

Convergence Dialogue on
Pathways to Better Jobs
Framing Paper

CONVERGENCE





Background

The COVID-19 pandemic created one of the worst economic crises in the last century. Nationwide, unemployment peaked at a rate of 14.8 percent¹ in April 2020.² Two years later, that rate has dropped back down to 4.1 percent; yet, that number fails to convey the economic distress many Americans continue to experience.³ The rate of unemployment that includes individuals who are marginally attached to the labor market, discouraged workers, or unemployed workers is at 7 percent.⁴

The public health crisis further exposed and exacerbated the pre-existing challenges and barriers that low- and moderate-income workers face to achieve financial security and upward mobility. Job losses throughout the pandemic have been significantly concentrated in low-wage work at a rate of about 15 times that of those in high-wage employment.⁵ Many individuals returning to entry-level and middle-income jobs continue to experience stagnant wages – with no clear routes to better jobs, alternative career pathways, or different benefits.

Moreover, sustained pain and dislocation around employment continue to disproportionately affect women and communities of color. Not only has the participation of women in the workforce not recovered, but the latest statistics also show women's participation rate in the workforce at 57 percent, a record low since 1988⁶ – and a number that reflects recent deterioration, with 275,000 women choosing to leave the workforce in January 2022.

Even as the economy continued to recover, rates of unemployment for Black (7.9 percent) and Latino (5.9 percent) workers remained higher than for White (4 percent) workers through October 2021.⁷ As of March 2022, the Black community's rate of unemployment hovered above the national average at 6.2 percent; Latino populations were experiencing a rate of 4.2 percent unemployment, while the rate for White workers was below the national average at 3.2 percent.⁸

The economic and financial ripple effects of the pandemic are still very present, and they exacerbate the challenges millions of Americans experienced well before the onset of COVID-19 in finding stable, quality jobs and economic mobility. Now, more than ever, it is time to come together across political, ideological, sectoral, and other divides to advance short-, medium-, and long-term solutions on behalf of America's workers and businesses and to build resilience against future detrimental and destabilizing events.

Assessment Learnings: Barriers, Innovations, & Partnerships

In 2020, as a result of the onset of the pandemic, Convergence spearheaded the project '[Economic Recovery for America's Workers](#),' consisting of stakeholders from Convergence's past project on economic mobility called '[Working Up](#),' which concluded in 2018. These stakeholders gathered for a short-term mandate to address the economic fallout of the pandemic on low-income workers, including potential solutions and recommendations in the public, private, and nonprofit realms. The concept for a full-year dialogue around Pathways to Better Jobs was born out of these discussions and Convergence set out to convene this Dialogue.

¹ This is the U3 rate of unemployment, which does not capture individuals who are marginally attached to the labor market, discouraged workers, or unemployed workers.

² <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R46554.pdf>

³ https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpsee_e16.htm

⁴ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/U6RATE#>

⁵ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>

⁶ <https://fortune.com/2022/03/24/employers-economic-recovery-child-care-benefits-great-resignation-women-work-careers-pandemic-priya-krishnan/>

⁷ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>

⁸ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>



To understand the full scope of issues, Convergence conducted an Assessment, which included interviews with 131⁹ stakeholders working on issues surrounding employment, workforce development, and education, as well as additional research and landscape analysis, to determine where Convergence could provide the most value in addressing these issues.

Figure 1: Interviews from cross-sector, cross-partisan, and varied geography



A. Findings: Current Challenges, Barriers, and Pandemic Disruption

- Many workers remain mired in roles with no clear path to upward economic mobility even if they recently moved into a job with a slightly higher wage.
- Many employers are innovating in upskilling current workers and new hires. However, there are a small number of employers working on “up and out” upskilling for employees. The benefits to employers and workers may be substantial, but it is unclear how widespread these practices are.
- The definition of “basic skills” has colloquially expanded from literacy and numeracy to also include fundamental digital literacy. Basic digital skills are now emphasized as crucial for many entry-level jobs and even more essential for upskilling and/or reskilling.
- There is a significant need for “basic skills” and career navigation for people who do not have access to or information on entry-points into the job market.
- A combination of academic, financial, and situational needs of students and workers has highlighted the need to normalize alternatives to the 4-year college experience as pathways to good jobs.
- Employer screening by college degree hits minority workers particularly hard.

⁹ Current number of interviews as of May 13, 2022.



B. Findings: Pandemic Disruption and Opportunity

- COVID-19 has accelerated ongoing disruptions in the labor market, increasing challenges for essential workers with financial hardship falling hardest on people of color, women, and those already in low- and moderate-income jobs. For workers with the greatest barriers, questions remain around who is accountable for their future success – government, employers, workers themselves, or a combination of all these actors.
- The pandemic has shifted the economy in many ways. Some workers feel empowered to move to different jobs or start businesses, however, there is not “one story” to be told about how workers are currently faring.
- The public-private workforce system was not consistently effective in upskilling and job placement before the COVID-19 crisis. This system, which includes community colleges and publicly funded job training and placement centers and programs, is experiencing greater pressure than it was pre-pandemic.
- COVID-19 offers both a challenge and a major opportunity to push the upskilling agenda forward and focus investments on those facing unemployment with the highest barriers to reconnecting.
- Some low- and moderate-income workers are getting short-term boosts from employers acting to entice them, including bumps in pay sometimes paired with other benefits. While these actions show some workers possess greater power than in the past, the ineffective systems undergirding our bigger structural challenges remain and require attention to build a sustainable recovery for all.

Dialogue Framing: Pathways to Better Jobs

Our driving questions for the dialogue will be:

- 1) How can we create or adapt public and private systems to generate better results from opportunities such as a) earning while learning and b) non four-year degree credentialing?
- 2) What changes in roles and responsibilities related to access, investment and accountability are needed?
- 3) What changes to societal norms, perceptions, narratives, and values are needed? How can we catalyze those changes?

In response to the learnings from research and interviews held during the Assessment Phase, Convergence has laid the groundwork to convene the Dialogue on Pathways to Better Jobs. This year-long process brings together a diverse and influential group of stakeholders representing workers, workforce development, policymakers, employers, and post-secondary education providers of all types to participate in collaborative problem-solving conversations. The Dialogue will seek to address the following problem statement: **Millions of job seekers are unable to access and navigate resources, tools, and opportunities to move into new, improved, and stable avenues of employment.**

This problem raises significant questions about the efficacy and efficiency of accessible education and skilling systems and reimagining or developing a system that could benefit both employers and employees.



Taking all of this into consideration, and after analyzing information obtained during the interview period, Convergence has identified two areas in which stakeholders believe there to be the most possibility for impact. Two specific pathways to better jobs that will be discussed by Dialogue participants are:

- **Apprenticeships**, which offer workers the opportunity to attain high-quality, portable credentials while earning a competitive wage.
- **Associate Degrees, Technical & Certificate Programs** are pathways that provide a variety of completion timelines (ex. one month to two years) that prepare students with the skills required for specific careers, most often in vocational subjects or trade sectors. There has been tremendous growth in these pathways that can provide opportunities for learners to work part-time while completing these programs and exploring additional upskilling possibilities. They also often lead learners into higher-paying jobs, offer job stability, and mobility opportunities.

In addition, we see the potential for linking apprenticeships and shorter-term education and training to improved career navigation support. Many individuals and populations who traditionally have faced employment barriers do not have the exposure, access, or opportunity to learn essential skills taught in these types of programs. **Therefore, career exploration, training and mentorship programs are critical wrap-around services that need to be built into multiple education, skilling and employment pathways across sectors and programs.** While not pathways to jobs themselves, these fundamental knowledge posts and wrap-around services are critical contributors to expanding and strengthening diverse pathways to job creation and mobility and must be integrated into any conversations about solutions.

The national discourse about these two critical pathways and associated wrap-around support services betrays significant political, ideological, and sectoral differences in perspective about how to transform the necessary systems and find solutions. There is a strong opportunity for Convergence's process to make a valuable impact around:

- Determination of accountability and coordination within and between the creation of economic opportunities available for workers, including publicly funded programs and related support services, public-private partnerships, and employers;
- Shifting the narrative from prioritizing four-year degree programs as the primary avenue to success and income generation to instead demonstrating the full breadth of career and skilling pathways that can lead to better jobs, while advocating for sustained, flexible, and systemic financial and legislative investment in adult education, learning, and training programs; and,
- Increase understanding of how to scale successful local pilot programs that can have impact at the state or national level.

Employer-Workforce Tensions and Barriers to Upward Mobility

We identified several key tensions and gaps that participants in a Convergence Dialogue would need to consider and address to produce successful recommendations.

- Individuals with the greatest need for financial security are often the hardest hit when any shocks to our system occur. There is a critical need to remove additional employment and skilling barriers for people of color, women, individuals returning from incarceration, workers who may have disabilities, and low-income families.

- Training systems, employers, and workers are often not aligned regarding goals, motivators, and barriers, which leads to inefficiency, poor outcomes for workers and families, and a lack of sufficient talent pipelines for employers.
- Employers often struggle to align their workforce training systems with reskilling or upskilling opportunities available for employees and employees are often unaware and/or unable to take advantage of career development possibilities to improve income, job mobility and security.
- Current skilling programs, related timelines, and costs are not responsive to regional labor markets or the needs of workers.
- Society often overlooks other pathways to success. There are ways to gain the skills and education that can lead to financial stability and upward mobility other than attending a four-year degree program. Normalizing apprenticeships and associate degrees, technical & certificate programs could make these options more accessible.
- Employee expectations have shifted within the last few years. Employers may need to evaluate their benefits and compensation packages, as well as corporate culture, to adjust to the changes.
- There is a missing link between economic advancement opportunities within organizations and the tradeoffs employees must make if they are receiving public benefits.
- There are some missing informational links between innovations regarding training and learning, such as subsidized work experience (apprenticeships, job shadowing, etc.) as well as the availability of supportive services, and the opportunities for jobseekers to pursue these professional development opportunities.
- Some supportive services around inclusive and sustainable participation include, but are certainly not limited to, childcare support, monetary stipend to offset wage loss during training participation, transportation assistance, and others.

Conclusion

As Convergence assembles participants for the Pathways to Better Jobs Dialogue based the findings from the assessment period, stakeholders are confident that Convergence's proven method of bringing people and groups with divergent views together to build trust, identify solutions, and form alliances for action will lead to lasting and scalable impact for our workforce.

To follow along on the progress of the Dialogue and actionable recommendations from participants, please check <https://convergencepolicy.org/latest-projects/pathways-to-better-jobs/>.

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About Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

Convergence is a national non-profit with locations in Washington, D.C. and the Bay Area that convenes individuals and organizations with divergent views to build trust, identify solutions and form alliances for action on issues of critical public concern. Learn more at: <https://convergencepolicy.org>.

****Disclaimer:***

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