The structure of the modern workplace has failed to meet the needs of many, particularly caregivers and people with disabilities. This considerably limits equitable earning and wealth building efforts by these communities. Increasing flexibility of high quality jobs and implementing more inclusive hiring practices are important steps to support employee well-being and financial health.

Workplace priorities have shifted. Many employees across the United States are demanding more from their workplaces, including greater flexibility. A Pew Research study found that 45% of workers who quit in 2021 said they did so because of lack of flexibility to choose when they would work. Nearly half cited childcare issues as a reason they left.1 At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has made inequality harder to ignore. Caregivers, people with disabilities, and people of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including facing increased health risks,2 worse mental health outcomes,3 and financial shocks like job loss and having to leave the workforce to care for family members.4

Though requests for flexibility in the workplace are more salient today, they are not new. For caregivers of children and other family members (who are typically women)5 and people with disabilities, flexibility has always been a requirement. For example, people with mobility impairments benefit from remote jobs that allow them to work from home.6 People with vision impairments may need to leave work earlier or have an earlier shift so they can drive or walk home before it gets dark.7 Caregivers of children and other family members often need flexibility in their schedule to attend to both expected and unexpected needs during the day.

Creating jobs that give these workers the flexibility they need would benefit companies, in addition to workers. Companies that have more racial and gender diversity in their leadership have higher profits.8 One study at a manufacturing company found that teams that have a greater diversity of people with disabilities were more productive.9

Yet, people with disabilities and caregivers are less likely to be hired and more likely to have lower salaries than their peers.10 Intersectional identities can compound this disparity. For instance, in 2021 unemployment rates for people with disabilities were highest among those who were also people of color.11 A 2019 Gallup survey found that race, ethnicity, and gender are strongly correlated with job quality. The study found that Black women (followed by Latina women) are the most likely to be in jobs that lack benefits, stability or sufficient pay,12 making them more likely to be financially vulnerable. This is important because having a high quality job—one with predictable and fair pay, benefits, meaningful work, and potential for development—improves the quality of people’s lives as well as their ability to pass on wealth to their children.14
Shared Prosperity Catalyst is an initiative, informed by behavioral science, aimed at reducing poverty and inequality in the United States, starting with reducing the many excess costs associated with living with poverty. Poverty rates among caregivers and people with disabilities are high,\textsuperscript{15} which isn’t surprising given the barriers they face to finding and securing a high quality job. In lieu of broader systemic change through the creation of policies that provide financial support to caregivers and people with disabilities, efforts to restructure the existing modern workplace are critical to ensure they have a fair shot at financial health. Through Shared Prosperity Catalyst, ideas42 has identified solutions with the potential to improve the financial health of caregivers and people with disabilities through flexible, high quality jobs.

**Current barriers to high quality employment**

**Part-time and gig work fail to provide economic security**

While part-time and gig work offer a source of income with flexibility,\textsuperscript{16} both can also come at a considerable cost to workers. Part-time work is almost always lower paid, more tenuous, and lacks the health insurance and other benefits of full-time work.\textsuperscript{17} Participating in the gig economy can even increase financial hardship among families with low incomes and may require employees to cover their own insurance and other costs.\textsuperscript{18} Put together, these employment options fail to provide most employees with the security or income they need.

**Hiring processes exacerbate bias**

Various elements of hiring processes perpetuate historical inequities and allow biases to drive hiring decisions. For example, sourcing job candidates via existing employees’ social networks can reinforce inequity by excluding Black job candidates, who are less likely than white candidates to get jobs through their social networks.\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, practices like failing to use standardized hiring criteria or using ambiguous criteria like “cultural fit” perpetuate biases in hiring because they rely on hiring managers’ intuition to make decisions (rather than candidates’ concrete qualifications).\textsuperscript{20}

Such practices harm people with disabilities and women caregivers because intuition is often affected by stereotypes, and both groups face stereotypes about their level of commitment and competence in the workplace.\textsuperscript{21} For example, in a 2018 survey conducted by the Department of Labor, over half of employers reported being concerned about people with disabilities’ ability to perform job duties.\textsuperscript{22} Another study found that women with children are rated as less competent and less committed to their jobs than their peers without children, while men with children are rated as more committed than men without children.\textsuperscript{23}
Innovative solutions

The pandemic has put pressure on businesses to address worker demands. For instance, many employers are considering offering benefits like childcare to address women’s departure from the workplace. While offering childcare will help address a crucial barrier for some—primarily parents in salaried jobs—it’s insufficient on its own. Childcare does not address the needs of other groups like caregivers of older adults or people with disabilities. Additionally, companies are unlikely to extend childcare benefits to all employees, leaving out part-time employees, contract workers, and gig workers.

To address the barriers faced by caregivers and people with disabilities, innovative businesses like Handoff and FlexJobs are creating new pathways to high quality jobs that better fit their needs.

Finding flexible, high quality job opportunities

Workers who need flexibility can have a hard time finding jobs that meet their needs, which is part of why many can turn to alternatives like part-time or gig work. FlexJobs was founded to solve this specific problem. FlexJobs has a team of researchers who screen jobs and companies to make sure they are legitimate, high quality, and will serve FlexJobs’ users. When users come to their website, they see a curated list of flexible jobs that can be filtered based on multiple types of flexibility (e.g., different work schedules, remote or hybrid environments). Users can also filter jobs based on “accolades”, like being military-friendly or recognized by the Human Rights Campaign as companies with policies and practices that ensure LGBTQ+ equity. FlexJobs further provides users with resources, guidance, and coaching to help them understand the landscape of flexible jobs and to set them up for success as they apply for jobs through the site.

While FlexJobs is making it easier for workers to find existing jobs, Handoff is tackling this challenge by creating new jobs—starting by focusing on the needs of breadwinning mothers and caregivers. Handoff begins by working with reputable employers to identify positions that can be turned into a “job share”: two people share one role as job partners, splitting their hours while still getting access to benefits and opportunities for advancement. Once in the role, the job partners use Handoff’s licensed software to coordinate schedules and manage their shared workflow. For example, Handoff’s tools make it easy for job partners to update each other about their progress, important tasks, and new relevant information via a video tool and automated information sharing.
Mitigating bias in the hiring process

Making hiring more inclusive requires systematically changing processes and practices. Having a diverse applicant pool—at every stage of the process—plays an important role. Research shows that if there is only one woman or person of color in a finalist pool, employers are very unlikely to hire the woman or person of color. Sourcing candidates broadly, and not just through existing networks, can help create a more diverse pool of candidates. However, it’s also important that employers signal that they want and value candidates who need flexibility. This can be done through intentional language choice in hiring materials, ensuring processes and tools are accessible, and by implementing workplace policies that support employees who need flexibility and accommodations.

FlexJobs helps employers source candidates broadly by targeting job seekers in typically overlooked rural and economically depressed areas and people with disabilities. In doing so, FlexJobs is removing hassles employers might face diversifying their applicant pool, like figuring out how to reach and appeal to a broader set of candidates. While hassles, or small barriers that make us less likely to follow-through on our intentions, shouldn’t be what determines who has access to opportunities, even a well-intentioned employer could fail to recruit broadly because of them. FlexJobs also removes hassles for users by compiling all the information they would need about an employer in one place, making it easy for them to learn about workplace policies and values. Not only does this help users confirm the workplace will be supportive of their needs, it helps employers make their supportive policies and inclusive culture salient to applicants.

Handoff leverages evidence-based practices from behavioral science to reduce biases throughout its hiring process. Rather than trying to change individuals, such as through unconscious bias training, these practices are behaviorally informed because they change the context of job searching and hiring to reduce biases in decisions. For example, Handoff removes gender-coded language from job descriptions, which have been shown to reduce the number of women applying for a job by impacting whether they see themselves in the role or find it appealing. Once a candidate applies for a position, Handoff uses hiring criteria linked to on-the-job responsibilities and structured, standardized interview guides to evaluate candidates. These practices create safeguards around hiring decisions so there are fewer chances for stereotypes to affect hiring managers’ decisions. For example, rather than using intuition to decide if someone is a good fit, hiring managers must use the provided criteria to make decisions. Similarly, structured interview guides ensure that all candidates are asked the same questions, giving them all equal opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Without structured guides, hiring managers can conduct interviews differently based on whether they feel a candidate is a good fit: not asking candidates difficult questions for those they feel are a good fit or shortening an interview for those that they feel are not.

The Impact of Job Sharing

Job sharing, when two people share one full-time role, is an established model in some countries. It has been implemented successfully by the U.K. government since 2015. Research from the U.K. suggests that job sharing could lead to more women in leadership. In addition to being able to balance their responsibilities at home and at work, women who participated in a job share were able to leverage their complementary skill sets to get work done while also learning from their job partner’s strengths. Job sharing has also been implemented in the U.S., although often informally. When job sharing is informal, employees need to advocate for and create their shared job role. A survey of employers in Michigan (which has a formal statewide program) found that job sharing has meaningful benefits for employers, including higher employee retention, lower absenteeism and more productive employees.
Creating Work that Fits into People’s Lives

For decades, people with disabilities, people with caregiving responsibilities, and people of color have been facing exclusionary practices that prevent them from accessing high quality jobs. The COVID-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the conflict between caregiving responsibilities and workplace expectations, as well other systemic injustices that affect marginalized communities, and led many people to demand that employers do more to meet the needs of employees. Organizations like Handoff and FlexJobs, and the employers that partner with them, are answering that call and redefining who has access to high quality, flexible jobs. They are also helping employers access a talented and qualified but underutilized job candidate pool. By providing sufficient income for employees to cover their costs and build wealth, these jobs create a path to improved financial health for employees, and support their well-being by providing a sense of purpose, dignity, and control in their lives.

Shared Prosperity Catalyst is a multi-year initiative focusing on creating more equitable prosperity across the U.S.. This initiative applies a behavioral lens to financial health, as well as the physical and mental health impacts of experiencing poverty, driven by an experienced team of behavioral designers, policy experts, and business builders and powered by a diverse network of academics, practitioners, and entrepreneurs with experience in the communities we aim to serve.

ideas42 is a non-profit behavioral design firm that uses behavioral science to help solve difficult social problems and achieve impact at scale.
Endnotes


7 Livingston v. Fred Meyer Stores, 388 F. App’x 738 (9th Cir. 2010)


30 For more on these practices, see TIME’S UP Foundation. “From Ideal Worker To Ideal Workplace: Using Behavioral Design to Create More Equitable Companies.” https://timesupfoundation.org/work/equity/from-ideal-worker-to-ideal-workplace/.