



WORKABLE HEALTH

Achieving Health Equity Amid Changing Work Dynamics

Institute for the Future (ITF) with support from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), convened a group of work and health leaders to evaluate how present-day forces shaping work will influence health equity, both positively and negatively, over the next decade. During the two-day convening, which took place on August 21st and 22nd in Palo Alto, California, ITF guided a diverse group of experts in creating positive scenarios for work and health equity. This report aims to jump-start targeted investigations on the future of work's impacts on health that lead to actions that contribute positively to health equity.

Changes in demographics, technology, and labor policies are combining to create an exciting, risky, and complex future for work and workers. Given the magnitude of these changes, and their powerful combinatorial effects, it's not surprising that the topic of the future of work has dominated conferences, convenings, and regional planning sessions over the last few years. From large businesses interested in maintaining a steady pipeline for talent, to educational institutions tasked with equipping today's learners with skills they will need for future jobs, to policymakers concerned about how these changes will impact the employer-employee social compact, a broad range of stakeholders is preparing for a vastly different future of work in the United States.

Because work is a core aspect of human life, substantial changes in work conditions and arrangements will result in large-scale societal effects. Conversations about the future of work routinely include the impacts on education, workforce preparation, health insurance, and safety-net protections. But if the impact of the forces shaping the future of work is as transformative as anticipated by business, academic, and policy leaders, then these conversations must include the broader consequences that the changing nature of work will have on the broader topic of health in American society. Conversations about the future of health need to take into account the forces shaping work, and conversations examining the future of work need to factor in the potential impacts these forces will have on health.

It's hard to imagine a work environment conducive to shared economic prosperity that doesn't also promote good health and well-being for workers and their families. The strong connection between work and health outcomes is well established, which is why it is imperative that we adequately prepare for the impacts of the changing nature of work.

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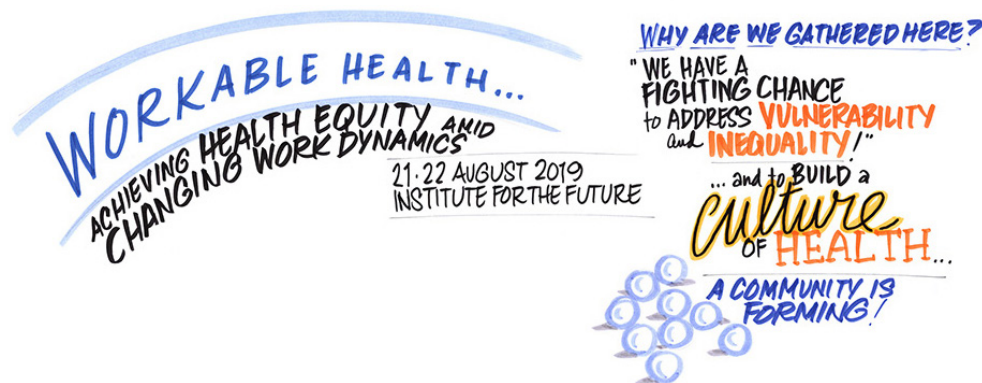


Envisioning a Positive Future for Work and Health

When health issues are discussed in future of work convenings, the conversations often focus on health risks and inequities. It's understandably difficult to envision a positive future for work and health. But conversations limited to negative outcomes constrain our thinking about what's possible for the future of work and health, and they impede our ability to coordinate efforts toward transformative change.

To catalyze a collective vision, IFTF implemented a process to guide the experts in developing positive futures for work and health. We focused on positive scenarios for the future because they clarify what needs to be done in the present in order to realize a future in which work contributes favorably to improving economic and health equity.

We kicked off the workshop by asking the experts the following question: *When you think about the intersection of work and health, what are the questions we must ask in order to prepare for the next decade?* Their responses included building worker voice and power, addressing demographic changes, leveraging technological advancements, and tackling daunting social problems such as economic inequality, racism, and sexism. To see the complete graphic recording responses, [view here](#).



The group then selected five of the questions for which they felt this convening was well equipped to create a positive future scenario. The five questions were:

- What are the employer obligations for health and work? What responsibilities do they have?
- How will our scenarios close the race and gender wealth divide?
- How will worker power and voice build cultures of health and wellness?
- How do we think about technological innovation and the impact on work?
- How do we build the political will needed to increase worker power?

The participants formed five groups and each group was assigned one of the questions. The groups were tasked with creating a 2030 scenario that produces better health equity.

The scenarios developed by the five groups begin on the next page.

Employers Redefined

What are the employer obligations for health and work?

What responsibilities do they have?

Imagine a future in which any entity or institution that controls, manages, or coordinates working conditions is considered to be an employer. Like any employer, it would assume certain responsibilities for workers that include not only investing in and subsidizing their health insurance, but supporting health for their families as well. This future is made possible through the establishment of a carrot-and-stick framework, one with a federally enforced floor for standards, and where workers can negotiate for quality and outcomes improvement to preempt actions that would lead to poor worker health outcomes. Notably, employers and workers serve as co-enforcers of the policy, ensuring that the suppliers, partners, and competitors in their ecosystems are all working toward equitable health and wealth outcomes.

This framework is structured to incentivize employers to be receptive to incorporating worker perspectives into their policies and operations. Every large organization employs a Chief Health Officer, an executive responsible for the stewardship of the workforce's well-being. (The return on investment on spending to improve employees' and their families' health and well-being has been well-documented.) Employees recognize health as an essential source of wealth. In 2030, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has become a policy think tank for healthy workplaces, and employers police each other and compete to support increasingly healthy workforces. In this environment, in which worker wealth and health are employers' responsibility, there is higher worker satisfaction and fewer worker complaints.

Second order effects: Governments and regulations play a significant role in this future, and it's important to be aware of potential trouble spots in this scenario. For instance, if state governments, rather than the federal government, lead this shift, businesses may leave high-standard states in favor of states with lower standards, creating greater geographic health inequity. Without job classifications reforms, we could see more disparity in employment status as a result of the higher obligations placed on employers to support labor. With a spotlight on employee health, protection and privacy of health data will be paramount. Without it, sicker workers may feel compelled to avoid seeking treatment out of fear of a perception of being "unhealthy" and less employable.

Signals:

- Trevor Peckham, Kaori Fujishiro, Anjum Hajat, Brian P. Flaherty and Noah Seixas, Evaluating Employment Quality as a Determinant of Health in a Changing Labor Market. *Journal of the Social Sciences*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/rsf.2019.5.4.09#metadata_info_tab_contents
- Business Roundtable Redefines the Purpose of a Corporation to Promote 'An Economy That Serves All Americans' (August 19, 2019).
- Washington State HB 1601: [Creating the Universal Protections Act](#).
- [Vermont's Remote Worker Grant Program](#): remote workers who relocate and become a full-time resident of Vermont on or after January 1, 2019 may receive up to \$5,000 per year for up to two years.
- Tommy's Car Wash Systems, [Keeping Your Car Wash Employees Safe During Extreme Heat](#).
- [The Maintenance Cooperation Trust Fund](#) is a statewide watchdog that works to eliminate illegal and unfair practices in California's janitorial industry.



The Maintenance Cooperation Trust Fund (MCTF) Executive Director celebrates the passage of the "Fair Day's Pay Act". Source: janitorialwatch.org

The Worker Renaissance

How will worker power and voice build cultures of health and wellness?

Imagine a future in which full public transparency into anonymized worker data (wages, benefits, health impacts) is a business norm and a societal expectation. Data on wages, work conditions, and health-related outcomes are disclosed for all sectors, and for all large firms, documented in an annual “Health Footprint” report.

This future is replete with new forms of worker power and institutions. For instance, the information in the Health Footprint reports was instrumental in legislating new worker standards and protections, including a 30-hour work week. And, by 2030, the Department of Labor expanded to include a Department of Worker Empowerment.

Workplace organizing is a mainstream workplace activity. Workers use their bargaining power to address work-related health concerns, such as time poverty. Because many more workers take collective action and succeed when they do, firms in the 2030s now integrate the outputs of worker organizing in their business decisions, and the market rewards them for it.

For some workers, the non-working time that they gain in their week is now spent on building relationships, both social and civic. This strengthens civil society, bolstering the ability for people to collect more data on disparities and advocate for better conditions for all workers, especially those employed by small businesses and/or working in informal sectors that do not abide by policy changes.

Second order effects: Improved conditions for workers may lead to higher labor costs, which may result in companies moving to where labor costs are less expensive, or replacing workers with automation. And for firms where neither outsourcing nor automation is viable, they may try to suppress worker voice to keep operating costs down. This may result in more government intervention, which may generate the political will needed to drive even more policy changes that support a culture of work that contributes positively to health equity. Greater influence of worker power could backfire if it leads to greater risks for workers or when advocacy fails to build cultures of health and wellness for workers.

Signals:

- Coworker.org In 2014, 74,000 workers organized via the Internet (Facebook, etc).
- IG Metall, Germany’s biggest trade union, negotiated a 28-hour week for its members for up to two years, typically when they have small children. (Note: Most IG Metall members are men.)
- Alia is an online platform to help house cleaners get benefits.
- [USWNT’s gender discrimination lawsuit](#) as part of a broader, reinvigorated women’s movement.



Source: myalia.org

1,000 Points of Data

How do we think about technological innovation and its impact on work?

Imagine a future in which worker-centered technological innovation is optimized to promote freedom and equity rather than algorithmic tyranny. By 2030, we've changed the agenda from data exploitation of workers to data ownership by workers. We have also changed who owns the development of technology from a cabal of elite founders to a distributed network of users and workers. With increased investment in public technologies, workers everywhere have greater access to cooperative models of data and platform ownership that provide a more level playing field between the workers and employers.

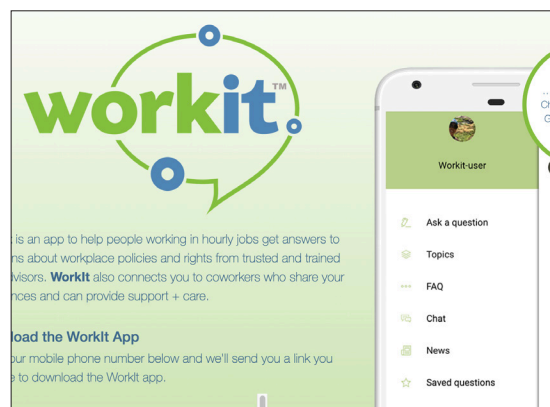
Government regulations were enacted to weave privacy into the fabric of our business and civic life. With modernized IP laws and policies, we have new channels for public oversight of data, driving an expanded push to use public blockchain technology for greater transparency and accountability in data collection and use. The establishment of a tech dividend fund enables workers to receive income from their ownership stakes in the platforms that coordinate and manage their work. And we've invested in more technical training and lifelong learning as well as enabled peer-to-peer opportunities for sharing career advice on navigating workplace shifts driven by technological innovation.

The tech dividend fund also provides financial assistance to train people and match them with quality jobs. The public algorithmic matching system is designed to allow for human oversight to correct for algorithmic biases. It makes matches based not only on a person's work qualifications, but on their health needs and preferences to ensure that the conditions and activities related to their work will enhance their overall health and well-being. And it connects applicants to health resources, such as personalized medicine, which enables them to adapt to an everchanging environment with more cost-effective, targeted interventions.

Second order effects: Bear in mind that an increased reliance of AI systems in decision-making has reduced trust in human judgment, which some see as harming human freedom and agency. And not all tech companies were interested in staying in the United States after the increased regulation. They have relocated to other countries with less oversight over tech companies.

Signals:

- [Wonolo](#), which stands for Work Now Locally, matches available talent with frontline jobs.
- [Alternative Staffing models](#) leverage charitable supports with fees earned from employers, and aim to be worker-centered, social-purpose businesses.
- [WorkIt](#) is an app to help people working in hourly jobs get answers about workplace policies and rights from trusted and trained peer advisors. It also connects workers to co-workers who can share experiences and provide advice.
- Turning Point Labs is a worker-owned staffing agency that uses data to help staff see more of the delta between what their wages are and what the agency charges.



Source: workitapp.org

A More Social, Social Contract

How will our scenarios close the race and gender wealth divide?

Imagine a future in which employers are responsible for creating holistically safe work environments. New social programs that decouple work from income and health insurance (universal basic income and universal health care) have helped to create a future in which the value of a person is no longer determined by their work. Employers no longer evaluate people solely as units of production, and they recognize that their relationship is not with one particular employee, but rather with the people, family, and communities that surround that person.

The roll-out of direct cash transfer programs and publicly sponsored health coverage has led to an increased sense of economic security. This, in turn, has generated more entrepreneurship and, in some places, homeownership.

Highly correlated to the greater sense of security is marked improvement in the individual and collective psychological health of the country. Anxiety and depression are down, and people are using their time to be more involved in their communities. A cottage industry emerges for professionals who are experts in building psychologically safe workspaces. They help employers foster a culture that supports worker autonomy over aspects of work such as scheduling and work hours.

Second order effects: In some places, more economic security has created more demand for housing, and the housing supply has not kept up. This higher demand increases housing costs, contributing to both more housing insecurity and shared housing. Interestingly, those who prioritize work over civic or family time are highly judged by society. Workaholics are the new “social pariahs.” There is also a fair amount of “equity fatigue” in communities. With public dollars getting directly transferred to the bank accounts of almost all Americans, many lack sympathy when an individual still struggles to succeed at life. A scarcity mindset hardens in Americans, resulting in a powerful anti-immigrant sentiment. The benefits of being an American citizen, which now include cash transfers and free health care resources, seem too precious (and expensive) to allow more people to participate.

Signals:

- Officially called [American Opportunity Accounts Act](#), U.S. Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Representative Ayanna Pressley’s (D-MA) baby bonds legislation would give every American child a fairer chance at economic mobility by creating a seed savings account of \$1,000 at birth.
- In 2016, [BAYADA Home Health Care transitioned into a non-profit](#) and distributed \$20 million to employees (present and former).
- [Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration](#): in February 2019, we began giving 125 Stocktonians a guaranteed income of \$500/month for 18 months. This income is unconditional, meaning there are no strings attached and no work requirements.

Nearly 40% of Americans can't afford a \$400 emergency.

THE STOCKTON ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT DEMONSTRATION

The Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED) is the country's first major led guaranteed income demonstration. We aim to test a simple yet innovative solution to poverty and inequality.

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Source: stocktondemonstration.org

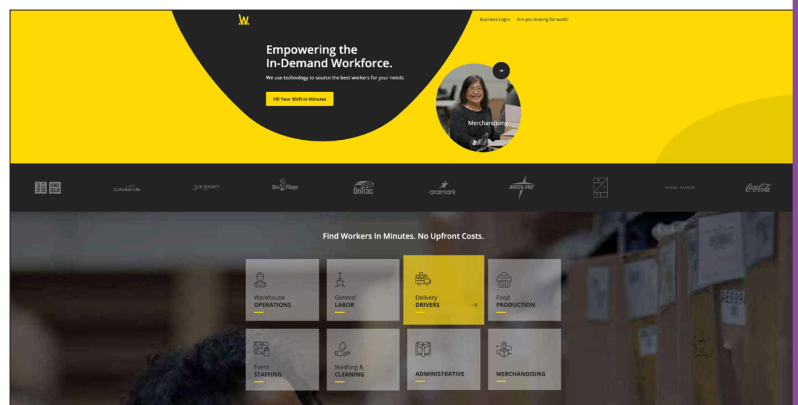
Empowered Communities

How do we build the political will needed to increase worker power?

Imagine a future in which more people are excited by policy as a lever of change. Technological advancements have enabled the digitalization of the political process, accelerating real-time, unfiltered communication between constituents and officials and facilitating robust mechanisms for transparency. Both rapid communication and unprecedented transparency drive renewed energy around political activism and an increase in collective local actions. Due to strengthened expectations that political actors should respond to the demands of communities, these representatives implement new safety net structures, such as portable benefits.

The impact of digitalization of everything has involved a rethinking of how we organize. People no longer organize around a broad topic, such as labor or a particular workforce segment, but around shared values and structural changes. “We realize all of our identities” is a common refrain from groups formally referred to as “organized labor.” These new coalitions reduce risk for the populations participating while they bring about new levels of prosperity.

Second order effects: Digitalization has not been limited to the political process. Every aspect of daily living that touches individuals and communities is digitalized by 2030. It’s commonplace for employers to monitor, nudge, and track workers, which has produced entirely new digital divides both inside the workplace and the communities workers reside in. In this future in which “full-spectrum identities” are embraced, the dominant culture continues to feel threatened and concerned about a loss of influence and control, history, and identity. The fringe backlashes of the early 2020s, centered on white supremacy, condense and solidify in certain geographies, producing even more geographic disparities and a collapse toward hyper-localism. And, while the digitalization of the political process has improved accountability of the representatives to make substantive changes, particularly at the intersection of work and health, it has also increased the potential for misinformation and hacking democracy at scale.



Source: wonolo.com



Discussion

The workshop yielded four important insights about the future of work and its effect on health equity over the next decade.

INSIGHT #1 | Remove the bright-line rule between work and home.

A dominant theme during the workshop centered on the present-day tension between work and family obligations. Current attempts to smooth out the frictions that exist between home and work lives were described by the experts as “tokenism.” These perfunctory efforts on the part of employers to accommodate schedules of parents and caregivers were seen as insufficiently bold and decidedly not equitable.

Many of the assumptions built into the positive future scenarios challenged the utility of simply adjusting or updating the bright-line rule that exists between work and family. One expert encouraged us to explore futures in which there is no bright line between our home and work lives, in part because caregiving duties in the future may demand a more holistic integration of the two identities.

INSIGHT #2 | Meritocracy exacerbates the opportunity gap.

The next decade may also reveal the limitations of a meritocratic system. Experts argued that recognizing performance and achievement has (inadvertently) contributed to the opportunity gap and restricted collaboration. They argued that meritocracy without equity rewards those who have had access to the tools, resources, and support needed to succeed. They envisioned a new valuation that better accounts for the skills, assets, and mindsets of people who have not had access to opportunities. They imagined a system that appreciated things like “community hacks, hustle mentalities, and informal social infrastructures.”

INSIGHT #3 | Design for psychologically safe work.

A clear takeaway from conversations about the connection between work and health in the future involved mental health. Numerous references were made to the “psychological healthiness” of one’s work. Examples of psychologically risky work included new tasks, such as social media content moderators whose jobs entail reviewing violent and inappropriate content, as well as new work arrangements in which the worker is surveilled through ambient and wearable sensors and computer vision AI systems to track and respond to workers’ performances. Existing jobs, such as bus drivers and other public workers—who routinely are called on to de-escalate issues associated with poor mental health, homelessness, or drug addiction as part of their day-to-day jobs—were also flagged as psychologically taxing jobs. Evaluating all jobs through the lens of psychological impact emerged as a critical action to ensure safe and healthy working conditions.

INSIGHT #4 | Build worker power.

Taken as whole, the idea that resounded most loudly from this group of experts was around worker voice and power. To increase not only economic and health equity, but also to ensure the dignity of all work, workers must have more power over their own working conditions. Through tools such as empowered industry and standards boards, worker participation on corporate boards, and increased worker activism, these experts envision a positive future in which the voice of workers shapes all policies and practices.



Conclusion

A culture of health requires both health and economic equity. The positive visions developed in this foresight workshop serve as jumping-off points to systematically act to create a future of work that drives toward health equity and contributes to a culture of health. More examination is needed for work and labor experts to understand the existing and emerging health needs and conditions related to work. And health experts must gain a better understanding of the key directional shifts shaping work dynamics.



About Institute for the Future

Institute for the Future is the world's leading futures thinking organization. For over 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop world-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California. www.iftf.org

Support
provided by



Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Support for this report was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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