

# John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

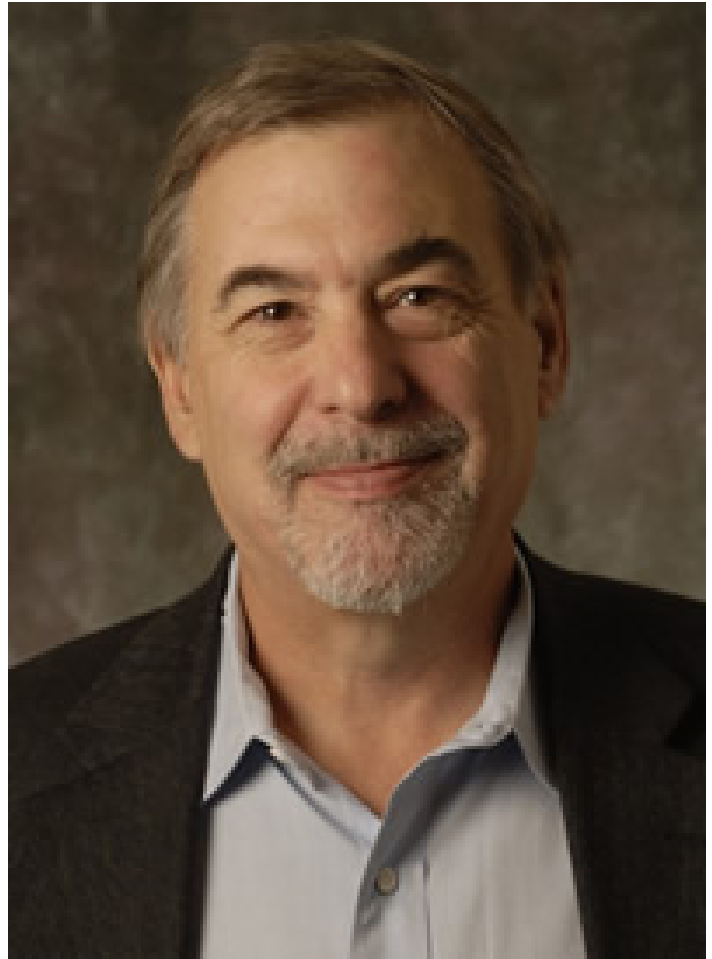
## getting to know you

### A Q&A with Cliff Zukin

*Cliff Zukin, Ph.D. is a senior research fellow at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and an emeritus professor of public policy and political science at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy and the Eagleton Institute of Politics, both at Rutgers University. Dr. Zukin is the co-director of the Heldrich Center's award-winning Work Trends series, where he offers his expertise in research methodology and survey design. He is also a senior officer at The Pew Charitable Trusts.*

**Please tell me about your background, particularly with the Heldrich Center.**

About 10 years ago, my three-year commitment and term as president of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) ended. I was thinking about what to do next when Carl Van Horn invited me to partner with him on the *Work Trends* project and lend my survey research experience to the Heldrich Center. Prior to joining the center, my survey experience had been running the *Star-Ledger/Eagleton* Poll and working with AAPOR, and had mostly entailed voting behavior and public opinion. I had actually never worked in workforce development, but Carl and I had been colleagues and close friends for almost 30 years then. I knew Carl was at the top of his profession in workforce policy and the Heldrich Center had a great reputation. I also knew Carl as a consummate professional with very high standards for research, and as a creative scholar with insight. So I figured working with him might be both fun and interesting, and that is what drew me to the Heldrich Center.



**When did you first get interested in survey research?**

For me, getting into survey research was completely accidental. I went to Ohio State University as a graduate student. While there, I was assigned a graduate fellowship working on the Ohio State University Poll, which was a survey of Ohio State students and faculty. I did that for a few years to support myself through graduate school and that's when I really learned, and started to enjoy, survey research. When it came time for me to enter

the job market, I saw an opening at the Eagleton Institute of Politics for someone who could teach American politics and also run a state opinion poll. I applied for the job because of fit — not that I wanted to come to New Jersey. I've since grown to love the state. Eagleton was attractive because it practiced a mix of applied research and academic research, and I felt that this job could have impact beyond just writing for other academics. I got the job and started in 1977; Carl came one year later. Interestingly, Carl and I overlapped as graduate students at Ohio State for three years and had a mutual best friend, but we never met each other until he came to Rutgers.

When I joined the Eagleton Institute, it was led by Alan Rosenthal, who was the country's foremost expert on state legislatures and a great mentor to me. It was at this time that I met and started working with Professor Van Horn — Carl headed up the Center for State Politics and I directed the Eagleton Poll. We also worked with Susan Fuhrman, who is now the president of Teachers College at Columbia University, and Ruth Mandel, who started the Center for American Women and Politics. Rosenthal was a unique character and a great role model and leader for us. Alan had a vision of what we might become and recruited us all to Eagleton. His vision has certainly been fulfilled. Those of us he brought here as very young faculty — I was 24 when I came here as a professor — eventually reached the top of their professions, and probably not by accident. Eagleton was a marvelous and intellectually lively place to be at that time.

### **What is your role in the *Work Trends* series and what is the process like for coming up with the featured topics?**

My role within the *Work Trends* project is survey design and implementation. The Heldrich Center itself has a much broader and deeper mission. When I joined the *Work Trends* project, as an expert in survey research, I presented the center with options and new ways to do surveys, such as taking specialized samples. Examples of this are surveys of recent college graduates or part-time workers, very small groups in the population. By using these newer survey methods, we have been able to do a lot of surveys of low-incidence groups, which has allowed us to look at special populations that nobody has looked at before.

Another example of this was surveying the unemployed population at the start of the Great Recession in 2009, an important project given the country was facing the biggest economic calamity since World War II. The information we found through this research was striking — the amount of pain in the lives of these impacted people. The surveys allowed us to chronicle what unemployment truly felt like during the recession.

After seeing the value of the information we had collected, I remember walking into Carl's office and saying, "Let's turn this into a panel study" — this is where respondents are interviewed at multiple points in time. We called back the respondents who were surveyed three other times, and followed them through the recession. By doing this, we could look at the continuing and cumulative effect of the recession and document its impact.

Each *Work Trends* survey project starts with deciding on a broad question of study. Carl and I discuss topics that we are both interested in researching. Once we decide on the topic, we talk about what areas we want the survey to cover. I write a first draft of the questionnaire, and we then work together to revise and refine it until we are satisfied that the questionnaire covers the goals of the survey and that we have measured things as carefully as we can. It is not unusual for the two of us to go back and forth on four to six versions of a questionnaire before it is ready for testing in the field. Carl and I then collaborate extensively on analyzing the data and writing the report for the project.

### **Why do you feel that this type of survey research is important?**

We feel that one important impact of the *Work Trends* research has been in the area of "agenda setting." We focus on workforce issues that aren't always at the center of policymakers' agendas. Often the problems of marginalized worker groups, such as the long-term unemployed or part-time workers, need to have light shone on them to just get the attention of decision-makers, and that is an important function of the studies. Another is to inform decision-makers by presenting evidence-based research on our subjects of study and what public support for various policy options are. Because of staying current with "best practices" in survey research and working to the "gold standard"

in our research, we have become a very credible source of information for national decision-makers working on policy formation and implementation in the area of workforce development.

### **Were there any projects that you feel were especially impactful?**

The four-way panel survey that polled unemployed workers through the Great Recession had more impact than any project I've ever been involved with — in terms of both policy impact and impact on me as a researcher. In the former, it even won the AAPOR's Policy Impact Award. In the latter, it affected me because we were documenting a downward course in people's lives — the number who had taken loans, moved back in with parents, sold possessions. Seeing the trouble that people were having getting back into the labor market was difficult because I personally knew people that were affected. In this *Work Trends*, we asked questions about the level of impact on the unemployed and their friends and relatives. Altogether, the number of people affected by the recession was staggering. Although this project dealt with difficult subject matter, it was rewarding to be able to bring these findings to the forefront. I never thought I would stay at the Heldrich Center for 10 years, but having the chance to do this kind of research has been very gratifying.

## About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The Center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policy-making and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is also deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, "Solutions at Work," the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The Center's work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers' skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The Center's projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- > Disability Employment
- > Education and Training
- > Unemployment and Reemployment
- > U.S. Labor Market and Industry
- > Workforce Policy and Practice
- > Work Trends Surveys

Learn more: [www.heldrich.rutgers.edu](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu)

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