

FOCUSING ON WORKER AND JOBSEEKER PERCEPTIONS

**UNDERSTANDING THE ATTITUDES, CHALLENGES,
AND NEEDS OF WORKERS AND JOBSEEKERS WHO
ARE UNEMPLOYED OR UNDEREMPLOYED**

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Focusing on Worker and Jobseeker Perceptions: Understanding the Attitudes, Challenges, and Needs of Workers Who are Unemployed or Underemployed is based on focus groups with workers and jobseekers who are un- and under-employed workers and jobseekers and are experiencing structural marginalization. The short report presents insights shared by these workers and jobseekers about their approach to job searching, the tools and services they use, and most importantly their perceptions of that process. The brief also presents strategies for crafting outreach to these workers. The report was produced by Gina Johnson, Senior Associate at NCHEMS and Communication**Works**, LLC, which has provided communication support for the D4AD initiative and conducted the focus groups that inform this brief. The views presented in this brief are those of the author and do not represent Schmidt Futures, Lumina Foundation, Walmart Foundation, or the Walton Family Foundation.

ABOUT DATA FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

Data for the American Dream (D4AD) is a consortium bringing together Schmidt Futures, Lumina Foundation, Walmart Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation. D4AD initiatives in three states (Colorado, Michigan, and New Jersey) are aimed at supporting workers and jobseekers, particularly those who are un- or underemployed and experiencing structural racism and economic marginalization. D4AD is focused on creating tools and systems that provide more accessible, current and actionable information workers can use to identify career and training opportunities. D4AD initiatives work with both public and private agencies to engage workers and jobseekers and ensure that services and resources are flexible, responsive and designed to meet the needs of jobseekers.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) is the implementation partner of D4AD. NCHEMS is a private nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve strategic decision making in postsecondary education for states, systems, institutions, and workforce development organizations in the United States and abroad.



INTRODUCTION

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, the Brookings Institute reported more than 53 million people, 44% of all workers aged 18-64 earned median hourly wages of \$10.22 and median annual earnings of \$17,950.¹ These workers, disproportionately women and people of color, often experience structural marginalization, resulting in unequal circumstances that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and resulting economic upheaval.

Data show greater job losses for women, higher un- and underemployment among African Americans and Latinx Americans, and a drop in community college enrollments, particularly for first-generation and students of color. As we saw in the recovery from the Great Recession where workers with at least some college education or a degree had captured 11.5 million of the 11.6 million net new jobs created during the recovery,² the path back to a good job is clearer for those with education or training credentials. For example, “just 7,000 of the 916,000 jobs added back by the economy in March [2021] went to adults with high school diplomas but no college degree.”³

D4AD initiatives aim to expand access to education and career data to provide students and jobseekers with access to better information so they can make better career decisions in a changing economy through data-driven information, especially Americans who are unemployed or underemployed, and facing structural racism or economic marginalization. Given the growing economic disparities and the uneven recovery, this work is all the more important. However, it requires a better understanding of how to connect with these workers and work with them to create better access to jobseeker tools that provide information to support workers and jobseekers in their efforts to secure employment and advance their careers.

Education, training and workforce development providers need to develop a deeper understanding of how workers and jobseekers who are economically marginalized perceive:

- their current work situations;
- the challenges they face in securing better jobs and careers;
- the jobseeker tools and information they are aware of; and
- job services and career training opportunities and providers.

1 Brookings Institution: *Meet the Low-wage Workforce*. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/201911_BrookingsMetro_low-wage-workforce_Ross-Bateman.pdf

2 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce: *AMERICA'S DIVIDED RECOVERY College Haves and Have-Nots*. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf>

3 *Washington Post*: “For some former college students, the pandemic opened a door to finish their degrees”. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/06/06/college-dropouts-return-virtual-learning/>

Better understanding the attitudes, challenges, and needs of the people targeted by jobseeker tools can help the tool developers design for maximum impact and particularly assist workers experiencing marginalization for whom systemic inequities present particular challenges that jobseeker tool creators need to better understand. Equally important it can help agencies design and implement more effective outreach strategies to ensure workers and jobseekers know how and where to access tools and services that will be of most value to them.

In October 2020 D4AD partner Communication**Works**, LLC, conducted focus groups with jobseekers in Maryland and Ohio who were either unemployed or underemployed and earning less than \$25,000 annually to learn more about their attitudes, challenges, and needs. The groups included a balance of women and men, workers who were racially minoritized and a significant representation of workers who were parents. These discussions built on focus groups conducted by the American Institutes for Research in September 2019 with workers and jobseekers in Michigan, New Jersey and Virginia. The observations and insights gathered from these focus groups informed the work of the inaugural D4AD grantees and provides a guide for jobseeker tool developers to better understand the attitudes, challenges and needs of workers experiencing economic marginalization and how to design communications to best connect with these workers and jobseekers.

The following sections outline the challenges, attitudes and needs workers identified in the focus groups and then outlines several strategies for developing effective outreach strategies to reach these workers and jobseekers.



CHALLENGES

Focus group participants reported several challenges they face in seeking a job or searching for an improved employment situation.

- **Information overload.** Many participants began their job searches with basic internet searches or used large, job listing services such as Indeed, ZipRecruiter, Monster and other job boards or by searching via Google. Many felt overwhelmed by the amount of information and jobs listed and found it difficult to match their interests and skills with jobs they felt would meet their economic, family and personal needs.
- **Competition for jobs.** Participants felt that there were significantly more applicants than jobs, and didn't know how to distinguish themselves from others, and felt the process was a mystery.
- **Unreasonable/inflated qualifications requirements for open positions.** Participants felt that employers often had unreasonable expectations concerning and often were seeking education or experience that would eliminate them even though they had strong backgrounds for positions.
- **Disconnect between their experience and pay scale of positions.** Participants felt that many position announcements required qualifications that were not commensurate with projected pay, which made some feel their experience was not valued and led others to question the value of investing in upgrading their qualifications.
- **Keeping a work/life balance.** A number of participants, particularly but not exclusively women, were concerned about finding positions that would allow them to maintain a healthy work/life balance. The COVID-19 context was a factor here as many participants were questioning this balance as they dealt with children and other dependents at home and managing virtual work environments.

“There aren’t a lot of options or they make unreasonable stipulations to try to get the job. You need a bachelor’s degree to do basic data entry . . . you have to have this many years’ experience. Well, how do I get experience if I can’t get the job? Or you need... advanced degrees for very menial skills to get the job so it gets a little discouraging sometimes.”

Ohio focus group participant

ATTITUDES

These challenges (and the impact of the COVID-19 on participants during the pandemic) led to a variety of attitudes about the job seeking process. In general, participants were reflective and were clearly self-assessing their own skills and potential to improve their employment situations. Generally, workers felt:

“Frustrated. The actual job search and submitting applications and not hearing back. So much time is spent doing that and so much effort is put into it. Unfortunately, not getting a result so far and it’s been months.”

Maryland focus group participant

- **Frustrated and anxious.** Participants reported applying to multiple positions and either being rejected or not receiving any response and generally feeling worn down by the process. Some participants expressed concern that they would never be able to find a rewarding position. This was exacerbated by the pandemic which was forcing some to choose between working and feeling safe.

- **Overwhelmed.** Other participants reported feeling overwhelmed by both the amount of information, but also by the effort it takes to manage the job seeking process. In some cases, participants indicated feeling overwhelmed to the point of inaction.
- **Self-doubt.** While most participants were frustrated with the process, many also expressed self-doubt in their own ability to succeed and disappointment with the position they found themselves in.
- **Constrained by circumstances.** Participants also noted that their own circumstances prevented them from pursuing different paths they knew might lead to better employment opportunities, whether that be family obligations, location, health considerations of other circumstances.

“I guess, ‘disappointing’ because having to move onto something else, that was hard for a little while. It took a lot of acceptance and I felt kind of rejected. Even though I feel like I’ve sort of got back on my feet, it’s just not how I envisioned. That’s why it feels disappointing.”

Maryland focus group participant

ATTITUDES ABOUT JOB TRAINING AND CAREER SERVICES

While participants were aware of their own circumstances, they also expressed skepticism about the workforce development system and reacted negatively to workforce services they perceived as “public assistance”. Given this skepticism as well as their overall attitudes and the challenges they faced, participants were asked to reflect on what they thought would be most beneficial in terms of job training and career services.

Evidence of success and return on investment. Participants wanted to be reassured that any organization providing services could show evidence of their success and that jobseekers would see a return on their investment—whether that be time and/or money—in the form of a good job.

- **Real-time and relevant Information.** Participants wanted access to information that was up-to-date and matched their skills, experience and aspirations rather than being inundated with generic information not related to their particular circumstances.
- **Connected to where they are.** Participants wanted information about positions in their local area and that services were connected with their communities.
- **Experienced counselors and coaches.** Participants expressed concerns about counselors and job coaches who did not have enough experience and awareness of employers in the community to provide the most relevant and beneficial guidance.

“If I go to a website, I want to have personalized choices based on very selective, personalized factors that relate only to me, not generalized... So, I like that if the website is very, very strong and very personalized to you, to only you and not to a general audience.”

“I’m always trying to look locally. Because when I apply for things online, I tend to get a lot of things nationwide, a lot of things in areas that I am obviously not going to be... I try to find things [that] are going to be updated locally.”

Ohio focus group participant

EFFECTIVE WORKER AND JOBSEEKER OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Insights from the focus groups suggest that successful outreach strategies need to be intentional and targeted to rise above the “marketing noise” and informational overload many jobseekers experience and needs to come from trusted messengers to address jobseeker skepticism. To ensure jobseekers and workers learn about new approaches to job and career development, consider these strategies.

- Partner with community-based agencies and community organizers who can help connect to hard-to-reach populations.
- Be clear about what worker and jobseeker groups communications are trying to reach.
- Understand the channels and resource pathways jobseekers use to gather information and make decisions, and plan for how the tool will integrate with those resources.
- Use a social marketing approach to activate influencers relevant to the target audience.
- Engage jobseekers and job center employment specialists in the development of tools, resources, and outreach strategies to build trust and to best reach/serve these audiences.
- Focus technology-based outreach on mobile devices and communicate concise information with simple, directed tasks.
- Target employers as well as workers and jobseekers outreach campaigns.

“If there was that resource out there that wasn’t going to cost me anything and that was going to give me all those different options of helping me find the work, seeing what my potential is, and attributing that to a career path, I think that would be great.”

Ohio focus group participant

Strategies for developing successful messaging include:

- Develop culturally sensitive messages and customized outreach to reach diverse target groups.
- Create straightforward messages that speak to jobseeker needs, values, and aspirations.
- Feature workers who are representative of those you serve so that workers can see themselves, feel validated, and be inspired by career paths.
- Focus on worker assets and strive to counter messages focused on deficiencies and limitations.
- Provide information and specific steps to take that are narrowly focused, relevant, timely, and easily acted upon.

The following table provides examples of messages that participants responded positively to and can be effective with this group of workers.

THE 4 P'S: Positive, Practical, Personal, Precise	
<p>Positive/empowering messages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use an optimistic tone • Speak to solutions (with realistic expectations for results) • Address challenges/burdens/barriers without being overwhelmed by them • Emphasize what workers can do with the right help • Identify how people can help themselves 	<p>Messages with positive/empowering language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In spite of the pandemic, people are still being hired for good jobs. • You can find the job you need, and we can support you. • The next step toward independence and better pay is yours. • You may need more education and skills, but you can find your upside.
<p>Practical messages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the bottom line • Address not only what but how • Call for action that is doable (local, convenient, free, technology friendly) • Provide small assurances, not big promises • Provide proof, track record, examples of others who benefit 	<p>Messages with practical language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So many services and job sites connect you to jobs across the country and make you compete with thousands. But we line you up with new job openings right here that can put more money in your pocket. • We'll talk with you about your challenges, work with you to get the real-time information you need about new jobs, match your skills and interest to work that pays, and get the job. • Call XXX-XXXX for an appointment today.
<p>Personal messages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address workers' personal circumstance and who they are • Convey an ethos aligned with personal values, hopes, and aspirations • Recognize workers' personal preferences and choices • Speak in a tone that provides attention and care for the worker • Speak to a person not to a class of people 	<p>Messages with personal/ized language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students, workers and jobseekers need just-in-time information personalized to address their career interests, skills, and salary requirements. • You want work that is flexible, let's you make a contribution to the world, and raise a family. • Find the job that works for you—with more stability, better pay, and real growth potential.
<p>Practical messages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are concise • Use straightforward, clear and literal language • Don't use shared associations, or conceptual frameworks • Avoid overly clever copy, sarcasm, or innuendo 	<p>Messages with precise language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No time? No money? No more. • We save students, workers, and jobseekers time looking for the right job. We improve job prospects with real-time information, no-cost support, and access to work that pays. • We work with you to find the work you want and the path to get there.

Generally, participants responded best to messages that stressed that information and support would be customized. They want services that go beyond basic things people get at job centers and to find timely information targeted to them that will help them find jobs locally. Remember that students, jobseekers, and workers may be one and the same people, because there is significant crossover among these groups. The strongest messages were positive, practical, personal, and precise and connected their goals with what workers and jobseekers are looking for and with specific supports provided.

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