



Worker-Led Research Yields a New Framework for Assessing Job Quality

Worker leadership is critical to crafting recovery strategies that emphasize equity and quality jobs

AT A GLANCE

JFF and Turning Basin Labs are engaged in a multiphase initiative to identify and invest in high road employment models in California. This update documents the results of Phase 1 of this project, which include the worker-led development of a new framework for assessing job quality and an interactive tool that employers can use to design rewarding and fulfilling jobs that reflect worker experiences and perspectives.

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About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For nearly 40 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. Learn more at www.jff.org

About Turning Basin Labs

Turning Basin Labs (TBL) is a worker-owned cooperative dedicated to ensuring “economic opportunity accessible to all” workers. Our workers come from varied socio-economic backgrounds—formerly incarcerated workers, immigrant workers, minority workers, women workers—all seeking better jobs. We provide these workers community, access to benefits, and high road jobs. Join us at www.turningbasinlabs.com.

Acknowledgments

JFF, TBL, and the Worker-Researcher team would like to thank the many stakeholders who came together to make this report possible. We thank the research participants who shared the work experience and stories at the heart of this project, and we hope our collective efforts come back to benefit them in the long term. We thank Shaun Danquah of The Social Innovation Partnership for guiding our team on community-based research ethics. We also thank the James Irvine Foundation for generously supporting our research partnerships. Finally, we thank our advisory group for the feedback and connections that helped move this project from an idea to reality, including:

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Introduction

In an economy marked by stagnating wages, fragile worker protections and benefits, and declining union membership, we see an urgent need to increase the supply of quality jobs available to California’s workers. COVID-19 has exacerbated this situation, highlighting the inequities that caused the pandemic-driven health care and economic crises to have a disproportionate impact on people and families who depend on low-wage work. As the state looks toward its economic future, recovery strategies must prioritize quality jobs to ensure that we build a truly inclusive and equitable economy that’s strong enough to endure for the long term.

To help overcome the challenges of this moment, JFF and Turning Basin Labs (TBL) came together in partnership to explore what real solutions might look like through new investments in “high road employers” whose business models emphasize worker power, job quality, and career advancement. We believe that by investing specifically in these types of employers, California can create and scale economic opportunities that enable upward mobility for workers and ultimately build more resilient communities.



This report documents Phase 1 of our joint multiphase project: a worker-centered, participatory research pilot with the goal of developing a new framework, introduced at the end of this report, that uses more than wages and benefits to evaluate job quality. We used that framework to develop an interactive tool that employers of all sizes can use to design more rewarding and fulfilling jobs that reflect worker experiences and perspectives. Our findings and recommendations will inform the longer-term work we will embark on in Phase 2 of this initiative, when we plan to set up an investment fund with built-in worker oversight whose mission will be to provide financing for employers that are working to design better employment models.

Inclusion in the Process: Our Worker-Centered Approach to Research

A multitude of nonprofits, think tanks, and employers have already developed strong frameworks to define job quality. Many, if not most of them, focus on wages and benefits. And while those are important factors, we wanted our work to identify new recommendations and strategies based on workers' own lived experiences.

To get to new insights, we took a new approach—one that engages workers as leaders, researchers, and advisors.

Few studies examining working conditions ask for workers' perspectives on research methodology, and none that we know has built worker leadership directly into the development of recommendations. We wanted to create a process through which workers could conduct job quality research from start to finish from their own critical perspectives. We also wanted to test the hypothesis that an approach in which workers played a principal role as researchers and strategic advisors would, in fact, help identify new and deeper insights on quality employment—and ultimately lead to better investment opportunities for the fund we hope to establish. So, building on other participatory research models, including the approaches put forth by Chicago

Beyond, Research Justice, and the UK-based Social Innovation Partnership, we facilitated a process that included workers in every phase of our work—from study design, interviewing, and data collection to analysis and recommendations.¹

Our Worker-Researcher Team

To build a research team that could meet our immediate objectives and fulfill the broader vision of the work, JFF and TBL hired four paid Worker-Researchers (WR): Lamar Bursey, Elsa Guerra Garcia, Leneka Pendergrass, and Marti Shaw. All had experience in what they described as low-wage jobs, contract work, or both. Three came from the Underground Scholars program at the University of California, Berkeley, and we recruited one from our partnership's broader network. To train, facilitate, and support the WR team, JFF and TBL hired two people who had expertise in participatory research: Danny Spitzberg, who served as lead researcher, and Karin Vosgueritchian, who served as policy analyst. Danny trained the WRs in research methods for interviews, data collection, analysis, presentation, and ethical practices. He provided meaningful opportunities for WR leadership, including

inviting and developing proposals for improvements to the interview guide. Karin provided personalized coaching to ensure that the WRs received support throughout the project. The training and support enabled the WRs to build the skills and capacity necessary to conduct the research and lead the process to completion.

JFF and TBL intend to continue to test this inclusive research model, and we hope it influences a broader approach to other economic policy initiatives. The possibilities are endless: Worker-Researchers could improve the systems and programs they interact with on a daily basis by drawing on their lived experiences to inform training program design, make workplaces more inclusive, or guide policymakers in developing more equitable legislation.

“My participation in the analysis allowed me to learn how to organize the data and tell a story. I was able to say what was and was not working, and my voice was not only heard, but requested and respected by the project leads.”

— Leneka Pendergrass
Worker-Researcher

Meet the WR Team



Lamar Bursey. A second-year transfer student at UC Berkeley majoring in sociology, Lamar is a member of the Underground Scholars program and worked as the outreach coordinator and assistant board director of Reentry Services. He also has experience working in retail, sales, and warehouse operations.



Elsa Guerra Garcia. A second-year transfer student at UC Berkeley majoring in sociology and minoring in ethnic studies, Elsa is a member of the Underground Scholars program. She also has experience working as a restorative justice facilitator.



Leneka Pendergrass. A mother of two and a recent UC Berkeley graduate with a degree in sociology, Leneka is a former member of the Underground Scholars program. Over the past five years, she has worked in various positions focused on social justice issues that affect members of marginalized communities.



Marti Shaw. A mother and a personal trainer with 32 years of experience in exercise program design, nutrition, and coaching, Marti has worked at a number of fitness facilities, including 24 Hour Fitness, Lifetime Athletic, and Orange Theory. After being laid off because of COVID-driven cutbacks, she worked in an Amazon warehouse. Marti currently trains clients privately online and in person.

Participants

The WRs recruited participants for interviews from their communities and personal networks, and JFF and TBL recruited participants via an online interest form we sent to our partners. We eventually assembled a group of 46 interviewees. The participant pool was diverse in terms of work experience, employment status, educational attainment, training background, age, race, ethnicity, gender, income level, and geographic location. Moreover, we selected participants based on their experience in self-described low-wage jobs across a wide range of professions, including landscaping, baking, delivery, graphic design, software engineering, fitness, retail, and customer support. In our final sample, a majority of the participants were residents of the San Francisco Bay Area who identified themselves as either Black, Indigenous, or a person of color and reported an income far below the cost of living.

79%

described themselves as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC)

60%

said that they live in the San Francisco Bay Area; 25% said they were residents of Oakland

64%

reported earning an annual income lower than \$49,000

Our team paid interviewees for the time it took to schedule the interview, talk with us, and participate further in the research. A majority of the participants expressed interest in continuing the conversation and in participating as advisors in later phases of the project. Through this inclusive process, we observed the power of assigning the task of gathering data to the WRs, who had lived experiences that were similar to those of the interviewees.

Connections formed between researchers and interviewees that would serve as the foundation for our findings.

“[This process] made me think about the reasons why I made up my mind never to work a job where I don’t have a leadership role in helping others.”

— Lamar Bursey

Worker-Researcher



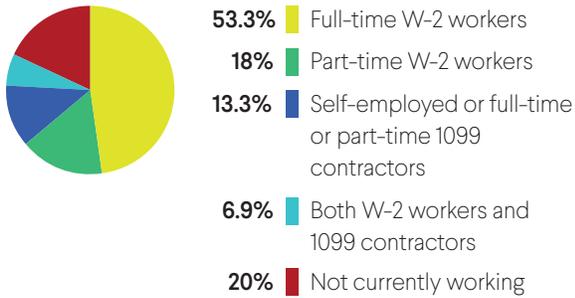
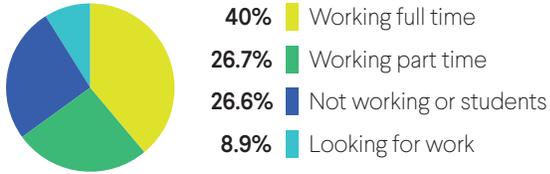
“Interviewing people felt like I was doing relationship-building with the hopes of gaining trust from the interviewees.”

— Leneka Pendergrass

Worker-Researcher

Participant Demographics

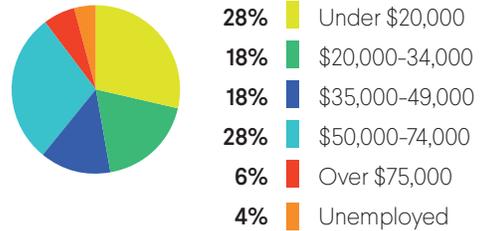
EMPLOYMENT STATUS



(Note: percentage totals exceed 100% because these categories are not mutually exclusive)

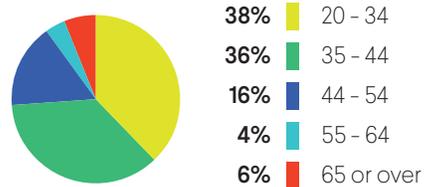
ANNUAL INCOME BEFORE TAXES

Base: 46 participants



AGE

Base: 46 participants



GENDER AND RACIAL OR ETHNIC IDENTITY

57% female/femme

43% male

79% BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, person of color)

21% white

GEOGRAPHY

60% San Francisco Bay Area (25% Oakland)

30% Northern California (Sacramento, Modesto, Roseville)

10% Southern California and Central Valley



Research Design

Once trained, the WRs led an iterative research process, developing research questions, an interview guide, and a selection framework for participants. This initial work was informed by existing research on quality jobs, and by discussions of personal experiences among members of the team. That process yielded the following research questions:

- 1. What are quality jobs and better employment models, from the worker's perspective?**
- 2. What kinds of opportunities, training, or support have workers found valuable?**
- 3. How do workers define an ideal work situation and overall career?**

From July to September 2020, WRs used these questions to conduct 46 in-depth, one-on-one interviews via videoconference with the research participants. They also led an interviewee feedback session with eight participants. Our full team also had three sessions with our advisory group from August to October to discuss findings and receive guidance. (See the Appendix for further details on ethics and validation.)

Worker-Led Analysis and Research Shifts

The WRs conducted their analysis by first focusing on pilot interviews, then revising the interview guide and conducting further interviews. We saw clear benefits of worker leadership throughout our research process—connections between WRs and participants around similar lived experiences led to more meaningful storytelling and subsequently more relevant and useful data. Clear expectations, hands-on training, and structured facilitation helped the WRs turn reflections and conversations into proposals for improvements. The team made three significant shifts in the research process that yielded key insights for the final quality jobs framework.

WR-Led Shift 1: Exploring the Concept of ‘Ownership’

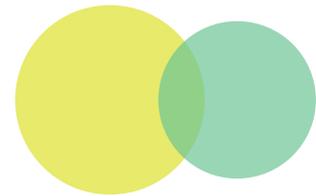
The first critical shift the WRs made came from reviewing pilot interviews, and especially the conversations about power, decision-making, and what it means to have ownership in your work. An interview with a trained glass artist who works in retail but runs her own business on the side uncovered a specific tension between a possible sense of job satisfaction and the potential for missing out on an improved economic situation through actual ownership or co-ownership of a business. Worker-Researcher Marti Shaw reflected on her own experience: **“I had a rewarding job as a personal trainer, but not owning a gym facility meant missing out on financial gain. Hearing people describe two kinds of ownership, psychological or material, the skies opened up.”**

The insights into the concept of ownership led the WRs to develop and incorporate a new frame for the study that considered the dimensions of both psychological and material ownership at work.

A New Frame for Our Study: ‘Ownership’

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- A “sense” of ownership
- A feeling or belief that something belongs to you — your work, product, etc.



MATERIAL

- “Real” ownership
- A legal claim to an asset, like financial stake in a business
- Power to make decisions, like on pay and benefits, hiring and firing, etc.

WR-Led Shift 2: Opening Up the Definition of a ‘Career’

The second critical shift the WRs made emerged while they were revising and refining the interview guide. The team saw a need to re-examine the language used to describe work experience. In particular, Worker-Researcher Elsa Guerra Garcia shared critical feedback about the use of the word *career*.

According to Elsa, **“The word *career* was limiting for interviewees. One said, ‘Career? What career?!’ So, I asked people to define it, which opened up all kinds of work that doesn’t get seen. That was a huge insight in itself.”**

The WRs discussed this feedback and decided that the concept of autonomy allowed them to dig into important aspects of the on-the-job experience, like schedule flexibility, job choice, and the opportunity to define and create a career path. They revised the interview guide to ask interviewees how they themselves define *career*, and they noted experience and references to autonomy when coding interview transcripts.

WR-Led Shift 3: Incorporating the Experience of ‘Being Policed’

The third critical shift came about while the WRs were trying to describe and explain the differences they found

between the initial interview data and the information they gathered in our additional feedback sessions. In writing about people’s particular experiences with micromanagement and a lack of autonomy, Worker-Researcher Leneka Pendergrass summarized a dominant worker perspective: **“People don’t want to just show up and be subjected to authority figures in high places. If someone has an idea that can make a workflow more effective, they should have opportunities to contribute or at least feel that their voice matters in a place where they are spending most of their time and contributing their labor. It’s like a slap in the face to take someone’s labor but reject their voice.”**

This perspective was shared by several workers. For example, a high-rise window cleaner described feeling trapped in a specialized job and a computer programmer reported feeling a lack of autonomy despite having in-demand skills that made it possible to find a new job. The WRs identified this concept as one of “being policed” at work, or experiencing excessive control—because of practices like dress codes, micromanagement, or racial and gender discrimination. Feeling policed at work is effectively the opposite of having ownership.

Building a New Job Quality Framework

The original goal of our study was to take a novel approach to researching attitudes about employment in order to gain new insights and recommendations about what—beyond wages and benefits—makes for a quality job. We hoped to use those insights to develop a framework from the ground up to reflect worker experiences and perspectives.

As a result of the WR-led design, shifts in our approach, and unique findings, we effectively integrated the three dimensions from the outset of the study—worker power, job quality, and career development—into a single framework from the worker’s perspective. Specifically, we created a four-quadrant matrix to aid in our analysis and discussion. That matrix was built along two axes: A vertical axis that represented the continuum of feelings of ownership, and a horizontal axis that represented the continuum of feelings of autonomy.

“The main reason

I took that job was for hourly stability.”

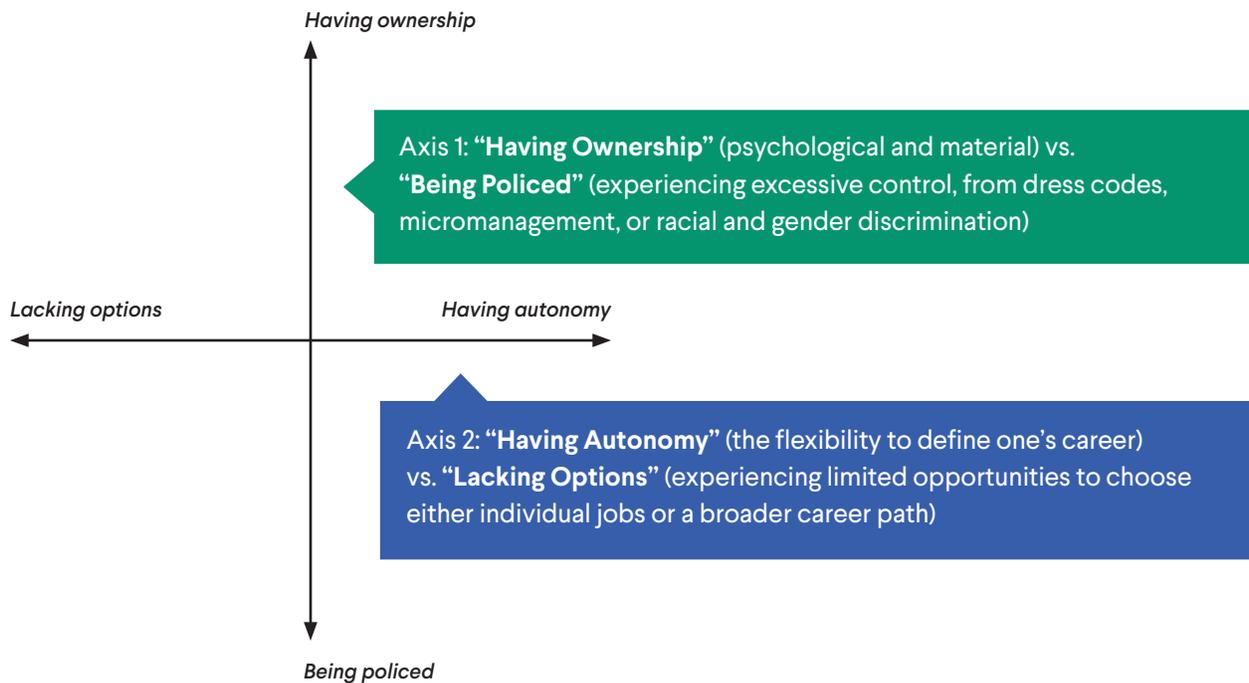
– TG, factory worker

“Why would anyone listen to me if I don’t own the company? They only listen if you own it.”

– DR, truck driver

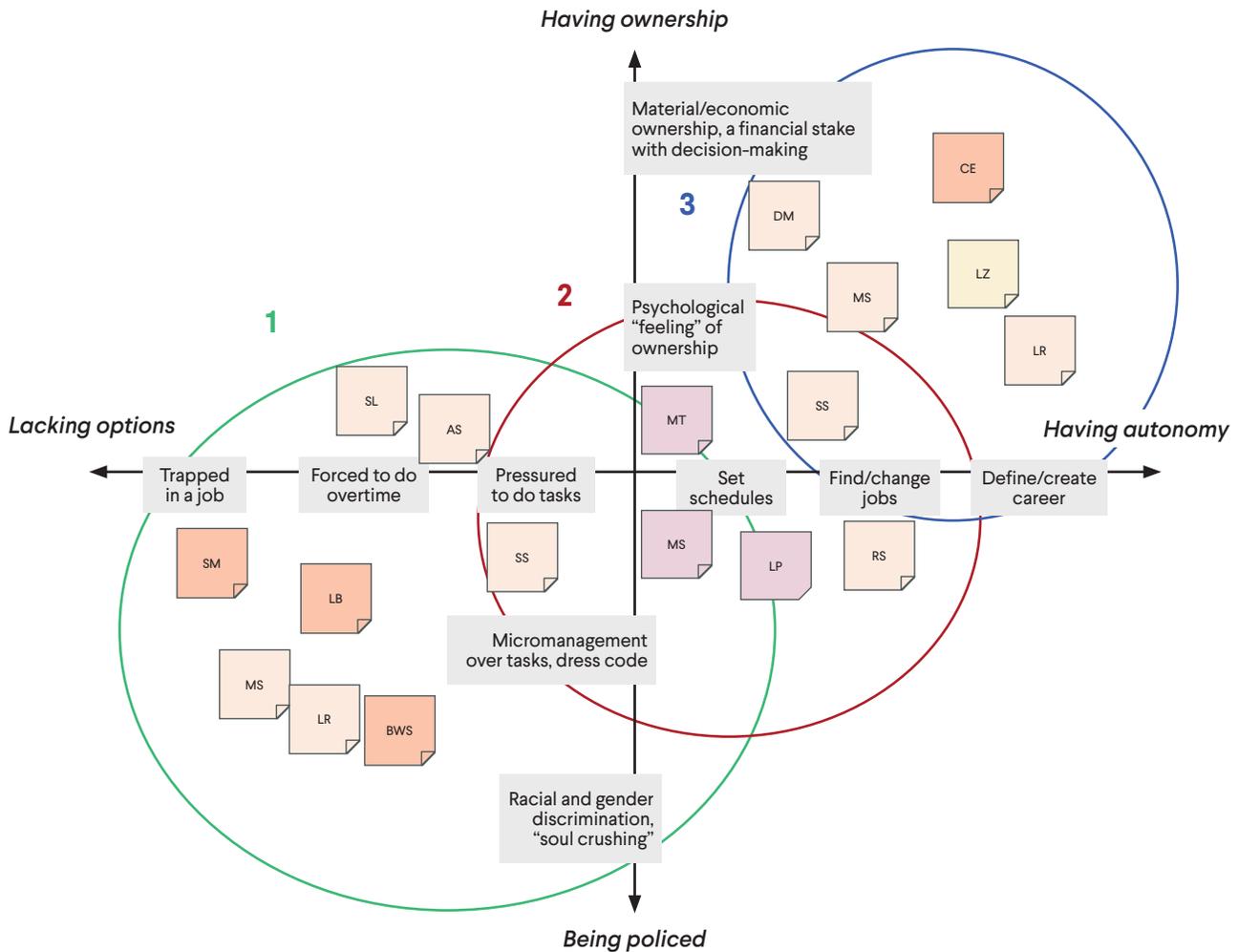
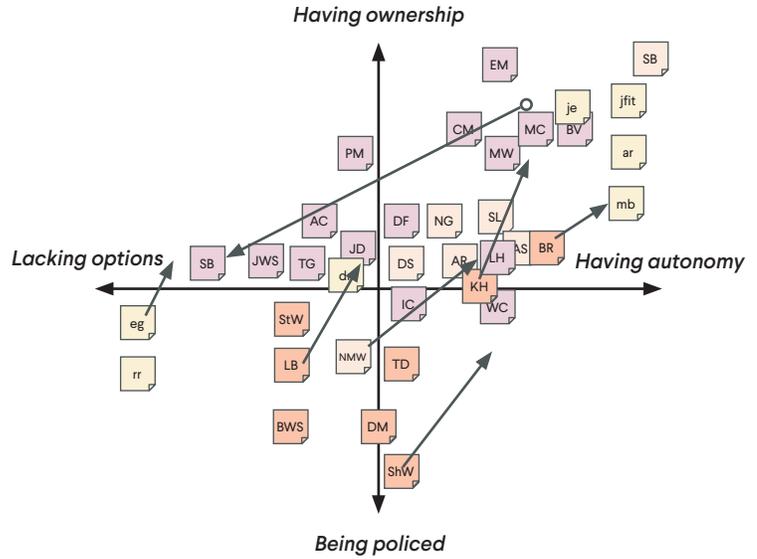
“[Y]ou know, being in a typical nine-to-five, I feel like I have more freedom in a sense.”

– GF, construction worker



The WRs focused on clusters of interviewees and discussed, person by person, what explained the differences between individuals. Also, to ensure that the framework was clear and consistent, they further defined each axis by labeling it with a set of criteria. In doing so, three main categories of work experiences emerged:

- 1. Trapped and Struggling
- 2. Flexible but Stuck
- 3. Happily Invested



1. Trapped and Struggling:

Workers in this bottom-left category end up “bouncing around the box” defined by lacking options and being policed, whether they are stuck in one job or moving between jobs.

For example, BWS, a high-rise window cleaner who had been hurt on the job and wants to move into a less risky field, like driving, reported feeling as though he didn’t have any options.

2. Flexible but Stuck:

Workers in this middle area feel some degree of autonomy and ownership at work—perhaps because they have schedule flexibility, for example—but end up being stuck. This can happen often without workers even realizing it, sometimes for a long time. Many still feel that real ownership and autonomy are out of reach.

For example, KH, a software engineer who does independent contracting at various tech companies, says that “on mornings when I check my bank account to see if I can quit, that’s when I know work is bad.” He’s currently looking for a new job but will likely continue contracting.

3. Happily Invested:

Workers in the top-right category have found a pathway to what we describe as “real” economic ownership and “real” autonomy to define and create their careers.

For example, at the very top right is SB, a graphic designer who is emotionally and financially invested in the print and web design co-op where she has worked for more than 14 years. SB’s co-op is invested in her, too: She earns a living wage, receives full benefits, is represented by a union, and has professional development opportunities. SB says she “couldn’t be happier.”

Our Work Ahead

Phase 1 of JFF and TBL's multiphase, collective work yielded insights into not only our original research questions, but also what it takes to conduct truly inclusive participatory research. Our ability to glean those insights is due in large part to lessons learned through the leadership of our team of Worker-Researchers and from our interviewees. Their involvement made possible this tangible, emerging framework for evaluating quality employment that uses the concepts of ownership and autonomy as guideposts.

Now that it's been designed, tested, and validated by workers, it must be tested and validated by employers, business leaders, and other groups with the power to affect real change in both private and public systems, and in individual jobs. We must all work together to make this framework actionable, co-design what it really looks like to have ownership and autonomy at work, and lay out concrete steps for companies to achieve the goal of creating quality jobs for their employees.

Looking forward, the findings and recommendations from this worker-centered, participatory research effort have positioned us to launch Phase 2 of JFF and TBL's collaborative work: developing an investment fund that promotes the creation of quality jobs and better employment models. Phase 2 will allow us to test the notion that investing in companies that advance worker power, job quality, and career development will lead to more equitable outcomes for workers. Members of the WR team will continue working with JFF and TBL as strategic advisors as we work to raise capital and launch the fund.

“Surprisingly, it became personal. This process humanized employment issues I’ve not been familiar with, but also allowed me to relive painful employment experiences I’d chosen to forget.”

— Marti Shaw
Worker-Researcher

Appendix

Establishing Research Ethics

At the outset of this project, Shaun Danquah, head of engagement at the Social Innovation Partnership in London, facilitated a discussion on research ethics. During that session, the members of the Worker-Researcher (WR) team discussed principles for our own research process. These principles included:

- Do no harm
- Honesty and openness
- Consent is required
- Commitment to truth
- Feedback to the community you researched
- Look after yourself

Then, over the course of our research, we committed to creating a practice of reciprocity, benefit sharing, and democratization of knowledge in our team and with our research participants.

Validating Research Findings

To validate findings from our research, the WRs facilitated and participated in several rounds of input and feedback from interviewees and advisors.

One pivotal effort involved validating initial findings with interviewees. WRs uploaded, transcribed, and tagged the collected data in Dovetail, a software platform for collaborative research. After completing 30 one-on-one interviews out of an eventual total of 46, the WRs facilitated an in-depth feedback session with eight interviewee participants to explore emerging themes, gather more data, and identify areas for further interviews. This ensured that the WRs could validate findings and generate insights.

Another critical effort involved dialogue with the project's advisory group. Over the course of several months, the WRs prepared and delivered three presentations on findings and the emerging framework. This provided space for discussion around key steps of the process—for instance, recommendations for investment models to examine, or connections to their priorities and initiatives—and helped prepare a more relevant and useful final presentation and deliverables.

Endnote

1 Our research process builds on the large but little-known practice of participatory and community-based methods. A few resources that we found most useful and relevant include the following:

Chicago Beyond, *Why Am I Always Being Researched? A Guidebook for Community Organizations, Researchers, and Funders to Help Us Get From Insufficient Understanding to More Authentic Truth* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Beyond, 2018), <https://chicagobeyond.org/researchequity/>

Andrew J. Jolivet, ed., *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* (Bristol, England: Policy Press, 2015), <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/research-justice>

The Social Innovation Partnership, “Community Research: Moving from Exploitative Extraction to Genuine Collaboration” (London, England: The Social Innovation Partnership: 2020), <https://www.tsip.co.uk/blog/2020/8/13/community-research-exploitative-extraction-to-collaborative-research>



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