

The 3 Pillars of a Good Job

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Before the pandemic, employee wellbeing, and engagement were on the rise. Research now shows them stagnating, and job unhappiness is at an all-time high.

So what makes a good job, well, good? There's now actually a working definition for employers to read and heed.

"Good jobs are essential to a healthy economy, successful businesses, strong communities, thriving families, and a well-functioning democracy," begins a statement released today by the Good Jobs Champions Group, a joint venture of the Families and Workers Fund and the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program. The group's definition, signed by more than 100 leaders across industries, lays out the three pillars of a good job: economic stability; economic mobility; and equity, respect, and voice.

These three areas emerge as not just helpful in wooing and retaining talent, but crucial in employers' relationships and communications with their workers on the job. Translated into action items, they might be applied and demonstrated in the following ways:

- Economic stability: a wage that's enough to afford food to eat and a place to live, health insurance, transit credits or discounts.
- Economic mobility: learning new skills, career development, cost-of-living adjustments, a path to advancement or promotion, bonus or commission structures.
- Equity, respect and voice: regular check-ins, affinity groups, two-way feedback sessions, a willingness to listen and change.

The group's manifesto, shared with me last week for release today, are impressive for the socioeconomic range and unifying vision it encompasses. I am guilty here, week after week, of focusing on white-collar workers having the right to balance and flexibility. When it comes to lower-wage workers, I have been less vocal, assuming a gulf in priorities: that while people who like their jobs likely have the privilege to focus on career growth and happiness, the folks who don't like their jobs are likely not making enough or feeling enough stability to think about satisfaction and advancement.

Rachel Korberg, executive director of the Families and Workers Fund, corrected me. "It's not just about pay—many low-wage workers also place a high value on having the voice and power to improve their workplace, feeling a sense of purpose on the job, or having advancement opportunities," she says. "On the flip side, people who work in highly-compensated jobs could be overlooked for advancement opportunities due to their race, gender, or other identity characteristics, or might not be supported to meet their caregiving responsibilities."

This reckoning with what it really means to have a good job comes amid a growing questioning of how we might define ourselves less by what we do for a living. The pandemic has made people consider the role of work in their lives, and increasingly workers seek a sense of purpose and value in their jobs.

A good job today, says Maureen Conway, executive director of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, needs to offer that flexibility. "It strikes me that people often describe the quality of their jobs in terms of how their job makes them feel about themselves (a sense of accomplishment, pride in being associated with the organization, feeling responsible/trusted/valued as a member of the organization)," she says, "and how well their job supports them in their ability to manage daily life and care for loved ones."

Indeed, external factors are changing the nature of work and moving income out of the hands of employers. Several cities across California are currently testing guaranteed income in an experiment that already feels revolutionary, especially for people of color. One San Francisco program called Miracle Messages gave \$500 a month to homeless

people in the city through a GoFundMe campaign. About half went on to find housing after receiving the cash payments. Massachusetts is home to some of the biggest guaranteed income pilots in the country, through a mix of government and nonprofit efforts.

Last year, Matthew Taylor authored a provocative book examining the future of jobs in our society titled *Do We Have To Work?* Taylor, based in the UK and the chairman of the NHS Confederation, questions the need for a constantly moving “growth escalator,” and suggests that we find ways to step off the “hedonic treadmill” that has us continually craving more money, power, and consumer goods. The book outlines new ways to approach work, such as a universal basic income and more self-employment, that might allow us to define ourselves by the people we are versus the work we do.

That shift feels especially urgent given that the premise of the Good Jobs Champions Group’s work rests on an alarming stat: Less than half of U.S. workers say they are in a good job, according to Gallup research published last year. The common traits of a bad job, says Korberg, are:

- Not being paid enough
- Workers feeling unable to care for children or their own mental or physical health
- A bad boss (such as bullying or disrespectful supervisor or sexual harassment on the job; the highest rates of this are reported in restaurants and hospitality)
- Being passed over for training opportunities
- Unsafe working conditions
- Not being heard at work
- A bad commute
- Feeling misalignment with your own values
- Feeling work is dull or boring

Asked about the changing nature of identity tied to work, Korberg reiterated the need for good jobs. “Everyone should have access to a good job,” she says, “whether you’re someone who wants to make the job your identity or just wants to work, earn a paycheck,

and then go home at the end of the day and not think about work. Both relationships with work have a place in our society, but seeking a sense of purpose at work shouldn't provide an excuse for offering low-quality jobs."

One example is child care workers and educators, often doing the work because they have a passion for working with children and making a difference in their lives. "The country is relying on their sense of passion and purpose to justify extremely low and often poverty-level wages," says Korberg, a strategy that's currently imploding as workers leave the field in droves.

The inclusion of these essential workers in discussions and definitions of good jobs seems key—and a distinguishing trait of the group's work. "During pandemic times, a conversation about purpose, flexibility, and trajectory seemed focused on privileged workers who were suddenly in isolation and working on Zoom—and it was a conversation that these workers were included in," reminds Conway. "At the same time, there was a conversation about essential workers, which both lauded and pitied them, but it wasn't a conversation that included these workers in any meaningful way."

Whether the pandemic is over might be up for debate. Whether we still need these essential workers to function as an economy—as the past two years have made abundantly clear—is not.