

A Good Job in Hawai‘i

An alternative framework for prosperity and wellbeing

September 2023

Written for the **Hawai‘i Workforce Funders Collaborative**

by

ISLANDER INSTITUTE

A Letter from the Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative

Dear Readers,

In 2021 and 2022, in collaboration with Guild Consulting, the Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative (HWFC) conducted foundational research by speaking with [supply side](#) (training providers) and [demand side](#) (employers and industry representatives). What we discovered was both concerning but not necessarily surprising: few jobs in Hawai'i offer wages sufficient for residents to support themselves and their families. In fact, among the 755 occupations within Hawai'i's industries, only 26 provide more than 100 annual job openings and a wage that can sustain a resident and one other family member. Seeing this stark reality in numbers made it clear that merely directing learners down existing pathways may not lead to the desired outcomes because, simply put, there are not enough good jobs to build pathways to.

This realization prompted a shift in our approach. We recognized the need to explore a yet-to-be-uncovered narrative. If the "good jobs" as commonly defined do not exist yet, then we have a unique opportunity to learn and help define another definition that raises up Hawai'i's communities' voices along with those of industry, employers, education, and policymakers. We envision a healthy economy in Hawai'i, built upon recognition of a symbiotic relationship between job seekers, training providers, and employers, centered on a model of work that aligns with the needs, values, and motivations of Hawai'i residents. These "good jobs" will both compensate workers at levels that allow current residents to remain in Hawai'i and provide opportunities to use their gifts and talents in a way that makes Hawai'i a better place to live for everyone. As you read this report and begin to envision what such a future could look like, notice how conversations with communities across the state begin to align around these common themes. Suddenly such a future seems more within reach.

This report would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of the Islander Institute and the Community Based Organizations across our state – Vibrant Hawai'i, Men of Pa'a, Hui No Ke Ola Pono, Kauai'i Economic Development Board, KEY Projects, and We Are Oceania. What you will find within these pages is the result of conversations with six diverse communities spanning Hawai'i Island, Kaua'i, Maui, and O'ahu. These conversations paint a vivid picture of what good jobs—and more importantly, what good work—could look like.

While the clear foundation of a framework has emerged from these initial conversations, we want to emphasize that this is the beginning of the conversation. There is still so much more to learn and more relationships that will need to be built to bring the vision outlined in this report to life.

(continued on next page)

Our next steps include:

- Continuing to engage with communities to develop meaningful metrics that measure access to and barriers to good jobs, ensuring these metrics accurately represent the communities being measured.
- Developing publicly available data tools and data sense-making white papers that enable stakeholders across the state to explore communities, demographics, and industries to identify both the current opportunities as well as the barriers to good work.
- In November 2023, we will be partnering with group of stakeholders from Community-Based Organizations, local American Job Centers, Higher Education, and Industry to launch the Hawai'i Worker Equity Lab—a collaborative effort rooted in human centered design principles to identify, prototype, and implement solutions that will break down existing barriers that currently prevent certain groups of workers from accessing good jobs.

We also plan on creating user-specific playbooks based on this research to help put this framework into action, but we need your help! Are you a training provider that has already tested or developed ways to deliver what workers need to succeed? Are you an employer that like many of us had to adapt your policies during the pandemic but have memorialized some of these changes to continue to attract and retain team members going forward? Do you work for a company that is getting it right? Or do you just have ideas or questions about how you might incorporate some of these ideas into your work? We would [love to hear from you](#).

We recognize that for most of us, incorporating some of these ideas into our work will be a change from how things have happened in the past. But we know that in order to create equitable opportunity for the types of good jobs described in this report, that we each have a role to play. By taking the time to read the stories of workers across the state contained in this report, you become part of the conversation. By connecting with us and sharing your ideas and feedback, you become part of the solution.

Thank you,

Matt Stevens

Executive Director, Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative

Kelly Miyamura & Alex Harris

Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative Steering Committee Co-Chairs

SUMMARY

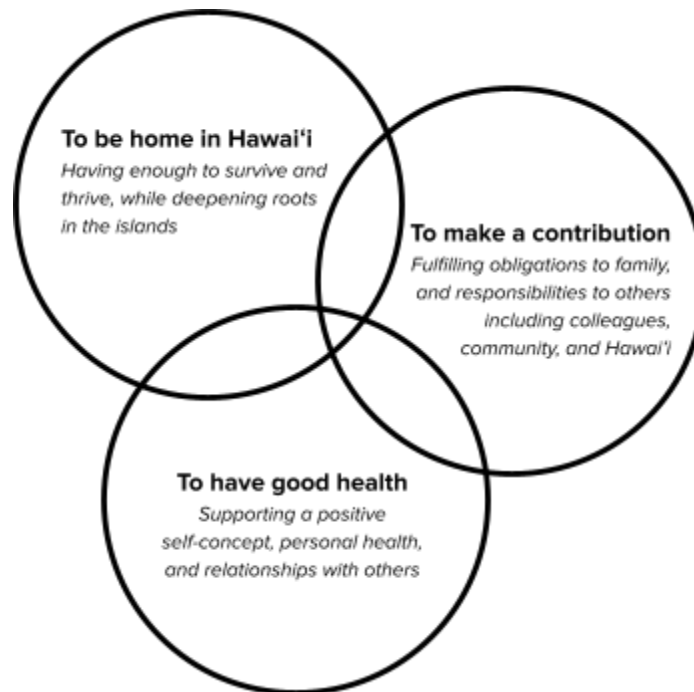
There is a rudimentary story deeply etched in our minds. It says, “Get a job!” The job will give you money, and the money will buy you the things you need and want. These jobs are created by businesses and governments, and you could be the beneficiary.

This pervasive story is failing to work as advertised for many people and, in turn, much time and money has been expended on the cause of “good jobs” for those who struggle to make ends meet. But what is a good job?

Instead of assuming we know what people think, or declaring what they should think, the Hawai'i Workforce Funders Collaborative wanted to know, “What do people in Hawai'i actually think?”

This framework is the result of that query. It is based on a set of conversations with diverse participants in Hawai'i — not enough conversations to have a comprehensive picture of our collective views on jobs, but enough good talk-story to begin identifying common themes.

In an American culture that describes work as a merit-based competition for money and status, many people in Hawai'i don't seem to be playing. Instead, people in Hawai'i describe a good job as helping to achieve three deeper goals:



If this framework is, in fact, closer to reality, then employers, policy makers, and workers might consider the implications. It may be time to make tangible changes to the ways we approach wages and benefits, the social safety net, economic development, the social status of occupations, equal opportunity, expectations of employers, education and workforce development, the labor/management power balance, and the stories we tell ourselves and our children about work and life.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, work has been on people’s minds. In 2020, much work came to a halt in favor of the higher priorities of health and life itself. For a brief and quiet moment, we could contemplate the impact of work on our lives — as employees, as consumers, and as human beings. The moment didn’t last. Soon our minds were re-occupied with the concept of the “essential worker,” the qualities of a safe workplace, the future of the office, the “Great Resignation,” and the sweeping impact of the CARES Act. Today, as we gaze into an unknown future shaped by artificial intelligence and climate change, it seems quite unwise to cling to pre-pandemic notions of jobs and careers. Instead, it is a good time to ask: What is work for? What role does it play in our lives? How do we make work a force for good in building a more secure, fair, united, prosperous society?

In 2023, the Hawai‘i Workforce Funders Collaborative (HWFC) asked Islander Institute (Islander) to explore these questions and begin to develop a framework that describes a “good job” in Hawai‘i. In addition to the post-pandemic phenomena experienced worldwide and in the United States, Hawai‘i is grappling with its own issues, including a housing affordability and houseless crisis; out-migration of Hawai‘i families which has left more Native Hawaiians living outside of Hawai‘i than within it; and a critical lack of living wage jobs, notably indicated by the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) statistic, which [most recently showed](#) 44 percent of Hawai‘i households living below that threshold.

The debate over what to do, among those who debate such things, has centered on two ideas. The first idea is to “upskill” more people into the available jobs. As evidenced by an [HWFC survey of industry representatives](#), many Hawai‘i industry leaders believe that job candidates from Hawai‘i lack experience or needed skills for their positions. The resulting strategy includes “workforce development,” which has focused efforts on developing “pipelines” that aim to draw people into job openings through training largely designed by employers themselves. The strategy reaches into education systems with their emphasis on college and career preparation. Significant public resources have been pumped into these strategies.

The alternative idea is articulated in a 2021 op-ed by Maureen Conway, Mary Alice McCarthy and Alex Camardelle in [Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity](#). Citing the growing asymmetry of worker productivity and compensation, as well as the fact that the large majority of available jobs (70 percent) require only a high school degree or less, the authors state: “Indeed, the real problem with the current labor market is not the shortage of qualified workers, it is the shortage of quality jobs.” This narrative challenges the status quo and can be a source of inspiration for efforts to organize worker power, eliminate hiring discrimination, increase the minimum wage, address income inequality, and pursue other progressive causes.

Which is it? A lack of qualified workers, or a lack of quality jobs? Or is it something else? One fact to note is that most of the people creating and implementing policies and programs, and most of the people debating these issues (including the authors of this report), have good paying jobs

themselves. It is fair to ask whether the debate is cognizant of and accountable to the perspectives of those whom policies and programs purport to help. To address this potential design flaw, HWFC has [made a commitment](#) to “elevate worker/learner voices,” to go wherever they might lead, and to develop “a new narrative for understanding workforce development — one that moves away from employer-driven conversations of supply and demand, and towards acknowledgement of symbiotic relationships between job seekers, training providers, and employers.”

Islander was charged with creating spaces for honest conversations and listening for themes that might form the basis of a new narrative. This report is the early result and a starting point for that new narrative.

To preface this work, Islander wishes to extend a heartfelt mahalo to all the individuals who participated in this project and who shared deeply personal stories with vulnerability, humility, humanity, and humor. Mahalo also to the community-based organizations that helped organize these talks and shared their own perspectives on work and life in Hawai‘i. Aloha goes to HWFC for having the curiosity and vision to listen to Hawai‘i’s people in an effort to develop solutions that are worthy of our islands and our ancestors.

PROCESS

In order to build a good jobs framework, Islander sought out individual perspectives conveyed mostly through shared stories and open discussion. Islander then analyzed and reflected on what was said to identify cross-cutting themes.

A community-based approach was employed to draw out rich and candid stories. This means Islander worked with community organizations, which extended invitations to participants and helped host the meetings. This approach does two things. First, it creates a level of comfort so that people can go deep quickly and share honestly. Second, it provides insights into broader communities because while individual accounts are shared, collective behavior is often revealed, reflecting the attitudes and values of people not in the conversation. In essence, certain stories can effectively bring other voices into the room.

For this report, Islander primarily worked with six organizations to hold group conversations. These organizations are Vibrant Hawai'i and The Men of Pa'a on Hawai'i Island, Hui No Ke Ola Pono on Mau'i, Kaua'i Economic Development Board on Kaua'i, and KEY Project and We Are Oceania on O'ahu.

In total, the conversations included representatives of varied backgrounds with particular focus on populations that are targeted by workforce development programs. Participants included Pacific Islanders, Native Hawaiians, recent immigrants, high school students, young adults, people recovering from addiction, people recently incarcerated, health care workers, people with low incomes, community college administrators, government workers, small business owners, managers, community workers, and more. In addition to group conversations, Islander spoke to individuals with professional and personal experiences that are relevant to this work.

In all, the contributors to this framework were a diverse group based on age, ethnicity, years in Hawai'i, occupation, gender, educational attainment, and economic status. Among those who participated were people who experienced houselessness, serious health issues, prison, unemployment, tragedy and trauma. People worked for local companies, offshore companies, government, nonprofits, small businesses, large chains, and some people worked for themselves as entrepreneurs.

No claim is being made that all relevant viewpoints were heard, nor even that this was the perfect sample of voices. Good conversations take time to plan and conduct. More should be had so that this framework can be well considered, challenged, and refined. It is likely that views will vary among different communities (geographies and affinity groups) and of course all individuals have unique and valid views. This framework is not intended to be a prescriptive formula, to which everyone should conform. Rather, it is a descriptive tool rooted in Hawai'i to inform better decision making.

Most meetings were conducted in person, in a circle, with food. The meetings were facilitated in a Hawai'i-appropriate, talk-story style intended to make participants know that they were being

respected and listened to. One goal of these meetings was that participants would leave feeling glad that they participated and feeling that they received something from the experience. Another goal was for the process to offer something of value to the community organizations.

Some of the basic questions asked included:

- What did you want to be when you were a kid? What happened to that dream?
- What is your definition of a good job?
- Tell a story of a job you had that you thought was a good job/bad job.
- What does success look like to you?
- What role does money play in your life?

Beyond a few basic questions, each conversation went wherever the group wanted to go and lasted around two hours. The stories shared are the basis for these findings.

THE PREVAILING CONCEPT OF JOBS AND WORK

From an early age, many of us are conditioned to think of a job as having two purposes. First, a job allows you to convert your labor into money, which you use to purchase a quality of life that lies somewhere on a spectrum that runs from survival to comfort and luxury. Second, a job is an opportunity to build a career, pursue personal and professional goals, and shape a defining measure of your identity. In the American conception of work, these ends — money and status — are supposed to be distributed by individual merit in what is essentially a contest among workers for the highest paying, most prestigious jobs. Some people embrace this as the foundation of an American “land of opportunity” while others lament this “rat race.” Love it or hate it, most of us are swept up in this prevailing narrative of work.

We preserve this narrative even though there are strong reasons to doubt its truth and value, including:

- Job rewards are often not matched to a person’s talents and value. Obvious examples include educators, caregivers, nonprofit workers, farmers, laborers and other important jobs, many of which were historically done by women, immigrants, and other oppressed peoples. In the pandemic, we learned that retail and restaurant workers, childcare providers, health aides, custodians, and others could be deemed “essential” despite being among the lowest paid workers in society.
- Jobs are often not determined by pure merit. Instead the distribution of high-paying jobs is slanted by factors such as pre-existing wealth and privilege, access to networks, access to education, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Equal opportunity remains an aspiration rather than an attribute of the job market.
- The prevailing concept of work divides society into winners and losers along arbitrary and suspect criteria. People in low paying, low prestige jobs are often demeaned. Meanwhile, those in the highest paying jobs are led to believe that they earned it through their singular efforts and therefore deserve their higher position in society. Even if this were true, this dichotomy is a recipe for divisions that hamper society’s ability to achieve collective goals.
- Some people simply are not playing the game, viewing it as a lost cause or finding it to be unaligned with their values. These people may voluntarily choose lower paying work over higher paying work, work fewer hours or drop out of the workforce entirely, turn down promotions, or view their job as “just a job” and a necessary evil in life.

And yet, despite the flaws, the idea of work as a contest is resilient, in part because it sustains the economic and political systems that surround us. For industries and employers, the process of people vying for greater rewards is a force that has driven increased productivity and profits. For our governments, which often measure success in terms of gross domestic product, tax revenues, low unemployment, and higher wages, the striving of workers is the generator of these

key statistics. And for the significant segment of the population that already has a “good job,” the prevailing narrative is particularly self-satisfying. Winning feels good.

Despite evidence and common sense to the contrary, we continue to double down on the belief that work is a competition. We infuse it in every child by ranking them best to worst, and sorting them into pathways where they can start the pursuit of the jobs made available to them. If they emerge from school neither ready for college nor career, we lament their lack of success and encourage them to be developed as part of the workforce. We might think that the problem is a lack of qualified workers, or we might think that it is a lack of quality jobs. Either way, we are talking about the master equation that represents the supply and demand of labor.

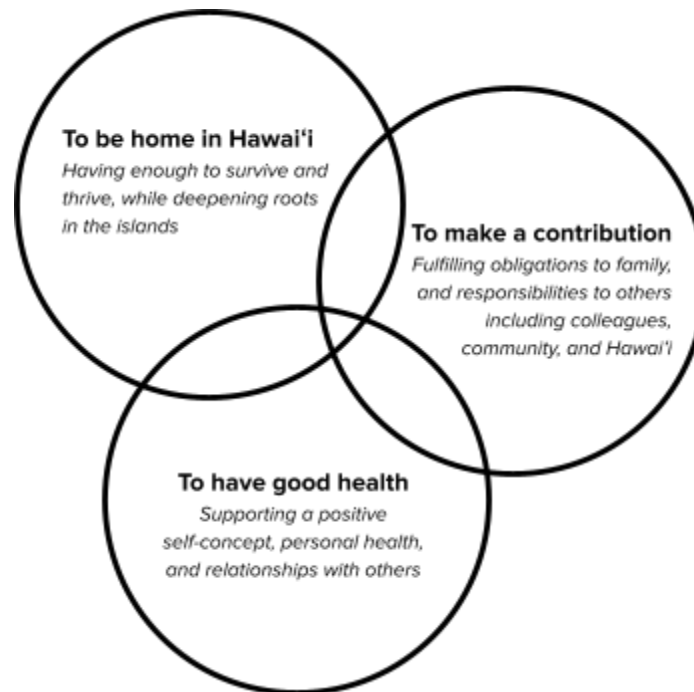
In the prevailing narrative, a “good job” is not difficult to define. The Aspen Institute is helping lead the way with its [working definition](#) that includes three components. First, *economic stability*, which speaks to the rewards of work. Second, *economic mobility*, which speaks to vitality in the jobs contest. Third, *equity, respect, and voice*, which speak to creating a more level playing field and more equal opportunity.

In this project, Islander heard stories about dream jobs and realities; about good jobs and bad jobs; about how a job fits into a whole person’s life. Taken together, these stories point to a different narrative. One that reflects the values and experiences of Hawai’i’s people.

A HAWAI'I “GOOD JOBS” FRAMEWORK

Community conversations point to a “good jobs” framework that is particular to Hawai'i. Future conversations may lead to amendment, refinement, or reconstruction of this framework, and perhaps it will be found that different communities will have their own versions. As a working document, however, we can begin to see the outlines of an alternative way of thinking about jobs, and the implications it has for education, job training, economic development, and the messages we repeat to ourselves and to future generations.

In Hawai'i, a good job contributes to the attainment of three goals:



Competition plays a role, but it isn't an overarching force that provides us with what we need. Likewise, money can help attain these goals, but it isn't the goal itself.

It is important to note that a good job does not *deliver* all these things. Most people would not find that statement realistic, and some may not find it desirable. But for all the time that it takes from our lives, a job should, at least, not put up obstacles to achieving those three goals, and at best should help a person thrive toward those ends.

HOME

When considering whether a job is “good” most of us are conditioned to first ask, “How much does it pay?” To be sure, compensation is an important consideration, and it is clear that jobs with insufficient pay are a serious problem in Hawai'i.

However, in conversations with people, very few mentioned high pay (or higher pay) as a primary characteristic of a good job. Instead, people talked about the expense side of the ledger: paying for housing, feeding the family, getting to work, and everything else involved in sustaining a household in Hawai'i.

For many in Hawai'i, a job is more of a place-based goal than an economic goal. As one long-time local attorney put it, "People who stay in Hawai'i aren't trying to get rich — if they wanted to get rich they would leave Hawai'i. They are staying in Hawai'i for something else. We should be cultivating that 'something else.'"

"I made a choice. I can either give back to a community that isn't mine or I can go back home and lessen the struggle of my family. That meant more to me than whatever material goods. It's much more worthwhile to give back to my community where I have roots. I much rather struggle alongside my family."

- Kaua'i resident on her decision to leave the Continent and return to Hawai'i

Roots in the ground

Put succinctly, the first characteristic of a good job in Hawai'i is that you can do the job in Hawai'i. More specifically, you can do the job in the place where you have roots, or if not physically located in that place, you can live in place because of remote work or good transportation. So for example, according to an educator on Moloka'i, "A good job is first and foremost on Moloka'i." Roots are important, whether to a new arrival who commits to this place and community, a person whose ancestors came to the islands generations ago, or an indigenous Native Hawaiian whose lineage goes back to time immemorial. The deeper those roots, the more critical it is that a job allows those roots to stay in the ground. For many, a good job is first about making a home before it is about making a career.

"To live comfortably here is success. People are moving away, success is living here in Hawai'i and being ok. Staying here is about connection to land, culture ... Land is our ancestor, our kupuna, our sibling."

- Participant from Men of Pa'a

The idea of having roots is not unique to Hawai'i. Even the American President is emphasizing the importance of place in a country where the freedom to move can serve some individuals at the expense of others. In advocating for his economic agenda, [President Biden has been saying](#): "I believe that every American willing to work hard should be able to get a job no matter where they are — in the heartland, in small towns, in every part of this country — to raise their kids on a good paycheck and keep their roots where they grew up."

Geographic mobility is not a simple concept. It can be a lifesaver for some people at some times, and it can harm people and places at other times. If you talk to people who love Hawai'i, the important value is not the freedom to move to a job, the important value is home.

Making ends meet

It is not enough that a job be located in a place where you have roots, it also needs to allow you to stay in that place. Many people who are in Hawai'i today cannot make ends meet and are captured by houselessness, hunger, catastrophic health conditions, bankruptcy, addiction, and criminal activity. Merely getting a good job will not be enough to lift people out of these conditions. Others are figuring out a way to stay above those lines by working multiple jobs and having "side hustles," leaning on family and friends for housing and other needs, utilizing government and nonprofit programs, taking on dangerous amounts of debt, living off the wealth accumulated by previous generations, and perhaps the most common solution — living with less.

All other things being equal, there is no doubt that a job in Hawai'i is better if it pays more. Along with income, a job can also provide access to networks, housing, transportation, childcare, healthcare, time and other ingredients to making ends meet. In today's reality, a job that provides for everything a person needs to keep roots in Hawai'i would be a *great* job, but there aren't enough of those jobs in existence. So in the meantime, a *good* job in Hawai'i is a reliable and substantial part of the system of effort that allows a person to maintain their roots and build a home. What is aggravating is that far too many jobs in Hawai'i fail to meet even that lesser standard.

"I see my dad working two jobs. When he comes home, he never eat and never shower yet and looks exhausted, he just looks rough. He's not doing it for his happiness, he's doing it to support himself and his kids. I feel bad. I view money differently because I grew up with money tight because Hawai'i is expensive. That's why I'm trying to do well in school. A good job is something that pays you enough because I don't see myself coming back to this island after I leave because it's so expensive to live here."

- Waimea High School student

CONTRIBUTION

A major recurring theme in every conversation was that a good job contributes to something bigger than the self. In Hawai'i, kuleana matters. While some equate kuleana to "responsibility" the word also connotes the concept of privilege in responsibility, which for many, lies at the core of a meaningful life.

Contribution to family

The most frequently mentioned value was the need to fulfill one's obligation to family.

This could mean finding a job: high school students shared their desires to support their households so their parents could get some relief. This could mean working less: a recovering addict said that he is turning down construction jobs and the associated drinking culture in order to continue his progress and be the man his family needs him to be.

We heard numerous stories from women who changed jobs or careers because of the birth of a child or needing to care for family members. It is significant to note the clear gender differences revealed in our conversations. This split standard — men supporting families through earning income and women supporting families through time and service — is still strong in Hawai'i, and it continues to challenge the ideal of equal opportunity.

“When I had kids, working so far away in the hotel was tough because of the commute time. I couldn't keep that job because it was taking away from my quality of life, that balance. Then I worked nominal retail jobs, not necessarily making enough money but provided enough opportunity to be with the kids. That was the trade off — I could be home and still be here with the kids even though it didn't pay much.”

- Mother in Maui who changed jobs multiple times to care for her children

A good job must be placed in context of what a person needs and wants to contribute to their family. As such, a good job could be a higher paying job, but it could also be a lower paying job with better benefits such as health insurance, opportunities to save money for retirement, and paid leave. To fulfill our obligation to family, a good job might be less than full-time so there is enough time to care for loved ones, or time that accommodates a second or third job that better fits the household schedule. A good job might be located near other family members who help with childcare, or who need help themselves. In short, a good job is good for the family.

Contribution to community

The story of the American “essential worker” is a sad one — these workers were genuinely or cynically lauded for a brief moment in the pandemic, and then quickly moved back to their place in the social pecking order. It is particularly sad because in that brief moment, we may have had it right. The “essentialness” of work should matter to society and, if you ask those workers, they say that it matters to them as individuals too.

Contributing something positive to others on a team, to a cause, to people being served, to the community, and/or to Hawai'i matters greatly to people. When people recounted their “bad jobs,” they talked of jobs that seemed meaningless, where the purpose was to satisfy someone else's self-centered agenda, where they felt like a cog in a machine, or where they felt they were part of taking things from people and from this place.

“I want to do ethical work. I wouldn't want to be a debt collector, for example. I want to do something that I'm proud of and contributes positively to the community.”

- Gen Z worker in Hilo

In our talk story with immigrants from Pacific Island nations, almost everyone shared that their ambition as a child was to become a doctor or a teacher. These were the most esteemed jobs in their island homes because those were the jobs that the community needed the most. When one participant had the opportunity to go to college, her parents told her clearly, “When we said you could go to college, we were giving you to the community.”

“Community work is something I grew up into — it was in my nature. It is not something big out here in Hawai‘i — I didn’t know community work was something you go to school for, I didn’t know it was a job, a career, I thought it was just being a human being as islander people.”

- We Are Oceania participant

Another participant talked about a good job at a local fast food establishment. The pay was terrible and unsustainable, but the job was good because she is great at making a person’s day, whether co-workers or customers. Now working in a nonprofit, she has taken that gift for helping others in a new direction.

Jobs that benefit others may not pay more, and in fact often pay less than comparable work. But while our economic system may not value contribution to others, many people in Hawai‘i do.

“My job is part of my identity and I want to be proud of what I do and give back to the community.”

- Kaua‘i worker

HEALTH

A decent job should provide adequate pay and benefits so one can afford safe housing, nutritious food, health insurance, health care and other necessities. However, not all of the things we need for good health are for sale, and the participants in our talk stories recognized that a job can either help or hinder our whole sense of well-being. A good job supports health in at least two ways.

A healthy sense of self

“Good job and good pay no mean nothing if I cannot be who I am. The best man, father, brother, son I can be. It’s not about perfection, it’s about progress.”

- Member of the Men of Pa‘a

For most of us, our jobs consume a substantial share of our precious time on Earth. So while no one shared that their job was their entire identity, most did talk about a job as a defining factor in who they are or who they want to be. A healthy sense of self is cultivated by a good workplace. People shared how it matters that they feel valued by others.

“At my best job, I felt seen and heard, I flourished and was doing things I enjoyed. My boss recognized my effort and the leadership provided me the chance to grow.”

- Participant at KEY Project

“The value of my job is I know my self-worth. I know how important my role is.”

- Member of the Men of Pa‘a

A good job can be a doorway to confidence and self-respect, including for those struggling with poverty or addiction. The job is often the lens through which a person sees themselves, and many shared stories of good jobs that made them see that they could be good at something; that they could learn and grow and develop mastery. These experiences build a sense of self-worth and generate the intrinsic motivation needed if one wants to take on bigger life challenges.

“Success is not having to run from my mistakes anymore. Being proud of the person I see in the mirror every morning and accepting the good and bad of who I am. It’s not about the finances, it’s about having a sense of direction and purpose in what I’m trying to accomplish.”

- Participant at KEY Project

Here it is important to note some deep generational differences that were apparent in our conversations. Most of the people shaping education and workforce policy grew up in a different economy, political reality, technological environment, and culture than the generation coming into the workforce now and impacted by those policies. We heard many in the established generations bemoan younger generations for not wanting to work hard enough, not being willing to sacrifice, and for being too soft. On the other hand, we heard younger generations talk about their predecessors as having hard lives that they don’t wish to repeat. This new generation is aware of and values mental and emotional health on an equal footing with physical health, and they are looking for jobs that share these values.

“One of the things I love about this generation is that we can have conversations about mental health, and we can talk more freely than our parent’s generation. We see we have more opportunities to prioritize mental health. Watching my grandparents and my parents neglect their mental health and realize that impact that has, I’m able to see the things that have negatively impacted them over the years. My parents have always told me to prioritize my mental health.”

- Gen Z worker in Hilo

Connection to others

In the American Dream, a person’s career is a story of the self. It is a solo journey.

“When I think of all the people who helped me along the way... this is not a solo journey.”

- Kaua‘i resident

As the U.S. Surgeon General brings more attention to what he calls an “epidemic of loneliness,” many people in Hawai‘i are already well aware of the need for strong relationships and positive connections to others. A good job allows for this inside the workplace, beginning with an environment of mutual respect, a commitment to belonging, effective team management, the development of networks, and positive interactions with co-workers, clients, and customers.

A good job also can contribute positively to relationships outside of work by providing ample time to be with family and friends, space for being in the community, and benefits such as paid time off and family leave to keep relationships healthy and strong.

“I was always someone led by passion rather than money. For now, what’s really important is flexibility and understanding and quality of life; being able to attend to all the things that keep myself healthy and well. Being able to have choice on what you do and when you do, it is a good job.”

- Maui healthcare manager

IMPLICATIONS FOR CREATING GOOD JOBS IN HAWAI'I

The three-part framework for a good job in Hawai'i is place-based in that it values the ability of a job to support making a home in Hawai'i. It is community-based in that it prioritizes making a contribution to the whole over working for self-centered goals. And it is health-based in that it recognizes the significant impact that a job can have on one's physical, mental, emotional, and social health.

People of Hawai'i are striving for the richness of home, community, and health, while navigating the realities of unaffordable costs and constant change. A good job is a helpful means to those ends. Viewing it this way has many implications for how we might increase the number of people with good jobs in Hawai'i, particularly for those currently in jobs that fail to provide a living wage.

HELPING PEOPLE MAKE ENDS MEET IN HAWAI'I

For many people in Hawai'i, the primary goal is to make ends meet, not to make the most money possible. Again, if the goal is to make the most money possible, the rational thing to do would be to leave Hawai'i. Making ends meet means having the basics for living — decent housing, nutritious food, a clean environment, quality healthcare, educational opportunity, safety, justice, transportation, support for the young and the old. In order to help people make ends meet in Hawai'i, we should look at the totality of that enterprise, including:

- **Living wages.** Of course, we can vastly increase the number of good jobs by focusing attention on the lowest paid workers and guaranteeing that everyone working a full-time job receives a living wage.
- **Robust safety net.** Until living wages are achieved, economic prudence calls for an expanded social safety net that is available to people who make substandard wages despite working, and that incentivizes work rather than penalizing it.
- **Subsidizing expensive needs.** As employers and governments struggle to improve incomes of poorly compensated workers, there may be better opportunities to reduce a worker's costs. Core needs such as housing, childcare, transportation, medical care, higher education, and food might be provided or subsidized as benefits of work. It is conceivable that providing savings for workers can be more cost effective than seemingly equivalent increases in pay, and these strategies can be better directed to people who are committed to keeping their Hawai'i roots.
- **Building assets.** Employers and policymakers can help low-income earners build financial assets in the form of savings, business ownership, home ownership, and other forms of wealth that are just as, and often more, important than income for helping Hawai'i families and their subsequent generations stay in Hawai'i.

- **Acknowledging the role of social capital.** In order to make ends meet, Hawai'i people convert their social capital to financial benefit. In other words, they go to friends and family for help — asking family for a loan, getting a cousin to fix a car, sharing food that you grew, asking friends for a referral for an affordable fill-in-the-blank. Particularly for families and tight-knit communities, social capital is an important part of making a home in Hawai'i. This is rarely acknowledged and sometimes even viewed as evidence of an individual's economic failure. The new framework suggests we view this differently. A good job might be one that enhances social capital, making interdependence easier, not harder to build.

CREATING AND SUSTAINING NEW, GOOD JOBS

With the new framework, we now have a human-centered, Hawai'i-based definition of a good job — good jobs are in the right places, they pay enough to live in those places, they make contributions, and they are good for workers. What might this mean for job creation efforts?

- **Community-Based Economic Development.** Economic development strategies designed and directed by communities are more likely to create good jobs, as now defined, than economic development driven by industry or distant government entities. This is because community-based economic development (CBED) is place based, it factors in the contributions (and deficits) that jobs create, and it has a palpable stake in the wellbeing of constituents including workers, businesses, and residents in the area. Though sometimes lacking economies of scale, CBED can also generate more feasible job creation strategies because they are aware of community assets, abilities, needs, values, opportunities, and the social and cultural conditions that impact economies.
- **Local Small Businesses.** Local small businesses have advantages over non-local large businesses when it comes to the ability to create good jobs and build financial assets for their Hawai'i-based owners. Because small business owners tend to live with or spend large amounts of time with the people they serve, they have an opportunity to be more attuned to places, communities, and Hawai'i workers. Small businesses often cannot compete with larger competition, and to make matters worse, these larger companies often siphon out the best workers after small businesses make investments in their training. A vibrant, protected, supported small business climate might supercharge the production of good jobs.
- **Local Entrepreneurism.** Entrepreneurial skill building and activity, whether for profit or for social benefit, can create good jobs. This is true for the person who wants to make a career from scratch. It is also true for the many working people in Hawai'i who need an entrepreneurial “side hustle” in order to feed their families and/or feed their souls. It has been difficult to let go of the one-job-with-one-employer picture that is stamped in our

heads. In the meantime, the current generation of adult workers is changing the economy into one that requires more creativity and more enterprising behavior.

ADDRESSING THE GOOD WORK PENALTY

A good job is one where workers can make a contribution. Families and communities benefit from these contributions. And yet, despite the demands of this kind of work and all the value being created for others, many of the workers who make the largest contributions are paid less than similarly qualified peers in profit-making enterprises. This pay inequity is a flaw in the meritocracy and the lingering fallout of a history of sexism and other forms of discrimination. It is also an economic problem, leading to the underproduction of the things that society needs, such as high quality education, effective social services, highly skilled civil servants, and more. Essentially, some of our best jobs require the payment of a penalty in the form of lower wages and status.

- **Essential workers.** Now that we know who the essential workers are — the ones without whom we cannot function as a society — we can reward them accordingly so that more people can be attracted to and trained for those jobs. We need them to be healthy in those jobs so that they will stay in them and master their requirements. In short, we need to ensure that the jobs of essential workers are good jobs. These include educators, care providers, workers in the food system, first responders, sanitation workers, civil servants, people who maintain critical infrastructure, and more.
- **Nonprofits.** Workers in nonprofit organizations tend to receive less pay than equally qualified people in for-profit companies. They also experience stress and burnout at high rates. Nonprofit jobs should be good jobs. Because the capacity of the nonprofit sector is heavily influenced by what funding entities — including philanthropy and governments — deem as reasonable, it is largely incumbent on these entities to establish a new paradigm of parity, where it is no longer assumed or accepted that making a contribution to the world means you will have to work more for less.

GOOD JOB ENVIRONMENTS

Employers have the power to make their jobs better jobs. Now that we have a definition of a good job, employers might consider strategies such as the following:

- **Purposeful work.** It is important that our work makes a meaningful contribution. This could accrue to our families, our co-workers, our customers, our community, or our islands themselves. And it is equally important that this feeling of contribution be sincerely, intrinsically felt by employees. It cannot be told to them or sold to them.

- **Healthy workers.** Good jobs make efforts to support the whole health of workers — physical, mental, emotional. Good employers respect employee time and effort, create workplaces that are safe from physical and mental harm, provide valuable benefits, and sincerely care for their workers.
- **Respect and belonging.** Workplaces need to be free of all forms of discrimination and harassment, and beyond that, they should strive to be places that foster a sense of belonging and genuine respect. In this way, any job can be made into a better job simply by the behavior of the people in the workplace.
- **Shared power.** Following the lead of organizations like HWFC, employers can incorporate worker voices with the goal of creating good jobs for all. In addition, workers can exercise their rights to organize in order to build power that can shape the conditions and rewards of the jobs they do. After decades of concerted efforts to diminish worker power, America is currently witnessing a rejuvenation and reinvention of organized labor. Hawai'i should have particular interest in this, since one of the most important episodes in our history is how the most marginalized workers came together to substantially improve and equalize working conditions for all workers, unionized or not.

ADDRESSING UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Parts of the population will continue to have far less access to good jobs as long we continue to maintain the inequality of opportunity. A popular and powerful word that is used today is “equity.” Equity does not merely mean doling out resources to people who need them, nor does it mean dispersing resources in equivalent chunks. Equity entails doing what it takes to make unfair conditions fair. This requires engaging with one another, and including disadvantaged people into the solution building process.

- **Acknowledging our shortcomings.** Hawai'i has always lived with a kind of cognitive dissonance because, on the one hand, aloha is a real value and a real cultural practice. On the other hand, “aloha” is an appropriated brand that has had the effect of masking the existence of conflict and oppression. The actual practice of aloha, requires us to acknowledge these things so that we can begin and complete the process of atoning for their consequences. This could pave the way for actual equality of opportunity.
- **Equitable investment.** Over the course of this project, we learned more about the immense challenges faced by some of our community members, as well as the tremendous effort that is required to overcome those challenges. If we are serious about having a “level playing field” for jobs, we will need to make investments that are commensurate to the challenges attached to race, nationality, immigrant status, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, incarceration, addiction, houselessness, trauma,

historical disadvantage, geographic disadvantage, and other factors that allow privilege to have lasting advantages in the job market.

EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

The new good jobs framework for Hawai'i should make it obvious that merely training people to fill employers' job openings is not a recipe for ensuring that more people have good jobs. It mainly just helps companies secure sufficient labor. If the real goal is good jobs, we will need to change the way we prepare people to be in the job market.

- **Seats at the table.** The easiest and most important change would be to add workers and community representatives into the design, decision making, and implementation of workforce development strategies and programs.
- **Feasible pipelines.** A popular workforce development strategy is to structure education, training, and career development into “pipelines” toward high-paying careers. This is a good example of a strategy that would benefit from worker input. Participants in this project made it clear that for many intended beneficiaries, a low-paying entry-level job that might lead to a higher-paying job is not a viable or attractive path for many people. Significant redesign of these efforts may be needed.
- **Inverting the investment.** Much of the attention and investment in workforce development is focused on the back end of the process — training programs and placement with employers. Before those stages can occur, there is a huge amount of, often uncompensated, effort to support people to help improve their chances of success. For workforce development efforts to be successful, the distribution of resources should be inverted to ensure sufficient front-end services including targeted candidate identification and recruitment; remedial education and skill building; community-based navigation of systems; and “wraparound” services such as housing support, childcare, transportation, nutrition, clothing, technology access, addiction services, mental health services, social support, and other supports to make job placement feasible.
- **The role of schools.** Most schools are designed around the prevailing narrative which tells us that work is a merit-based competition for money and status. This narrative benefits some, but not all. If we were to build schools around the things that Hawai'i people need and want, they would probably look quite different. They would probably deemphasize ranking children according to their labor-based “merit” and emphasize things such as health, communication, entrepreneurship, intrinsic motivation, skill building, and other abilities that will prepare them to obtain good jobs and create the good jobs of the future.

CONCLUSION

To some, jobs are inputs that generate outputs. To others, jobs are numbers that show progress or regress. These macro perspectives are far removed from the perspectives of the people doing the jobs — jobs that consume so much of our finite lives. And yet it is the macro perspectives that control the narrative. As a result, we have reduced the sacred to the mundane.

This dissonance leaves us in a state of collective frustration. There is an emerging idea that our jobs play too big a role in our lives. In America at-large, it is not uncommon for a first question upon meeting someone to be, “What do you do?” And in some circles, after stating your name, it is customary to state what your job is and for whom you work. In fact, studies show that Americans work more than people in comparable countries. Many feel that we live in a culture of overwork.

Hawai‘i feels different. Or perhaps Hawai‘i was different and is struggling to remain different. Working is central to our identity. Centuries of pre-colonial thriving was built on an indigenous nation of people working very hard and very smart. We saw waves of immigrants organize to emerge from substandard work and force the creation of rewarding, dignified jobs. A lot of Hawai‘i people practice and preach the virtues of hard work because it is in our roots.

But the traditional first question in Hawai‘i is not “Where do you work?” It is “Where you wen grad?” And although that traditional question is less frequently asked these days, the values and culture underpinning it linger on. In Hawai‘i, it's not about the job. What really matters is *why* we work. We work to make and sustain a home in this place we love. We work to be part of a community of purpose and meaning. We work because it can and should be good for us.

Hawai‘i people will love our jobs, as long as they are good jobs.