

SEEKING WORK IN SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

October 2022

**A Rowan University/Rutgers - Camden
Board of Governors Initiative**



In Partnership With

RUTGERS

Senator Walter Rand Institute
for Public Affairs



Background

Here we summarize the findings of the Seeking Work in Southern New Jersey project. In 2020, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University-Camden, in contract with the Rowan University / Rutgers - Camden Board of Governors, partnered with Camden Community Partnership (formerly Cooper's Ferry Partnership) and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University for a project aimed at better understanding the barriers and opportunities facing both employers and job seekers.

This project set out to explore questions around the region's economic landscape, barriers and opportunities to finding and securing a job, and understand challenges to connections between job seekers and employers. The project's goal was to illuminate the story behind traditional economic numbers - to explore the perspectives of job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden. We know what the labor force participation rate and unemployment rate are - but how can we understand for what reason an applicant is not hearing back from a local employer? How can we understand where employers are posting job positions, and how they recruit employees?

Researchers conducted a series of focus groups and individual conversations with both employers and job seekers, and captured the experiences, challenges, and opportunities posed by individuals both seeking and filling jobs in a pre- and -post pandemic economic landscape. Participants included employers and job seekers from the Southern New Jersey region (Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, and Salem Counties) and the City of Camden. Researchers combined the qualitative input with current labor force data to inform understanding of workforce trends and barriers across the region's eight counties. *Separate [data stories](#) with economic background information on Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden were also created for the project and can be [found here](#).*

The full report is the result of that data collection and analysis, and aims to provide insights into unique workforce trends and barriers across the region's eight counties and within the City of Camden. Job seeker and employer responses showed the choices residents made to advance their careers, how companies have shifted and changed, and considerations related to economic opportunities and structural barriers.

Key Themes from Job Seeker Interviews

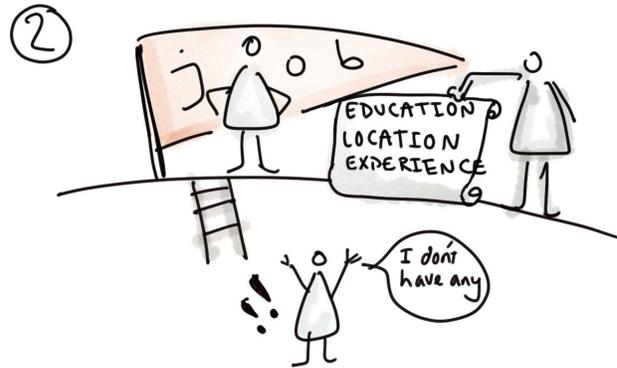
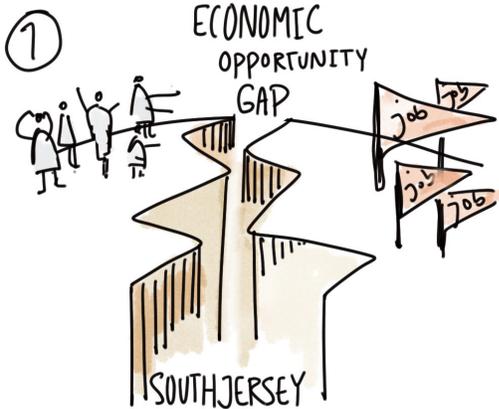
- **There is an economic opportunity gap for many residents of Southern New Jersey.** The economic landscape of Southern New Jersey and Camden provides both promise for growth but struggles for residents looking to obtain jobs - some of the areas are facing a dearth in certain industries, and/or challenges to people being able to access roles in those industries.
- **In some cases and places, a mismatch between skills and available jobs exists.** Location, skill, education and experience mismatch were all discussed by participants. Job seekers both noted jobs for which they were under or overqualified for, and how certain industries/jobs required certain skills that limited their ability to apply. Location mismatch was also discussed as some desired jobs and/or industries were not close to where job seekers lived, and/or a general lack of industry existed in their areas. Some participants expressed disdain with degree or certification requirements, particularly if compensation was not aligned, and expressed desire for employers to train employees and offer certifications where needed.
- **Communication and feedback during the job search process poses a great challenge to job seekers.** Participants shared the frustrations around the lack of responsiveness from employers with regards to status of applications and following interviews. Participants called for employers to increase their communication with job seekers and be forthcoming about the expectations of a prospective employee. Job seekers expressed the effort it takes to apply for jobs and the unknown wait time in hearing back, even a "no" is welcome so they are not left in limbo and can pursue other opportunities.

- **Access to resources for job searching and information about available jobs remains a challenge for some residents. Resources and support services can focus on job search skills, soft skill development, and key employment barriers.** Participants offered many suggestions for job search resources including resume assistance, interview preparation, interview clothing, and transportation. Barriers to employment related to transportation, child care, pay/wages, and technology access all limited job seekers' ability to find, apply, and maintain jobs. Resources aimed at reducing these challenges could lower the barriers to entering or reentering the labor market.
- **Flexibility in screening, hiring, job requirements, and training is desired.** Job seekers shared many elements of the job search process that limited accessibility for many residents. Limited accessibility included not knowing where to access job postings, needing additional soft skills, and desiring employers to take a chance on them: to bring job seekers in for interviews as opposed to just going off what is on paper, being flexible in experience and educational requirements, and offering opportunities for on the job training and career advancement.
- **Job seekers desire opportunity.** While job seekers mentioned cost and benefit tradeoffs of receiving unemployment, and some mentioned specific limitations to obtaining full time employment, as well as the pros and cons of various jobs or industries; ultimately, job seekers desired opportunities. Opportunities for employment (whatever that may look like for an individual), and employment that offers a livable wage; stable and consistent hours and schedule where feasible; access to information and resources; flexibility in requirements and hiring; training opportunities; and support to grow and develop in a job/career were discussed.

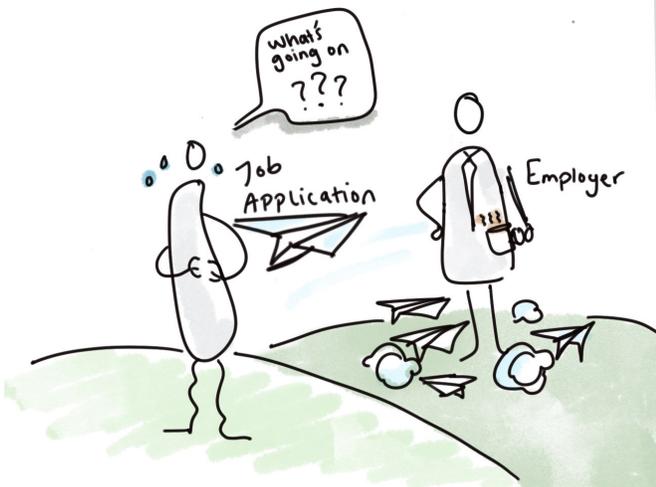
Key Themes from Employer Focus Groups

- **While employers expressed different skill needs, soft skills was by far the most prominent area where barriers arose and where resources could be funneled.** Employers expressed the benefit of soft skill development. Some considered soft skills to be work ethic or professionalism, while others characterized soft skills as customer service and communicating clearly. Employers had differing views on the preparedness of job seekers versus the role of employers to guide soft skill development.
- **Career awareness and early education is key.** Partnerships with local organizations and/or educational institutions provided ways for employers to connect with youth about careers, and providing opportunities through externships, internships, apprenticeships (for high schools and tech/vocational schools) in place of or as a supplement to a 4 year degree are advantageous.
- **In some cases and places, a mismatch between skills and available jobs exists.** Employers noted areas where the jobs they were offering were hard to fill and these roles were primarily in speciality skill positions (not knowledge economy based positions e.g. high level business positions).
- **Pathways to careers and talent pipelines are crucial to develop.** While employers discussed the variety of available jobs, educational outlets, and training opportunities - these opportunities often did not line up with each other, and direct pipelines of training and/or school to job could be more concrete and sustainable.
- **Jobs provided should be a livable wage and offer career advancement.** Employers recognized the disparate impact of underpaying employees and discussed ways to promote the career ladders available at their companies.
- **Varying degrees of flexibility in hiring and barriers to employment.** Employers discussed the barriers of drug testing, background checks, and certain educational or experience requirements needed for their positions. Where many applicants struggled was in drug testing requirements. Flexibility in hiring requirements, particularly around educational and experience, varied by employer, and were less possible for employers that were government agencies or funded through government programs. Employers challenged themselves to find avenues to lessen the barriers to entry for applicants. Government regulations also posed a barrier for employers in hiring, training, and providing opportunities, with some policies lacking nuance of the Southern New Jersey / Camden landscape.

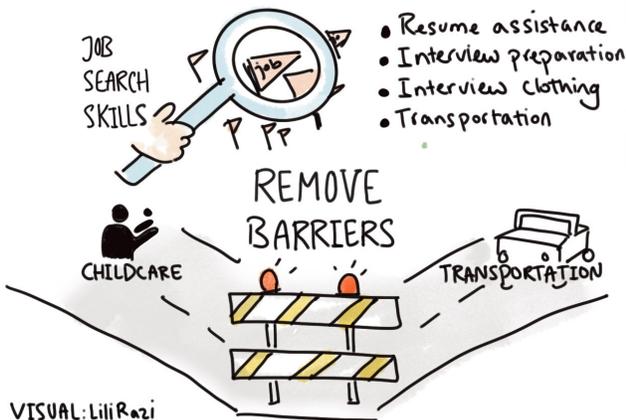
JOB SEEKER INTERVIEWS



③ LACK of RESPONSIVENESS from EMPLOYERS



⑤ WHAT TO DO NOW?



VISUAL: Lili Razi

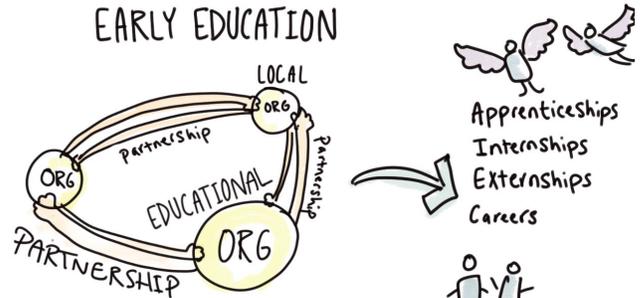


EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

① SOFT SKILLS



② CAREER AWARENESS & EARLY EDUCATION



③ MISMATCH BETWEEN JOBS AND SKILLS



④ DEVELOPING PATHWAYS TO CAREERS



⑤ CAREER ADVANCEMENT



VISUAL: LiliRazi

⑥ BARRIERS to EMPLOYMENT

- DRUG TESTING  
 - BACKGROUND CHECKS 
 - EDUCATIONAL/ EXPERIENCE requirements
- more strict in government agencies because of POLICIES

Bridging the Gap: Connecting Job Seekers and Employers

The data collected for this project were all collected and synthesized during the pandemic, and the immense challenges and shifts in daily life induced by COVID-19 were echoed by both job seekers and employers. Daily routines were disrupted and many work activities (including job search and hiring processes) were shifted online - exposing gaps in technology access and a loss of in-person communication. Both job seekers and employers expressed the apprehension and questions that will remain as businesses and residents reflect, reopen, and reconsider what economic development and what working in or offering a “good” job means. Even months following data collection and analysis for this project, the emergence of the Omicron variant and various sub-variants in the later half of 2021 and throughout 2022 continue to emphasize health, safety, and economic recovery priorities for all residents.

Our analysis revealed multiple recommendations centered on job seekers’ and employers’ responses throughout the pandemic, and three key themes emerged from the data. These themes were **opportunity, flexibility, and access.**

How have economic and job opportunities both stalled and grown throughout the region?

During interviews and focus groups, participants shared their views on changing industries across Southern New Jersey and in the City of Camden. These conversations reflect a theme of a mismatch of skills, jobs, and location for some people and in some places. **Taken together, there is an economic opportunity gap in Southern New Jersey and in the City of Camden.** Opportunities can continue to expand through growing industries (such as technology, alternative energies, health sciences) and committed, funded partnerships between public and private entities across the region. Simultaneously, expanded opportunities for occupations and industries to shift will support job seekers moving into these jobs, and increase alignment across skills, experience/education, and locations.

What are ways to shift available opportunities to meet the challenges and barriers faced by job seekers and employers?

Flexibility emerged as a theme as both job seekers and employers shared their desire for, and ability to, exhibit adaptability in job recruitment, hiring, and training processes. Job seekers expressed challenges in being under or overqualified for jobs, and not meeting exact educational or experience requirements. Flexibility in hiring requirements and certain disqualifiers varied by employer. Employers challenged themselves to find avenues to lessen the barriers to entry for applicants. Movement towards closing this opportunity gap can be **supported by flexibility in recruitment, hiring, and training practices, and investing equitable human resources infrastructures** that provide the space to engage in these processes in ways that are effective and fair to all. Providing career pathways, development opportunities, and direct access to resources can help shrink disconnect between employers and job seekers.

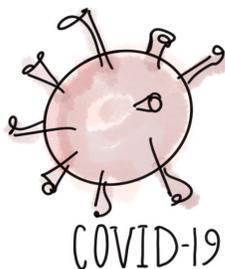
How did job seekers and employers define access and create awareness around opportunity?

Accessibility emerged as a prominent theme as participants shared views of how to best provide job information and career resources to residents, including early education. Resources and support services can focus on job search skills, soft skill development, and key employment barriers. This theme also reflects how existing infrastructures continue to present challenges or issues for individual job seekers during the pandemic, primarily regarding financial and physical wellbeing, cost of living, and awareness of services. The **removal of access barriers** can strengthen individual wellbeing and Southern New Jersey communities so all can participate in the ladder of opportunity.

Concerted and continued local and regional collaboration is essential to close the gaps in capacity, foster sustainable partnerships, and help create access to opportunity. Initiatives focused on these themes can contribute to bridging the gap between employers and job seekers.

Read the accompanying [Southern New Jersey](#) and [City of Camden](#) data stories [here](#).

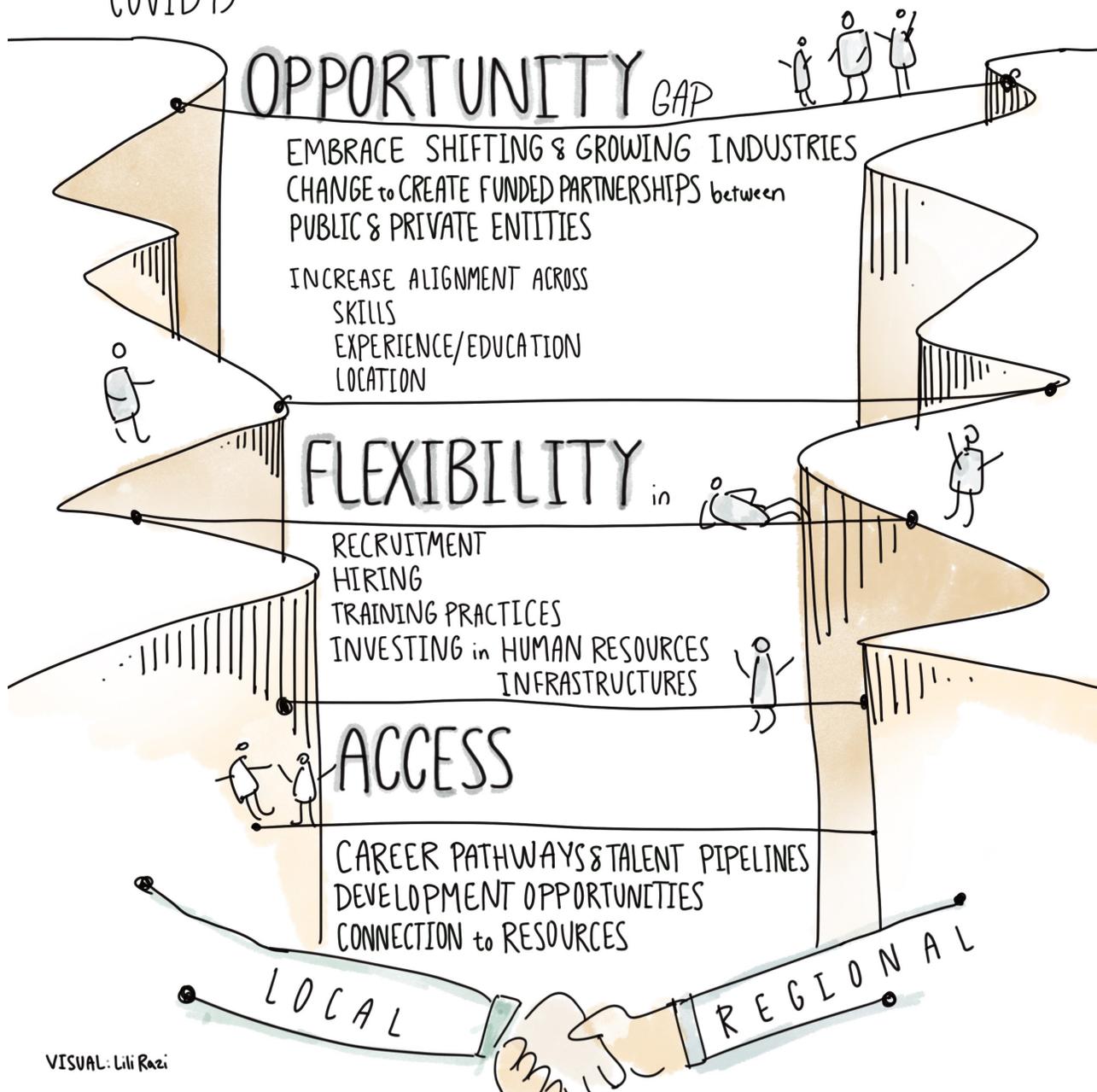
RECOMMENDATIONS & LOOKING FORWARD



COVID-19

JOB SEARCH
HIRING PROCESS

TECHNOLOGY ACCESS
IN PERSON COMMUNICATION



VISUAL: Lili Razi

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