Nurturing Growth: Strategies for Worker Advancement

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Introduction

The pandemic induced great resignation has created a historically high labor shortage. In December 2022, the job opening rate was 6.8 percent—nearly the highest it's been since the U.S. Department of Labor began tracking the number in 2001.[i] One strategy businesses can use to increase worker retention is supporting worker advancement—offering transparent career ladders and supports to navigate those ladders can encourage workers to stay and grow their careers rather than seeking employment elsewhere.

In partnership with Pearson, SPR conducted a worker advancement study with the goal of identifying successful approaches and what makes them work. We first conducted a knowledge review of business and social science studies to identify effective advancement strategies.[ii] Then we interviewed subject matter experts and employers to learn about the advancement practices used by employers and which they thought were most impactful.[iii]

In this study, we identified six effective practices (illustrated in figure 1) and summarized below.

- **Workers have supervisors** who encourage and nurture growth and actively promote their career advancement. This was cited most often as a key factor.
- **The process for worker career advancement is clearly documented in career pathways, and employers set internal goals for worker advancement** (such as 50% of managers will be promoted from within) and workers have **help navigating them**.
- **Workplace supports are provided.** These are policies and structures that help all workers address barriers they may encounter as they seek to advance their skills and careers (e.g. childcare subsidies to help workers find affordable child care or advanced scheduling to provide workers with a predictable schedule).
- **Training and education opportunities are provided and utilized.** This includes skill building that helps workers advance their careers, such as on-the-job training (OJT), support for GED completion, or funds to support college tuition.
- Strategies to support worker advancement are integrated into the business's operations, including **leadership and management commitment** to worker advancement and regularly obtaining **worker input** on their experiences at work.
    - **Leaders and managers at all levels are committed to advancement goals**, provided with training on mentorship and are held accountable for advancing workers. Advancement outcomes are analyzed for variation by department, worker level, demographics, and other variables to identify possible unevenness in outcomes.
    - **Workers' feedback informs the design and continuous improvement** of career ladders and policies and structures to support worker

advancement, and feedback is disaggregated by employee level and demographics to identify possible systemic variation.[iv]

Exhibit 1. Effective Advancement Strategies

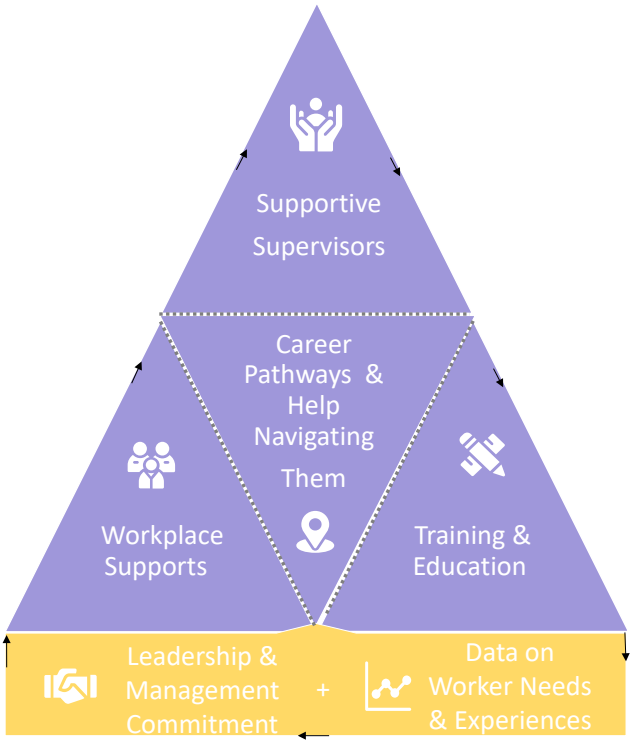

Exhibit 1 Notes: The dashed lines in the center of the exhibit indicate the connectedness of the strategies. The arrows on the border of the exhibit indicate that, to maintain effectiveness, the strategies are part of a continuous improvement process.

In recognition of the inequality of worker advancement for people of color, our background research considered studies that analyzed addressing inequity in the advancement process. What do we mean by inequality? Frontline workers in many sectors are disproportionately people of color and are often under-represented in positions of management and executive leadership. There are numerous contributing factors to this inequality including, biased practices, lack of transparent criteria for advancement, and historical policy choices that have created an unlevel playing field making it harder for people of color to experience economic mobility. [v] The strategies that are critical to minimizing bias in worker advancement are continuous improvement processes to identify inequality, and leaders and managers willing to take actions to correct it. Actions could include things such as implicit bias trainings and rubrics to ensure promotion opportunities. For example, if a company does not have frontline managers who are representative of their general workforces, those businesses can develop an action plan for addressing the imbalance and regularly assess progress. [vi]

SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORS

Nearly all employer respondents identified supervisors—and in some cases coaches or mentors—as a critical factor in helping frontline workers advance. They described supervisors as important primarily because supervisors are well-positioned to encourage, inspire, and teach. For example, one employer stated:

> *I have seen really good programs that have …[poor] curriculum. And they do great... You know why? Because the workers feel invested in, and they feel like their managers care about [them…, and they are feeling successful. And so they stay... I've seen great curriculum fail with the trappings of a poor superstructure of supports and leadership commitment.*

Respondents also explained that supervisors play important roles as champions (or gatekeepers) in the promotion and advancement process. As one employer articulated:

> *"People are always asking, 'What do I need to do to get to that next level?' And that's a lot of really what our supervisors focus on, is just kind of continuing to help people to gain those skills."*

Employers reported supporting and encouraging supervisors to assist frontline workers in the following ways:

- **Providing training for supervisors about the organization's career pathways and mentoring so that those supervisors can facilitate the professional growth and advancement of their teams.** Respondents explained that supervisors can affirm and express their support of employees' career advancement by educating them about career pathways, encouraging them to participate in education and training opportunities, and helping them to develop leadership skills.
    - One example of a program developed to train supervisors on such topics used role playing. It paired supervisors with actors who portrayed frontline workers in various scenarios related to supportive supervision practices. Immediately after each session, the supervisor received coaching feedback about what went well and how they could improve.
    - Recognizing the important role that frontline supervisors and hiring managers have in the advancement process, one subject matter expert mentioned the importance of providing supervisors with training to identify and counter the impact of implicit bias.[vii] Developing upskilling strategies that intentionally counter implicit bias can create a friendlier workplace, especially for underrepresented workers.

- **Rewarding supervisors for promoting from within to fill job openings and, specifically, for helping frontline workers advance.** Respondents noted that this can require redesigning accountability systems. For example, one employer suggested including successful internal promotion as part of supervisors' performance reviews. Another reported including specific goals for internal advancement in the company's strategic plan.

CLEAR CAREER PATHWAYS DELINATING OPPORTUNITES FOR ADVANCEMENT AND HELP NAVIGATING THEM

Another important advancement strategy is helping frontline workers navigate internal career pathways. As one employer noted:

> "*Ultimately, people want to advance. And so, unless they feel like there are career ladders or career pathways, both within a company and within the sector, then they will leave.*"

Effective pathway practices reported by interview respondents include:

- **Clearly documenting career advancement pathways.** Respondents reported the importance of having clear information about pathways to advancement within their organizations and of having the criteria that are used to assess promotion to the next level. For example, one employer uses a career navigation app that can be used on worker phones that provides "a line of sight into career pathways and other industries" and allows them to focus on specific skills they want to develop.
- **Communicating information about career pathways and career advancement criteria to frontline workers so that they are aware of other options open to them.** One employer shared information about advancement opportunities through email, in one-on-one conversations with managers and workers, and by putting up flyers in the break room. Another respondent described an employer-hosted open house where management from different departments met with frontline workers to talk about their skills and interests and what career pathways within the company were available to them. Another respondent reported that some employers partner with community-based organizations or education institutions to offer 2- to 3-day introductory courses on various career pathways available within their organizations; workers who participated were better able to decide whether they wanted to pursue advancement via one of those pathways.
- **Creating opportunities for career advancement via training programs that are directly connected to pay increases or promotions.** At one company, training programs are

clearly connected to pay increases at predetermined levels. Program curricula make clear the connection between the training and the company's internal career advancement pathways, so workers know what to expect after completing the training (i.e., how the training is linked to a raise or a promotion). Another employer developed a program specifically focused on moving frontline workers into leadership positions, whether via referral from a supervisor or by self-selection.

- **Employing staff whose specific function is to support frontline worker career advancement.** While supervisors are critical in encouraging advancement, two respondents reported that some companies employ career navigators to help frontline workers achieve their career goals. For example, they help workers determine what training is most appropriate for their career goals and help them find funding to pay for that training. Career navigators are sometimes internal human resource staff members and are sometimes employed by outside vendors hired by the company.
- **Developing formal and informal mentoring programs for frontline workers.** Such mentoring programs can help workers by providing them with guidance and support about how to advance within the company, whether in their current department or unit or in another. For example, at one company, workers can seek out mentors outside their department if they have interest in exploring other areas of the company.
- **Prioritizing internal advancement.** One strategy for providing frontline workers with more opportunities for advancement is to prioritize promotion from within. For example, one employer posts all new job openings internally before advertising outside the company, even reaching out directly to workers who may be a good fit for a position. Another company created a new position that focuses solely on identifying and supporting talent within the company to fill available positions.

WORKPLACE SUPPORTS

Most employer respondents identified workplace supports as a critical component of a comprehensive advancement strategy. These supports provide resources that can ensure employees are successful in their jobs and advancement.

Respondents described numerous workplace supports intended to address immediate needs that help employees come to work, obtain resources to invest in further education, and/or address other barriers and challenges they encounter that inhibit their ability to advance at work.

- **Supportive services.** Several employer respondents reported that their organizations provide frontline workers with access to multiple types of supportive services, such as childcare, transportation, and housing assistance. For example, One employer has on-

site resource coordinators who help frontline workers connect to supportive services, including those related to childcare, housing, transportation, healthcare needs, paying bills, and car maintenance.

- **Paid time off for attending training.** Some employers provide employees with paid leave for the time they spend taking classes. For example, one employer pays employees for the time they spend in classroom training associated with their apprenticeship. Another has set up an on-site lab where workers receive training; the employer sets aside paid time each week for employees to participate during work hours.
- **Supportive scheduling.** Several employers had changed their scheduling practices to better enable frontline workers to retain employment while tending to family responsibilities and participating in education and training programs to help them advance. For example, one employer worked with employees to shift schedules to accommodate workers with prescheduled family responsibilities or to attend training. The same employer partnered with a consultant to develop a phone app that gives employees more control over their scheduling and makes schedules more predictable. According to this employer, the app allows the worker to "relay their own scheduling needs to their supervisor. It's not just the manager; you [associates] have to input [their own] schedule."

TRAINING AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

Engaging frontline workers in skill building to advance their careers represents another important strategy. Respondents reported several common approaches to skill development, which can be classified into three broad types: training directly provided by employers; training provided via collaboration between an employer and an external education or training provider (usually on site at the employer's location); and training provided by external education and training institutions funded by the employer (or for which the employer facilitates worker access to funding).

- **Training directly provided by employers.** On-the-job training (OJT) is the most common type of directly provided training offered by employers because it can easily be blended into tasks workers already carry out as part of their jobs. Respondents reported using OJT for onboarding, throughout a worker's tenure, and for specific occupation transitions. For example, one employer has an apprenticeship program that combines classroom training provided by a community or technical college and OJT provided by the employer. The program is customizable at the local level, as this employer has multiple locations across the country. Another employer uses both OJT and other classroom-based training (e.g., English-language classes) as part of its open-hiring

model. In this model, the company has shifted resources that were previously spent to screen people (e.g., interviews, reference checks) into training. Instead of an intensive screening model, the company only screens individuals to make sure they are physically able to do the job (e.g., they can lift 50 pounds), and then trains them post-hire. They do set expectations early on that workers be on time, respectful, and ready to learn.

- **Training provided via a collaboration between an employer and an external education or training provider.** The most common examples of this type of training are high school completion programs and English-language training programs. Employers reported working with educational institutions to develop these programs because high school diplomas or equivalencies and English fluency are typically required for workers to be able to advance to jobs higher on career ladders and/or to enroll in postsecondary education programs. One company worked with an online accredited school district to develop a high school completion program specifically for working-age adults. The program considered reasons people may have originally dropped out of high school and built in supports to keep them engaged. For example, because many students quit school due to poor grades, the program is competency-based and does not award letter grades.
- **English language training.** On employer worked with its university partners to offer a high school equivalency program and an English as a second language (ESL) instruction program. As an employer representative explained,

  > *We definitely have an ESL program and I do think that is a high-impact strategy. Sometimes the inability to speak English prevents somebody from moving from the kitchen up to the front of the house and getting promoted.*

  Another company does not require a high level of English proficiency for its entry-level roles and offers translation services in partnership with the local United States Refugee Resettlement Program for its two-day orientation class. Then it pairs employees with informal trainers that can speak their language. As employees move up the career ladder and need to be more comfortable communicating in English, the company offers on-site ESL classes.
- **Funding—or facilitating access to funding—for training provided by external education and training institutions.** Another common skill-building strategy reported by respondents was for employers to cover the costs (either fully or partially) of programs provided by education and training institutions, either online or on site at those institutions' locations. In some cases, this assistance is provided via tuition reimbursement, where workers pay for their tuition out-of-pocket first and are then reimbursed. Many employees lack the cash to cover tuition, however, even when they will eventually be reimbursed. Thus, some companies have shifted to providing funding

to cover all or most of the cost up front.[viii] For example, one company provides an[ix]y employee who has been working an average 15 hours a week for 90 days up-front access to $2,500 a year in tuition funds (managers have access to $3,000 a year). Another company has developed relationships with publicly funded workforce and training programs to facilitate access for its workers to public funding for training, including Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), Pell Grant, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Incumbent Worker funding.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

Multiple employers and SMEs highlighted the importance of buy-in from employer managers, from the executive level to frontline supervisors, when operationalizing advancement strategies. The primary approach used by advancement champions to develop this buy-in was to demonstrate how such strategies help increase employee retention and reduce turnover, which in turn reduces recruitment costs. As one leader stated:

> *I spent 6 months as a traveling salesman, selling the promise of upskilling [and advancement strategies] to people that didn't know what I was talking about and didn't know what a credential was. But I talked to them about an objective they had [that could be achieved by upskilling], which was to retain workers and to advance those workers. So, they believed me and I sold the product [the upskilling program].*

Other champions of worker advancement emphasized the effects of advancement strategies on brand loyalty. For instance, one respondent explained:

> *I do think there's a brand image quantification [from advancement strategies]. Can we drill that down to a particular program? Maybe, maybe not. But I do think that that [the benefit to brand image of worker advancement strategies] is a place that companies are starting to look more intensely at.*

Another employer explained that frontline worker advancement strategies connect to his company's goal of being an organization that supports its employees and puts them at the center:

> *And so the workforce focus is really entirely….How are we developing and driving strategic programs to meet our vision of being a kind of employer of choice and really focused on social justice and many of the things we've talked about?*

Respondents asserted that evidence of these "bottom-line" benefits from frontline worker advancement strategies can be helpful in making the case to senior executives who have competing priorities when it comes to decisions about where to invest company resources. Moreover, they believed that measurable returns could support a case for embedding advancement in a company's overall strategic plan.

DATA ON FRONTLINE WORKER NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES

Respondents agreed that another key aspect of successfully implementing the frontline worker advancement strategies discussed above is to regularly collect rigorous and comprehensive data on worker needs and experiences and use the data to assess frontline worker needs, identify gaps in upskilling investments, and assess advancement practices for equity.

They reported several common strategies and practices for such data collection and assessments.

- **Collecting feedback from frontline workers themselves on how to fill gaps.** Employers and SMEs highlighted three primary mechanisms for seeking feedback directly from frontline workers: one-on-one conversations with workers, employee surveys, and small group discussions.
- **Creating a trusting environment.** Several respondents underscored the importance of trust between workers and their managers to facilitate the collection of honest and accurate data. One employer even recommended bringing in a third party to collect data from frontline workers to make it more likely that workers would be open and candid in their responses to questions.
- **Assessing needs on an ongoing basis and during the design phase.** Employers reported that data collection needs to be a continuous process in order to identify gaps and needs on an ongoing basis. For example, one employer described designing training programs for frontline workers as "an ongoing evolution." His company constantly tracks which employees complete trainings and how long they take to do so, so that they can try to improve their metrics. While one training module initially took workers 35 hours to complete, multiple learner and partner feedback sessions helped the employer adjust and rework the content (e.g., rearranging lessons into shorter modules, introducing multiple checkpoints and "mini-goals" spread out throughout the training). As a result, the time needed to complete that training was shortened by several hours.
- **Examining internal hiring, retention, and promotion data to ensure that an organization is meeting its internal goals for worker advancement and to identify possible inequity in outcomes**. As described earlier, some employers set internal promotion goals and regularly self-assess if they are meeting those goals. Employers also measure the utilization and outcomes of upskilling efforts and analyze how outcomes vary by demographic groups and employee levels. Outcome metrics include attrition, absenteeism, promotions, training utilization, and support service use or referrals to support providers.

Conclusion

The increasing attention on quality jobs has resulted in numerous reports about quality jobs, including from the Aspen Institute, the Urban Institute, and the National Fund for Workforce Solutions.[x] Comparing these frameworks yields four common areas:

- Compensation (i.e. wages and benefits)
- Worker protections (e.g. reduced wage violations)
- A supportive work environment (e.g. supportive supervisor practices, transparent career ladders and promotion criteria)
- Worker voice (e.g. participatory management practices and collecting feedback from employees).

However the literature does not indicate which of these factors have the most impact on quality. Our research brief builds on this work and expands on it by identifying supportive supervisors as the most commonly reported impactful strategy for job advancement among our employer interviews.

Another key strategy is offering workers training and education supports, but supporting advancement also requires the strategies discussed here: clear career pathways and help navigating those pathways, workplace supports, leadership and management commitment, and data on worker needs and experience.

The most effective companies have integrated these elements into their company practices and culture. For example, one company we interviewed developed an "employee experience calendar" which is a way for them to systematize the implementation of their strategic goals at the employee level. For instance, since the company prioritize workplace supports, the calendar codifies that on certain days of the week they have resource coordinators on sight or ESL classes. As more companies begin to implement these types of practices, both worker advancement and job quality will improve.

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[i] The highest rate was 7.4% in March 2022 and the lowest was 2.8 in July 2013. See: https://www.bls.gov/jlt/

[ii] Our review included approximately 30 studies and reports. Most of the studies we reviewed included employer perspectives. The studies that didn't include the employer perspectives included the perspectives of training programs that prepared job seekers for the labor force (many for entry level jobs) or were literature reviews or empirical studies about the labor market. Key studies that informed our interview guide structure were: Cukier, W. (2020), Deloitte Consulting & Aspen Institute (2015)., Hanleybrown, F. et al. (2020), Oakes, K., et al. (2016), and U.S Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2020). The primary advancement strategies identified were providing upskilling (i.e. opportunities for learning new skills on the job), mentorship, leadership and management commitment to internal advancement, career pathways and navigation assistance, continuing education, workplace supports (such as flexible work hours), and conducting on-going assessment of worker needs.

[iii] We interviewed 7 subject matter experts and 7 employer representatives. We identified employers known for effective advancement practices. We know these employers offer effective upskilling programs because their programs were cited in published reports or were recommended to us by subject matter experts or members of the Pearson team.

[iv] For example, a worker survey at a company with a predominantly male workforce may show overall a small portion of workers with child care challenges impacting their ability to get to work. However, when disaggregated by gender the portion my be high among women (who are commonly the primary care giver).

[v] Biases include : 1) Hiring bias based on names on a resume. Field experiments have shown employers discriminate in selecting people for interviews based on name as a proxy for race or ethnicity. See Nunely (2015) 2)Recruitment practices that rely more on professional networks than widely advertising job openings in the community can perpetuate existing racial disparities because people's networks are often made up of people from their same race. One way employers can assess this is determine if the racial composition of their applicant pool is

reflective of their industries and the areas in which they are located. Historical policy choices include: Redlining--Through the late 1970s, Federal Housing Authority (FHA) engaged in practice of redlining, where the FHA would effectively not provide financial services (e.g. loans or re-financing) to neighborhoods that were racially or ethnically mixed. The practices limited access to homeownership among Blacks, which impacted the ability of families to accumulate wealth. The lack of such wealth contributes to economic insecurity and likely impacts to a family's ability to finance post-secondary education for their children. See: Massey and Denton (1993).

[vi] See Hanleybrown, F. et al. (2020) for more strategies.

[vii] Implicit biases are unconscious attitudes or perceptions of people based on stereotypes that might lead to preferential treatment. In the workplace, this could result in a supervisor promoting someone they know or someone who is demographically similar to them.

[viii] Several employers and SMEs noted that tuition reimbursement programs (as opposed to tuition assistance programs) can actually perpetuate racial and wealth inequities, as workers may not be able to afford to pay tuition up front. One SME explained, "Reimbursement programs count on people having enough money to pay for it and then sit around and wait 3 or 4 months for you to reimburse them after they complete the course. Well, I can afford to do that, not only because I have a nice salary, but because no one in my immediate family is depending on me to support them financially. My colleagues of color, who may have equally nice salaries, are often coming from low-wealth families [and] were like, 'Well I am my parents' retirement fund.' And so they don't have $4,000 that they can outlay for a course. That's an example of an upskilling policy with no overt racial animus that nevertheless has disparate racial impact."

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