

TITLE: “Building with humans at the center”: How a local text hotline promotes workplace wellness

Ivy (who asked to withhold her last name out of fear of employer retribution) rarely takes the 22 Fillmore bus on the way back to her San Francisco home. But one day in February, she decided the hourlong commute would give her time to think.

Since September, Ivy had been grappling with the knowledge of a coworker’s inappropriate behavior towards other employees. As a manager at her company, she had filed a formal complaint against them. But it was months later now, and nothing had been done — and the inaction was taking a toll on Ivy’s mental health.

Ivy glanced up, exhausted, and an advertisement caught her eye: Empower Work, a text hotline offering support to workers. With nowhere else to turn, she thought, “What can I lose?”

Ivy sent a text. Within minutes, an Empower Work volunteer responded. Text by text, Ivy began to share her story. To her surprise, the conversation continued the entire ride home. She sat down in her kitchen, just as the chat came to a close — and with it, much of her anxiety.

“It was just like this blanket of relief,” she recalled. “I thought, even if I don’t solve this, and I can’t help the people who came to me, at least somebody knows what I’m going through, genuinely.”

Founded by Jaime-Alexis Fowler, Empower Work is a technology nonprofit providing free, confidential services and support to workers like Ivy. Its chat lines connect workers in need with trained volunteers, who help users navigate adverse situations in their workplace. That day on

the bus, Ivy joined the nearly 400,000 workers who have used the chat service to navigate workplace challenges since the organization's launch in 2018.

In 2022, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released the [Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being](#), emphasizing workplace mental health and well-being as a critical priority for public health. According to the report, mental health and well-being have “numerous and cascading impacts for the health of individual workers and their families, organizational productivity, the bottom-line for businesses and the U.S. economy.”

Before founding Empower Work, Fowler understood the consequences of lacking workplace well-being from a frightening experience in her early career. She recalls cowering as her mentor screamed in her face, hovering so close that she could feel his spit.

“I felt like I'd been physically punched,” she said. “I had trouble eating for weeks.”

Fowler left that workplace, but she never put that experience completely behind her. Years later, working in managerial roles at social impact companies, she noticed that people across industries were facing uncomfortable and unsafe conditions at work.

Curious about available resources, Fowler started researching crisis text hotlines for workers in 2017. When she discovered that none existed, she decided to design one herself.

Fowler built the chat line using Twilio, a communications provider underlying other common messaging services like DoorDash. Since Empower Work's founding days, maintaining humanity and simplicity has been an essential element of the service. Whether they're texting

from a phone or typing on a laptop, Fowler said users will never find themselves talking with an AI chatbot.

“There are some organizations who position themselves as a tech company solving a human problem. I think of Empower Work as a human company leveraging tech to solve a human problem,” Fowler said. “I think it's important because when you're building with humans at the center, you're thinking about technology as the way to facilitate impact.”

Volunteers like Cathy Ye, who joined the team in 2020, work from the opposite end of the chat system. Every Tuesday, Ye makes a cup of tea and logs on for a two-hour shift using a platform called Front. From there, Ye responds to texts from workers by using active listening, validating their experiences and offering gentle suggestions to help navigate their unique situation.

Conversations vary in length and topic, ranging from simple questions about a job search, to disclosures of sexual assault. All are completely anonymous, and Ye said it can feel hard to say goodbye.

“You get to drop in on someone's life in this little, little window,” she said. “And then you just have to believe that you helped, and that they'll get out of this.”

Workers from nearly all backgrounds and industries have benefited from Empower Work's services. In 2023, the most frequent industries seen by the service were largely lower-income, including health and human services, service, retail and education.

That year, 55% of Empower Work users identified as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) and 66% identified as women.

To Fowler, this high percentage of people with lower-wage jobs, people of color and women is a positive indicator for the nonprofit's mission.

“We know that the majority of people who experience challenges that really knock them off course are people who identify as women,” she said. “People who identify as a people of color, and folks who are maybe first generation to join a particular industry, I mean, they’re certainly just overall less represented and less resourced in those environments. We're always building for that. We’re on the right track.”

Over the years, Fowler has watched her organization grow from a small local hotline to a national resource. The organization has set its sights on serving 3 million workers in the next two years. Looking ahead, the company is actively building AI programs for training volunteers and more effectively analyzing chat data. And while AI chatbots will not be directly communicating with texters, Empower Work is building a support chatbot to generate resources and relevant questions for volunteers to apply in conversations.

A few months after Ivy connected with Empower Work on the bus, she was laid off from her manager position. Even now, she scrolls through her texts with Empower Work for confidence as she prepares for a major career pivot.

“The peer support words ring true today. And it actually was very peaceful, that I could move on,” Ivy said. “I feel so grateful to them on many levels.”