![Jobs for the Future logo] Jobs for the Future

From the Front Lines: Reimagining Nonprofit Job Quality

Lessons and actionable strategies from worker-led research to elevate staff voice, strengthen organizational practices, and drive lasting change.

AT A GLANCE

A paradox of the workforce development industry is that the organizations dedicated to promoting quality job pathways for jobseekers often struggle to provide their own employees with quality jobs. This report shares lessons learned and field recommendations from participatory research projects conducted by eight California workforce organizations seeking to address this challenge.

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) transforms U.S. education and workforce systems to drive economic success for people, businesses, and communities. jff.org

About ReWork the Bay

ReWork the Bay, an initiative hosted at the San Francisco Foundation, brings together leaders in economic justice, education and training, business, and philanthropy to take bold, urgent action to create a prosperous Bay Area for all. www.reworkthebay.org

About Turning Basin Labs

Turning Basin Labs is a cooperative staffing agency that creates value for Bay Area workers and businesses by sourcing, placing, and supporting the best, most diverse talent. www.turningbasinlabs.com

About Path Group

Path Group is a social innovation studio focusing on the challenges of the future of humans at work. www.pathgroup.co

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Worker-Researcher In-Person Design Retreat, October 2023, at Oakstop in Oakland, California

Executive Summary

Nonprofit leaders at workforce development organizations are juggling shifting policies, funding constraints, and rising community needs, facing challenges in staff support and retention. At the same time, direct service staff at these organizations are on the front lines, helping jobseekers overcome barriers to quality employment—yet too often, they face instability, burnout, and limited opportunities themselves. With today's financial uncertainties and growing demands, now is the time to invest in staff well-being, job quality, and retention. When client-facing staff and leadership are supported together, the entire sector is stronger.

Serving as a foundation for this project, JFF's Quality Jobs Framework and JFF and Turning Basin Labs' worker-led job quality research offer a comprehensive definition of what truly makes a quality job. Beyond good pay and benefits, quality jobs provide stability, flexibility, autonomy and opportunities for advancement. These are all critical elements that allow workers to thrive, and applying these frameworks to nonprofit workforce organizations is essential to ensuring that client-facing staff not only support others in achieving quality employment but also experience it themselves.

ReWork the Bay, with funding from the **James Irvine Foundation**, launched an effort in May 2023 ("Job Quality Project") to address job quality for client-facing nonprofit staff in partnership with **Jobs for the Future** (JFF) and **Path Group** ("project team"). This initiative aimed to elevate the voices of client-facing staff through participatory research, identify actionable strategies to improve job quality, support organizations in implementing sustainable job quality improvements, and strengthen the workforce development ecosystem by prioritizing worker well-being.

Hypothesis

Prioritizing job quality for client-facing staff is essential not only for worker well-being but also for organizational sustainability, ensuring that nonprofits can retain talent, deliver higher-quality services for jobseekers, and drive lasting change for the communities they serve.

Lessons Learned From the Research

The challenges facing nonprofit workforce development staff are not new, but addressing them requires deeper engagement from both client-facing staff and nonprofit leadership. Through this research, organizations explored what it takes to improve job quality from the inside out—centering staff experiences, fostering leadership buy-in, and navigating the complexities of nonprofit structures. Key insights emerged about what works, what needs to shift, and how organizations can move forward in strengthening workplace culture and sustainability. These lessons include:

1. **Workers Surface What Matters:** When client-facing staff lead the research, they uncover honest feedback from their colleagues.

2. **When Leaders Listen, They Grow:** Nonprofit leaders gained new perspectives when they leaned into the job quality initiative, fostering more supportive and effective workplaces.

3. **Addressing Power Dynamics Is Essential:** Both client-facing staff and project leadership representatives must be supported throughout to address power dynamics and ensure project success.

4. **Context Matters:** Differentiated strategies are needed based on organizational size and maturity.

5. **Change Takes Time:** It's important to acknowledge that improving job quality requires a long-term commitment.

These lessons learned culminate into the following *guiding principles* that any organization can utilize if they're considering this approach:

1. **Empower** client-facing staff to lead

2. **Leverage** existing aligned initiatives

3. **Involve** staff at all levels

4. **Build** a culture of collaboration

5. **Implement** feedback early

Recommendations for Workforce Development Organizations

Creating a workplace where staff feel valued, heard, and supported is critical to the success of workforce development organizations. While there's no one-size-fits-all approach, research from this project points to key strategies that help organizations take meaningful steps toward improving job quality. From building shared leadership structures to advocating for new nonprofit funding models, these recommendations offer practical ways to strengthen retention, morale, and long-term impact.

1. **Advancing Shared Leadership:** Organization leaders can continue to invest resources in mechanisms for shared leadership between staff and the leadership team.

2. **Transforming Funding Systems:** Both organization leaders and funders can challenge the existing funding paradigms affecting nonprofit organizations. This requires a new way of thinking about how job quality initiatives are supported, the return on those investments, and the essential role they play in driving long-term impact.

3. **Elevating Collective Voice:** There's an opportunity to strengthen statewide collaboration by enhancing communications, advocacy efforts, and peer-learning. This is critical to addressing some of the barriers to investments in job quality for this sector that can't be addressed by one organization alone.

Human-Centered Approach

The project included client-facing staff as worker-researchers from eight nonprofit workforce organizations across California. Throughout this report, we feature case studies and worker-researcher spotlights from the cohort of eight organizations, showcasing real people and the tangible impact of job quality initiatives. These stories offer a human-centered perspective that goes beyond data, providing a deeper understanding of how these strategies affect individuals in the workforce. By grounding our findings in lived experiences, we highlight the value of both evidence-based approaches and personal narratives in driving meaningful change. The insights shared here underscore the importance of prioritizing people to foster sustainable progress across sectors.

Brianna Rogers, Initiative Officer, ReWork the Bay

Introduction

State of the Field: Job Quality in Nonprofit Workforce Development

Client-facing staff in nonprofit workforce development organizations, including case managers, community outreach specialists, and career coaches, play an essential role in helping jobseekers overcome barriers to quality jobs, yet they often don't have quality jobs themselves. At the same time, nonprofit leaders today are navigating an evolving landscape, requiring them to adapt to new policy directives, compliance measures, and funding priorities while continuing to meet the urgent and growing needs of their communities.

We know that many nonprofit staff manage high caseloads, work long hours, and contend with burnout. Many direct service staff members bring lived experience navigating the same challenges as the jobseekers they serve—which can be an asset in terms of client relationships but also requires nonprofits to provide additional resources to ensure staff well-being. Additionally, while these organizations often champion worker voice as a key component of job quality for their clients, they may lack opportunities for their own staff to contribute to organizational leadership decisions, a missed opportunity that can affect job satisfaction and retention. Historically, nonprofit turnover rates have been high, reaching 19% in 2016 compared to an all-industry average of 12%. With these

Worker-Researcher, at the In-Person Design Retreat, October 2023 at Oakstop in Oakland, California

existing trends in place and the looming financial impacts of shifts in federal funding on the nonprofit sector in 2025, investing in retention strategies, staff well-being, and ultimately, job quality, is more critical than ever.

Project Overview

The Job Quality Project was designed to address job quality in the workforce development sector. The project engaged eight nonprofit workforce organizations across California who applied to participate via a request for proposals process. These organizations were: Building Skills Partnership, Canal Alliance, Central Valley Workers Center, CROP (Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs), First Place for Youth, Latino Service Providers, Neighborhood Industries, and the

Who is in the cohort?

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program. The project team selected two client-facing staff members from each organization to serve as worker-researchers, equipping them with the training, tools and skills needed to assess job quality through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Participatory Research Approach

The primary method of research for this project was participatory research, or worker-led research, spearheaded by the Path Group team. The project team chose this approach because it ensures that solutions are shaped by those with lived experience, core to our hypothesis for this work that this approach builds trust and engagement among client-facing staff, fosters leadership development and strengthens organizations by embedding worker perspectives into decision-making. It is a collaborative research approach designed and led by people who are directly affected by or have lived experience with the research topic. This approach builds on foundations from prior worker-led research with Turning Basin Labs (TBL), Path Group, and JFF, including a new framework for assessing job quality.

Two client-facing staff ("worker-researchers") were chosen from each organization with the goal of designing and conducting participatory research on their own organizations' job quality efforts, successes, challenges, and opportunities. The worker-researchers gathered feedback from their colleagues through structured surveys, interviews, and focus groups to identify job quality challenges

Check out the tool A Worker-Centered Approach to an Equitable Economic Recovery, which was developed by JFF and TBL. It's available via **this page** on JFF.org

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and opportunities. They then analyzed their data using research software like Dovetail, which allowed them to identify patterns, synthesize findings, and develop actionable recommendations for their organizations. Based on their analysis, the worker-researchers developed strategies tailored to their organizations' needs and also ensured that the proposed job quality improvements were directly informed by client-facing staff experiences and priorities. They wrapped up their research projects by presenting their findings to their organizations' executive teams.

Worker-researchers were supported directly by Path Group and TBL researchers via an in-person design retreat, one-on-one coaching, office hours, and monthly cohort meetings. This direct mentorship and the cohort-based support model provided by the project team was critical for their success. Each pair of worker-researchers worked directly with a Path Group and TBL team member, who provided targeted and customized support to the challenges and opportunities that came up for each organization. They also received topic-specific training on tools and resources to conduct research; for example, they received cohort-based training and individual coaching on Dovetail. Lastly, they participated in monthly meetings with the entire worker-researcher cohort, which allowed for peer learning, fostered a sense of comradery, and promoted idea generation.

Leadership Capacity Building

Leadership representatives ("project leadership representatives") from each organization also participated in the Job Quality Project. Each organization selected one or two representatives, ranging from executive directors to HR directors and program supervisors, to provide direct support to worker-researchers and participate in collaborative learning spaces. The direct support to worker-researchers included providing feedback on research presentations, managing executive teams' expectations, and participating in the final presentations to the executive teams.

In addition, the project team provided capacity-building support for the project leadership representatives in order to ensure that they had the tools and ability to push this work forward. This included one-on-one coaching sessions that provided space for project leadership representatives to discuss project updates, refine strategies for supporting worker-researchers, and explore how to operationalize job quality enhancements within their organizations. Following the final presentations from worker-researchers to the executive teams, the project teams worked with project leadership representatives on practical action planning to implement these recommendations effectively.

Collaborative Spaces

Quarterly peer learning labs facilitated by JFF brought worker-researchers and organizational leaders together to work collaboratively and share insights, explore professional development opportunities and institutionalize leadership pathways for client-facing staff. These sessions created a structured environment for participants to reflect on research findings, exchange strategies for improving job quality, and identify concrete steps for embedding worker well-being into organizational practices. By fostering dialogue and collective problem-solving, these learning labs contributed to a more sustainable and systemic approach to job quality improvements in their organizations.

For more details about the project structure, please see the **Appendix**.

Theory of Change

At the core of this project is a commitment to ensuring better access to quality, empowered jobs—jobs that offer livable wages, access to essential benefits, and meaningful agency in the workplace—for client-facing workforce staff on the front lines. These investments are not just about individual well-being; they are foundational to organizational health and performance. As one worker-researcher put it, "The better I am able to operate, the better I can serve." This logic chain is captured in the overall project hypothesis: Prioritizing job quality for client-facing staff is essential not only for worker well-being but also for organizational sustainability, ensuring that nonprofits can retain talent, deliver higher quality services for jobseekers, and drive lasting change for the communities they serve.

Note: The theory of change depicted on the pages that follow outlines the strategic approach taken in this project to improve job quality within nonprofit workforce development organizations and demonstrates potential impacts for the field. It identifies the key inputs and activities designed to address challenges, while focusing on the long-term outcomes we aim to achieve.

Theory of Change

Project Hypothesis:
Prioritizing job quality for client-facing staff is essential not only for worker well-being but also for organizational sustainability, ensuring nonprofits can retain talent, deliver higher quality services for jobseekers, and drive lasting change for the communities they serve.

Together, the pathways for client-facing workforce staff and the workforce development field demonstrate that improving job quality at the front lines and reinforcing it at the systems level are both essential to achieving lasting impact.

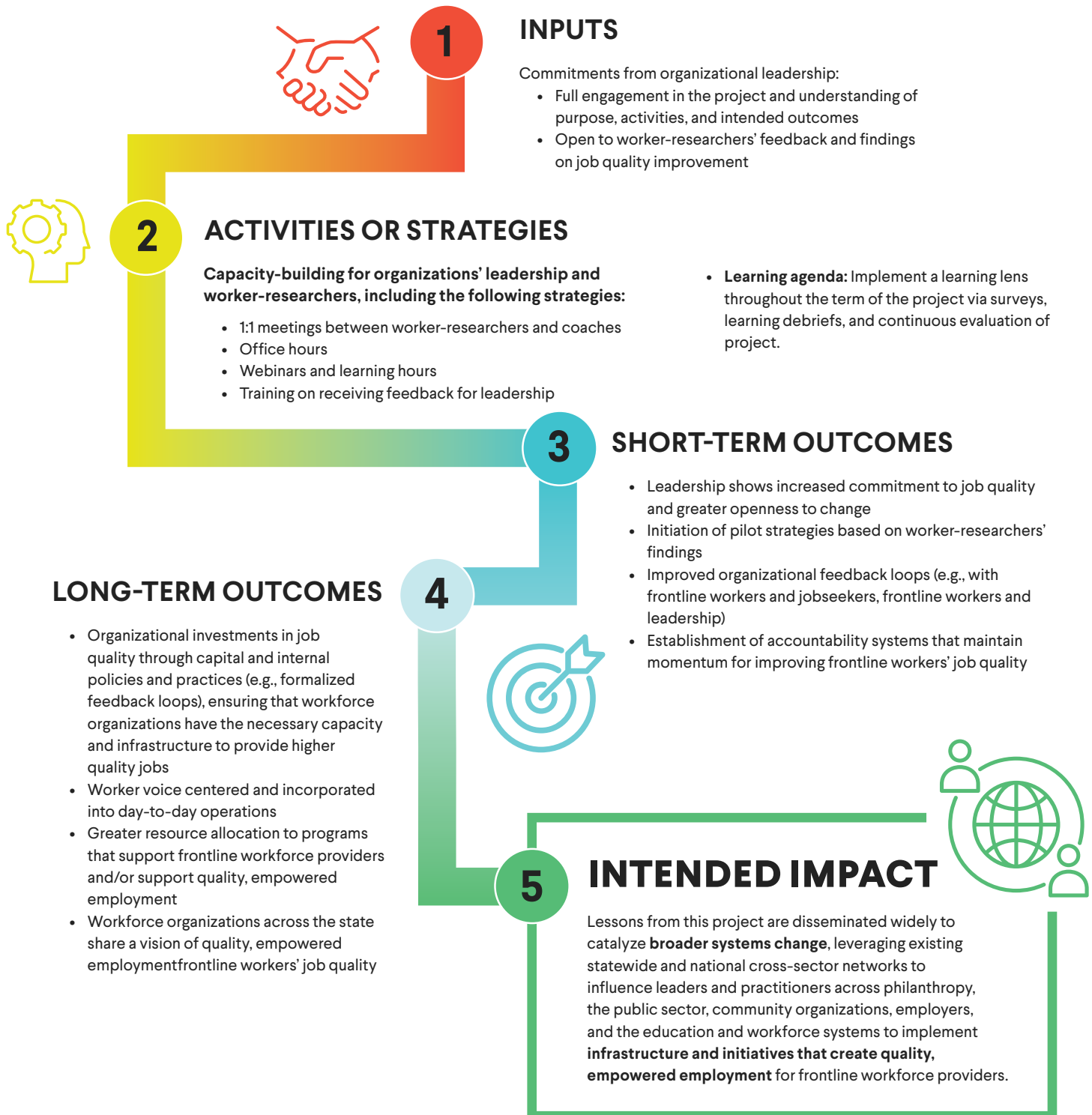|	Client-Facing Workforce Staff	Workforce Development Field
	Click for more details	*Click for more details*
Inputs — Starting resources and commitments	Selecting trusted **worker-researchers** and reducing their workloads results in capacity for meaningful participation.	**Leadership commitment** to the project creates the foundation for feedback, learning, and culture change.
Activities or Strategies — Actions taken to drive change	Centering worker voice through **participatory research**, using trauma-informed practices, and fostering peer learning enables greater connection, wellness, and engagement.	**Capacity building**, coaching, and **continuous learning** strengthen leadership's ability to receive and act on worker input.
Short-Term Outcomes — Early shifts in behavior	Workers build confidence, share feedback with leadership, and expand networks, which **strengthens voice and agency**.	Leadership launches job quality pilots and improves **feedback loops**, which begins shifting organizational culture toward shared ownership.
Long-Term Outcomes — Sustained change over time	Workers are seen as **leaders**, job satisfaction increases, and trust grows, which creates a healthier and more stable workforce.	Organizations establish accountability systems and embed worker voice, which supports **lasting improvements in job quality**.
Intended Impact — End goal	Frontline staff hold **quality jobs** with better wages, benefits, and agency.	Workforce organizations advance a **shared, statewide vision** for quality, empowered jobs across the field.

Client-Facing Workforce Staff

This offers a detailed outline of the activities, outcomes, and impacts that client-facing staff participated in and experienced in this project.

1 INPUTS

- Selection of worker-researchers with strong relationships and social capital among colleagues
- Reduced workloads for worker-researchers to create capacity for engagement in the research project

2 ACTIVITIES OR STRATEGIES

Participatory Research: Center workers' wisdom and employ the following strategies:

- Social/emotional learning and trauma-informed practices
- Prioritizing mental health and wellness
- Peer-to-peer learning
- Creating spaces for frontline workers and their organizations to learn from one another

3 SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

- Increased opportunities for worker-researchers to provide organizational feedback and engage in shared learning with leadership
- Growth in confidence and agency in interacting with leadership
- Increased opportunities for network-building for worker-researchers
- Growth in research, data collection, and analysis and interview skills
- Worker-researchers seen as influential among their colleagues and with leadership

4 LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

- Greater job satisfaction and decreased turnover
- Frontline workers empowered to prioritize mental health and well-being
- Greater trust between frontline workers and leadership

5 INTENDED IMPACT

Better access to quality, empowered jobs for frontline workforce providers. This includes better opportunities for higher wages, access to benefits, and agency.

Workforce Development Field

This offers a detailed outline of the activities, outcomes, and impacts that organizations and organizational leaders engaged in and experienced in this project.

1 INPUTS

Commitments from organizational leadership:
- Full engagement in the project and understanding of purpose, activities, and intended outcomes
- Open to worker-researchers' feedback and findings on job quality improvement

2 ACTIVITIES OR STRATEGIES

Capacity-building for organizations' leadership and worker-researchers, including the following strategies:

- 1:1 meetings between worker-researchers and coaches
- Office hours
- Webinars and learning hours
- Training on receiving feedback for leadership

- **Learning agenda:** Implement a learning lens throughout the term of the project via surveys, learning debriefs, and continuous evaluation of project.

3 SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

- Leadership shows increased commitment to job quality and greater openness to change
- Initiation of pilot strategies based on worker-researchers' findings
- Improved organizational feedback loops (e.g., with frontline workers and jobseekers, frontline workers and leadership)
- Establishment of accountability systems that maintain momentum for improving frontline workers' job quality

4 LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

- Organizational investments in job quality through capital and internal policies and practices (e.g., formalized feedback loops), ensuring that workforce organizations have the necessary capacity and infrastructure to provide higher quality jobs
- Worker voice centered and incorporated into day-to-day operations
- Greater resource allocation to programs that support frontline workforce providers and/or support quality, empowered employment
- Workforce organizations across the state share a vision of quality, empowered employmentfrontline workers' job quality

5 INTENDED IMPACT

Lessons from this project are disseminated widely to catalyze **broader systems change**, leveraging existing statewide and national cross-sector networks to influence leaders and practitioners across philanthropy, the public sector, community organizations, employers, and the education and workforce systems to implement **infrastructure and initiatives that create quality, empowered employment** for frontline workforce providers.

About This Report

This report is organized into the following sections:

1. **Project Overview:** A summary of the Job Quality Project structure, approach, and goals

2. **Outcomes From the Project:** Key results achieved through the project

3. **Lessons Learned:** Insights gained through the project, including challenges faced, successful strategies implemented, and factors that contributed to project progress

4. **Recommendations for Organizations Looking to Invest in Job Quality:** Actionable suggestions for organizations seeking to enhance job quality

Throughout the report, we highlight case studies and success stories from the cohort.

Outcomes From the Project

The Job Quality Project revealed key insights into how job quality manifests within workforce development organizations, the transformative impact of participatory research, and even early insights into how participating organizations are already applying the results of the research. Below are outcomes seen directly as a result of the research projects across the organizations.

Key Job Quality Themes

Although organizations in this initiative were at varying stages of their job quality journey, the participatory research conducted across these organizations uncovered shared themes regarding the job quality attributes that matter most to staff. These themes highlight aspects of worker agency that extend beyond compensation and benefits. While compensation and benefits were seen as fundamental elements of a good job by the cohort, and some even emphasized the need for greater access to family-sustaining wages, the worker-researchers chose to focus on issues that prioritized agency and empowerment.

A well-paying job that overlooks worker agency can still contribute to burnout and turnover.

The Importance of Clear Communication

Effective communication across all levels and clear organizational structure proved essential for fostering a productive and inclusive workplace across the organizations. It was evident through the research that while the tools and processes for this may look different depending on the size of the nonprofit, all nonprofit organizations must continue building and growing the muscle to be able to use these tools and processes in the best way. Worker-researchers found that their colleagues felt an increased sense of stability, trust, collaboration, and engagement with the organization when there was clear and transparent communication from organization leadership and their supervisors. A lack of communication and structure often fostered an environment of confusion, lower staff morale, and potentially turnover.
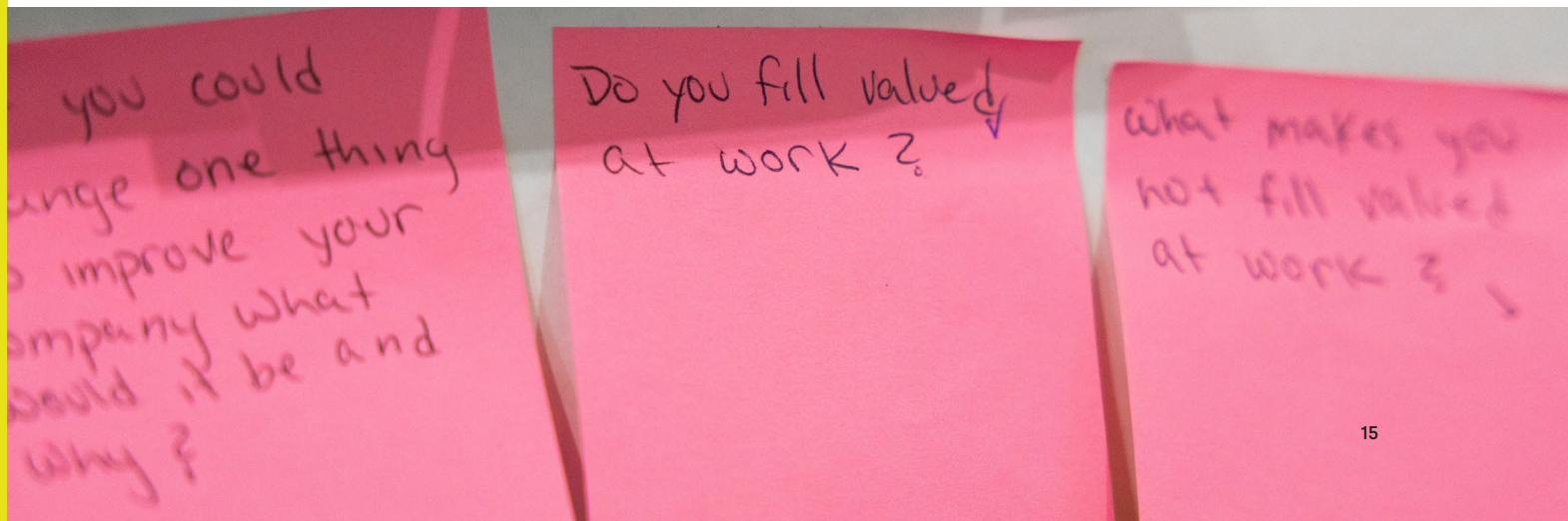
Labor Values in Action

Meet the Organization: Building Skills Partnership (BSP) is a California-based nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of property service workers and their families through workforce development, education, and community empowerment. Operating in major cities across the state, BSP provides training and skill-building programs for janitors, security officers, and other low-wage workers, with a focus on immigrant inclusion and economic mobility. In collaboration with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), BSP ensures that workers have access to career advancement opportunities, financial literacy education, and health and wellness programs. Read more at https://www.buildingskills.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: With a strong partnership with SEIU, BSP was uniquely positioned in the Job Quality Project, benefiting from a deeply ingrained labor perspective. Staff at BSP expressed high appreciation for their compensation and benefits—particularly the pension plan—stemming from their union affiliation. This connection fostered a strong alignment with the organization's mission and vision, reinforcing a people-centered culture that prioritized worker well-being. Because of this foundation, staff held clear expectations for transparency and accountability from leadership, emphasizing open communication and trust as key components of job quality within the organization.

Worker Safety and Well-Being

It's no secret that staff working in nonprofits and mission-driven organizations often struggle with work-life balance, because the expectation to remain engaged beyond standard hours can blur the lines between work and personal time. This was evident across many of the organizations in this cohort. Unlike employees in corporate settings, where it may be easier to disconnect after 5 p.m., direct service staff often feel pressure to stay available (e.g., to support the clients they work with who may be facing after-hours emergencies), leading to burnout and high turnover. Therefore, researchers highlighted that clear policies around paid time off (PTO), sick leave, and parental leave are foundational for sustainability. Establishing explicit guidelines on "offline" expectations can help create a healthier work culture and support employee well-being. In addition, direct-service staff may often work with participants who are going through challenging periods of their lives due to economic and social barriers which can sometimes result in unpredictable, tense, and potentially violent interactions. Worker-researchers elevated the importance of nonprofits having explicit policies in place to ensure the physical safety of their staff at all times.

CASE STUDY: THE FORESTRY AND FIRE RECRUITMENT PROGRAM

Centering Lived Experience

Meet the Organization: The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the representation of people with records of incarceration in the wildland and forestry sectors. Recognizing California's urgent need for wildfire personnel, FFRP provides training, skills, and career pathways to help people with records secure stable employment as firefighters and forestry technicians across three training sites in the state. Read more at https://www.forestryfirerp.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: FFRP prioritizes job quality by fostering both physical and psychological workplace safety. FFRP operates with a transparent structure, allowing employees to openly communicate with leadership. This approach is important, given the physically dangerous nature of wildland firefighting. Many staff members, including those in leadership positions have firsthand experience with the challenges of wildland firefighting. In fact, after facing significant challenges transitioning from Fire Camp to professional firefighting careers, FFRP cofounders Brandon Smith and Royal Ramey created FFRP to help others with similar experiences secure stable employment and reduce recidivism. Because of this shared lived experience, leadership is deeply invested in maintaining an environment where workers feel heard and supported. Their impact is clear—FFRP maintains a 10% recidivism rate among the more than 200 individuals placed in jobs to date, far below the state and national averages.

Worker-Researcher Spotlight

Beyond physical safety, FFRP actively fosters psychological safety, ensuring that workers feel respected, supported, and empowered to speak up. A powerful example of this is Aviance Contreras, an administrative assistant and Buffalo Crew member at FFRP and one of the organization's worker-researchers for the Job Quality Project. Through the organization's supportive environment, she has grown significantly in confidence and skill. The Job Quality Project provided her with the space to develop her voice as an advocate for workplace improvements while strengthening her communication and leadership abilities. Initially intimidated by Dovetail, the data analysis platform used in the research, Contreras was encouraged by FFRP's leadership and leaned into the challenge. She quickly adapted, mastering data transfer and analysis, which not only built her technical proficiency but also her confidence in learning new tools—an essential skill in workforce development. This experience empowered her to take a more active role in research and decision-making. FFRP exemplifies that job quality must include creating a workplace where employees feel valued, supported, and able to thrive.

Transparent Organizational Cultures

Central to much of the conversation around job quality for nonprofit workforce was the topic of building trust between leadership and staff. One critical strategy that came up from the research was staff's desire for greater transparency from leadership in areas like decision-making, strategic planning, and accountability. This can be an opportunity for organizations to consider how to embed staff voice and feedback loops as integral parts of their processes, core to their culture as a quality employer. Building trust through transparency isn't an overnight initiative. This is a culture shift journey that organizations need to go through over an extended period of time.

Clear Roles and Advancement Pathways

Often in nonprofit organizations, staff end up wearing multiple hats and playing different roles at once given the need for the organization to be agile. This can lead to unpredictable and long work hours, confusion about pathways for advancement, and, ultimately, burnout. The research found that direct service providers are looking for clearly defined job descriptions and roles and responsibilities, while also understanding that things may need to change and adapt given the nature of the work. Recommendations emerging from the research also included developing internal career advancement pathways and ensuring that frontline employees not only are aware of them but also are given the support to navigate them.

Professional Development and Training Opportunities

In general, researchers found that client-facing staff are eager to engage in professional development, but they often rely on their organizations to identify opportunities. Further, client-facing staff who get promoted into supervisory or managerial positions often receive limited or no training. Providing access to training, workshops, and other skill-building programs ensures that employees can grow in their roles and contribute more effectively. Some organizations also use cross-training as a strategy to enhance flexibility and team capacity, though its implementation varies. By actively investing in staff development, nonprofits can strengthen their workforces, improve job satisfaction, and foster long-term retention.

Professional Development and Growth for Worker-Researchers

Engaging client-facing staff as worker-researchers created invaluable professional development opportunities while strengthening organizations as a whole.

Communication and Influence

Worker-researchers developed essential communication skills through this project as they learned to manage relationships across different levels of the organization. Their role as researchers required them to clearly

communicate findings to leadership, persuade their peers of the benefits of participating in the research interviews, and present insights effectively. Path Group and TBL provided worker-researchers with direct coaching to develop these skills and address some of the challenges they faced when communicating and influencing stakeholders. Public speaking was a key component of the process, as worker-researchers prepared and delivered presentations within their organizations to senior leaders, shared early insights and learnings to peers and supervisors in communities of practice throughout this project, and served as thought leaders at conferences. Through these experiences, they refined their ability to craft compelling narratives and influence decision-making.

Data Collection and Analysis Skills

As part of this research, client-facing staff built valuable research skills, many for the first time. They developed hypotheses, drafted interview questions, and applied analysis tools such as the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), the Situation Complication Recommendation framework, storytelling techniques, and Dovetail (a qualitative analysis tool). While research may not be part of their official job responsibilities, these skills apply directly to frontline work, helping staff summarize jobseekers' experiences, identify patterns, and ask the right questions to improve service delivery.

Collaboration and Peer Networking

The cohort-based structure of this research fostered collaboration and connection among client-facing staff across different organizations and regions. Worker-researchers engaged with their research partners, leadership representatives, and others in their cohorts, building relationships that strengthened teamwork and shared learning. The project team was intentional about creating this cohort-based model as a community of practice that the worker-researchers could lean on and utilize when they ran into opportunities or challenges during their research. For example, they had space to bounce ideas off one another, troubleshoot research strategies,

"I've been at this organization for years, and only now do I truly feel this way."
— Regina Vindel, Worker-Researcher and Workforce Supervisor, Canal Alliance

and understand that they weren't alone in some of the challenges they or their colleagues may be facing in nonprofit workplaces. These connections created professional networks that extend beyond the research process, offering long-term benefits for both individuals and their organizations.

Building Self-Agency

Beyond individual development, worker-researchers gained a stronger sense of agency and leadership within their organizations. From designing their research project to engaging a wide array of stakeholders, they took on responsibilities that deepened their strategic thinking. This experience provided a higher-level perspective on decision-making and organizational strategy, increasing their confidence and visibility with leadership. Many saw their recommendations implemented, reinforcing a sense of empowerment and ownership over workplace changes. In other cases, worker-researchers had to learn how to share negative feedback constructively with their executive leadership team. Worker-researchers, therefore, grew confidence because the process helped them consider and incorporate approaches in conflict resolution. Ultimately, this process helped client-facing staff envision career growth both within and beyond their current roles.

Strategic Thinking

Throughout the project, worker-researchers developed strategic thinking skills, meaning they learned to see the big picture, make thoughtful decisions, and focus their efforts where they'd have the most impact. As one participant said,

"I changed the emphasis last-minute... to be more strategic.... Where am I gonna have the most impact for something that can actually be changed?" — A Worker-Researcher Who Requested Anonymity

This shift reflects their growing ability to set clear goals, tailor their communication to leadership priorities, and identify where change was most possible. It also highlights real growth in confidence, systems thinking, and strategic leadership.

Early Implementation of Job Quality Strategies Emerging From the Research

Organizations in the cohort have taken a range of actions to strengthen job quality through this project already, with some initiatives reinforcing existing priorities and others introducing entirely new strategies. For several organizations, this process served as a validating exercise, affirming efforts already underway while also highlighting opportunities for growth and innovation.

> "[Leadership] took [the research] super seriously, and we saw. . . I would say some more immediate changes to how things happened. So I would say I've seen already within 30 days, changes." — A Worker-Researcher Who Requested Anonymity

Organization leaders have already responded to much of the research by implementing strategies like strengthening HR and talent functions, refining communication processes, or updating key employee policies and procedures, including employee safety practices. Many have focused on enhancing training programs, implementing feedback loops, hiring HR professionals, and revising employee handbooks to align with evolving workforce needs. Additionally, several have prioritized wellness initiatives, professional development opportunities, and improvements to onboarding and program planning. Strategic planning updates have also been a focus, ensuring long-term sustainability and alignment with organizational goals.

Worker-Researcher at the In-Person Design Retreat, October 2023, at Oakstop in Oakland, California

Strengthening Organizational Wellness

Meet the Organization: Latino Service Providers (LSP) is a nonprofit based in Sonoma County dedicated to fostering collaboration and resource-sharing among community partners to uplift the Latine community. Through public policy advocacy, professional development, and increased access to services such as health care, mental health services, education, and legal support, LSP works to ensure that Latine individuals and families have the support they need to thrive. Read more at https://latinoserviceproviders.org.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: Worker-researchers were given the opportunity to assess their internal job quality and present key findings to LSP's board of directors in late 2024. Gaining board support for these recommendations was seamless and led to the integration of an "Organizational Wellness" pillar in LSP's 2024-27 Strategic Plan, recognizing the need to invest in their team's well-being to sustain their mission-driven work. This commitment resulted in tangible enhancements for staff, including increased PTO and sick time, wellness days to promote work-life balance, and wellness reimbursements to support employees' physical and mental health. LSP's leadership embracing these changes is a direct investment in their team while also recognizing that a supported workforce in their organization is essential to advancing their mission.

Investing in Sustainable Growth

Meet the Organization: The Central Valley Workers Center (CVWC) is a worker advocacy organization based in California's Central Valley that's dedicated to promoting economic justice through strategic support for worker organizing, community education, and engagement. Their mission is to strengthen the capacity of labor and community organizations to advance policies that support quality job creation, ensure community health, promote shared prosperity, and increase justice for working people, including immigrant workers. Read more at https://www.valleyworkers.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: Through the Job Quality Project and reviewing the research findings shared by the worker-researchers, CVWC leaders recognized the importance of looking inward to strengthen their foundation and ensure long-term sustainability in their organization. This reflection led them to prioritize restructuring their organization, shifting to a full-time staffing model and investing in trained and dedicated team members to improve retention and better serve workers and the communities they serve. As they head into strategic planning, they're integrating these insights and working with a human resources consultant to refine their hiring processes, creating a more sustainable and effective organization from the inside out.

Lessons Learned

The project team learned valuable lessons from this project that can guide other workforce development organizations in engaging worker voice, conducting worker-led research, and implementing effective job quality strategies.

1   **Workers Surface What Matters:** When client-facing staff lead the research, they uncover honest feedback from their colleagues.

2   **When Leaders Listen, They Grow:** Nonprofit leaders gained new perspectives when they leaned into the job quality initiative, fostering more supportive and effective workplaces.

3   **Addressing Power Dynamics Is Essential:** Both client-facing staff and project leadership representatives must be supported throughout to address power dynamics and ensure project success.

4   **Context Matters:** Differentiated strategies are needed based on organizational size and maturity.

5   **Change Takes Time:** It's important to acknowledge that improving job quality requires a long-term commitment.

Workers Surface What Matters

Key to this initiative was having direct-service, client-facing staff design, conduct, and analyze the research themselves. This type of participatory research, led by Turning Basin Labs and Path Group, unveiled honest feedback from staff that many leaders in the organizations hadn't heard before though they've conducted plenty of employee feedback surveys. In fact, one organization leader said, "We do surveys all the time, but have never received this level of honest feedback from our staff." Their colleagues felt more safe and comfortable sharing feedback around the quality of their jobs to the worker-researchers than to leaders who may not be experiencing the same exact challenges they are on a day-to-day basis. Further, worker-researchers were able to design questions in a way that aligned to how their colleagues think and experience their jobs, versus having the interview questions come top-down from managers or external HR consultants.

Fresh Perspectives From Worker Voice

Meet the Organization: First Place for Youth is a national nonprofit committed to supporting young people transitioning out of foster care. With a focus on education, employment, and housing stability, the organization offers comprehensive programs that equip current and former foster youth with the skills and resources needed for long-term success. Through individualized case management, career coaching, and supportive housing, First Place for Youth empowers young adults to achieve financial independence and break the cycle of poverty. By addressing the unique challenges faced by this population, the organization creates pathways to self-sufficiency and brighter futures. Read more at https://firstplaceforyouth.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: While First Place for Youth has conducted employee surveys in the past, this worker-led project revealed valuable insights that provided a deeper understanding of staff experiences. Staff expressed a desire for more communication and transparency in leadership decisions, opportunities to share feedback, better work-life balance, and considerations for workplace safety. These perspectives are being used to refine their approach to job quality, ensuring the organization continues to evolve in ways that better support both staff and the young people they serve.

When Leaders Listen, They Grow

While the worker-researchers were in charge of the research process from start to finish, the project leadership representatives who were involved in the process throughout the project also gained significant benefits from participating. The organizational leaders in this project who leaned into the process and were willing to have a "mirror held to their organization" and advocate on behalf of the worker-researchers were able to gain the most out of the process.

Engaging in the project prompted leaders to reflect on their own growth, challenging them to unpack what it truly means to be an effective leader. Many gained a deeper understanding of how they could continue developing their leadership skills, with some even expressing interest in seeking additional coaching. The project also created a heightened sense of accountability, as leaders recognized areas where they could better support their teams and foster a more inclusive, empowering workplace.

Beyond personal growth, the research opened leaders' perspectives on their staff's capabilities. By observing worker-researchers take ownership of the process, project leadership representatives saw skills—such as autonomy, problem-solving, and creativity—that may not have been visible in their day-to-day roles.

Elevating Frontline Worker Leadership Skills

Meet the Organization: Neighborhood Industries is a social enterprise based in Fresno, California, with a mission centered on empowerment through employment. The organization believes that jobs are crucial for transforming individuals from recipients to active contributors, fostering long-term neighborhood stabilization. A key component of their model is Neighborhood Thrift, which offers employment training and workforce development services to help individuals in south Fresno secure jobs and positively impact their communities. By providing meaningful employment and career pathways, Neighborhood Industries creates opportunities for growth, stability, and leadership development. Read more at https://neighborhoodindustries.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: Through the Job Quality Project, Neighborhood Industries' leadership team gained a deeper appreciation for the skills, ideas, and leadership potential of their client-facing staff. Worker-researchers identified key challenges and proposed solutions that not only aimed to improve job quality but also aligned with the organization's broader goals. Leadership embraced these insights, implementing changes such as cross-training employees across departments to build skills and create more flexibility, adding staff during closing and night shifts to ease workloads and prioritize workplace safety, and introducing a group chat to improve team communication. These changes, championed by client-facing staff, demonstrated the powerful impact of giving workers a voice. As a result, Neighborhood Industries CEO and Cofounder Anthony "AP" Armour said, "Neighborhood Thrift has seen a 30% increase in sales since implementing the cross-training model."

"Neighborhood Thrift has seen a **30% increase in sales** since implementing the cross-training model."
— Anthony "AP" Armour, CEO and Cofounder, Neighborhood Industries

Rodasja Conley, Store Manager and Worker- Researcher, Neighborhood Industries

Worker-Researcher Spotlight

One of the standout examples of leadership in this project is Rodasja Conley, a worker-researcher whose contributions made a significant impact. Her ability to identify challenges, advocate for meaningful changes, and collaborate with her team directly led to an opportunity for career advancement within the organization. In a specific example of her leadership skills, she suggested and implemented the cross-training model, which improved team flexibility and skills. By empowering and trusting worker leadership, Neighborhood Industries is not only enhancing job quality but also creating a workplace where employees feel valued and heard and are given real opportunities to lead. As a result of her growth early on in the project, Conley was promoted to store manager of Neighborhood Thrift.

Addressing Power Dynamics Is Essential

While worker-researchers went through a recruitment process for this role, many had limited experience doing research, let alone experience with the job-quality-related topics. In addition, there existed an inherent power dynamic between the worker-researchers and their organizational leaders. Because of this challenge, the project team prioritized ways to make this project accessible and approachable for workers to have the greatest impact. For example, all worker-researchers who participated in this project received a quarterly stipend to acknowledge and recognize that this work was in addition to their day jobs. The project team also involved worker-researchers in the design of the project. For example, the purpose of the in-person retreat that took place at the start of the project went beyond giving worker-researchers an opportunity to meet one another and learn about the project; during the gathering, the project team solicited feedback and input from worker-researchers on what type of support, templates, and guidance would be most helpful for them. The vision was clear from the start—the workers were to drive the project. Further, ReWork the Bay prioritized

accessibility to attend the retreat—all costs of attending the retreat, including transportation, accommodations, and meals, were covered by funding from ReWork the Bay.

Just as client-facing staff required guidance throughout the research process, project leadership representatives also needed targeted support to ensure their full engagement and accountability. Their buy-in from the beginning was essential—not just as a formality, but as a commitment to acting on the research findings. Too often, research insights are at risk of being left on a virtual shelf unless leadership is prepared to take concrete steps. Organizational leaders needed to fully understand what they were committing to: Inviting client-facing staff into the research process meant hearing honest, and sometimes difficult, feedback. Workers expected more than just being asked for input—they anticipated action. There is an inherent risk in sharing this type of feedback due to existing power dynamics in organizations, especially when research findings could challenge workplace practices and structures. The project team attempted to mitigate this risk through facilitation of one-on-one check-ins with leadership to reinforce expectations around fostering a safe and open environment. Additionally, we provided targeted guidance on giving and receiving feedback, ensuring that the process remained constructive and rooted in a shared goal of organizational improvement.

In addition to this support by the project team, the project leadership representatives and organization executive teams received coaching and support by ReWork the Bay as part of their grant relationship. This relationship not only held organizations accountable for advancing the work but also emphasized the value of embracing adaptive strategies from a funder's perspective. This approach helped create space for organizations to be vulnerable—many were reflecting on and assessing their own job quality practices for the first time. Organizations need a safe environment where they can "get it wrong" while working toward "getting it right." The deep relationships that ReWork the Bay had established with many of the participating organizations were instrumental in fostering that trust.

Building trust and alignment between project leadership representatives and client-facing staff required intentional spaces for shared learning. These spaces included the eight virtual learning labs that were held across the project. These sessions provided a unique opportunity for worker-researchers and project leadership representatives to reflect together on their research insights and explore job quality strategies in real time, rather than waiting until the project's conclusion. By engaging in these discussions collectively, project leadership representatives and client-facing staff were able to see themselves as part of the same team, working toward a shared goal of improving their organizations. The Learning Labs fostered open dialogue, strengthened relationships, and helped bridge the gap between decision-makers and those directly impacted by workplace policies. These spaces ensured that learning and collaboration happened iteratively, reinforcing a culture of trust, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Context Matters

Nonprofit leaders said they are often constrained by limited opportunities for flexible or unrestricted funding, staffing capacity, and short-term grant cycles that often prioritize program outcomes over workforce investments into their staff. Balancing mission-driven service delivery with the need for competitive wages, benefits, and career growth opportunities can be difficult, especially with high turnover and burnout in demanding roles. Many organizations also lack the HR infrastructure to support formal job quality initiatives, making it harder to implement career pathways or retention strategies. Addressing these challenges requires tailored approaches that align with an organization's resources and stage of development.

The organizations in this cohort varied greatly in terms of size and tenure, ranging from three to 127 full-time employees and founding dates spanning 1982 to 2018. By having this diversity, the project team was able to see firsthand how organizational size and maturity affects both participation in the project and the ability to implement recommendations. For example, we observed that some of the smaller organizations had participation from their CEOs and other top leaders, which helped with the long-term buy-in of the project's vision and research recommendations; their small size and nimbleness also allowed them to move quickly to make small changes. However, smaller organizations often had fewer financial and staff resources to dedicate to implementation. While

the will to deliver might be there, additional fundraising may be needed. Conversely, the project team found that securing buy-in from top leadership was more challenging in larger organizations with multiple layers of bureaucracy. However, these organizations often have greater resources to implement recommendations and dedicated human resources staffers whose daily responsibilities align closely with this project, making implementation more manageable.

Finally, we also observed that newer organizations that are still building their internal infrastructures and processes have an opportunity to embed job quality principles from the outset, rather than retrofit afterward. So ultimately, there is no "ideal" organizational size or type to engage in job quality work. It's about knowing the strengths and weaknesses and leveraging those to make change. By tailoring approaches based on organizational size and maturity, we can better support their capacity to integrate and sustain meaningful changes.

Change Takes Time

This project spanned two years, which provided enough time to run two full research cycles and also include a phase of action planning. The project team found it helpful to build in milestones along the way to maintain momentum, like mid-project presentations. Shorter research projects could be feasible if there is an existing culture of worker-led initiatives within the organization, but when

building this process from scratch, ample time is needed to learn, experiment, and pivot. Even with sufficient time to complete the research, we see this job quality project as just a starting point for each organization's job quality journey—rather than a one-time effort, sustained change will require regular assessment and retooling of internal practices. One worker-researcher said they learned that "Change in orgs is incremental. ...I just had to think, 'Where can I be most effective?'" They gained realistic insights into how progress unfolds gradually, with strategic entry points being key to driving sustainable transformation.

> "Change in orgs is incremental. . . I just had to think, 'Where can I be most effective?'" — A Worker-Researcher Who Requested Anonymity

Throughout this project, we observed that the types of cultural changes and mindset shifts—such as building trust between workers and leadership, fostering a shared commitment to equity, and shifting mindsets around worker voice and agency—that are needed for sustained job quality practices can't be rushed. While some recommendations (like instituting monthly department meetings) could be implemented in a short time frame, others (like building a formal professional development program) may take several years. When asked the question "What is needed from leadership and staff at your organization to advance culture change that prioritizes job quality?" project participants shared a need for intentional allocation of resources, curiosity, a growth mindset, training, patience, trust, and a true openness to change. These elements can take years to cultivate.

Worker-Researchers at the In-Person Design Retreat, October 2023, at Oakstop in Oakland, California

How Nonprofits Can Start Improving Job Quality Today

Guiding Principles

While we found that the cohort-based nature of our project allowed for a robust research and action planning process with guided support and peer learning, some organizations may be ready to act right away on their own. Here are some suggested principles to abide by to achieve meaningful results, as well as ideas organizations can implement right away.

Empower Client-Facing Staff to Lead

While a top-down approach is often considered more efficient or affordable for launching a job quality strategy, this project showed that prioritizing client-facing staff in research and recommendations leads to more impactful outcomes. Though it may seem like an upfront cost, investing in staff empowerment ultimately strengthens the organization.

Leverage Existing Aligned Initiatives

Throughout this project, we found that organizations already engaged in employee well-being efforts were well-positioned to quickly implement the worker-researchers' recommendations. The research findings reinforced and clarified this need, amplifying existing momentum to address staff burnout.

Involve Staff at All Levels

Active participation of client-facing staff is crucial for the success of job quality initiatives, but securing buy-in from leadership is equally important. This ensures that staff feel supported and that findings can be effectively communicated to boards, leadership teams, and funders, securing resources and driving action.

Ensuring HR Is at the Table

Meet the Organization: Canal Alliance is a nonprofit in Marin County that supports members of the immigrant community through workforce development, legal services, education, and social services. They help immigrants and their families achieve economic security by addressing their unique needs, such as access to food, pathways to citizenship, and opportunities to learn English, earn a college degree, and gain in-demand skills that prepare them for quality jobs with career advancement opportunities. Read more at https://www.canalalliance.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: A key breakthrough in Canal Alliance's research project occurred when Chief Human Resources Officer Johanna Schlere joined several months in. Her involvement accelerated progress, as the worker-researchers' recommendations aligned with challenges she was already addressing within the organization. With her leadership, initiatives like an organization-wide transparency program gained momentum, and new HR strategies were implemented to improve job quality. Canal Alliance's transparency initiative kicked off with a workgroup, including worker-researchers, to define transparency and drive change. They launched two key projects: an intranet site for easy access to information and best practices for more effective meetings and communication. This initiative is shifting the organizational culture and sparking impactful conversations about how to ensure everyone has access to the information they need. Having an HR leader at the table bridged the gap between leadership and client-facing staff, fostering a deeper understanding of each group's experiences and improving communication, which facilitated organizational changes benefiting everyone.

Worker-Researcher Spotlight

For Franccesca Santana, workforce service supervisor at Canal Alliance and one of the organization's worker-researchers, participation in the project was also a personal journey. At the outset, she requested to conduct her interview in Spanish because it's her first language, and she initially considered using an interpreter for meetings. However, she challenged herself to build confidence in English, ultimately choosing to engage in discussions without an interpreter. Reflecting on her experience, she said, "Every time I attend the meetings and working sessions, I learn something new." This process not only strengthened her language skills but also reinforced the importance of welcoming multilingual workplace environments that support worker development and empowerment. Santana's journey highlights how worker-centered projects can be powerful spaces for building confidence— both in professional skills and in one's own voice.

"Every time I attend the meetings and working sessions, I learn something new." — Franccesca Santana, Worker-Researcher and Workforce Service Supervisor, Canal Alliance

Build a Culture of Collaboration

The journey of exploring and improving job quality can be just as transformative as the outcomes themselves. We have observed that organizations that intentionally cultivate collaboration, trust, transparency, and empathy across all staff levels create a stronger foundation for employee wellness and satisfaction.

Implement Feedback Early

Implementing feedback early is crucial for staff engagement, because employees want to see their ideas put into action. By acting on what can be implemented and keeping staff informed, organizations demonstrate that worker input is valued, fostering trust and a more collaborative environment.

Implementation Ideas

Some organizations may be past the exploratory stage of research and looking to implement direct job quality strategies. If that applies to you, here are some ideas to explore:

Job Quality Challenge	Suggested Strategies
Transparency	Create **town hall** or "**ask me anything**" spaces for staff to submit anonymous questions for organizational leadership.
Burnout and Mental Health	Explore efforts like four-day workweeks, employee assistance programs, **wellness reimbursements**, and job description analyses to **improve role clarity**. Learn about Canal Alliance's four-day workweek here.
Organization-Wide Communication	**Evaluate** existing internal communication channels and **develop training** to ensure consistent use of communication tools and practices.
Inclusion and Belonging	Develop ways to improve employee engagement through employee resource groups and **team-building wellness days**.
Professional Development and Advancement	**Prioritize internal advancement** by filling job openings from within whenever possible, create **transparent promotion criteria**, invest in cross-training, and **provide professional development stipends**.

Recommendations for Organizations Looking to Invest in Job Quality

1. **Advancing Shared Leadership:** Continue to Invest in mechanisms for shared leadership

2. **Transforming Funding Systems:** Challenge the existing funding paradigms affecting nonprofit organizations

3. **Elevating Collective Voice:** Strengthen statewide collaboration by enhancing communications, advocacy efforts, and peer-learning

Advancing Shared Leadership

Organizational leaders can continue to invest resources in mechanisms for shared leadership between staff and the leadership team.

Organizations committed to improving job quality must establish structures that foster collaboration, transparency, and teamwork—ensuring that decision-making is not solely top-down. Leaders can achieve this by embedding worker voice into the organization's daily operations, rather than limiting it to one-off projects tied to specific funding. When making decisions that impact the entire organization (beyond standard compliance matters), are there mechanisms for staff to provide meaningful input? Are there accessible and anonymous channels for suggestions and concerns?

To support shared leadership, organizations can implement a wide variety of strategies, including structural approaches, feedback mechanisms, and accountability measures. Some examples include:

- Embedding **worker voice into decision-making** processes at the leadership or board level

- Forming **worker-led internal committees** or coalitions made up of client-facing staff and supervisors who provide direct feedback to leadership

- Utilizing **anonymous feedback** opportunities so staff can share suggestions and concerns without fear of retaliation

- Institutionalizing **transparent decision-making** that holds specific members of the leadership team accountable for considering staff voice and feedback

- Establishing a **worker-owned** or democratic governance model with worker-elected boards or consensus-based decision-making

- Exploring **participatory budgeting** where employees play a role in deciding how certain funds are allocated

However, shared leadership isn't a one-time fix—organizations are on an ongoing job quality journey, each progressing at its own pace. The examples above require different levels of investment and can be adopted based on where an organization is starting from. The goal is not to implement all strategies at once but to commit to a long-term culture shift toward job quality. For instance, organizations new to this approach might begin with recurring employee surveys as a first step toward shared leadership. A crucial part of this work is recognizing existing power dynamics and taking concrete steps to empower client-facing staff in decision-making.

Worker-Researchers at the In-Person Design Retreat, October 2023, at Oakstop in Oakland, California

Sample Exercise to Identify Desired Changes: Developing a culture of shared leadership isn't easy and doesn't happen overnight. Achieving sustained and widespread improvements in organizational job quality requires time, deliberate effort, staff buy-in at all levels, and culture change. Clearly defining the desired cultural shifts—encompassing the values, beliefs, and assumptions that drive the adoption of new or consistent behaviors—and establishing success metrics can help align short-term strategies with a long-term vision. Organizations in this cohort did an exercise in which they listed norms, values, and behaviors they would like to see less of at their organizations alongside norms, values, and behaviors they would like to see more of. Consider doing this exercise at your organization.

Instructions: Fill out the table below, identifying what you would like to see less of and more of at your organization.

Desired Organizational Culture Shifts		
LESS OF		MORE OF
(Example) Org-wide decisions communicated to a select group of staff members		(Example) Transparent, centralized communication between leadership and all staff

Embedding Job Quality in New HR Strategies

Meet the Organization: CROP (Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs) is an Oakland-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting people who are returning to their communities following incarceration. Through workforce development, leadership training, and advocacy, CROP provides comprehensive reentry services that empower individuals to secure stable employment and build successful futures. The organization focuses on breaking cycles of recidivism by providing housing assistance, educational and employment opportunities, and other supports to enable individuals to overcome barriers to economic mobility. Read more at https://www.croporganization.org/.

Exploring Their Job Quality Work: CROP is integrating the findings from the Job Quality Project into its organizational practices to further its commitment to supporting people with records of incarceration. As part of this effort, the organization hired a new human resources specialist who is focusing on embedding the lessons learned from the research and ensuring effective implementation of job quality strategies. This includes conducting an internal audit of communication practices across departments, clarifying roles through a review of job descriptions, and eventually refining their approach to career advancement.

Additionally, CROP is working to strengthen feedback loops within the organization to ensure that this collaborative, bottom-up approach becomes a sustainable part of the structure, rather than a one-time research project. This is a pivotal moment in CROP's growth as they leverage the results of the Job Quality Project to foster a supportive, people-centered workplace that aligns with their mission of economic mobility and restorative opportunities.

Transforming Funding Systems

Both organization leaders and funders can challenge the existing funding paradigms affecting nonprofit organizations.

To truly embed job quality into the nonprofit workforce development sector, nonprofit organizations (and funders on the flip side), must rethink how they approach funding. Many organizations operate within restrictive funding models that prioritize programmatic expenses over the actual costs of sustaining a high-quality workforce. However, it is important to highlight that "nonprofit people are nonprofit programs," as Fund the People CEO Rusty M. Stahl writes in his organization's case-making toolkit *Talent-Value Chain in the Nonprofit Sector*. The majority of a nonprofit's budget is spent on staff, yet funders often expect proposals to focus on direct program costs rather than investments in job quality. To shift this paradigm, organizations should incorporate the real cost of job quality into their budgets and fundraising strategies— assessing staff-related expenses such as fair wages, benefits, professional development, and workplace well-being, and making the case for these as essential programmatic costs.

This shift requires clear communication with funders, framing investments in job quality as a driver of mission and program effectiveness rather than an optional add-on. Nonprofits should highlight the return on investment (ROI) of job quality—demonstrating how well-supported staff lead to stronger, more sustainable outcomes. Importantly, this is not a challenge for nonprofits alone; grantmakers also play a role in rethinking funding structures. Models like real-cost funding emphasize the need for funders to support the full cost of nonprofit operations, including the people who power the work. By advocating for a funding approach that values job quality, nonprofits and funders together can create a more sustainable and impactful workforce ecosystem.

This project itself highlights the transformative potential of catalytic funding. Unlike traditional operating grants that often sustain business as usual, the funding provided through ReWork the Bay, a funder intermediary, enabled a thoughtful and intentional collaboration between nonprofit organizations leaders and their staff. This approach supported organizations not only in rethinking their internal job quality practices but also in engaging deeply with systems change efforts. ReWork the Bay's model turns pass-through grants into strategic investments that align with an inclusive economy agenda. Through this kind of funding, organizations are empowered to leverage their direct service work to drive broader, long-term impact.

> This project itself highlights the transformative potential of catalytic funding. The funding provided through ReWork the Bay enabled a thoughtful and intentional collaboration between nonprofit organizations leaders and their staff.

Elevating Collective Voice

There is opportunity to strengthen statewide collaboration by enhancing communications, advocacy efforts, and peer learning.

While many of the recommendations arising from the worker-researchers in this project focus on internal factors within an organization's control—such as culture, policies, and communication—external systemic challenges often limit a nonprofit's ability to enhance wages, benefits, or implement flexible funding strategies for employee well-being. Public contracts may impose strict salary or indirect cost caps, while philanthropic funders may favor single-year grants over flexible, multiyear funding that supports job quality improvements. By collaborating with other organizations facing similar barriers, nonprofits can strengthen advocacy efforts, amplify their collective voice, and drive systemic change that benefits the broader sector.

For example, in Los Angeles, a coalition of youth-serving workforce organizations recognized that the salary caps imposed by county funding were lower than those for equivalent government positions. Convened by the Nonprofit Finance Fund (NFF), these organizations joined forces to advocate for change, successfully negotiating with Los Angeles County to raise the allowable salary limits. (More details on this collaborative effort can be found in this NFF's report: Uncovering the Full Cost of LA Youth Workforce Development Programs.)

That example illustrates how ongoing network-building and peer-learning among nonprofits that share common public and private funders can yield tangible results. Additionally, nonprofits can contribute to state-level policy discussions and advocacy efforts led by groups like CalNonprofits, which pushes for greater fairness, efficiency, and stability in government contracts through efforts such as the Nonprofit Equity Initiative—critical steps toward strengthening organizations' ability to invest in wages, benefits, and overall worker well-being.

Conclusion

Investing in job quality initiatives that prioritize worker voice, well-being, and organizational transparency is crucial for fostering more supportive and effective workplaces, especially within nonprofit organizations. The lessons learned from this project demonstrate that when client-facing employees are empowered to lead and contribute to solutions, organizations not only improve job quality but also create pathways for growth and sustainability.

For nonprofit leaders, the call to action is clear: Prioritize creating an environment that values and supports staff at all levels, actively engage workers in decision-making, and invest in ongoing efforts to improve workplace conditions. This includes building internal capacity to support reflective supervision, shared leadership models, and feedback loops that ensure staff voices are heard and acted upon. When leaders make these practices a part of the organizational fabric—not one-off initiatives—they lay the foundation for greater staff retention, stronger team cohesion, and more effective service delivery.

For funders, supporting initiatives that strengthen organizational culture, improve job quality, and promote worker leadership is essential to creating a sustainable future of work. Long gone are the days where funders assumed workforce development was solely an economic issue. This project demonstrates that advancing job quality not only supports worker well-being and mental health but also strengthens organizational sustainability—helping nonprofits retain skilled staff, enhance outcomes for jobseekers, and contribute to deeper, long-term impact in the communities they serve. Opportunities for professional growth and continued learning are critical components of quality jobs. Reimagining the role of a funder means embracing wraparound funding strategies that enable organizations to address these interconnected needs holistically.

Equally important was what we learned about the power of participatory research as a methodology. Involving staff in shaping the research questions, interpreting data, and identifying solutions not only built trust but also led to more relevant and actionable insights. This approach deepened engagement across organizations and modeled the very job quality practices we aimed to explore. We see significant potential to apply participatory research to other pressing challenges facing the nonprofit workforce—from burnout and retention to inclusive leadership development—and encourage leaders and funders alike to see it as both a process and a strategy for systems change.

> **Together, nonprofit leaders and funders have the opportunity to reshape the future of work in the nonprofit sector, ensuring that both the organizations and the people they serve can thrive.**

Appendix

Participatory Research Methodology

Participatory research is a collaborative research approach designed and led by people who are directly affected by or have lived experience with the research topic. In this project, these individuals are referred to as "worker-researchers." Unlike traditional research methods, few studies exploring job quality actively seek input from workers themselves in shaping research methodologies or developing recommendations. By centering the experiences of those closest to the issues, participatory research fosters trust, engagement, and actionable change within organizations and the broader workforce development ecosystem. This approach ensures that recommendations are more likely to be embraced by staff members because they come from their peers and aren't top-down mandates from leadership. Additionally, participatory research serves as a professional development opportunity through which direct service staff can build research skills and gain leadership experience.

Selection of Worker-Researchers

Worker-researchers were selected based on their frontline experience and interest in engaging in research and advocacy for job quality improvements. Organizations helped the JFF and PathGroup project team identify potential worker-researchers. Once identified, these individuals were interviewed by the project team to gauge their interest in and commitment to the project.

Worker-Researcher at the In-Person Design Retreat, October 2023, at Oakstop in Oakland, California

After being selected, the worker-researchers from all eight organizations participated in a retreat that was hosted and funded by ReWork the Bay to kick off the project and give the participants and opportunity to collaborate with one another. At the retreat, worker-researchers learned about the research process, developed example interview questions with their partners, and built connections with fellow researchers.

Research Approach and Action Learning Cycles

To ensure that there were opportunities for iterative reflection, adaptation, and collaboration, the project was structured into two learning cycles. The table below offers a detailed breakdown of the activities in the two cycles:

Phase	Topic/Title
Learning Cycle 1: Project Design and Initial Data Collection and Analysis	
Research Questions and Design	Develop interview guide and determine research project hypothesis
Data Collection	Conduct structured interviews with client-facing staff and leadership Address interview best practices and troubleshoot challenges
Analyze Data	Utilize research software (e.g., Dovetail) to identify patterns and themes from the interviews
Summarize Findings	Draft preliminary findings, and discuss them within the cohort of worker-researchers Share insights with organizational leadership and peers
Learning Cycle 2: Refining Insights and Developing Recommendations	
Research Questions and Design	Review and update interview guide based on initial learnings
Data Collection	Continue gathering insights and refining data sources
Analyze Data	Deepen analysis through further synthesis of findings
Summarize Findings	Develop recommendations tailored to organizational needs Prepare for final presentations to the broader leadership team

During these two cycles, worker-researchers also participated in:

- **Monthly Cohort Meetings:** Deep dives into research processes, development of research materials (interview guides, for example), and sharing of lessons learned with the group.

- **Optional Working Sessions:** Sessions held once every two weeks to receive guidance on specific questions or challenges and to brainstorm with the project team.

- **Quarterly Learning Labs:** Dedicated sessions where worker-researchers met with organizational leaders to discuss the research process, share knowledge, and align on findings and recommendations.

Interview Process and Data Collection

Worker-researchers conducted structured surveys, interviews, and focus groups with their peers to gather insights on job quality challenges and opportunities. The interview guide balanced shared questions applicable across organizations with customized questions reflecting each organization's specific circumstances. Some worker-researchers also interviewed organizational leaders to gain a broader perspective. Data collection was iterative, allowing worker-researchers to adapt their approach based on emerging insights.

Example Interview Questions

Worker-researchers developed sets of structured and open-ended questions. Here are some examples:

1. What does agency mean to you? What does structure mean to you? What does culture mean to you?

2. How do you feel about the way your supervisor communicates with you?

3. Are there any communication resources that you have used or heard about that you think our organization could benefit from?

4. What do you like about your role? What would you change about your role?

5. What is one immediate improvement we could make to improve your job?

6. Do you feel that you are provided with adequate time and resources to complete your responsibilities? If not, where are the deficiencies?

7. How would you describe the culture at your organization? What direction do you see the culture shifting as the organization grows?

8. What issues do you have with the working culture now?

9. What obstacles do you encounter that inhibit your ability to perform your job effectively?

Analyzing Data and Developing Recommendations

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative research software such as Dovetail, which enabled worker-researchers to identify recurring themes and patterns, organize qualitative data for synthesis, and develop evidence-based findings to inform organizational strategies. Based on these findings, worker-researchers crafted tailored recommendations aimed at improving job quality. These recommendations were grounded in worker experiences, designed to be actionable and feasible within each organization and intended to empower leadership with data-driven insights for sustainable job quality improvements. Additionally, project leadership representatives provided input into the recommendations and played a key role in the final presentations, sharing insights with the broader team to ensure alignment and support for implementation.

Conclusion of Research

The worker-researchers concluded the initiative by delivering final presentations to their organizational leaders and board members. In those presentations, they shared their findings and presented recommendations based on their research.

By embedding participatory research into workforce development organizations, this initiative has created a model for meaningful worker engagement in efforts to shape job quality improvements in their organizations. The worker-researcher approach has demonstrated that the people closest to the challenges are also best positioned to develop impactful solutions fostering a culture of trust, shared leadership, and sustainable change for both the workers and the populations they serve.

List of Organizations and Worker-Researchers

Representing three regions of California—the North San Francisco Bay Area, Fresno, and Los Angeles—the following nonprofit workforce organizations are participating in this project:

Building Skills Partnership

Canal Alliance

Central Valley Workers Center

Creating Restorative Opportunities and Programs

First Place for Youth

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program

Latino Service Providers

Neighborhood Industries

Worker-Researchers

The following worker-researchers played key roles in gathering insights on job quality in their organizations. Their contributions helped shape the themes and findings of this project.

Name	Organization
Jasmin Castaneda	Building Skills Partnership
Sergi Bach	Building Skills Partnership
Regina Vindel	Canal Alliance
Franccesca Santana	Canal Alliance
Oscar Venegas-Jacobo	Central Valley Workers Center
Mayra Cruz	Central Valley Workers Center
Alejandra Vila	CROP (former employee)
Stanford Chatfield	CROP
Eddie Sumlin	First Place for Youth
Lara Torii	First Place for Youth
Anthony Bracy	Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program
Aviance (Avi) Contreras	Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program
Alex Sosa	Latino Service Providers
Angie Avalos	Latino Service Providers
Saul Ramirez	Neighborhood Industries
Rodasja Conley	Neighborhood Industries
Joslyn Beard	CROP (former employee)
Maya Meza	First Place for Youth (former employee)
Alayza Cervantes	Latino Service Providers (former employee)
Maria Tah Pech	Latino Service Providers (former employee)

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