

THRIVING AT WORK: A HEALTH-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR DECENT WORK

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Introduction

As of September 2021, over 27,000 Ontario workers had contracted COVID-19 at work according to WSIB claims.¹ Even while stay-at-home orders were in place to reduce COVID-19 spread the majority of Toronto-area workers had to continue working outside their homes – 65 per cent.² Toronto neighbourhoods with the highest proportions of workers who cannot work from home have faced the highest levels of COVID cases.³ Many have called for enhanced protections and supports for workers such as permanent paid sick days, adequate personal protective equipment and training, and increased proactive workplace inspections.^{4,5} However, the pandemic response, which has had a limited focus on working conditions, has not adequately addressed the risks that COVID-19 poses to workers' safety, mental health, and job and income security.

Our economy is often discussed in terms of “jobs.” But our economic recovery and our health depend on the creation of *good* jobs. The relationship between work and health has been well established through decades of research.⁶ Work can play a significant role in what keeps us mentally and physically healthy as well as what makes us sick and unwell. When workers earn a fair wage and working conditions are healthy and safe our working lives can be a source of stable income, benefits, and social connections that contribute to our health and well-being. On the other hand, poor working conditions – from unfair wages and inadequate benefits to unsafe working conditions, long hours, or poor work-life balance – can all contribute to ill health.^{7,8}

The emergence of COVID-19 has brought many of these issues to the forefront for everyone in Ontario. As we grapple with the devastating and inequitable impacts of the pandemic, it is essential to understand the role decent and healthy jobs can play in recovering as a city, province, and country.

Some of the ingredients of a healthy job are clear and there are some minimum protections in place in Ontario to keep workers safe.⁹ But we have also seen great changes in the ways that we work which require worker protections that keep pace. Since the 1970s, Ontario has seen less full-time, full-year work and a growth in temporary, contract, and involuntary part-time work¹⁰ that is often characterized by low wages, insecurity, and a lack of benefits.¹¹ This rise in insecure

and precarious jobs can be felt differently across communities. Women, racialized and Indigenous workers, workers with disabilities, newcomers, and 2SLGBTQ+ workers are more likely to be working in lower paid, insecure, and more hazardous jobs.¹² As precarious employment rises so do unhealthy working conditions that are made worse by a lack of adequate standards.

There are, however, opportunities to protect and promote what makes a healthy job. Knowing what makes a healthy job is vital to understanding how our society is doing. This paper investigates and outlines the conditions needed for healthy work. It offers a framework that can be used by employees, employers, and governments to understand and advance conditions that protect and promote health and allow all workers to thrive. It is possible to build healthier workplaces and jobs that save lives, reduce illness and injury, and improve health outcomes – during the pandemic and beyond.

This framework is grounded in an evidence review of academic and grey literature on what constitutes a healthy job. To supplement this evidence review, five focus groups were conducted with workers across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The focus groups were used to explore the transferability of the information from the evidence review to inform the development of a Thriving Work framework which highlights the conditions needed for healthy work across the GTA.

Evidence Review

The first stage of the methods was a review of 15 national and international frameworks on healthy jobs (Appendix A). Through this review of existing frameworks, *The Marmot Review of health inequalities in England* was identified as a foundational starting point for this framework.¹³ The Marmot review, entitled “Fair Society, Healthy Lives,” is an evidence-based examination of the social determinants of health, their disproportional impact across communities, and identified strategies for action to address them. Led by Professor Sir Michael Marmot, this work builds on his landmark studies on work and health in the United Kingdom¹⁴

and includes an evidence-based framework on ten features of good work that reflect the importance of physical, mental, social, and economic well-being at work.

A review of Canadian literature was performed based on the categories in *The Marmot Review*. In total, the Marmot Review has eight categories: work-life balance, wages and benefits, secure jobs, diversity, equity, and inclusion, occupational health and safety, job control and job demand, opportunities for growth, and participatory and fair work culture. This local evidence was then used to develop this healthy work framework that reflects the local GTA context. The evidence review was conducted using Scopus, a cross-disciplinary database (science, health/medicine, social science and the humanities) of peer-reviewed journal articles, to identify credible, evidence-based literature for each of the components listed in the Marmot framework (outlined above). To supplement this academic literature a grey literature scan was completed of local institutions including the Workers Action Centre, the Institute for Work and Health, the Decent Work and Health Network, and the Ontario Non-Profit Network. In total 15 frameworks and 23 Canadian articles on healthy jobs.

From this research some changes were made to the framework to reflect the realities of work and healthy work in the GTA and Ontario. For example, the income category was amended to include extended health benefits. This change stems from that fact that in Canada access to employer-provided benefits can make a significant difference for worker health—and in fact many Canadian workers are falling through the cracks without any health coverage at all.¹⁵ The works cited for the evidence review are attached as Appendix B.

Focus Groups

The healthy job framework was then presented to a series of five focus groups made up of diverse workers from across the GTA to test its relevance and acceptability based on their working experience. In total, 44 workers participated from various community locations across the GTA including Scarborough (in partnership with the East Scarborough Storefront), a library in Mississauga, a Richmond Hill library (in partnership with the Social Planning Council of York Region), and two in downtown Toronto.

All participants were aged 18 and above and had worked in the GTA in the previous two years. Focus group participants worked in a range of industries including all of Toronto's top ten industries (based on Labour Statistics from the 2016 Census).¹ Focus groups included participants who were employed full-time and part-time, who had causal or temporary contracts and who were permanently employed, and who were self-employed. Participants were presented with the framework and were asked to consider if each component was important for health and why and to discuss what aspects of each component were important for health. A thematic analysis was conducted and was used to further adapt the initial framework to incorporate participant perspectives. Informed, signed consent was obtained from each focus group participant.

Participants were paid an honorarium of \$25 and travel expenses were reimbursed in appreciation of the time they volunteered for these focus groups. Ethical approval was received from the Research Ethics Board at Ryerson University (REB 2018-435).

Thriving Framework

Definition of Healthy Work

This framework's definition of healthy work is not restricted to work that does not harm workers' mental or physical health, such as illnesses and injuries, as often defined by workplace health and safety laws and policies. The framework's definition of healthy work includes promoting and protecting physical, mental, economic, and social health, and this framework aims to set a north star for what it means to be healthy and thrive at work.

This project extends and builds on previous Wellesley Institute research to determine a thriving income for Torontonians. This Thriving approach incorporates synthesized health evidence and

¹ Labour Statistics from the 2016 Census profile for Toronto: 1. Wholesale and retail trade; 2. transportation and warehousing; 3. Finance, insurance, real estate, rental and leasing; 4. Professional, scientific, and technical services; 5. Business, building and other support services; 6. Educational services; 7. Health care and social assistance; 8. Information culture and recreation; 9. Accommodation and food services; 10. Public administration.

local input through focus groups to highlight the working and employment conditions needed for individuals to thrive. Using the framework categories identified in the table below, focus group participants responded to what each category meant to their working lives and their health. This framework, like past Thriving research, is grounded in the principle of shared responsibility: an understanding that employers, as well as governments, workers, unions, communities, and other stakeholders have a role to play in ensuring healthy working and employment conditions. However, it does not address important cultural and structural changes that would certainly be of great benefit to workers while at work, such as reducing inequality and poverty, Indigenous reconciliation, societal anti-racism work, or creating communities with higher social capital and greater resilience - it is focussed on workplace change.

Thriving Work Framework Summary Table

Thriving Work Category	Description
Income and Benefits	Workers are supported in living a full and healthy life by earning an adequate employment income and having access to retirement savings and extended health care.
Secure Jobs	Workers are not afraid of losing their job and have access to stable and predictable hours, income, and schedules.
Inclusive Work Environments	Clear policies are implemented to ensure workplaces are inclusive and meet individual needs so that everyone is able to fully participate in the workplace.
Occupational Health and Safety	Workers are protected from preventable unsafe conditions and hazards at work and workplaces protect and promote the mental health and well being of workers.
Reducing Work-Life Conflict	A working environment is created that better enables workers to reconcile work and personal responsibilities.
Job Demand and Job Control	Demands placed on individual workers match their resources, skills, and capacity, and workers have some ability to make decisions in their day-to-day work.
Opportunities for Growth	Workplaces support opportunities for skills training, learning, and promotion.

Participatory and Fair Work Culture	Workplaces promote participation in organisational decision-making, have a fair process for resolving conflicts, and enable workers to share relevant information within their organization.
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Income and Benefits

Statement: *All workers are making an income that can support health – a thriving income.*

Income is one of the most well researched determinants of health and research has consistently shown that those with higher incomes have longer, healthier lives than those with lower incomes. For example, there is a direct association between the ability to afford to meet needs and the risk of chronic diseases and life expectancy. In addition, low-income workers are more likely to report poorer general health and increased stress compared to workers in higher income groups.¹⁶

This was illustrated in a 2017 Wellesley Institute Thriving Income report that estimated that it costs between \$46,186-\$55,432 (after tax) to be healthy and thrive in the GTA.¹⁷ The Thriving Income framework presents what income is needed for health and includes enough income to afford necessities such as a healthy home and nutritious food as well as being able to pay off debt, save money, and afford healthcare. The gap between Ontario's minimum wage of \$14.25 per hour as of October 1, 2020 (i.e., \$29,640 annual before tax income with full-time hours) and the thriving income is significant, and our focus group participants agreed that Ontario's legislated minimum wage is not enough to meet needs.

Building income adequacy and security for working Ontarians is therefore a vital component of this framework. However, a base wage or salary alone is not enough for health; workers need to be able to access extended health care as well as adequate retirement income that support their health across the life course, either through additional employment income, employer-provided benefits, or government programs. Due to gaps in public health coverage in Canada and Ontario, there is a clear connection between low wage work and reduced access to extended health benefits. For example, low wage workers in Ontario are less likely to have access to critical health benefits such as dental, vision coverage, and prescription medication.¹⁸ A lack of comprehensive health care coverage via employer benefits or government coverage is harmful to health. Workers without benefits are more likely to delay necessary health services or are forced

to pay out of pocket which leaves them with less income to meet their needs, such as nutritious food, good housing, and other health care needs. One participant noted that *“benefits help you feel secure with coverage and you are better able to care for your health which reduces stress.”* Whether through additional employment income or employer or government-provided programs, having the resources to access to prescription medication, dental, vision, psychological and physical therapy, and retirement income are all essential aspects of promoting and protecting the health of workers and their families.

Secure Jobs

Statement: *Workers are not afraid of losing their jobs and have stable and predictable hours, income, and schedules.*

Job security is critical for healthy and thriving workers. In recent years however, new forms of employment have created working conditions that are characterized by higher levels of job insecurity.¹⁹ For example, work that is characterized by low stability, constant change, high turnover, and temporary or contract roles can cause workers to continuously worry about losing their jobs and can contribute to ill health. Job insecurity can be detrimental to both mental and physical health. For instance, when workers are faced with job insecurity, they are more likely to report higher incidences of cardiovascular disease and excess body weight.²⁰ One study found that those with high job insecurity have a 32 per cent greater risk of heart disease than those in highly secure jobs.²¹ In addition, psychological studies of job insecurity have emphasized how job insecurity should be categorized as a significant cause of stress²² and is linked to increased anxiety and depression.²³ Job security is also linked to vulnerability to occupational injury and disease; Ontario research demonstrates that temporary workers without secure permanent positions are more vulnerable to occupational injuries and disease as a result of lower ability to participate in raising concerns.²⁴

Across focus groups, workers with low job security expressed continuous worry about their fate in their workplaces. For example, one participant said, *“when you don’t have job security, you’re scared of being fired and when you live with that kind of fear your mental health becomes poor.”* Establishing workplaces where workers feel secure means giving them access to stable and

predictable hours, incomes, and schedules, which could protect and promote both the mental and physical health of workers, particularly for the most precarious lower-wage workers.

Inclusive Work Environments

Statement: *Work where everyone feels safe, comfortable, valued, and assisted.*

Creating an environment where every worker regardless of their race, gender, gender identity, ability, country of origin, or sexual orientation can thrive is good for everyone. Discrimination is a social stressor that has adverse psychological and physical health impacts. For example, research indicates that discrimination can lead to an increase in poor self-reported health, high blood pressure, and substance use.²⁵ In addition, research links discrimination to increased depression, psychological distress, and anxiety.

Although workers' right to equal treatment without discrimination and employers' duty to accommodate have been well established by the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Ontario Human Rights Code, structural and individual discrimination still occurs at work. Anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies as well as individual accommodations are an important part of ensuring workers are treated fairly and their human rights are protected.²⁶

Being proactive about ensuring inclusive workplaces, however, can ensure everyone is thriving. Developing and implementing clear and proactive practices and policies that ensure work is fair and inclusive, and taking meaningful efforts to address structural discrimination, racism, anti-Indigenous racism, and anti-Black racism in workplaces, is therefore essential for promoting and securing safe, fair, and healthy work.²⁷

Across our focus groups participants stressed the importance of creating more accommodating, inclusive, and diverse workplaces. Participants spoke of the need for greater access to mental health accommodations. For example, the need for access to mental health days. Participants also emphasized the importance of respect and support for religious and cultural differences. For example, some participants highlighted the need for access to prayer rooms and religious holidays off. Building equitable and diverse working conditions that are inclusive and

accommodate all workers with different needs is essential in ensuring that everyone is able to fully participant in work.

Occupational Health and Safety

Statement: *Worker health, safety, and well-being are promoted and protected across every sector.*

Worker illnesses and injuries are preventable. Jobs that actively prevent unhealthy working environments are essential for keeping workers safe from hazards and workplace injuries. Research from the Institute for Work & Health highlights the importance of workplace cultures of health and safety; workers are most vulnerable to workplace injuries and disease when they are exposed to hazards *and* when workplaces have inadequate policies and procedures, low awareness of hazards, rights and responsibilities, and cultures that discourage participation of workers in occupational health and safety (e.g., voicing concerns, identifying hazards to management, stopping unsafe work).²⁸ Safe workplaces must ensure that all hazards are proactively identified and addressed and workers are aware of and able to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

In Ontario there is a patchwork of inadequate financial and social supports when it comes to accident compensation and as a result sustaining a workplace injury can lead to poverty as individuals are left to rely on limited social assistance, which has significant health implications.²⁹ A strong health and safety workplace means that all workers are safe at work from hazards, have access to proper accident reporting systems, and are financially and socially supported if they are injured. Focus groups participants highlighted a need for a better workers compensation system. Participants indicated that the system for workers compensation is complicated to navigate and that it demands a high burden of proof that is often placed on the individual worker. One participant stated, “*injured workers experience difficulty in getting the compensation they need and become more vulnerable*” Participants across focus groups stressed that a compensation system that provides proper income supports and benefits after a workplace injury is essential for supporting workers’ return to full health.

Reducing Work-Life Conflict

Statement: *A working environment is created that better enables workers to reconcile work and personal responsibilities.*

Maintaining a workplace in which workers can reconcile work and their personal life helps to reduce the cumulative burden of multiple social roles.³⁰ A lack of ability to manage personal and family needs can expose workers to stress-related illness that has been linked to higher cholesterol, worker burnout, depressive symptoms, and decreased overall health.³¹

This need to balance time at and away from work was consistently raised as one of the most pressing issues among focus group participants. One participant said, “*healthy work-life balance is part of human decency and the foundation for any lifestyle to have a positive work-life balance.*” This can be a function of many different aspects of work, including hours worked, scheduling notice and flexibility, and ability to take time off. Work settings vary greatly in terms of what are fixed elements and what can be adapted to accommodate staff interests. The incompatibility of work and personal responsibilities can vary based on social determinants such as age, health status, abilities, culture, gender, family and marital status, caregiver demands, and socioeconomic status. As a result, flexibility for workers will vary by the needs and expectations of the individual and what is feasible within different jobs and industries. However, focus groups participants highlighted that work environments can improve to satisfy the needs of many employees. This means time off to respond to personal and family needs, and in some cases worker-driven schedules or the ability to work from home. Meaningful “right to disconnect” policies are also currently receiving international attention as an option to reduce stress. All this can mean workers can schedule preventative medical appointments, better manage caregiving responsibilities, and still have enough income to meet their basic needs. Worker-responsive scheduling can contribute to better rated personal health, healthier family relationships, and increased social connections.³²

Job Demand and Control

Statement: *Demands placed on individual workers are balanced with their resources and capacity, and workers have some ability to make decisions in their day-to-day work.*

The Marmot Review highlights the importance of workers having some participatory decision-making over how tasks are done (i.e. job control). It also emphasizes the need to ensure that workers have the resources, supports, and capacity to accomplish tasks and that the quantity and quality of job demands do not result in physical or mental harms for workers. When workers are given demands that are too high and have limited control over how work gets done, it can negatively impact health. For example, research indicates that high demand and low control can cause increased fatigue and exhaustion, depression,³³ nervousness, stress, anxiety, and insomnia.³⁴ In addition, Marmot's foundational work on the Whitehall Study II found that long-lasting illness and the prevalence of cardiovascular disease are linked to high demand and low control.³⁵

New Canadian research emphasizes that a cluster of broader psychosocial work stressors are associated with burnout, stress, and cognitive strain for Canadian workers, including job demands, job control and meaning, as well as co-worker support, supervisor support, justice, trust, and rewards, and job security.³⁶ This work suggests this importance of comprehensive approaches to understanding and promoting healthy psychosocial work environments, much like the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

Work-related stress was a significant concern for focus group participants. Participants expressed concern that workers are at risk for exploitation when workers, especially those in precarious jobs, fear losing their job if they say no when the demand is too high or when their task goes beyond their job responsibility. They expressed the impact this can have on one's mental health. For example, one participant said, *"there are often times where your work asks you to do things that go beyond the scope of your role and skills, and this can lead to poor mental health."* Ensuring demands placed on workers match their skill set without overtaxing their resources and capabilities is essential to worker health and well-being. In addition, providing opportunities for participatory decision-making on matters that relate directly to their work such as the timing and place of work and how tasks are done is part of healthy jobs.

Opportunities for Growth and Development

Statement: *All jobs have opportunities for skills training, learning, and promotion prospects.*

Creating opportunities for growth and development make workplaces more equitable by providing equal opportunities for all workers to develop skills that help them reach their full potential.³⁷ According to research, workers who have opportunities for growth and development are more likely to report higher self-esteem and reduced stress.³⁸ Research has established the link between self-rated low self-esteem and depressive symptoms,³⁹ which has significant implications for our health and well-being.

Focus group participants expressed that the feeling of not being able to grow within a company has left workers feeling anxious and depressed. In addition, participants discussed how this impacted workers stress levels because they are forced to always be looking for other jobs. Healthy policies support opportunities for workers' growth and development and promote and sustain a healthy workforce.

Participatory and Fair Work Culture

Statement: *All workers are able to participate in organisational decision-making, have fair processes for resolving conflicts, and are able to share relevant information within their organization.*

Developing a successful and healthy work cultural is essential to ensure fair, equitable, and healthy working conditions. When workers feel like they are treated fairly, their opinions are valued, and they are able to participate in organizational decisions that impact their work they are more likely to be happier, less stressed, and more productive.⁴⁰ Research also tells us that a positive organizational culture help make employees feel safe, comfortable, valued, and assisted, which in turn makes them healthier.

Focus group participants stressed the need for fairer processes and recognition so that everyone receives an equal opportunity to be recognized. One participant remarked “*you can only build an*

ideal work environment if all staff are involved.” Healthy work cultures are necessary for health, safety, and well-being in all work environments across every sector.

Discussion and Conclusion

For many Canadians more waking hours are spent at work than anywhere else.⁴¹ However, the nature of work is changing⁴² and as a result there is an increase in non-traditional and more precarious forms of work.⁴³ Developing a framework to guide government and workplace policy and programs and reduce the impacts of unhealthy working conditions on health – during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond – is essential to creating a thriving and healthy work environment and jobs.

Historically, definitions of healthy work have largely focused on occupational injuries and have left out other important aspects that make our working lives healthy or unhealthy. Taking this into consideration, this framework presents a wide range of workplace conditions that consider how the physical, social, economic, and psychological aspects of work come together to either harm or protect our health. This framework is informed by local, national, and international research that helped us present an evidence-based, comprehensive approach to workplace health. However, it is important to note that this is not a blanket framework that applies to all aspects or types of work. Different types of work and workers have different priorities when it comes to their health and well-being in their workplaces. Instead, this framework provides a starting place to adapt for industry or population-specific needs.

Healthy, thriving jobs can be achieved through a range of levers such as stronger protections for workers through provincial and federal employment and labour standards and proactive enforcement, decent equitable wages, benefits and anti-racist, inclusive and safe workplaces from employers, robust collective bargaining agreements that advance healthy working conditions, and universal pharmacare and other benefits. This framework should serve as a tool to support creating the conditions needed for healthy jobs across the GTA as well as add to current policy conversations about the important role work plays in our health.

Good jobs matter for health. A healthy job can also improve productivity and reduce costs related to absenteeism, turnover, workers' compensation, and health costs. Thriving jobs are highly dependent on the policies put in place by government bodies—not just employers. Creating the conditions needed to advance healthy and inclusive work requires a shared responsibility amongst employers, government, unions, employees, and all other workplace stakeholders. By bringing together all workplace stakeholders we can improve the conditions in which we work and better support and promote thriving communities.

Appendix A: Healthy Work Frameworks Reviewed

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