

# This tool lets employers compare wages, benefits to competitors

By [Katie Johnston](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 15, 2022, 9:43 a.m.



From left, Selena Pitter, teacher Adriana Salas, and Dallas Whitehead played with blocks at Little Sprouts in Boston. MATTHEW J LEE/GLOBE STAFF

When Little Sprouts got its scores back from a job-quality survey tool last summer, the child-care provider could immediately see there was room for improvement. The tool, created by the Boston workforce development organization Jewish Vocational Service, allows employers to compare certain entry-level jobs to similar positions at other local

companies, and it showed that in several key categories, Little Sprouts' early-child-care educator role wasn't keeping up with the competition.

Armed with this information, the company made enhancements to teacher wages, career development, and flexibility, and these changes are proving to be valuable recruiting tools for the open jobs that Little Sprouts has at most of its 25 centers around New England.

"This was a really nice look, almost a 30,000-foot view, of the employment picture and what we needed to do to become the employer of choice in early childhood education," said head of recruiting Cristine Trayner.

JVS Boston started offering employers this free tool, called the [Job Quality Benchmarking Index](#), last summer as a way to "raise the floor" of lower-wage jobs while giving participants a competitive advantage at the same time. More than 53 million workers — 44 percent of the labor force — are considered low wage, according to a 2019 [Brookings Institution report](#). A [report](#) released Monday by the US Department of the Treasury found that a lack of competition in the labor market has led to low wages, unpredictable work schedules, poor working conditions, and little opportunity to move up.

The pandemic shone a spotlight on the workers on the front lines who kept society functioning and were suddenly deemed "essential." But the attention was fleeting, and many people performing these jobs are still stuck in low-paying positions with inflexible schedules and little room for advancement.

There have been a number of efforts to improve wages and working conditions in recent years. In 2018, the Maine nonprofit lender Coastal Enterprises, which promotes equity and sustainability, developed a [Good Jobs Framework](#) that measures wages, benefits, and workplace practices before making loans or investments to businesses. Last year, the nonprofit Living Wage for US launched a [national certification system](#) to recognize employers that pay workers and contractors a living wage.

But many executives are reluctant to make investments in their workers because the results aren't as tangible as, say, buying new high-speed equipment, said Zeynep Ton, an MIT management professor and cofounder of the [Good Jobs Institute](#), which has worked with companies in low-wage service industries to improve job quality since 2017.

“Too many leaders see employees as a cost to be minimized,” she said. “‘Hey, I’m going to spend this much on pay, what’s going to be my return?’ ”

Managers also don't seem to trust workers, Ton said, noting that the biggest question she gets is: “Are people really worthy of \$15 an hour?”

“If you don't trust their ability or motivation,” she said, “then it's much harder to make a bet on them.”

JVS's benchmarking tool lets employers compare themselves to other local companies in five areas: salary, benefits, schedules, career advancement, and work environment, including diversity and safety, based on input from its career coaches and the job seekers the nonprofit serves. So far, the index includes 60 entry-level jobs — including pharmacy tech, administrative assistant, dishwasher, and bank teller — that each have data from at least five employers gleaned from an anonymous 50-question survey. Each company that participates is scored and ranked in each of the five areas compared to similar-sized companies with the same jobs. Once employers see where they need to improve, they can pay to work with a coach at JVS to figure out how to make their jobs more attractive.

About 10 employers have elected for follow-up coaching, with payments ranging from \$1,000 for a one-time meeting to \$3,500 for six months.

With people quitting their jobs in record numbers last year and companies struggling to fill positions, the insights that the benchmarking tool provides are proving especially valuable, said Mandy Townsend, vice president of employer engagement at JVS.

The majority of Americans who quit their jobs last year cited low pay (63 percent), lack of opportunity to advance (63 percent), and feeling disrespected (57 percent) as the reasons why, according to a [Pew Research Center survey](#) released Wednesday.

“In a looser, softer labor market, I don’t think that employers would be paying attention,” Townsend said. “But they’re paying attention now.”

About 100 local employers have taken the free survey so far, and several workforce agencies in other parts of the country have licensed the index to give to companies in their communities. The Boston Foundation’s SkillWorks has started requiring its nonprofit grant recipients to take the survey in an attempt to assess the overall quality of nonprofit jobs. JVS even took the survey for its own career coach and instructor positions and realized the agency needed a more formal management training program to become a more competitive employer.

Employers aren’t always happy with the results, Townsend noted.

“If they’re not glowingly positive, there’s often this initial shock and defensiveness.”

But the data can be used by human resources staffers to show senior leadership why the company is struggling to recruit job candidates, she said. And the changes an employer puts in place can be touted in advertising and marketing materials.

When a senior home-care company discovered its wages for certified nursing assistants were well below the benchmark, the initial response from senior leadership was “radio silence,” Townsend said. Then the company turned to JVS for coaching and ended up raising wages substantially, along with combining several per-diem jobs into a full-time role with benefits. Another employer, a child-care provider, raised wages and also offered employees a larger discount on childcare for their own children.

After Little Sprouts got its scores, the company took action. It conducted a comprehensive wage analysis and gave the majority of its in-school employees a raise. It

formalized a program to alert assistant teachers who want to become certified, and teachers who want to become administrators, about how to enroll in courses — and often when and where to take them. Little Sprouts also started looking into alternative schedules for employees who can't work typical teacher hours.

Retention in the industry is “not wonderful,” Trayner acknowledged, and getting insights into how Little Sprouts measures up to other employers will help bring in new teachers and also help them advance.

“We don't want them to feel stuck,” she said.

Most employers think they have adequate policies in place to support their workers, according to surveys of low-wage workers and business leaders conducted by [Harvard Business School](#) in the fall of 2020, but America's lowest earners don't get the mentorship, career guidance, or training they need to advance and get a higher paycheck.

This kind of mismatch is exactly what the JVS tool is attempting to bridge, Townsend said. If an employer doesn't know that it's lagging in certain areas, it's less likely to make substantial changes.

“I don't believe any employer goes to work and says, ‘Hmm, how can I offer the crappiest jobs out there?’ ” Townsend said. “I think people want to be the best employers.... They just might not know where to start. And now, we can help.”

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Katie Johnston can be reached at [katie.johnston@globe.com](mailto:katie.johnston@globe.com). Follow her [@ktkjohnston](#).

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