



WORKER VOICES

The Worker Voices Project

Background

- **Why:** Workers and jobseekers are critical stakeholders in the economy and their perspectives on the labor market, opportunities with employment influence their economic mobility. Greater understanding of their experiences illustrates a broader picture of economic conditions and supports the Fed's ability to achieve its full employment mandate.
- **What:** The Worker Voices Project aims to share the perspective of workers and jobseekers to better understand their experiences navigating the labor market during the pandemic and in recovery.
- **Who:** The project reached out to workers in lower-wage roles and individuals without a four-year college degree, as well as jobseekers and clients enrolled in workforce or training programs.
- **How:** Led by the Atlanta and Philadelphia Fed, this project engaged with each regional bank to host **20 virtual focus groups** with **175 total participants** from May-September 2022. These participants represent 33 states and 147 zip codes across the United States.



The Worker Voices Project

Qualitative Research

In 2022, Federal Reserve researchers conducted focus groups across the U.S. with workers and job seekers without a four-year degree to seek answers to the following questions:

- What were workers' experiences with employment at the onset of the pandemic and during the economic recovery?
- Do these workers and job seekers believe that they are benefiting from strong labor market conditions and experiencing greater economic stability?
- What barriers persist and prevent them from returning to and then remaining in the labor market?
- How are they changing what they expect from a job, and how do changing expectations inform the choices they make around work going forward?





“These past two years, I've been laid off from work many times due to the COVID pandemic. I was interested in the title, ‘The worker's voice,’ because it makes me think we have a voice, the voice of those who are not heard. And I felt the urge to share my experience with other people.”

- Worker Voices Participant

Complex Calculations

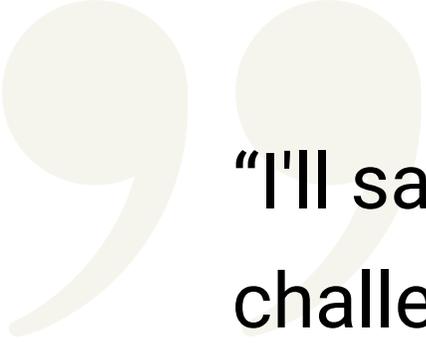


Workers in this study weighed complex choices around employment, often balancing risks of financial instability against health and safety concerns, caregiving demands, and other barriers. Their comments reflected the mental health impacts these stressors had on their work & family lives. Many workers described how these traumatic and scary experiences fundamentally changed how they evaluate employment opportunities and affect how they navigate the labor market.

Themes included:

- Job insecurity and financial precarity
- Health and safety concerns
- Pandemic exacerbated barriers
- Increased mental stress





“I'll say for me, it wasn't really easy. It was very challenging, because ... I was very concerned for my health and for the health of my child. ... I was also very scared because I thought maybe I could lose my job and I wasn't going to be able to provide the necessary means for my children. And it was a very tough and challenging moment for me.”

– Worker Voices Participant



Labor Market Disparities



The tight labor market may not have benefited all workers equally. Respondents in this study described their experiences with heavy workloads and increased burnout, and also spoke of struggling to find employment, even in a time of significant job availability.

Themes included:

- Job search challenges
- Labor shortages and experiences with burnout





“I've probably put in for the last three months about, I would say, 80 to 100 applications, and so since I haven't been able to find a job... I've been pulled in for interviews and not selected because I'm not what they're looking for.”

– Worker Voices Participant





Expectations for Quality Jobs



Workers shifted their expectations of jobs and are seeking higher-quality employment opportunities. Participants spoke about job stability, agency, dignity, wages proportional to their job responsibilities, and flexibility as aspects of what they now expect in a good job.

Themes included:

- Stable employment
- Agency, dignity and value in work
- Wages and compensation
- Flexibility and work-life balance





“We want certain benefits, we want certain hours, certain schedules, and before the pandemic we were not like that. That is, what they gave us, we accepted because we need[ed] the work. And after the pandemic we realized ... work sometimes needs us more.”

– Worker Voices Participant



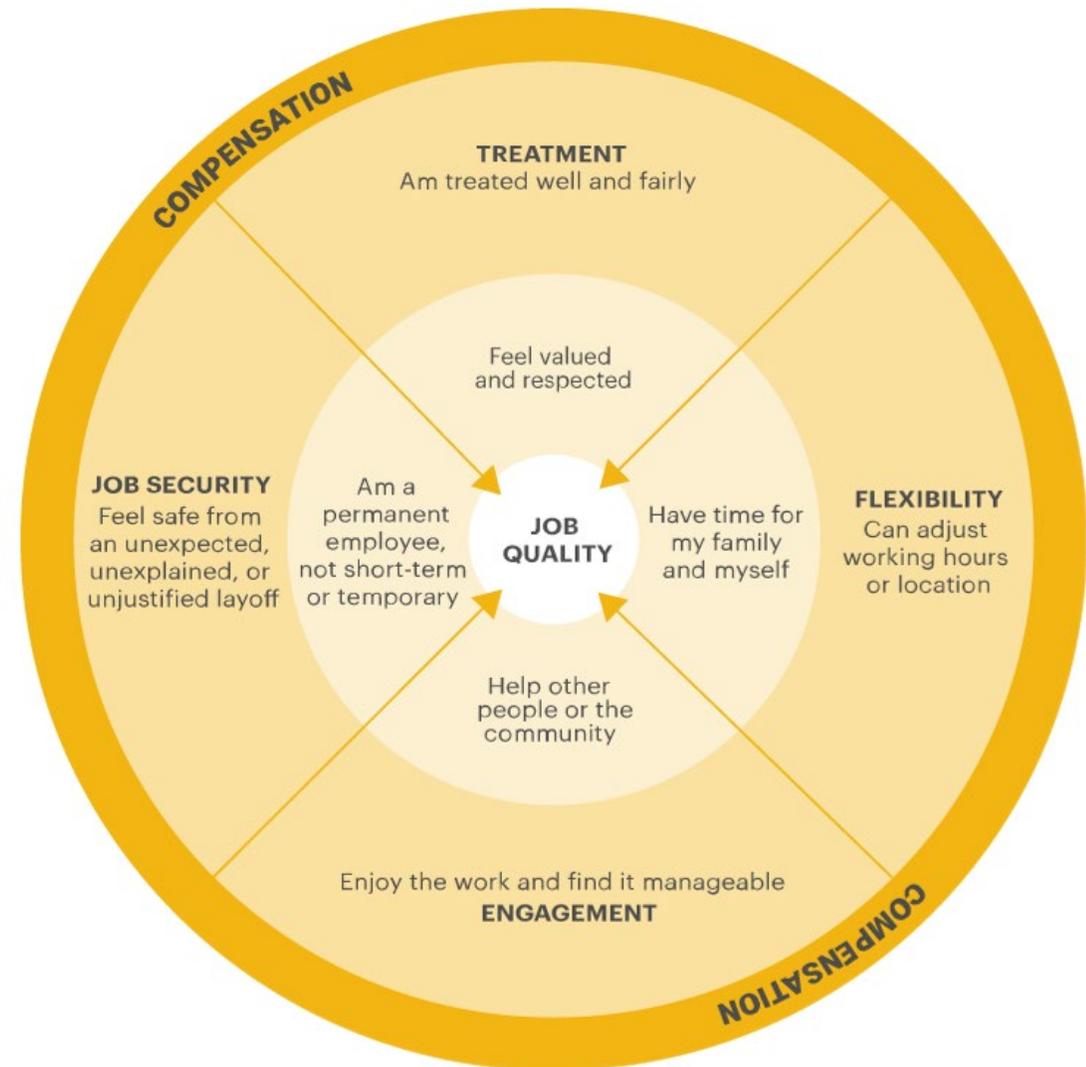
Worker Voices Special Brief: Perspectives on Job Quality

How did noncollege workers participating in nationwide focus groups describe a quality job?

The overarching themes from these conversations included:

- Compensation
- Treatment
- Job security
- Flexibility
- Engagement

The subthemes shown in the figure finish the statement, "A quality job is one in which I..."





Investing in Themselves



Participants are actively reinventing themselves to achieve better employment opportunities, investing in their skills in new and traditional ways through formal, informal, and self-directed learning and are exploring entrepreneurship as a means to achieve economic opportunity. Motivated to find better employment opportunities that meet their expectations of economic security and stability, participants focused on economic mobility in the near term through higher-paying job opportunities to secure economic stability in the long run.

Themes included:

- Formal, informal and self-directed learning
- Self-employment aspirations





“I'm trying to transition to software development. I'm going into tech, going to working remotely. I feel like there's more [job] security in that area. So, I've been taking some tutorials. It's not been easy, but I'm still pushing through.”

– Worker Voices Participant



Worker Voices Project



Considerations Going Forward

The workers who participated in this research provided nuanced perspectives to allow us to better understand the experiences of those in low-wage jobs in the labor market. The project makes the case for additional research going forward, particularly looking into if the trends identified are cyclical or structural. At the same time, these findings are relevant to understanding the ways in which non-degree workers navigate economic shocks, their definitions of job quality, and the methods by which workers are investing in their skills and reinventing themselves for the future.



Target Audiences

Value to Stakeholders

Who is the target audience for this research and what value does it provide to stakeholders?

- **Employer and Business Intermediaries:** Understand issues that prevent workers from pursuing or remaining in jobs.
- **Workforce Development Intermediaries and Service Providers:** Provides insights into workers expectations and needs related to employment and training pathways.
- **Policy Makers:** Offers insight into worker behavior and barriers preventing long-term attachment to employment.
- **Economic and Labor Market Research:** Qualitative insight adds nuance and context to labor market data and raises questions on structural shifts in worker behavior with employment.





“And I think during the pandemic – it kind of flipped the tables a little bit. ... I know that I can bring a lot to the table. Are you going to uphold your end of the half as an employer? So at least for me, it gave me a different perspective of ... don't settle for less.”

– Worker Voices Participant

THANK YOU

Full report and Special Brief Landing Page: [Worker Voices: Shifting Perspectives and Expectations on Employment](#)
([fedcommunities.org](#))

Questions contact:

Sarah Miller, sarah.miller@atl.frb.org

Ashley Putnam, ashley.putnam@phil.frb.org

