



JOB QUALITY FOR FRONTLINE WORKFORCE PROFESSIONALS

This is the second of two briefs about job quality. The first installment highlighted the emerging consensus about the dimensions of job quality, and started to explore how a broadened definition of job quality—one that goes beyond pay and benefits—can help employers understand and address challenges of job retention and employee satisfaction. With this installment, we will continue the conversation about job quality in the workforce development field, looking more closely at what we already know, what a focus on job quality for frontline workforce professionals might look like in practice, and what it might mean for the success of the field even as COVID-19 impacts the workforce landscape.

In recent years, there has been some reorientation in the workforce development field towards job quality as a marker of success: a consideration of the salary, benefits, and potential for career advancement, in contrast to job placement as the sole target outcome. This reorientation is exemplified by New York City's 2014 *Career Pathways* framework, which lays out a vision for facilitating entry into middle-skills jobs and jobs in good-paying sectors.¹

At the same time that this framework has established a new vision for workforce development, local and state policy changes that have improved job quality and protections for most workers have yielded significant gains for workers at the lowest end of the wage and economic security spectrum. For example, [state legislation has pushed New York City's minimum wage up steadily to \\$15 an hour](#), [city and state policies](#) have guaranteed some amount of paid sick leave to most workers, and the [NYC Fair Workweek Law](#) is designed to increase schedule stability for fast food and retail workers.

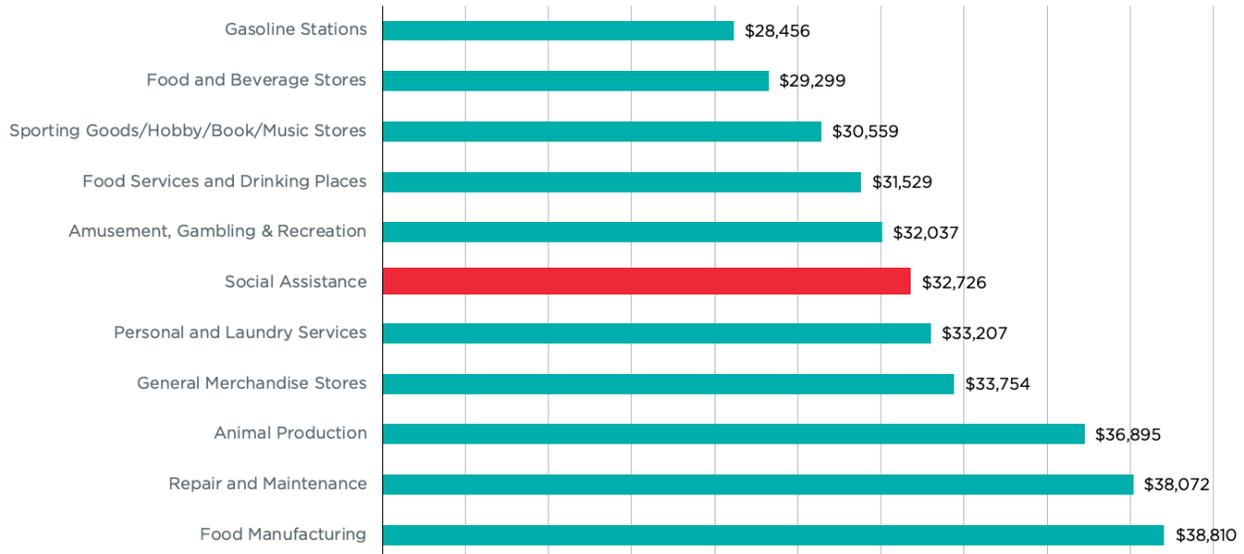
While fast food and retail are sectors people frequently associate with low-wage work—and the oft-cited examples of what the workforce development system wants to move away from—the social assistance sector was actually the sixth lowest-paid sector in New York City in 2018

(see Figure 1 on page 2). Workers in the social assistance sector have been among the largest beneficiaries of minimum wage increases. In 2015, as minimum wage increases were phasing in, the average annual pay in the social assistance or human services sector was \$29,600 in New York City, falling well within the range of what is considered a low-wage job, despite 65 percent having an associate degree or higher.²

This underscores the uncomfortable reality that many social service providers are perhaps just one rung above the individuals they serve on the economic security ladder, despite having higher levels of education. Further, this gap may have even narrowed as the floor has been raised most dramatically for minimum wage workers, and as more workforce development providers focus their efforts on middle-wage sectors like technology and construction.

As one frontline worker who participated in a focus group that informed the design of the *Voices from the Frontline* initiative said, "It feels great to place someone in a job that pays \$25 an hour. I wish I made that much," while another cited hearing her co-workers talk about the contradiction of working to place their clients in jobs while struggling to feed their own families. Strikingly, twenty-five percent of respondents to the *Voices from the Frontline* survey said that their salary does not cover their basic living expenses.³

Figure 1: Lowest Paying Industry Sectors in NYC, Average Wages (2018)



Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, NAICS Based Industry Employment and Wages for New York City, 2018.

Why Pay Matters

The first installment on job quality highlighted research and an emerging consensus that pay is not the only marker of job quality, nor is it necessarily more important to low-wage earners than it is to earners at higher ends of the pay scale. Nevertheless, the reality of low pay in the social services has several troubling implications for frontline workers themselves, as well as for their clients, employers and the workforce development system as a whole.

First, low pay contributes to the challenge of attracting talented workers, and those with the proper credentials and skills to meet the needs of job seekers. One manager who participated in a focus group that inform the design of the *Voices From the Frontline* initiative cited the need for master’s degree-level staff to address job seekers’ mental health challenges, which can act as a barrier to employment and job retention, and the challenge of offering pay commensurate with this level of education and experience. This can result in a mismatch between staff and client needs, and ultimately acts as a constraint on organizations’ abilities to meet their clients’ needs.

Second, low pay contributes to financial stress, which nearly 50 percent of workers in the United States reported experiencing in a 2019 survey of 10,000 workers conducted by Salary Finance, a workplace financial wellness provider.⁴ Financial stress increases the likelihood that a worker will suffer from anxiety, panic attacks and depression; at the office, it contributes to distraction, inability to finish tasks, and conflicts with coworkers. Overall, an employee experiencing financial stress loses an estimated one month of productivity a year, and is twice as likely to be looking for another job⁵—another source of distraction.

Because low pay in the human services sector is frequently tied to restrictions or constraints in available funding streams, it often is accompanied by uncertainty of job tenure as workers are left to wonder whether the funding for their job will be renewed. Low pay and uncertainty of tenure are two aspects of precarious work; other elements include limited access to benefits, low wages, high risks of ill health and substantial obstacles to collective bargaining. While pay alone may not be the sole marker of job quality and worker satisfaction, as a symptom of workplace precarity, it matters. A study of the nonprofit employment services sector in Canada found

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that “workplace precarity not only undermines nonprofit organizations’ ability to attract and retain highly skilled and qualified workers, but also institutionalizes precarity through a lack of organizational continuity, high turnover, and impacts on service delivery mandates.”⁶

Precarity in the workforce development sector is highlighted in a survey conducted by the New York City Employment and Training Coalition in April 2020 to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workforce development organizations. The report noted that at the same time that these organizations will be experiencing increased demand for their services as the economic fallout of the crisis continues to take shape, they were predicting high levels of risk and potential loss in all of their funding streams, especially in light of New York City’s proposed \$250 million cut in funding for health and human service programs. In response to this financial picture, 66 percent of organizations anticipated laying off staff; 54 percent predicted closing programs temporarily; and nearly 20 percent predicted other changes to staffing and compensation including salary reductions and furloughing of staff.⁷

What Else Matters?

Any analysis of the barriers to better pay in the workforce development sector comes back to the constraints of public and private funding and the chronic underfunding of an organization’s full costs; see [Brief 2](#) from this series for a fuller discussion of these dynamics. These systemic issues are daunting and can seem intractable, particularly to any single organization that wants to address employee satisfaction and retention but feels constrained in its ability to raise salaries or improve benefits.

The good news is pay is not the only thing that defines a good job. As discussed in more detail in [Brief 3](#) in this series, workers value having purpose and meaning in their jobs, seeing opportunities for advancement, and having control and agency over their working conditions. This is not to relegate responsibility of leaders

and funders in the system to committing to fair and adequate compensation for the workforce development frontline; rather, it is meant to remind leadership that they have the agency and power to be good employers and create environments that are fulfilling to their staff, even in a constrained funding environment.

One of the goals of the *Voices from the Frontline* initiative is to hear from workers about what makes them stay—or leave—their jobs, organizations and the workforce field. In our initial focus groups to inform the survey’s design, much of what we heard about what keeps frontline workers in their jobs echoes the non-monetary aspects of job quality. For example:

- Experiencing the reward of helping people
- Being creative by brainstorming and collaborating with colleagues to figure out ways to make programs better
- Taking advantage of opportunities for personal growth
- Seeing a clear path for advancement within their organization
- Having transparent communications with their boss

More good news: while putting the conditions in place to allow these non-monetary aspects of job quality to thrive may require some investment of time and additional resources, the harder work may be in shifting organizational culture, expectations and incentives to create these types of conditions. Nevertheless, the financial investment required is marginal when compared to the potential upside of improved employee satisfaction, productivity and retention.

The Good Jobs Institute framework for job quality emerged from an analysis of four companies in the low-cost retail sector who see the creation of good jobs as a strategic business decision—companies that consistently generate value for their employees, their customers and their shareholders.

Similarly, an investment in job quality in the workforce development sector that results in increased job satisfaction and employee retention could create benefits for frontline workers themselves, the jobseekers they serve, their employers and the organization's stakeholders: its leadership, its funders, its employer partners and the communities it serves. This investment could take the form of across-the-board increases in salary—or minimum required salaries using public funding streams—coupled with intra- and inter-organizational efforts to engage frontline workers in identifying improvements to the workforce development system and their organization's programs; a professional development system that recognizes and rewards participation in the form of continuing education credits, which are then tied to career advancement opportunities; and improved organizational practices around employee engagement, evaluation and feedback, and career coaching.

These ideas are just the beginning; the survey data that will be released in early summer 2020 will provide a picture of the monetary and non-monetary aspects of job quality, which will hopefully provide a richer set of ideas from workers themselves on how their employers could invest in them to ensure that the workforce development system has the talent it needs to meet the immense task at hand of getting New Yorkers back to work and on an upward trajectory in an economy recovering from COVID-19's wide-reaching impacts.

The 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce

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

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

Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI)

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

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1 *Career Pathways: One City Working Together*. The City of New York. November 2014.

2 Restore Opportunity. Undervalued & Underpaid: How New York State Shortchanges Nonprofit Human Services Providers and their Workers. November 2017.

3 The initial analysis of the *Voices from the Frontline* survey will be released in early summer 2020.

4 "New survey reveals most financially stressed cities and states." June 11, 2019. Accessed on May 4, 2020 from <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/survey-reveals-americas-most-financially-130000008.html>

5 *ibid*

6 Fanelli, C., Rudiman, D. and Aldrich, R. 2017. Precarity in the Nonprofit Employment Services Sector.

7 New York City Employment & Training Coalition. April 2020. *Economic Ripple Effects: Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on the New York City Workforce Development Sector & Marginalized New Yorkers*. May 2020.