How New Jersey Asked Workers About the Future of Work: The Importance of Partnership

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Textile factory in Paterson, New Jersey (1937). Source: National Archives and Records Administration

An architect would never design a house without talking to the client, yet those who govern often create policy without the meaningful input of affected residents. That is why the New Jersey Future of Work Task Force went online in February

2020 to ask New Jersey residents what they felt were the challenges that technology posed to the future of work in order to inform the Task Force's recommendations. Nearly 4,000 responded.

ORGANIZED BY THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY FUTURE OF WORK TASK FORCE

Established by Governor Phil Murphy in 2018, the Future of Work Task Force is charged with understanding how the coming changes in technology will impact New Jerseyans and is responsible for producing a comprehensive policy roadmap to prepare Garden State workers and businesses for the future of work. In order to better identify challenges facing workers and businesses, the Task Force invited New Jersey's workers to share and rank their concerns related to the future of work, in particular, the need for skills and lifelong learning, worker rights and benefits, and worker health and safety, during a three-week online consultation in February.

The large number of participants in such a short time was the result of collaboration with over 40 community stakeholders and workforce organizations. Collaborators helped share the request to participate and amplify the importance of the invitation.

The Tools

In order to make it easy for people to tell us their concerns, the Task Force used the "wiki survey" tool called All Our Ideas. All Our Ideas has been used around the world in over 18,000 different online engagement exercises. Created by Princeton sociology professor Matt Salganik, this open source tool asks respondents to choose between two statements and select the one with which they most strongly agree. By repeatedly "voting" between two statements, the software produces a

rank-ordered list of those statements. Participants can also draft their own statements.

166 different "problem statements" were drafted across the three categories, and participants were asked to choose which problem was of greater concern. For example, in skills and lifelong learning, they were asked to choose between such statements as:

- Unnecessary degree requirements for jobs have a bigger impact on low-income populations.
- Employers do not understand the benefits of investing in training for their workers.
- Higher education curricula may not align with the skills that employers demand.

The system then randomized the pitting of options against each other.

All Our Ideas Pairwise "Wiki Survey" Tool

The pairwise feature is easier than responding to a lengthy survey. Additionally, there was no minimum or maximum threshold for participation—participants could answer one or one hundred questions. The average number of questions answered was a little over eight questions per respondent.

In addition to an easy-to-use platform, the Task Force lowered barriers to participation by translating all materials into Spanish to appeal to the 1.3 million New Jerseyans who speak Spanish at home.

Getting the Word Out

Without outreach, however, even the best tool with the most comprehensive content will not attract participation and surely not attract the diverse participation we were hoping for in this engagement. But how does one reach out to thousands of people in a very short time frame? Find allies to help.

The Future of Work Task Force started with its own members. The members of the Task Force hail from academia, labor unions, workforce training organizations, think tanks, private enterprise, and government. All share a deep experience and expertise with work in various forms. Task Force members helped shape the engagement strategy and promoted the engagement within their networks.

The Office of the Governor and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development also helped identify over 100 organizations as potential collaborators and 40 of those offered to help with this outreach campaign.

These organizations' missions and memberships are as diverse as New Jersey itself — fighting poverty, strengthening faith communities, organizing domestic workers, feeding the hungry, and advocating for worker rights. Partners included AARP New Jersey, Black Issues Convention, Anti-Poverty Network of New Jersey, Bangladeshi American Women's Development Initiative, and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, to name a few.

In the lead up to the consultation, the Office of Innovation and the Task Force convened three preparatory calls to efficiently bring partners up to speed on the context, scope, and goals of the work ahead. These calls also served as an opportunity for the stakeholders to suggest improvements. Finally, partners also learned about each other's methods for soliciting participation and shared materials.

Partners emphasized the importance of enabling people to participate anonymously. Thus, we collected no demographic information as part of the survey. While this means the survey might not be representative, extensive outreach by partners gave us the opportunity to reach as diverse an audience as possible.
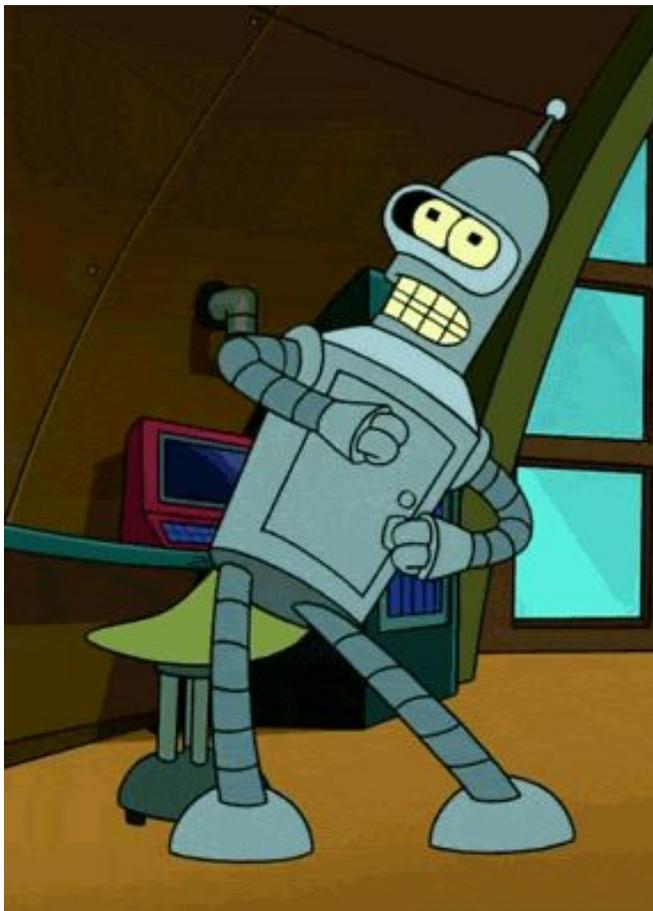
In addition to the discussion of outreach strategy, the Office of Innovation developed a communications toolkit, including sample text for a dedicated email blast, sample newsletters copy, and proposed social media posts to make it easy for partners to get the word out.

The copy was kept simple and the graphics were tongue-in-cheek featuring emojis, *The Jetsons,* and a dancing robot or two for good measure.

Demonstrating another benefit of collaboration, partners made improvements to the materials

to cater to their respective audience—this included translating materials into different languages.

Coordinating an outreach campaign involving dozens of stakeholders required significant investment—phone calls, direct emails, and meetings. But finding common ground with allies, asking for help, and empowering partners made it possible to get significantly more participation in a shorter amount of time.

Looking back

The potential audience for talking about work is significant—everyone interacts with the concept of work in one way or another. Whether it's young people preparing to enter the workforce or veteran workers wondering about their careers' longevity, concern about the future of work is a common sentiment. This fact allowed the Task Force to recruit a wide and diverse set of partners to encourage and facilitate engagement within their respective communities.

As the adage goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

By making use of each Task Force member's community and expanding the coalition to other allies in government, business, and the nonprofit world, the Task Force was able to tap the collective insight of thousands of New Jerseyans. As a result, the state will realize better, more informed policy outcomes.