



What's Important in a Job?

An Analysis of What Matters and for Whom

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February 2021

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic recession, workers' issues are at the forefront of many policy spaces. Many of the immediate concerns facing workers right now—such as access to health care, workplace safety, job security, and flexible scheduling—are elements of job quality that may vary significantly by job, employer, and industry. Workers may value aspects of their job differently in varying circumstances. For example, a worker taking on child care responsibilities during school closures may have a greater need for flexible scheduling, whereas frontline employees may need greater workplace safety as they continue to work in person amid risks of contracting COVID-19. More than ever, it is important to understand what individual workers need from their jobs. In this brief, we analyze how preferences for different job quality elements vary based on worker characteristics, as well as how those elements may group or bundle to provide a “good” or “bad” job.

This analysis is part of a larger project exploring job quality and mobility. In a report from summer 2020, we reviewed the literature on job quality and connections to economic mobility and developed a framework of job quality elements (Congdon et al. 2020). Recently, we outlined a research agenda for better understanding the connections between job quality and worker outcomes, including economic mobility (Loprest, Katz, and Shakesprere 2021). As part of our efforts to explore evidence on job quality, we also analyzed the importance and impact of different aspects of job quality (Congdon, Katz, Shakesprere 2021). However, people's preferences may have different outcomes, so we are interested both in how people value different elements and how those elements affect their well-being in the short

and long term. Here, we present results from our analysis of the importance of different job quality elements to different people.

What Do We Know about What's Important?

Our review of the existing literature reinforced much that we already know about what elements of jobs are important to people and get attention in the literature and definitions of good jobs (Congdon et al. 2020). The impact of pay on well-being is the most documented job quality element, and working conditions such as stability of hours, job security, and control over hours are also prevalent in the literature. Across the board, these elements seem to be the most documented by research. Intangible elements related to fulfillment seem to be less frequently mentioned, but they are still recognized as elements that could alter the quality of a job. There also seems to be a relationship between certain job quality elements and economic mobility. Access to educational benefits, on-the-job training, and opportunities for personal growth are all elements of jobs that could be linked to future advancement. In the Urban Institute's review of 11 major definitions of good jobs, these elements are mentioned in more than half of the literature reviewed.

However, less is known about how preferences for different job quality elements might differ by individual needs, demographic characteristics, and societal factors. Intuitively, we know that a worker's circumstances will determine what she values in a job (Congdon et al. 2020). Some evidence in the literature suggests certain populations value some elements more than others. For example, Wiswall and Zafar (2018) find that women are more likely to accept lower wages in exchange for more flexible schedules. Similarly, older workers may be less likely to retire if they are able to have flexible work arrangements (Hudomiet et al. 2019). However, previous studies do not explore these relationships across different elements of job quality—such as pay level, training opportunities, or insurance—or across multiple worker characteristics. In this brief, we build on the previous literature, exploring how preferences for job quality elements may vary by worker characteristics, as well as how these preferences may cluster and relate to each other.

What Did We Do?

We used data from the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Survey¹ to explore several elements of job quality. The Gallup survey asked 9,671 participants to rate 10 job quality elements on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being “unimportant” and 5 being “extremely important” to them in determining whether a job is “good.” Figure 1 maps the 10 Gallup survey job quality elements (middle and right-hand columns) onto the Urban Institute's job quality framework (left-hand column) (Congdon et al. 2020). The Urban framework organizes each of the Gallup job quality elements into overarching categories (such as pay, benefits, and working conditions) as well as whether they support later career and economic mobility.

FIGURE 1

The Gallup Survey Captures Information on Most Elements in Urban's Organizing Framework

	Elements that provide benefits in current job	Elements that support advancement
Pay	Level of pay Stable and predictable pay	
Benefits	Employee benefits (e.g., health care, retirement)	
Working conditions	Stable and predictable hours Control over hours and/or location Job security	
Business culture and job design	Enjoying your day-to-day work (e.g., good coworkers/managers, pleasant work environment, manageable stress level) Having a sense of purpose and dignity in your work	Career advancement opportunities (e.g., promotion path) Having the power to change things about your job that you're not satisfied with
On-the-job skill development	Training for specific tasks	Career advancement opportunities (e.g., learning new skills)

BOX 1

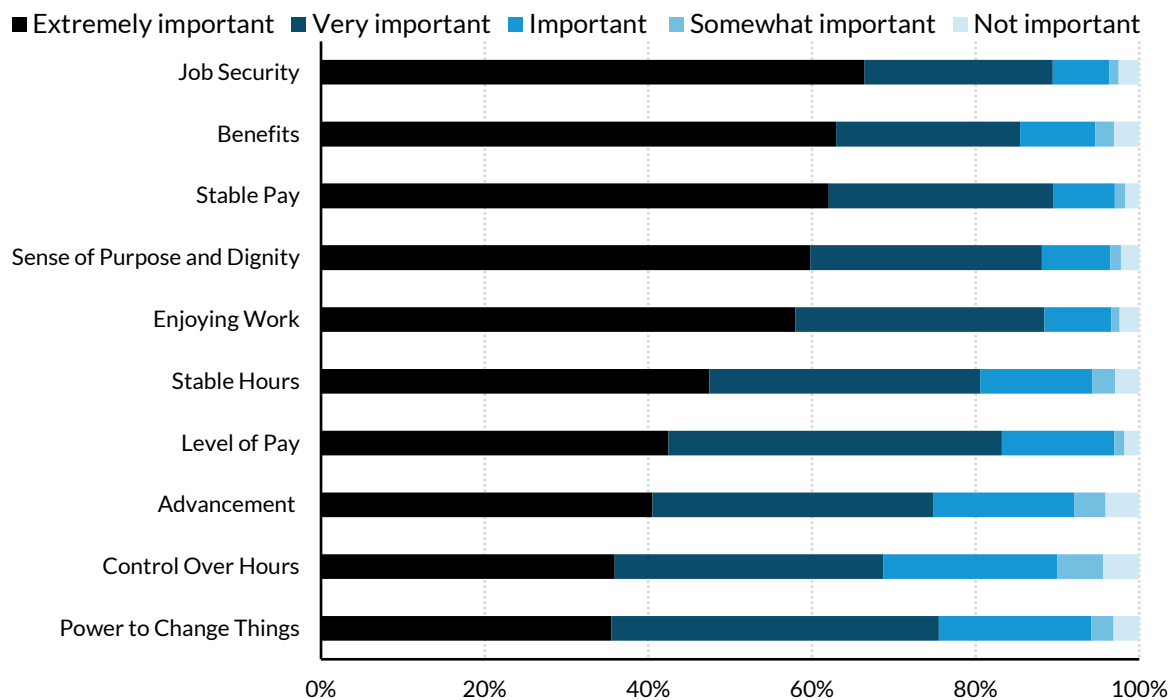
Methods

Using the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study of 9,671 participants, we analyzed how each of the 10 job quality preference elements varied by worker characteristics. We first ran correlations to understand how workers may prefer groups of elements as a bundle rather than separately. We then calculated bivariate statistics to gauge how the frequency that each job element is “extremely important” varied by each characteristic. Finally, we ran logistic regressions to isolate which characteristics most clearly shaped the importance of each element and calculated the associated odds ratios.

The first step in the analysis was to examine the full distributions of the importance measures and determine how to analyze the data (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Job Security and Benefits Were Most Frequently Cited as “Extremely Important”



Source: Authors’ tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Data analysis was challenging because most survey participants reported every element as at least “somewhat important,” and the majority of people ranked each element as either “very important” or “extremely important.” There is little variation in how people viewed each job quality element when we look at this threshold. In fact, most of the variation among elements occurs in the top category, that is, the percentage of respondents who rated the element as “extremely important.” Most respondents (66 percent) described job security as “extremely important” to them. In addition to job security, the majority of respondents viewed benefits, stable pay, a sense of purpose and dignity, and enjoying their day-to-day work as “extremely important.” On the other end of the spectrum, only 36 percent of respondents described the power to change things as “extremely important” to them.² Because of the wide variability in responses, in our analyses we used binary variables capturing the share of respondents who reported each element as “extremely important.”

We first looked at correlations among job elements to understand how the elements might bundle in certain jobs. Anecdotally, we know that some jobs tend to have multiple job elements, while others don’t. We were interested in learning if some of these elements may go together or conflict with each other in workers’ preferences. For example, we might expect that enjoyment might be correlated with power to change things, because if people have the power to change aspects of their employment they dislike, they would likely enjoy their day-to-day activities more. Exploring correlations allows us to understand what sets of job elements people tend to prefer together, which can indicate how employers

might think about packaging elements, as well as how people are used to experiencing them in typical jobs.

We then examined how different people assign different values to job elements, depending on who they are. The following characteristics were explored:

- **demographics:** gender, race/ethnicity, age, foreign-born status, having children under 6, and having a partner or spouse in the household
- **disadvantage:** receipt of Medicaid as a flag for low income, and formerly incarcerated
- **education and employment:** educational attainment, employment status, being self-employed, having multiple jobs, and belonging to a labor union

We first calculated bivariate statistics to gauge how the frequency that each job element is “extremely important” varied by each characteristic. We then ran logistic regressions to isolate which characteristics most clearly shaped the importance of each element and calculated the associated odds ratios.

How Do Preferences for Job Elements Bundle?

In practice, all job elements ranked as “extremely important” were significantly correlated with each other. However, the magnitude of these correlations suggests there are particular types of job elements that workers may prefer together and that jobseekers may consider as a package. Figure 3 shows the correlation between pairs of job elements that workers ranked as “extremely important.” For example, workers who ranked pay stability as “extremely important” were more likely to rank stability of hours as “extremely important” (0.52 correlation) than enjoyment (0.17 correlation).

FIGURE 3

Some Job Quality Elements May Bundle

	Pay level	Pay stability	Stability of hours	Job security	Benefits	Control over hours	Power to change things	Enjoyment	Purpose	Advancement
Pay level	1.00									
Pay stability	0.49	1.00								
Stability of hours	0.42	0.52	1.00							
Job security	0.35	0.46	0.44	1.00						
Benefits	0.28	0.33	0.32	0.44	1.00					
Control over hours	0.26	0.18	0.28	0.20	0.16	1.00				
Power to change things	0.28	0.18	0.22	0.22	0.20	0.36	1.00			
Enjoyment	0.17	0.17	0.22	0.23	0.25	0.25	0.38	1.00		
Purpose	0.20	0.21	0.23	0.26	0.28	0.23	0.44	0.53	1.00	
Advancement	0.35	0.24	0.29	0.28	0.35	0.23	0.36	0.31	0.35	1.00

Source: Authors' tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Notes: Darker colors represent higher correlations. All correlation coefficients are significant at the 0.001 level.

Based on this correlation matrix, we grouped elements that workers tended to rank together as “extremely important,” which helps illuminate what sets of job quality elements might be important to different groups of people:

- **Job security and stability.** Of the 10 job elements, 4 (job security, pay stability, stability of hours, and benefits) can be thought of as related to job security and stability. Workers tended to rate these 4 elements as “extremely important” together: their preferences for these elements all have correlations above 0.40. One might also include pay level in this group, as it is highly correlated with the two stability measures (pay and hours).
- **Purpose and autonomy.** Another potential group of job elements relates to a worker’s sense of purpose and autonomy at a job: purpose, enjoyment, power to change things, and possibly control over hours. Correlations for worker preferences for these elements range between 0.36 and 0.53.
- **Advancement.** Worker preference for advancement is notable because it is moderately correlated with preference for elements of both job security and stability, and the group of elements related to purpose and autonomy.

We used these preliminary categories merely to group our subsequent analyses into a narrative. Formal cluster analysis or principal components analysis could be used in future analyses.

How Does Who You Are Shape What’s Most Important to You?

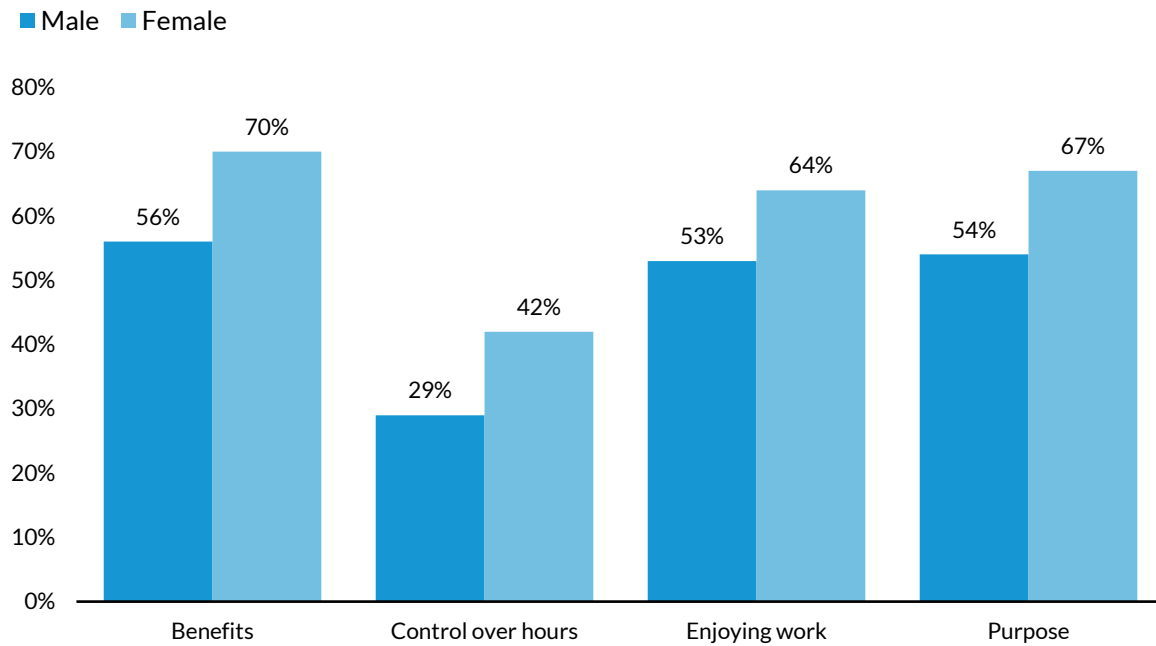
Demographics Matter, Particularly Gender and Race/Ethnicity

As we examined the relationships between the importance of different job elements and individual characteristics, two dimensions emerged that consistently shaped workers’ perceived importance of job elements: gender and race/ethnicity.

Across the board, women reported that job elements are “extremely important” more frequently than men (examples shown in figure 4). This finding is true for all 10 of the elements measured in the Gallup survey, even when we controlled for other individual characteristics. The difference between women and men is most pronounced for control over hours. Women, who often take the lead on caregiving responsibilities, were more than twice as likely to say control over hours is “extremely important” (see appendix A).³ Women were also 77 percent more likely to say benefits are “extremely important” and 74 percent more likely to say that enjoyment and purpose reached that threshold.

FIGURE 4

Women More Frequently Said That Elements of Job Quality Are “Extremely Important”



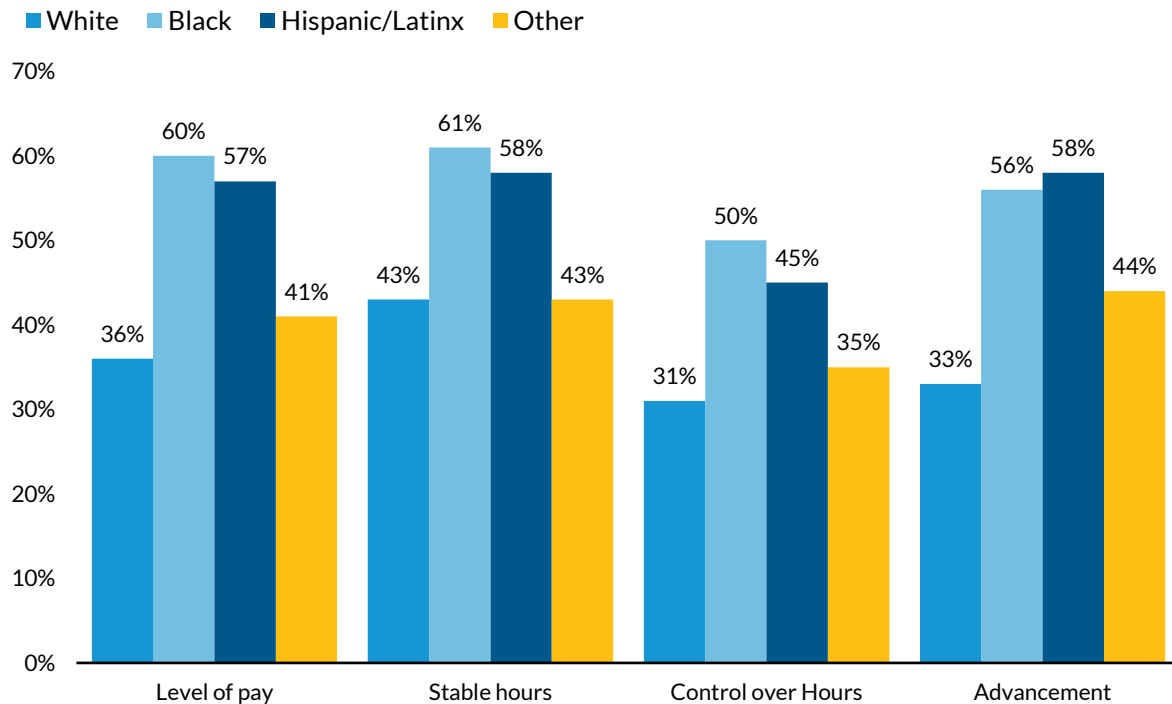
Source: Authors' tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Note: Only selected elements are displayed, but significant differences by gender exist across all job elements.

Similarly, people of different races and ethnicities held different perceptions of the importance of job quality elements. Black and Hispanic/Latinx people reported all of the 10 elements are “extremely important” more often than white people (figure 5), and these differences persisted even after controlling for other characteristics (appendix A). Differences by race/ethnicity were largest for advancement. Both Black and Hispanic people were about two and a half times more likely than white people to rate advancement as “extremely important.” Pay level also mattered much more to people of color. Black people were two and a half times and Hispanic people were twice as likely as white people to say a job’s pay level is “extremely important.”

FIGURE 5

Black and Hispanic/Latinx People More Frequently Said That All Elements of Job Quality Are “Extremely Important”



Source: Authors’ tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

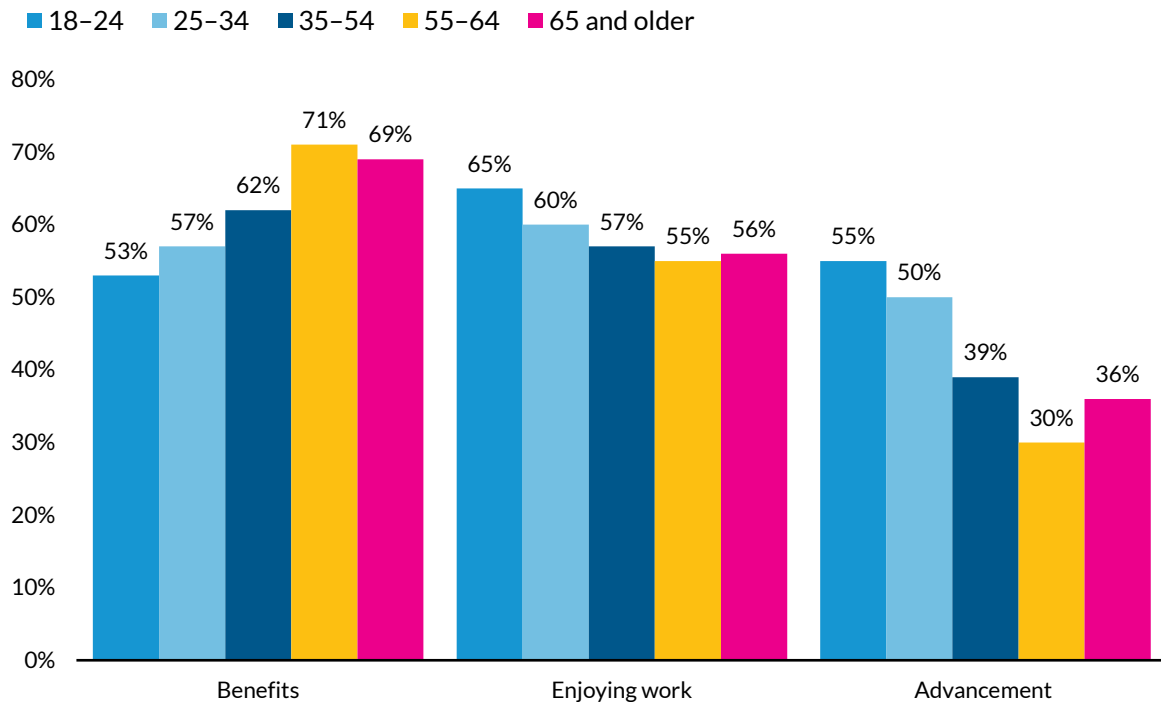
Note: Only selected elements are displayed, but significant differences by race/ethnicity exist across all job elements.

As a group, immigrants had different preferences for the importance of job quality elements than US-born Americans. However, these differences disappeared once we controlled for other factors, including race/ethnicity.

We also found that people of different ages tended to value some job aspects more than others. Older workers reported benefits as “extremely important” more often than younger workers, while enjoyment and advancement were relatively more important to people in earlier stages of their careers (figure 6). The most systematic differences arose when looking at attitudes toward advancement (appendix A). All groups older than 25 were at least 53 percent less likely than workers younger than 25 to rank advancement at the highest level of importance. At the same time, it is notable that age did not seem to matter much for other elements of jobs, even other job security and stability elements, or ones relating to purpose and autonomy.

FIGURE 6

Benefits Were Significantly More Important to Older People, While Enjoying Work and Advancement Mattered More to Younger Ones



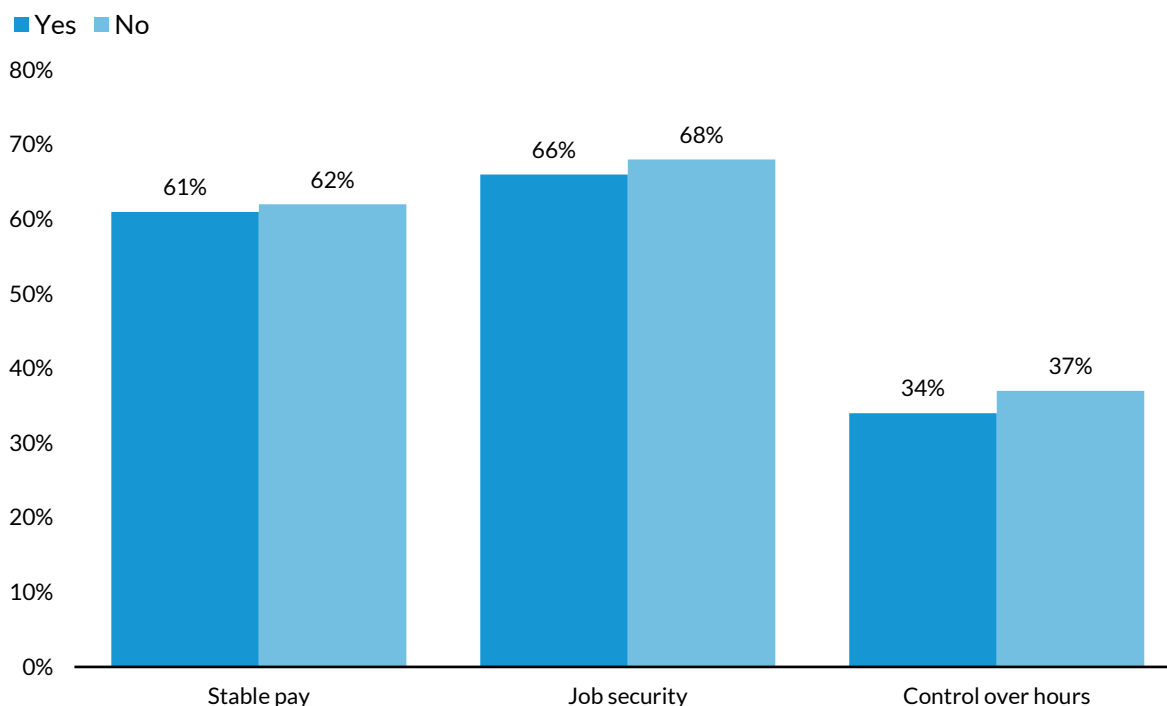
Source: Authors' tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Having a Spouse or Small Children Influenced How People Rated Some Job Elements

Some evidence suggests that household dynamics may influence what people think is important for their job quality. Gallup survey respondents who had partners or spouses at home said that stable pay, job security, and control over their hours are “extremely important” more often than people living without them (figure 7). Even after we controlled for other factors, respondents with partners were 25 to 33 percent more likely to highly value these job elements (appendix A). Having children younger than 6 generally did not seem to affect the importance that people assigned to most job elements. However, those with young children were 42 percent more likely than other people to think that advancement is important.

FIGURE 7

People with Partners or Spouses at Home Tended to Assign More Importance to Stable Pay, Job Security, and Control over Their Hours



Source: Authors' tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Economically Disadvantaged Individuals Did Not Have Different Preferences from Others

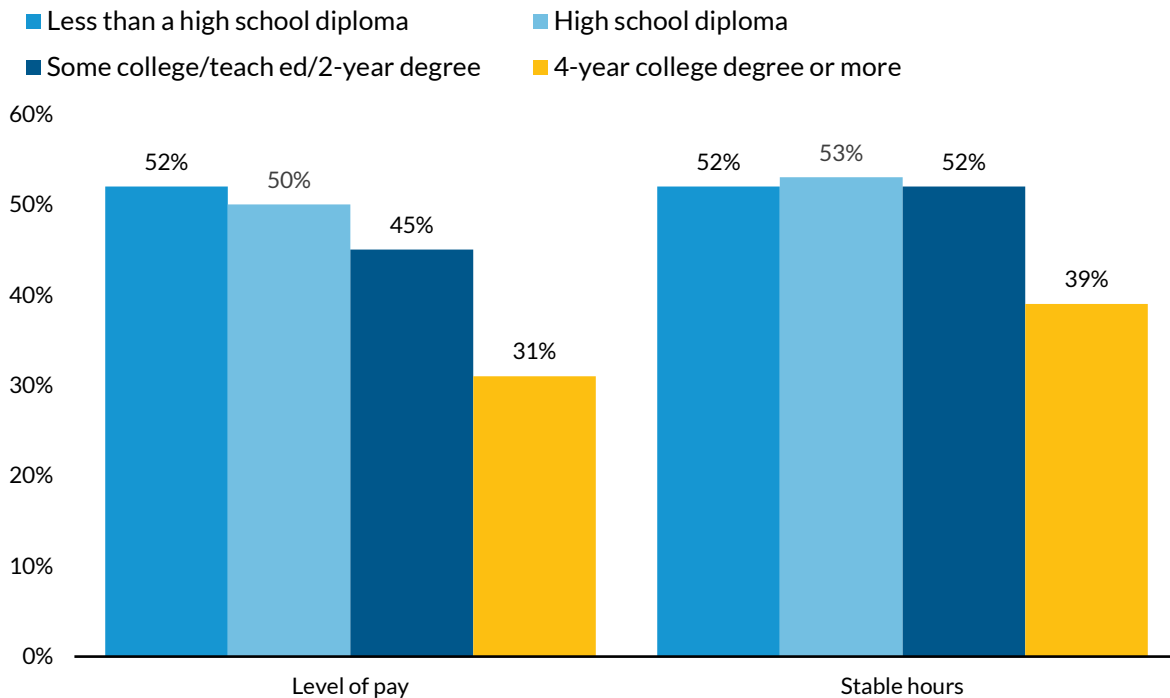
In our analysis, it appears that workers who were covered by Medicaid or formerly incarcerated—both indicators of greater economic disadvantage—did not have significantly different preferences about the job quality elements from workers without these disadvantages.

Educational Background and Employment Factors Like Unionization Shaped Workers' Preferences

People who graduated from a four-year college generally had similar preferences to those with less institutional education for purpose, autonomy at work, and advancement. However, for job elements that concerned job security and stability, their preferences diverged. College graduates less frequently said that level of pay and stable hours are “extremely important” (figure 8). Even after we controlled for other characteristics, respondents with a four-year degree were, respectively, 47 and 48 percent less likely to rate these elements in this way than those with less institutional education (appendix A).

FIGURE 8

People with Four-Year Degrees Said Level of Pay and Stable Hours Are “Extremely Important” Less Often Than People with Less Institutional Education



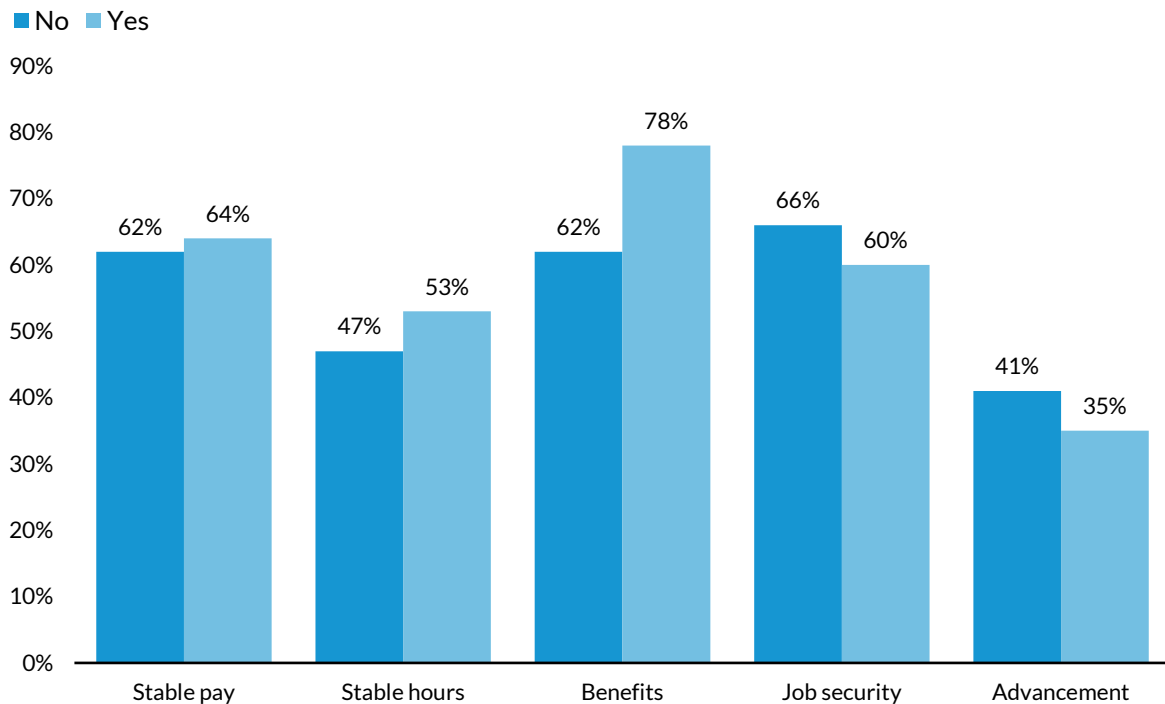
Source: Authors' tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

We hypothesized that people with different employment experiences would feel differently about what is important to them. However, we found that these experiences collectively tended to be less consistently related than demographics to workers' perceptions of the importance of job quality elements, regardless of whether people were self-employed or held a traditional job. Employment status and the number of jobs seemed to have effects on perceptions of the importance of a few job elements. People who were employed had about 32 percent lower odds of saying that benefits are “extremely important.” We also found that people with multiple jobs were about 30 percent less likely to assign high importance to control of hours and about two times more likely to care about benefits.

Unionization, in contrast, appeared to shape people's sense of what is important much more clearly than other employment factors. Union members said that stable pay, stable hours, and benefits are “extremely important” more frequently than other respondents (figure 9). However, this group tended to value job security and advancement less. These trends held up even after controlling for demographics and other factors.

FIGURE 9

Union Members Tended to Place Relatively More Emphasis on Stable Pay, Hours, and Benefits and Less on Job Security and Advancement



Source: Authors' tabulation of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Discussion

The Gallup survey provides a unique opportunity to explore how a wide array of job elements cluster and the types of factors that shape their importance to American workers. Several key themes emerged from the analysis, starting with how to think about people's preferences for job elements:

- All of the importance measures are significantly correlated with each other.
- Some job elements seem to cluster: job security and stability, purpose and control over working conditions, and advancement opportunities.

These findings imply there is strong evidence that job elements should be thought of as a bundle, rather than stand-alone elements, when we think about what it means to have a good job. At the same time, there may be smaller bundles of job elements that could help employers and policymakers think more coherently about larger dimensions of job quality, such as what bundle of elements might promote worker purpose and control over working conditions. Future research might further explore what job quality elements tend to appear together in jobs and what that means for workers and employers trying to improve job quality.

We also found trends concerning how workers' characteristics shaped their preferences:

- Women and people of color systematically said all job elements are “extremely important” more often than their counterparts.
- People with low levels of educational attainment and younger people just starting out in their careers tended to put more value on some elements.
- Union members rated benefits, stable pay, and stable hours as more important than nonunion members did, and job security and advancement as less.

Many of the survey respondents who put relatively more value on elements of job quality are the same people who were most likely in low-quality jobs: women, people of color, younger workers, and people with less education.⁴ It may be that people put more value on the elements of job quality that they do not currently enjoy because those elements are seen as more of a need than merely a preference. Once someone enjoys a certain level of pay, security, and flexibility, she may put relatively less emphasis on these job elements because they are largely issues that are resolved for her. Current job conditions may also explain why union members tended to value job security and advancement less; they may have felt that these elements were baked into their jobs, while benefits, stable pay, and hours were potentially still on the negotiation table.

These trends suggest that people may not fundamentally have different preferences, but rather experience very different levels of job quality. An exception might occur when people's preferences for job elements are closely associated with life stage or role in their household's ecosystem, and these preferences still might differ even controlling for current job quality. For example, we might expect women—who frequently take the lead on caregiving responsibilities—to have a stronger need than men for control of their hours.

To truly understand and disentangle the connection between job quality preferences and worker characteristics, future research would benefit from having information on workers' current job quality.

Many unknown factors shape individual preferences:

- Even after controlling for all of the factors explored in these analyses, the models could only explain a small fraction of the variation in importance measures (appendix A).

Future research might explore not only the role of current job conditions, but also such factors as people's attitudes, expectations, and the role their jobs play in their household economy. A better understanding of these factors could help businesses better target and tailor their approaches to different workers to improve their satisfaction and engagement on the job. This analysis shows that Americans see many different elements of job quality as important, not only pay and benefits. The differences in preferences we find across characteristics may be influenced by current access to these job elements, as well as by life circumstances. We undertook this analysis with these preference data in part because the breadth of job quality elements included here is not represented in any data on workers' current jobs. Researchers, advocates, and all stakeholders interested in improving job quality

should work to extend current and develop new data that includes a broader set of job quality elements. This will allow us to better understand the incidence of job quality elements on current jobs, how they bundle together and how they relate to worker characteristics. With this information, we can work toward solutions that can improve access to job quality for all workers.

Appendix A. Odds Ratios

TABLE A.1

Odds Ratios for Job Security and Stability Elements

		Job security and stability				
	Variable	Pay level	Stable pay	Stable hours	Job security	Benefits
Demographic trends	Female vs. male	1.383*	1.348*	1.648*	1.481*	1.768*
	Black vs. white	2.588*	1.720*	2.222*	1.710*	2.023*
	Hispanic/Latinx vs. white	2.085*	1.402	1.757*	1.417	1.47
	Other vs. white	1.172	0.988	1.003	0.887	1.024
	25–34 vs. 18–24	0.688	0.784	0.808	0.946	1.195
	35–54 vs. 18–24	0.701	0.735	0.736	0.783	1.676*
	55–64 vs. 18–24	0.612	0.685	0.655	0.727	1.549
Household dynamics	Foreign born vs. native	1.07	1.017	0.753	1.058	1.3
	Has children under 6 vs. none	1.095	1.15	1.141	0.935	0.97
	Has a partner vs. none	1.022	1.250*	1.201	1.271*	1.094
Education and work status	HS diploma vs. less than HS	1.115	1.004	0.897	1.165	0.754
	Some college/tech ed/2-yr degree vs. less than HS	0.867	1.016	0.796	0.966	0.659
	4-Year degree + vs. less than HS	0.529*	0.752	0.518*	0.652	0.606
	Unemployed vs. not in labor force	1.698	1.164	1.49	1.772	1.011
	Employed vs. not in labor force	1.08	1.188	0.956	1.126	0.682*
	Multiple jobs vs. not	1.025	0.976	1.208	1.181	2.066*
	Labor union member vs. not	0.871	0.607*	0.635*	0.513*	0.570*
Poverty and barriers	Self-employed vs. not	0.659	0.757	0.854	0.635	1.058
	Medicaid recipient vs. not	1.088	0.892	0.919	0.968	0.8
	Previously incarcerated vs. not	0.983	1.149	1.051	1.115	1.11
Constant		0.826	1.606	1.059	1.989	1.757
Observations		7,964	7,947	7,833	7,946	7,938
Pseudo R-squared		0.0595	0.0241	0.0527	0.0446	0.0653

Source: Authors' analysis of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Note: * indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level

TABLE A.2

Odds Ratios for Purpose and Autonomy and Advancement Elements

		Purpose and autonomy			Advancement	
Variable		Control over hours	Power to change things	Enjoyment	Purpose	Advancement
Demographic trends	Female vs. male	2.057*	1.271*	1.744*	1.744*	1.152
	Black vs. white	2.267*	1.364	1.065	1.272	2.641*
	Hispanic/Latinx vs. white	1.626*	1.632*	1.488*	1.613*	2.466*
	Other vs. white	1.168	1.182	0.75	0.861	1.328
	Other vs. white	1.168	1.182	0.75	0.861	1.328
	25–34 vs. 18–24	1.108	1.099	0.563*	0.844	0.461*
	35–54 vs. 18–24	1.075	1.072	0.571*	1.043	0.348*
	55–64 vs. 18–24	0.933	1.282	0.649	1.058	0.473*
Household dynamics	Foreign born vs. native	1.254	1.086	1.344	1.357	1.445
	Has children under 6 vs. none	1.164	0.983	1.047	1.017	1.423*
	Has a partner vs. none	1.325*	1.057	1.14	1.131	0.931
Education and work status	HS diploma vs. less than HS	1.045	0.911	0.775	0.931	0.705
	Some college/tech ed/2-yr degree vs. less than HS	0.919	0.835	0.844	0.902	0.699
	4-Year degree + vs. less than HS	1.093	0.875	0.957	1.067	0.724
	Unemployed vs. not in labor force	1.211	1.054	0.836	1.097	1.036
	Employed vs. not in labor force	1.188	1.085	1.09	0.911	0.841
	Multiple jobs vs. not	0.720*	0.822	0.914	0.854	0.792
	Labor union member vs. not	1.271	1.261	1.092	1.064	0.775
	Self-employed vs. not	0.97	0.853	0.636	0.763	0.681
Poverty and barriers	Medicaid recipient vs. not	1.037	1.075	0.849	0.995	1.296
	Previously Incarcerated vs. Not	1.255	1.156	1.284	1.397	1.526
Constant		0.203*	0.399*	1.582	1.12	1.383
Observations		7,956	7,955	7,966	7,960	7,952
Pseudo R-squared		0.0482	0.0148	0.025	0.0261	0.0775

Source: Authors' analysis of the Gallup Great Jobs Demonstration Study data.

Note: * indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level

Notes

- ¹ For more information or to download a copy of the report, the methodology, or the data and documentation, please see: <https://www.gallup.com/education/267590/great-jobs-lumina-gates-omidyar-gallup-report-2019.aspx>
- ² Interestingly, despite intuition and the attention in the literature that might lead us to think that level of pay is the most important job element to people, the percentage of respondents who rated level of pay as “extremely important” was actually lower than for most of the other elements. Other aspects of people’s preferences may also be surprising compared with the attention they get in research and policy.
- ³ Appendix A displays the odds ratios for all of the regressions. The relationships highlighted in this brief are consistent with the most salient findings from those analyses.
- ⁴ For more information on these disparities, see <https://equitablegrowth.org/fact-sheet-occupational-segregation-in-the-united-states/>

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Batia Katz is a research analyst in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, where she researches workforce development and apprenticeship, evidence and evaluation capacity, and job quality and mobility. Katz’s previous research experience includes studying the science labor market,

the impact of personality traits on employment outcomes, and gender and family in the workforce. Katz graduated with high honors from Haverford College, where she earned a BA in economics.

Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.



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