me what is required to professionally advance within my organization.	52%
Belonging 	I feel connected to and supported by my co-workers.	81%
Achievement 	During a typical workday I have enough resources to perform my job as well as I would like.	69%
	During a typical workday I have enough time to perform my job as well as I would like.	66%
	I am able to adequately address client needs.	86%
Recognition 	When I complete a particularly challenging assignment I feel recognized by my supervisor and coworkers.	67%
Meaningfulness 	I am familiar with my organization's mission and it is very important to me.	83%
Personal Growth 	The duties of my job often allow me to exercise personal initiative, judgment, and creativity.	81%
	I feel supported by my manager in learning and performing tasks that help me grow my skills.	70%



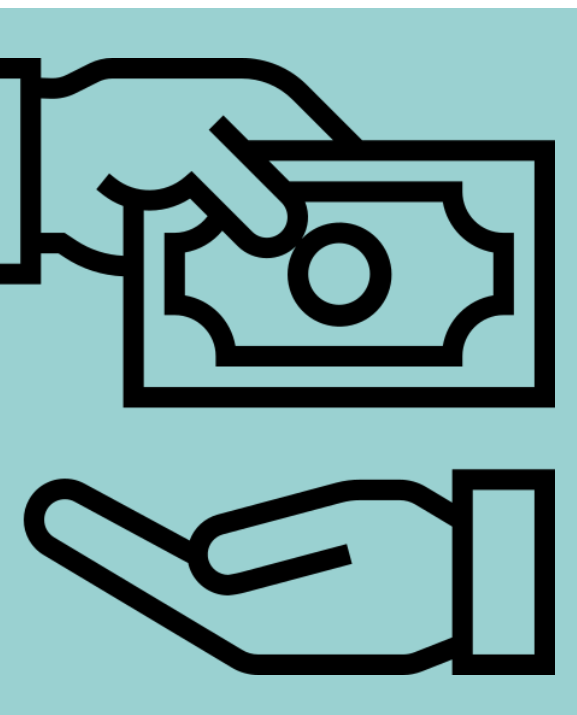
SALARY AND JOB QUALITY



As this series of reports has established, in tandem with research on the nonprofit human services sector as a whole, the workforce development field is marked by low compensation relative to workers' high educational attainment, with slightly more than half of workers earning at or below the median wage for New York City despite the fact that 74 percent have at least a bachelor's degree. The issue of compensation is central to the necessary discussion about improving job quality and employee retention in the field. However, the Gallup poll, mentioned above, found that workers at all points in the income scale also value non-financial elements of their job equally. Put another way, caring about non-financial aspects of work is not a behavior *only* exhibited by higher earners once they have achieved a certain level of financial stability. Nevertheless, the same poll found that lower-income workers were more likely to be dissatisfied with the financial aspects of their job.

As in previous reports, we used \$55,000—roughly the median earnings for New York City as well as for the survey respondents—as a cut-off, to see if there were any differences in perceptions of job quality by wage. For the most part, response rates to questions about job quality were similar for respondents above and below the cut-off, but those earning more than \$55,000 reported a higher rate of overall job satisfaction (78%) than those earning less than that amount (71%). One other notable difference between workers earning above and below \$55,000 was in their feelings of emotional safety: 79% of workers earning more than \$55,000 reported feeling emotionally safe at work, versus 69% of workers earning \$55,000 or less.

Higher earners were slightly less likely to look for a job in the next year (51% compared to 63% of their peers earning less than \$55,000), but a similar percent of each earning group reported that they were likely to look for a new job in the next three years (73% of the lower earners and 69% of the higher earners). For both groups, getting better pay and/or benefits was the most commonly cited reason for moving to a new job although slightly more respondents in the “below \$55,000” category cited this as a reason: 70%, versus 65% of the higher salary group. Forty-four percent of those earning below \$55,000 said that changing careers was a reason they would leave their current position, versus 35% of higher earners; this may speak to a perceived lack of career advancement opportunities, or other facets of dissatisfaction with job quality that are more prevalent for lower earners in the field.





GENDER AND JOB QUALITY

As noted in our previous analyses in this series, the workforce development field is predominantly female; 67% of survey respondents identified as women and 85% agreed that women were adequately represented in leadership in their organizations. [Data Report 3](#) in this series noted differences by race/ethnicity in individual workforce professionals' experiences of the workplace, with regard to both the financial and non-financial dimensions of job quality, so this report offers an analysis of perceptions of job quality by gender. This is a particularly timely question, as women have borne the brunt of the job losses during the current recession, and the struggle to balance childcare and work in an era of remote schooling has pushed more women out of the workforce.

Our analysis showed that, for the most part, men and women had similar response rates to questions related to their day-to-day experience of the workplace and the non-financial aspects of job quality. One exception was that women were more likely to report feeling that there was someone trustworthy that they could go to with a concern (79%, versus 70% of men).

There were also differences in the perceived affordability and adequacy of medical insurance as well as paid leave policies. As seen in **Figure 4**, women are less likely to find these benefits affordable or sufficient, although men and women cite their coverage as unaffordable and insufficient at similar rates. Nationally, 25% of people who receive health insurance from their employer are classified as underinsured, defined as having some health insurance but having trouble paying for health care or medications⁴.

Figure 4

	WOMEN	MEN
I participate in medical insurance and it is affordable.	54%	58%
I participate in medical insurance but it is not affordable.	24%	20%
I participate in medical insurance and it is sufficient.	52%	59%
I participate in medical insurance but it is not sufficient.	25%	20%
Paid sick leave (beyond legal requirement) is sufficient.	68%	75%
Paid family leave (beyond legal requirement) is sufficient.	44%	62%

Overall, 59% of respondents said that their organizations provided paid family leave beyond the legal requirement, and 76% of respondents said that their organizations provided paid sick leave beyond the legal requirement. For respondents whose organizations do provide additional paid time off beyond the legal requirement, 48% found the amount of paid family leave sufficient and 40% did not know, but there was a pronounced gender divide in responses: 44% of women found the additional paid family leave sufficient, compared to 62% of their male counterparts. Additionally, 23 percent of women cited a change in family status (e.g. the birth of a child) as a reason they would leave their job, which suggests one way in which the connection between job quality and employee retention may be variable by gender.



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ORGANIZATION SIZE AND JOB QUALITY

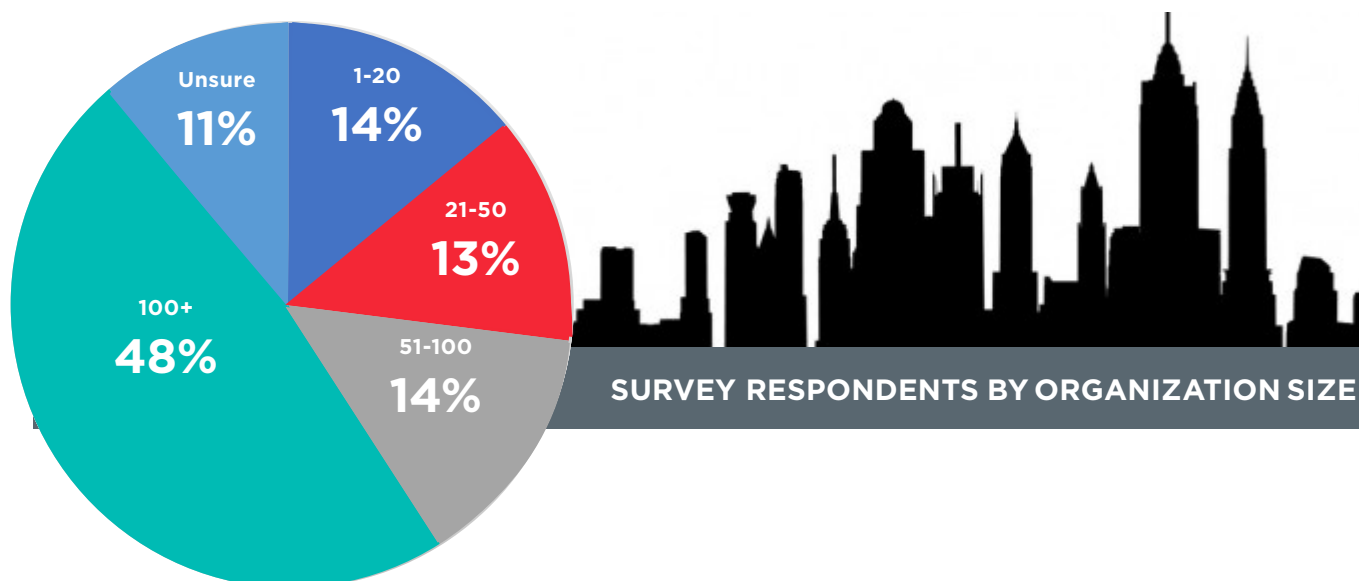


One of the striking themes of the emerging body of job quality work is that *any job* can be a good job, because job quality is the result of choices that employers make, as well as a reflection of what workers care about. This challenges the assumptions that only certain sectors, occupations, or types of companies can offer good jobs, and that low-paid jobs are by default bad jobs. The 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals adds another proof point to this body of work on job quality by showing that in a relatively low-paid sector, workers have fairly high rates of job satisfaction and in particular, high levels of satisfaction on the non-financial dimensions of job quality. This is not to say that pay and benefits do not matter. As mentioned above, they certainly do. However, many other variables contribute to overall job quality, separate and apart from compensation -- including for lower-wage workers.

The workforce development field itself includes organizations of varying sizes, with unique missions, histories, and business models. In an effort to capture what differences, if any, there might be within the field when it comes to job quality, we analyzed responses by organization staff size. The overall breakdown of organization staff size as reported by survey respondents is seen below, with the caveat that larger organizations likely had multiple staff who responded to the survey.

As can be seen in **Figure 6**, workers at the smallest organizations had the highest rates of positive responses to most questions about job quality, but had rates of positive response similar to workers at organizations with more than 100 employees. Workers at organizations with between 21 and 100 employees had lower positive response rates than either the smallest or largest organizations. This pattern was reflected in responses about overall job satisfaction (**Figure 7**).

Figure 5





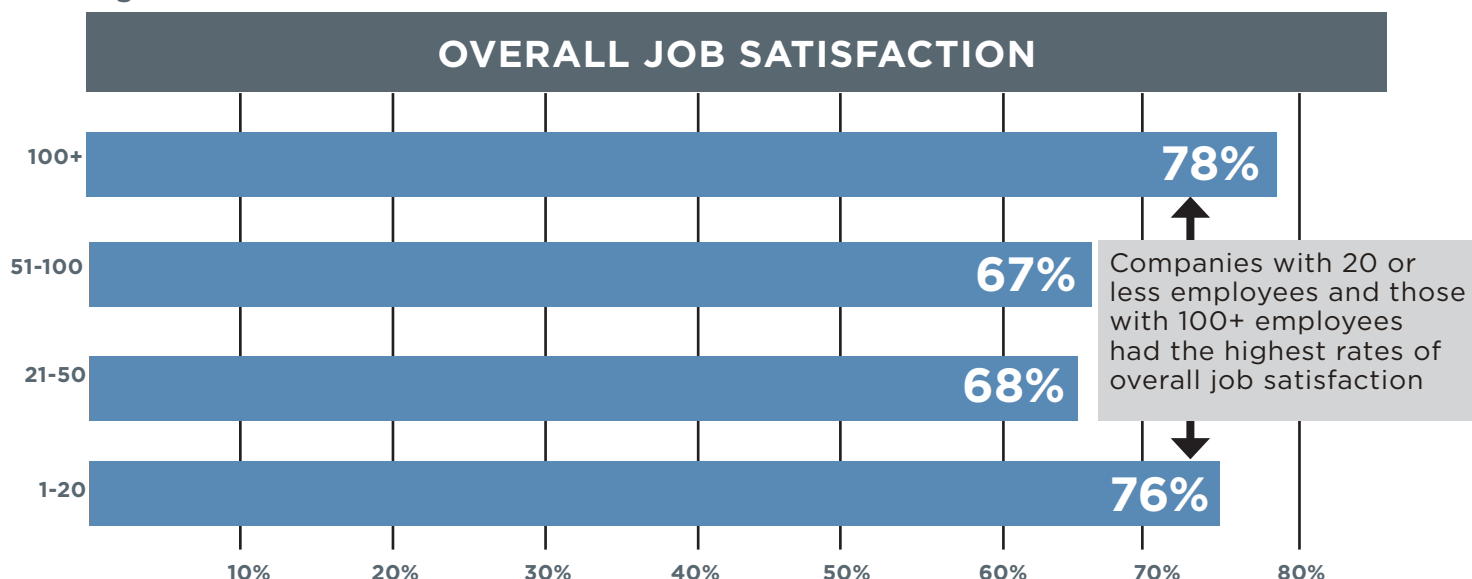
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Figure 6

	1-20	21-50	51-100	MORE THAN 100
My work hours are predictable week-to-week	76%	84%	83%	84%
The amount of pay I receive is consistent throughout the year.	86%	75%	94%	88%
I feel physically safe at work.	88%	71%	89%	87%
I feel emotionally safe at work.	80%	57%	73%	77%
I am familiar with my organization's mission and it is very important to me.	92%	87%	74%	81%
I feel connected to and supported by my co-workers.	84%	81%	74%	82%
During a typical workday I have enough resources to perform my job as well as I would like.	74%	52%	60%	72%
My supervisor provides me with helpful feedback	80%	67%	70%	78%
The duties of my job often allow me to exercise personal initiative, judgment, and creativity.	76%	74%	72%	84%
I feel there is someone trustworthy at my workplace I can go to if I have concerns.	84%	69%	82%	81%
I am able to adequately address client needs.	94%	81%	82%	85%



Figure 7



We also looked at differences in benefits, since the ability to provide benefits (and the quality and affordability of those benefits) is often assumed to be associated with organizational budget size. On the whole, workers at smaller organizations were less likely to report having most types of benefits, and less likely to report that their medical insurance was affordable. For organizations with more than 100 employees, medical insurance, retirement contributions, and paid vacation are nearly universal, while for smaller organizations, only about two-thirds of workers receive most other benefits besides medical insurance. Interestingly, on some benefits, organizations with 21-50 employees appear less likely to offer some benefits than organizations with between 1 and 20 employees. (Figure 8) Surprisingly, though, 68% of workers at organizations with more than 100 employees cite getting better pay or benefits elsewhere as a reason to leave their current job, compared to 59% of workers at organizations with between 1 and 20 employees.

Figure 8

	1-20	21-50	51-100	More than 100
My organization offers medical insurance	82%	89%	96%	97%
I participate in medical insurance and it is affordable	47%	38%	43%	58%
My employer contributes to retirement savings	65%	60%	78%	84%
My employer offer paid vacation	69%	81%	94%	95%
My employer offers paid sick leave beyond legal requirements	67%	64%	80%	83%
My organization offers paid family leave beyond legal requirements	57%	34%	51%	67%



CAREER ADVANCEMENT & EMPLOYEE TURNOVER



The differences between organizations, based on size, is a reminder that job quality is not even across the sector and that workers face trade-offs in their decision-making about staying in their current roles or pursuing new ones. Further, this data shows that organizations that want to improve job quality have a number of levers for doing so but the specific strategies may depend on where the organization is in its growth or organizational life cycle and the experience of its current employees.

We know that the workforce development field is diverse and there is no one path into a workforce development career, but we have endeavored to understand what keeps people in their jobs and in the sector as a way of understanding how to improve the sector's ability to meet its mission.

Career advancement within an organization can be an antidote to turnover, which 40% of survey respondents cited as affecting their ability to do their job, and having the opportunity for career advancement is an important element of job quality. After getting better pay and/or benefits, a lack of opportunities to advance was the most common reason for leaving a job, cited by 56% of all survey respondents.

The majority of survey respondents indicated that they would like to advance into positions with greater responsibility and pay within their organizations, but less than half had a clear understanding of what is required in order to advance and only one-third had had a discussion about requirements to advance with their supervisor.



Workers at the smallest organizations (1-20 employees) were slightly less likely than workers at all other sizes of organizations to cite lack of advancement opportunities as a reason they would leave their job, and slightly more likely to report having a clear understanding of what would be required of them to advance. However, they were at least 20 percentage points less likely to report that they had seen frontline staff promoted within their organization when compared to their counterparts at larger organizations.

Discussions about job quality in the workforce development sector tend to focus narrowly on the issue of pay, with the scarcity of funding from, and constraints imposed by, public and private sources bearing the blame for sector-wide norms and individual organizations' decision making around compensation. Our goal, in this report and earlier briefs on the subject of job quality, was to broaden the working definition of job quality to give employers a bigger toolkit when thinking about how to address issues like employee retention, professional development, and organizational culture.



CONCLUSION

As the data in this report and previous reports show, job quality is not uniform across the sector or the workforce, with differences in perception and experience based on race, gender, earnings, and organization size. As a result, organizations can and must employ different strategies to improve job quality for their frontline staff. This will require employers to understand their own workforce and their needs, priorities and experiences, but we believe that the data presented here can provide a useful starting point for thinking about what strategies to employ.

Despite the variations in responses about different aspects of job quality, a clear picture of the tensions between financial and non-financial elements of job quality, and overall job satisfaction and dissatisfaction

As the workforce development field rightly increases its focus on the quality of jobs available to the jobseekers it serves, ensuring that candidates are placed in positions that offer fair compensation and benefits, opportunities for advancement, and a supportive work environment, it is also critical for the sector to look inward, and examine how its own workers are treated. Only by addressing the needs of these professionals will our sector ensure that talent is retained, leaders are cultivated, and the needs of communities are effectively met.

with compensation in the workforce development sector emerges from looking at this data in the aggregate. These tensions are real, they are shared across the sector, and they have concrete implications for the sector as a whole and the systems in which

the sector operates. While there are levers that individual organizations can pull to improve job quality for their workers, the system as a whole has to grapple with the issue of job quality and common assumptions and practices that act as limiting factors to any individual efforts to improve job quality.

Individuals who choose to work in the nonprofit sector, and human services in particular, *do* demonstrate a willingness to accept some trade-off between monetary rewards and less tangible ones. The damaging side of this is that these individual choices are leveraged against these workers and sector as a whole; for example contracts and grants that do not cover the full cost of program delivery and limit the ability of employers to adjust pay; heightened scrutiny of compensation by funders; and salary scales that do not reflect the level of education of the workforce or the importance of their job duties. The gendered nature of the sector reflects another layer of systemic challenge. The predominantly female human services sector is in many ways a continuation of women's traditional relegation to charitable and unpaid labor, which is assumed to be a fit with their intrinsic motivations or dispositions toward caregiving roles and therefore less worthy of fair compensation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Voices from the Frontline: Job Quality for NYC Workforce Development Professionals is a publication of the Workforce Field Building Hub (The Hub) at Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI). This report was written by Dana Archer-Rosenthal. The *Voices from the Frontline* initiative is managed by Justin Collins, Assistant Director of The Hub, and research support is provided by Gregory Brodie, Senior Associate of Programs, Operations, and Research. Stacy Woodruff, Senior Fellow, led research efforts for *Voices from the Frontline* and crafted the initial reports for the initiative.

The 2020 Survey of NYC Workforce Professionals was designed in partnership with the CUNY Labor Market Information Service (LMIS); LMIS administered the online survey and conducted initial analysis of the data. Research Consultants Matthew Vanaman and Scott Koenig performed additional data analyses for this series of reports. East End Advertising designed this report, and Momentum Communication Group provides messaging, media outreach, and communication strategy support. Dana Archer-Rosenthal serves as a strategic advisor to the initiative.

WPTI wishes to express gratitude to the dozens of frontline workforce professionals, leaders, and intermediary partners from across the New York City workforce ecosystem who participated in focus groups and stakeholder interviews, broadly disseminated the 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals, and provided valuable feedback to realign initiative priorities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. These individuals provided informed, candid, and often heartfelt assessments of the roles assumed by frontline workforce professionals; the challenges encountered within workforce organizations and embedded into the fabric of the workforce system; and the importance of the often passion-driven work of frontline workforce professionals in their efforts to position more New Yorkers for success in the labor market.

Additionally, we thank the more than 350 frontline workforce professionals who participated in the 2020 Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals; without their input, the *Voices from the Frontline* initiative would not be possible. Finally, we are grateful for the support of WPTI's Executive Director, Sharon Sewell-Fairman, and full WPTI team for working every day to provide support, increase capacity, and raise the standards of quality service throughout New York City's workforce development field.



FOOTNOTES



1. <https://www.thecity.nyc/economy/2021/3/14/22326414/nyc-lost-record-jobs-to-pandemic-unemployment>
2. Rothwell, J. and Crabtree, S. 2019. Not Just a Job: New Evidence on the Quality of Work in the United States. Gallup. Available for download at: <https://www.gallup.com/education/267590/great-jobs-report.aspx>
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