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Katy Knight (left) of the Siegel Family Endowment and José Cisneros (right), elected treasurer for the City and County of San Francisco, listen as MIT professor and Work of the Future Initiative co-chair David Autor provides feedback on how to design an effective evaluation of a labor force development program.

Photo: J-PAL North America

Experts join J-PAL North America in advancing conversation on the work of the future

Academic, government, and advocacy leaders gathered to promote collaborative research partnerships to identify strategies that help workers thrive in today’s labor market.

J-PAL North America
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On Jan. 14, J-PAL North America’s Work of the Future Initiative hosted an afternoon of conversation on how to address the changing nature of work while advancing equity and opportunity. The event, entitled Building A Future That Works For All, was attended by 35 leaders from nonprofits, academia, government, philanthropy, and advocacy organizations.

“The assumption that we can solve these problems without workers in the conversation is one that we need to leave behind,” said Ai-jen Poo, co-founder and executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, as she kicked off the first panel of the day. This theme was echoed throughout the day’s conversations, which were hosted by the Gerri and Rich Wong family at the Accel office in Palo Alto, California. Rich Wong is an alumnus of MIT engineering and the MIT Sloan School of Management.

The event sought to continue J-PAL North America and the Work of the Future Initiative’s efforts to shift the conversations surrounding the future of work to focus on working people and collaborative research partnerships. As J-PAL North America Executive Director Mary Ann Bates stated in her introductory remarks: “We’re here to talk about the work of the future,

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which is about many big ideas – automation, artificial intelligence, and more – but we care about this work because of the people.”

J-PAL North America launched the Work of the Future Initiative in April 2019 to identify effective, evidence-based strategies to increase opportunities, reduce disparities, and help all workers navigate and thrive in the labor markets of the future.

Research partnerships are vital to generating the rigorous evidence necessary to identify these effective strategies. The recent event's conversations sought to provide attendees with a chance to forge new partnerships and discuss innovative ideas for new programs and evaluations.

The first panel discussed the role of rigorous research to inform worker-centered policies. Aijen Poo focused her discussion on the care sector – a workforce that will grow at five times the rate of any other sector in the coming years. Specifically, Poo noted the creative and innovative measures that the National Domestic Workers Alliance is taking to ensure that care work is dignified and that domestic workers are protected, including turning to technology: “What we’re trying to do is deploy technology to solve for dignity and equity.”

Harvard professor and J-PAL North America Co-Scientific Director Lawrence Katz followed Poo's remarks by discussing the growing divergence between real wages and worker productivity. Katz cited rising inequality as a primary driver of the decline in upward mobility and the stagnation of wages; more so than slow economic growth.

Lastly, Aneesh Raman, senior advisor to California Governor Gavin Newsom, closed the conversation with a discussion on why collaboration across sectors and a willingness to innovate is crucial to progress: “We live in a world where politicians have very little opportunity to fail, which makes it very hard to innovate. We need to create a shared ownership of risk. Philanthropy, government, the private sector, and the nonprofit community need to come together to innovate and make a difference.”

Other highlights of the day included a discussion of an ongoing research partnership between MIT Professor and Work of the Future Initiative Co-Chair David Autor, Rutgers University professor and J-PAL-affiliated researcher Amanda Agan, and Irene Liu and Jen Yeh of Checkr.

Checkr is a selected partner through the Work of the Future Initiative's inaugural innovation competition. The company partnered with Autor and Agan to evaluate whether their Positive Adjudication Matrix (PAM) can reduce bias in the background-check and hiring process. PAM allows employers to deem certain types of offenses irrelevant to the roles for which they're hiring. Companies can then choose to either filter out or de-emphasize these criminal records.

The candid conversation addressed the challenging aspects of partnering to design an evaluation and discussed what conditions must hold for more productive research partnerships to form in the future. Autor discussed the need for a champion within a partner organization, stating, “Data is threatening in the sense that it can produce results that you're not looking for. You need a champion within your organization to move this forward.”

The Checkr team expressed their hope that the evaluation of their product can inform policy decisions in the future: “There are states that have laws dictating who can and cannot apply to these companies. If we have evidence there, that can be really helpful.”



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Other panelists, such as Katy Hamilton of the Center for Work Education and Employment and Jukay Hsu of Pursuit, run organizations that provide direct support to workers seeking quality jobs. Hamilton and Hsu discussed the programs that they hope to evaluate and turned to the audience for advice and constructive questions to inform their evaluation design processes.

To wrap up the day, representatives from academia, philanthropy, the private sector, and government offered a call to action to other leaders within their sectors. Themes included centering workers' voices and collaborating across sectors.

Katy Knight of the Siegel Family Endowment discussed the steps that philanthropic organizations should take to promote people-centered practices: "We need to bring other people into the conversation and listen to their personal expertise to make sure we really understand the work we're doing." Mark Gorenberg of Zetta Venture Partners echoed these statements, stressing the private sector's obligation to invest responsibly in programs that promote dignity.

José Cisneros, elected treasurer for the City and County of San Francisco, discussed how collaboration is crucial for innovation: "The government is ready to be creative and work in partnership with philanthropy and the private sector to see if we can do things differently." Columbia University professor and J-PAL-affiliated researcher Peter Bergman advocated for a similar type of collaboration within the academic community, calling for larger and more diverse research teams to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses of programs.

The Work of the Future Initiative will continue to shape the dialogue surrounding the future of work by bringing together leaders and innovators across sectors to engage in conversations and research partnerships that center worker voices and concerns. By generating research on strategies to help workers thrive in today's labor market, the initiative seeks to shape a more equitable future of work.

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