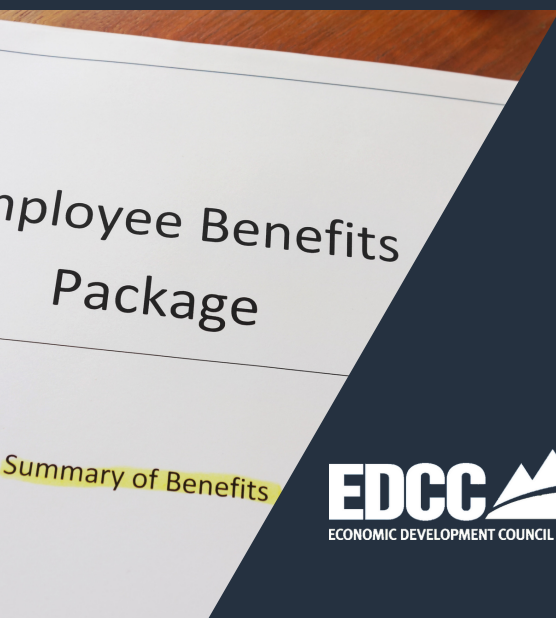




EDCC'S DRIVE | LEAD | SUCCEED
Thought Leadership Series

Job Quality as a Business Retention & Expansion Strategy?



Thought Leadership Series

OUR HISTORY

Established in 1976, the Economic Development Council of Colorado (EDCC) promotes effective, responsible economic development practices across Colorado. Today we are the state's premier economic development resource, representing the economic development interests of both the private and public sectors throughout the state. We connect our communities, our members and our partners to high-quality educational opportunities and trusted resources, and advocate for sound policies and programs that support a vibrant economy and enhance quality of life for all Coloradans.

EDCC members come from a variety of settings. We are rural and urban, public and private-sector, for profit and not-for-profit, and include individual communities, counties and regional organizations, local and state government, chambers of commerce, universities, and private industry. We are economic development professionals, community volunteers, and business and political leaders.

OUR VISION

To be recognized as Colorado's most trusted resource for economic development stakeholders committed to promoting a vibrant Colorado economy.

OUR MISSION

To promote effective, responsible economic development by connecting Colorado's economic development stakeholders to high-quality educational opportunities and trusted resources and advocating for sound policies and programs that support a vibrant economy and enhance quality of life for all Coloradans.

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Job Quality as a Business Retention + Expansion Strategy?

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Executive Summary

JOB QUALITY AS A BUSINESS RETENTION + EXPANSION STRATEGY?

It's as if "[The Great Resignation](#)" arrived on the scene—a problem—looking for a solution, which turned out to be Job Quality; a topic that has garnered an increasing number of adherents since its early arrival in 2016.

What is this job quality movement? Who does it impact, and why should economic development agencies—and their member organizations—be concerned over whether local businesses are taking steps to improve their policies on job quality and equity?

Five subject matter experts addressed these and other issues during the Economic Development Council of Colorado's "Job Quality used as a Business Retention, Expansion & Attraction Tool" webinar, September 15, 2021.

As a follow-on to this Drive|Lead|Succeed Virtual Series webinar, the panelists agreed to sit down for interviews with members from the EDCC's Communications Committee, to discuss how communities, employers, and non-profit organizations can advocate on behalf of job quality initiatives.

At its core, job quality is about providing all employees with meaning, purpose and social connection by ensuring that their jobs offer a living wage with benefits, safe working conditions, stable and predictable work, and the right to ask questions and contribute to the goals of the organization.

While seemingly basic, data from the Colorado Workforce Development Council reveals that 36-percent of Colorado's workforce (59 million employees) work at full-time jobs that provide a below living wage income. These employees work as trained caregivers, teachers, food service professionals, construction workers, as well as across other industries. The majority, according to national averages, are women, and men and women of color.

Jenny Weissbourd, Job Quality Fellow with The Aspen Institute, states racial equity is an area of focus for the Institute. She sees bidirectional policy, involving both government and corporations, as the key to "promote the creation and growth of good jobs."

Case studies on ways to implement quality job practices for some of these persistently low-paying jobs are cited in [Raise the Floor and Build Ladders](#), written by Maureen Conway and Steven L. Dawson, and published in 2016 by The Aspen Institute.

According to Weissbourd, the time is right for communities and state leaders to think about investing in both workforce and economic development initiatives, and to look at how those programs can support quality and equitable access to jobs. "...I love the framework, and I just really love what I've been seeing coming out of Colorado around... naming the need for quality standards and finding ways to institutionalize them in policies and practices," she observed.

Paula Gumina, a consultant with the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC), believes, "Job quality is not just about human resources, it is also about marketing and communications—telling the stories of the businesses who have created quality jobs [to help] establish your community as an attractive place for skilled workers, as well as potential new businesses that are focused on providing quality jobs." The CWDC uses the [Colorado Job Quality Framework](#), a three-tiered approach to advancing job quality and equity concepts, as a guide for communities, companies, and leaders.

Using this framework, communities commit to establishing coordinated policies and incentives, developing long-term attraction and retention plans and then, align their efforts with responsive education and training partners to meet the evolving needs of learners, businesses, and the economy. With the attraction phase completed, communities can work with businesses to create jobs in every sector that provide predictable, livable wages; a benefit package; scheduling that allows for healthy

work/life balance; safe work environment; growth and advancement opportunities; as well as an inclusive culture that makes all employees feel valued and accepted.

The third stage of the Job Quality Framework involves employers providing continuous opportunities for personal growth, a culture that embraces the free-flow of information and employees to express their ideas and concerns, receiving recognition for their contributions to the organization. Finally, a quality job engages employees with purposeful work.

Gumina points to [skills-based hiring](#) as a strategy that can help enhance the ability to attract and retain a talented labor force. She believes that the shift away from hiring based on previous titles, degrees and experience can help expand the pool of qualified candidates.

While wages are central to any conversation on job quality, it is not the sole metric people use to measure their career satisfaction. Aryn Schlichting, deputy director Human Resources for Eagle County, and founder of Mountain Careers, a job board dedicated to “creating the space to connect people, jobs and ideas across mountain towns to allow for life changing opportunities,” has witnessed first-hand an increase in interest by job seekers, when organizations apply these concepts. “If employers can list skills that a person is learning and show a path to growth, they can definitely show that a job is a quality job.”

Schlichting said the top four actions that employers can take to increase response to their job openings are 1) First invest in retention and communication efforts with your current workforce; 2) Be specific and list the benefits or provide a link to a list of the benefits based associated with the job; 3) Post the salary range, and 4) Clearly list the job growth opportunities for the position.

According to an [article](#) published by Business Insider there are three mismatches in the workplace contributing to the current labor shortage. Experience filters might be leaving behind the 70 million workers without college degrees, who are STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes). Additionally, an increasing number of workers want to

work remotely; while others are drawing the line at having to commit to being available 24/7, in order to meet an employer's scheduling needs.

Schlichting notes that in her experience, this is the first post-recession period that America has gone through where employees are coming out on top. She advises, "If you are seeing red flags as an employer, listen! If no one is applying or staff is leaving, you need to innovate and come up with a new solution."

Jimmy Burd, owner and chief financial officer at Colographic in Commerce City, has been an adherent of job quality practices for over five years, and sees this as providing his company with a competitive edge. A point of pride for him is detected when he states, "We didn't layoff any employees during the pandemic." The PPP (Payroll Protection Plan) program helped, but his whole intent was to "keep people employed."

Up until the pandemic, Colorgraphic paid 100% of its employees' health insurance benefits. "We work every day on hitting the numbers," Burd claims, "but we don't make a decision like better cut the staff by 30% when we don't hit our numbers."

"Colorgraphic runs on the belief that the company succeeds when its customers and employees succeed," according to Burd. "Having a job where you don't have to worry about being sick, and not getting paid for the day, or how you will retire—when the time comes—makes happier and more productive employees," he added. "People desire to be part of something, so the more we cross-train someone, the more we can make a better product."

Another cornerstone, Burd said, in Colorgraphic's personnel practices rests with building strong teams. "We focus on how we communicate with one another, [it's] such a savings to not have to retrain people. Everyone here has a say in what they do."

Pax8, headquartered in Greenwood Village, Colorado, subscribes to a similar ethos, through its "Wingman Experience" philosophy. According to Ashlie Arnold, rural empowerment program manager at Pax8, "Being a wingman or wing woman means being passionate about the quality of your work, caring about the people you serve and work with, and capitalizing on opportunities to improve." She notes that job quality initiatives are critical to how Pax8 recruits and trains its employees.

Founded in 2012, Pax8 provides cloud-based technology solutions to over 15,000 International technology partners. This business model allows Pax8 to "Bring technical and knowledge worker jobs to smaller cities in pursuit of geographically-dispersed talent," our Rural Empowerment program is built around meeting people where they are. We have hired twenty employees in seven counties, distributed throughout Colorado."

Employees at Pax8 are afforded a list of career enhancement opportunities, that include—but not limited to—a competitive benefit package, leadership training, job shadowing and

mentorship opportunities. In exchange, employees are asked to assume mentorship roles through their local schools and civic clubs, completing an ecosystem that the founders believe will help lift underserved populations and communities across the state.

In their report, *Raise the Floor and Build Ladders*, the authors “urge the workforce development community to rebalance fundamentally its strategies in response—forging a combination of policy and practice interventions that simultaneously build ladders to assist career development and raise the floor to make poor-quality jobs better.” At a local level, what does this look like?

For Schlichting, following an “organic model is the best way to implement” job quality practices across government and non-government agencies. Colorado’s recently implemented law requiring that employers list the salary associated with the positions that they advertise, ‘has helped drive wages in the market,’ she believes. Similarly, Schlichting notes, enactment on January 1, 2021, of Colorado’s paid sick leave law, for employers with 16 or more employees, places Colorado among the leading states engaged in advancing job quality practices.

Another area where Colorado has forged a leadership role can be found in the state’s advocacy for employee ownership and remote work programs. These programs, according to Gumina, can facilitate the growth of good jobs. “By blending and braiding funding,” Gumina said, communities “can leverage multi-funding streams to maximize resources, increase impact, and help with long-term sustainability of work taking place in a community.”

[Braiding and Blending: An Overview of Innovative Practices and Approaches to Funding](#), is an introduction to the concepts that underscore this approach to job quality and equity-driven economic development. Additional case studies are available on the TalentFOUND network webinar, conducted by the CWDC on July 22, 2021.

When it comes to advancing the importance of quality careers to benefit the long-term economic prosperity of our communities, collaboration, and engagement “between community and employer are critical to successfully creating job quality,” Arnold states. This two-way process requires business leaders and communities, and their economic development organizations, to remain open to transformational steps that can create impactful partnerships.

To achieve successful outcomes, it is important for everyone involved to understand the existing public and private relationships, as well as the industry ecosystems in the region. When this occurs, and local companies actively practice job quality and equity principals, Arnold points out, local economies become more stable and can “accelerate small business incubation and innovation, at scale, for future job creation.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the time is right for communities and state leaders to begin establishing coordinated policies and incentives, and developing long-term attraction and retention plans that meet the evolving needs of learners, businesses, and the economy. Colorado is leading this movement by naming the need for quality standards and finding ways to institutionalize them within policies and practices which will support equitable access to jobs.

Communities can take hold of this trend by telling the anecdotal stories of their businesses who are creating quality jobs within their community. In turn, this action begins to establish the community as an attractive place for skilled workers, as well as for potential new businesses that are focused on providing quality jobs. They can also align their efforts with responsive education and training partners to begin building an ecosystem of growth and support for job seekers and employers alike.

Businesses have the opportunity to reimagine benefits that attract a skilled labor force and allow for career satisfaction by providing access for employees to learn new skills, showing a path to growth, and allowing employees to contribute to the overall health of the business. While providing a livable wage with benefits, a safe work environment, an inclusive culture, and a healthy work/life balance are important to job seekers, their ability to grow and contribute to the overall goals of the business are just as important.

The onerous of this seemingly easy, but monumental task, should not be left up to businesses alone. It takes the collective action of our communities and state leaders to support businesses as we progress into the new era.