



*Tear the Paper Ceiling*  
*Hiring Playbook for Employers*

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CHAPTER 1

Seeing STARs:  
A Skills-Based Approach  
to an Inclusive Workforce

# Executive Summary

The American workforce has 70+ million STARS — workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor's degree. STARS make up a majority of the US workforce and can bring much-needed skills and diversity to organizations throughout the country. But they've been overlooked in the hiring process by too many for too long. Fortunately, this oversight is starting to change as leading employers recognize the value of skills developed through any route and move to skills-based hiring. As a result, these organizations are beginning to build more flourishing, resilient, and equitable talent pipelines.

There are tangible things your company can do to bring more STARS into your organization to serve in positions that suit their skills.

*If you're just starting out*, identify the roles in your organization well-suited to skills-based hiring and intentional STAR sourcing - and then retool your hiring processes to enable that.

*If you're ready to recruit STARS*, rethink your talent sourcing routes, including internal talent pathways.

*If you're ready for STARS to thrive at scale*, ensure that your onramps and onboarding are effective for a more diverse talent pool and continue to broaden and strengthen your future talent pipelines.



# STARs Are an Overlooked Talent Pool You Need

**Outmoded mindsets about talent are preventing employers from meeting their workforce needs.**

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*The world moves fast, making adaptation and innovation mandatory to stay relevant.* Whether your organization produces products or delivers services, what worked yesterday, last year, or last decade won't meet the needs of tomorrow, next year, or next decade. Some portion of your portfolio always needs rethinking, reworking, and retooling, and however you navigate those decisions, it will take skilled talent to implement those changes.

*Every leader strives for the right talent in the right place at the right time for the right cost — a tall order, and a moving target.* When your organization's goals shift, or the roadmap to get there does, the skills you need to deploy do too. Sometimes this looks like a minor evolution of existing roles and team structures, but often it means rebalancing the mix of roles you staff or even reenvisioning what roles you need. This demands a workforce strategy that sources and screens for today while investing and planning for the future.

**An optimized workforce reflects the environments in which it operates.**

Innate talent exists evenly across race, creed, gender, and geography. So staffing demographics that look substantially different from the customers or communities they serve indicate that something other than talent shaped opportunities and selections somewhere along the line. Even when the opportunity gaps start well upstream of your hiring choices it's in your organization's best interest to improve your representation and culture metrics.

It is now well-documented that diverse teams are more innovative, productive, and effective.<sup>1</sup> Employees also increasingly expect their workplace to take a proactive approach to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging that goes beyond "do no harm" and meshes with broader environmental, social, and governance criteria.<sup>2</sup> Given the upstream and deeply rooted origins of this challenge, employers' responses must be embedded into their strategy and operations.

**These are common workforce planning pain points for employers — and often the places where they start with skills-based hiring. What are the biggest talent needs of your organization?**

- *Hard-to-fill roles* that have specialized or uncommon skill requirements
- *High-turnover roles* with limited career paths that demand disproportionate recruiting effort
- Emerging, *new-to-world roles* that are poorly defined and have few sources and unclear onramps and pathways
- *Legacy roles* whose skills are becoming scarcer as their practitioners leave the workforce

## **We have a unique opportunity — and clear urgency — to update conventional wisdom.**

Employers have waged a war for talent for decades and more recently have bemoaned a skill mismatch borne out of accelerating technological change that outpaces workforce upskilling and reskilling.<sup>3</sup> Business practices have decreased investment in employee skill-building over decades, with anything above the bare minimum being treated as a perk for high performers rather than an essential investment in the health of organizational assets. Employers who do invest in training their workforce risk a free-ridership problem as peer companies poach their skilled workforce, causing many employers to disinvest from on-the-job training. Finally, an intense focus on short-term earnings and the drive for cost efficiency have encouraged employers to see training as discretionary rather than core. The collective effect is a downward spiral of investment in skill development and an artificially narrowed view of available talent.

Rather than continue to compete for talent in the same small pool, employers should rethink the talent funnel and put more targeted screening criteria in place to identify talent with the skills and aptitude to successfully transfer into occupations that need an influx of talent. Effective employers will change their approach in two ways: they will shift their efforts to find talent based on skill, and where true skill shortages exist, they'll harness potential talent to meet their needs.

In recent decades, employers have latched onto a bachelor's degree as a primary signal for skills (such as communication) and competencies (such as perseverance), resulting in a war for talent from a fraction of the labor market while undervaluing tens of millions of workers. The good news is that you can tear through that paper ceiling and access the STARS talent pool beyond it.

## **Tear the Paper Ceiling**

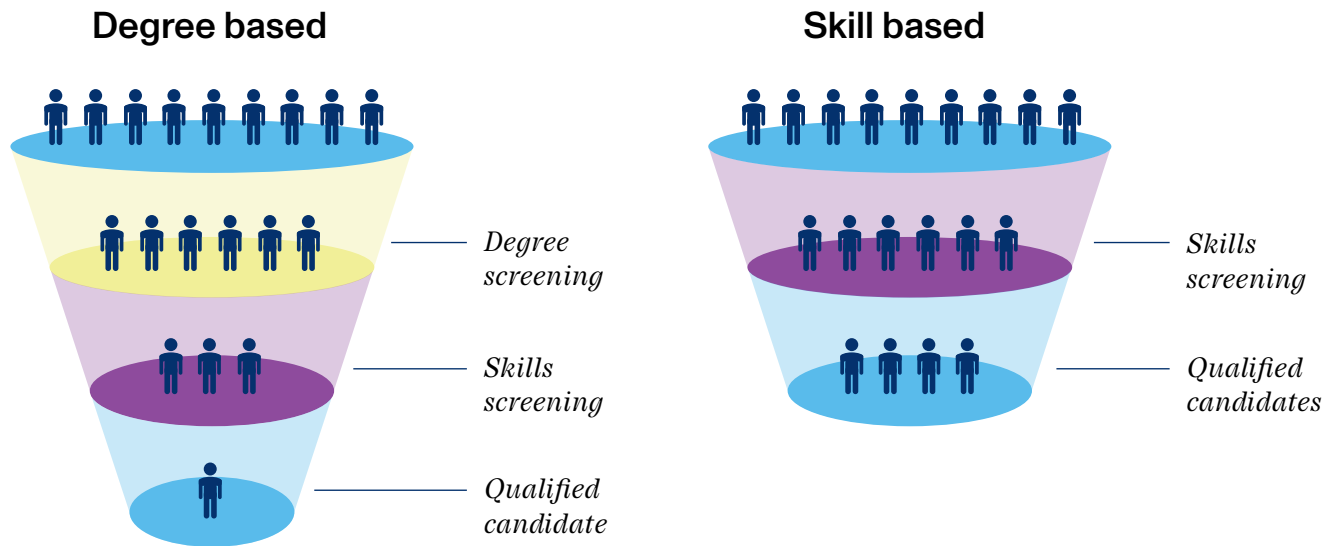
For decades, upward economic mobility for millions of STARS has been blocked by an invisible barrier — the paper ceiling. The paper ceiling represents the degree screens, biased algorithms, stereotypes, and exclusive professional networking that block career opportunities for more than 70 million workers in the U.S. who are STARS. When we tear the paper ceiling, employers gain access to a massive and diverse pool of skilled candidates for hard-to-fill jobs, while STARS get a fair chance to earn the higher wages that lead to upward economic mobility.

With workers and companies uniting to create a new and more equitable future of work in which skills matter more than what's on paper, both STARS and employers can thrive again.

Visit [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://tearthepaperceiling.org) to get involved.

## The Impact of Degree Requirements

Degree screens artificially constrain an employer's view of available talent, eliminating potentially qualified workers from consideration.



**More than half of the workforce are STARs, a talent pool that meets multiple needs.**

**The good news for your workforce strategy is that there is a large, skilled, diverse talent pool that is skilled through alternative routes.**

Many hiring managers overestimate how common bachelor's degrees are in the workforce, especially if they hold a bachelor's degree themselves.<sup>4</sup> The truth is that a minority of the population has completed a bachelor degree, and there are more than 70 million workers who are STARs such as military service, on-the-job experience, and community college. Misperceptions of degree prevalence can distort employers' expectations to create a self-inflicted strategic disadvantage.

### Consider This:

Think through the top 3-5 skills that you use daily in your job that make you effective. Where did you first learn each skill? When and how did you gain mastery of it? Most of us accrue more skills and sharpen existing ones throughout our careers. Like STARs, a large portion of *every worker's* abilities are acquired through alternate routes.

## STARs have skills that are transferable and relevant for in-demand roles.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the concept of essential workers became a widespread term. The people in those roles brought their skills to bear as they invented new business processes and adapted to new constraints and risks that the public health emergency posed. Although many essential workers receive relatively low pay, we know they are not low-skilled workers.

Furthermore, the vast majority of occupations — 94% of all jobs — employ a mix of STARs and workers with bachelor's degrees of many kinds. A few occupations are closely tied to a specific form of higher education due to professional standards tied to safety and legality — such as civil engineers, physicians, and research scientists. However, the broad swath of jobs in our economy have a variety of entry points and share substantial overlap with adjacent careers.

Many low-wage roles require skills that are similar to middle-wage roles, and middle-wage roles require skills that are also required in high-wage roles.<sup>5</sup> Most roles across job families like management, design, sales, office administration, business, technology, and healthcare have talented workers within them delivering a high level of excellence who came to that role from a wide array of previous roles and industries. Most workers performing that role exhibit the core skill it takes to do it; *whether that person has a degree or not does not determine their skill — their performance does.*

So we know all roles require skill. And most roles have a mix of workers who are STARs and have degrees. If two workers performing the same job have similar skill sets — and we know most roles have a mix of STARs and workers with degrees, — is it plausible to claim that the coworker with a degree is highly skilled or underemployed when their peer is capable of the same performance?

## STARs Paths to High-Wage Work Vary



### Shining STARs

4 million STARs currently work in high-wage occupations today. They are proof that workers can gain valuable skills through alternative pathways to college.



### Rising STARs

32 million STARs currently hold roles that demand skills similar to higher paying work; their current job suggests they could transfer those skills into, on average, more than 70% wage gains.



### Forming STARs

35 million STARs' current occupations indicate that they have skills for a wage gain of at least 10%, but may benefit from additional experience or training to access transformative wage growth.

**More than 32 million STARS are ready to perform significantly higher-paying work today, without any skilling intervention.**

This is not a philosophical statement. It simply describes the evidence in the labor market: 32 million Rising STARS use skills in their current occupation that readily translate to success in occupations that offer more than 70% higher wages on average. These wage gains represent important upward economic mobility for the STARS, yes. But importantly for employers, it means there is a large pool of talent currently undervalued by the market. Employers today have an opportunity to pursue a more robust and resilient talent portfolio strategy when they recognize and reward overlooked talent. Further, [our interviews with STARS](#) indicate that they frequently face barriers to advancement. Unlocking this pool to advance further by reexamining degree requirements and ensuring equity of opportunity is critical for STARS, but also is a benefit to their employers.

There are 4 million Shining STARS in high-wage occupations today. These STARS are 4 million living proof points that workers gain skills for high-wage work through alternative pathways. Nonetheless,

our interviews with Shining STARS reveal that they continue to face barriers in the workplace.

And innovative employers facing a true skills shortage in the marketplace for certain roles won't count out the 35 million Forming STARS. These STARS are positioned for less dramatic wage gains based on their current work. But many have foundational interpersonal skills that could be paired with a technical upskilling intervention to close talent shortages in under-resourced areas in the labor market. While technical skills such as coding or industry knowledge such as product information can be taught, more nuanced skills like social perceptiveness, service orientation, and active listening that are fundamental to many roles Forming STARS currently hold (e.g., taxi drivers, ushers/lobby attendants/ticket takers, retail salespeople, etc.) are much harder to impart via a training bootcamp or company orientation. Employers with niche roles missing a sufficient readily available talent pool should see Forming STARS as a large source of transferable talent to leverage with targeted interventions such as those laid out in the STARS Hiring Framework (see Appendix for framework).

# 4 Million ✨

There are 4 million Shining STARS in high-wage occupations today. They are 4 million living proof points that workers gain skills for high wage work through alternative pathways. *Nonetheless, our interviews with Shining STARS reveal that they continue to face barriers in the workplace.*

## STARs are a majority of many key demographic groups.

Within many workplaces, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) is high on the C-Suite's agenda. STARs represent a significant portion of all regions, races, ethnicities, genders and generations across the United States. In addition to being half the active workforce overall, STARs are the majority of workers in key demographic groups that are underrepresented in valuable and growing occupations. *Employers simply cannot find the diverse talent they need to meet emerging market needs without accessing the STAR talent pool.*

Approximately two-thirds of Black workers are STARs, and more than half of Black STARs work in 25 occupations.<sup>6</sup> With so much Black talent concentrated in a relatively narrow range of occupations, employers that look in the wrong places or use the wrong criteria will struggle to source Black talent. Similarly, 55% of Hispanic workers are STARs, while 27% of Asian workers are STARs.

Simultaneously, given the demographics of the country, almost half of STARs (49%) are white. With STARs making up half the workforce, making the labor market work for STARs is essential to make the labor market work at all. Companies cannot meet their diversity goals without STARs, but *the advantages of effectively tapping STARs talent extend well beyond diversity goals.*

## Who Are STARs?

65% of Black workers



55% of Hispanic workers



49% of white workers



27% of Asian workers



66% of rural workers



48% of urban workers



61% of military veterans



54% of male workers



52% of female workers



## Hiring STARs can mitigate hiring challenges and reduce the risk in your workforce plan.

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Employers have an opportunity to revitalize their talent pipelines. There are some risks to opening up to new talent, but let's put those risks in perspective — *all hiring carries risks*. There are financial, operational and psychological risks associated with any hire. In fact, the more senior the hire, the higher the risk. Given those risks, employers routinely deploy risk mitigation mechanisms (e.g., offshoring, outsourcing, etc.). Even internships are frequently used as a form of risk mitigation for early career hires, but such mechanisms are too frequently deployed unevenly and their effects are disproportionately harmful to STARs.

At the same time, employers now have an opportunity to articulate a strategy that avails them of an entire talent category most have previously ignored. *It is this inability to recognize half the workforce that is the true risk*. A well-tuned talent strategy must incorporate the STARs talent category alongside other talent categories. Many organizations have a recruiting approach tailored to veterans or recent college graduates, and a similar approach should be developed for STARs. Assess your organization's talent needs for areas best suited to intentional STAR sourcing and identify the routes that best integrate into your sourcing and recruiting portfolio.

### Getting started may be easier than you think

Our research and partnership with employers has revealed increasing receptivity for changing hiring practices, but figuring out how and where to start can be daunting. We recommend that you begin by considering your stakeholders' degree of readiness and motivation to shift toward skills-based hiring and share with key decision makers and implementation partners the value you see STARs offering. Depending on their role, they may have varied concerns about the implications of adjusting hiring practices. Determine who to recruit as fellow champions, who can be formal sponsors, and who with veto power might be hesitant or skeptical. Build a core group of ready champions for change, select a target, and scope your initiative to show practical and rapid progress within your unique circumstances and constraints.

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## STAGE 1: IF YOU'RE JUST GETTING STARTED WITH SKILLS-BASED HIRING

### 1. Identify the roles in your organization that are well-suited to skills-based hiring and intentional STAR talent sourcing.

Any organization has some roles or job families within them that are good candidates for intentional STARs hiring. At a minimum, your organization should ensure that STARs are not excluded from the 30 key mobility roles identified in Opportunity@Work's report, *Rise with the STARs* (see Appendix for a list). These occupations have historically employed substantial numbers of STARs, but our research has found that STARs have held a diminishing share of those roles over the past 20 years, and they have borne the brunt of losses in other positions with shrinking numbers. Nonetheless, STARs represent traditional high-value candidates — those who have direct experience in the role and can hit the ground running. Make sure your organization isn't inadvertently screening out seasoned workers with direct relevant experience.

But don't stop there — the real opportunity that STARs represent for your workforce is in catalyzing a labor market that effectively uses transferable skills as currency. The ability to look beyond an exact replica of experience to recognize and harness relevant skills and skills adjacencies as applied in a different context is a necessary tactic for talent leaders and hiring managers alike.

### 2. Retool your processes for skills-based hiring.

Using a bachelor's degree as a primary screen for qualifications is a broken hack. In place of a blunt instrument like a degree screen, employers can choose from an array of more specialized tools that they already use to effectively match work with workers. It's time to hone these tools to better target the critical skills for each role and wield them with confidence across an expanded range of candidates. *Prioritizing skills over pedigree doesn't devalue skills learned as part of a degree, it's about recognizing and rewarding relevant skills learned from any route.*

This doesn't mean banning degree requirements entirely; however, demand a consistent and principled rationale to retain a degree requirement. Over time, move away from defaulting to a mandatory degree, and ensure that job descriptions that include a degree requirement have a principled reason for doing so and can identify a specific degree, rather than a generic bachelor's.

Many employers are already rewriting their job descriptions to denominate their roles in terms of the skills required and the experience needed. Leaders must also be careful to screen their job descriptions for exclusionary language. Once you start the recruitment process, ensure that your interview questions are skills-, experience-, and behavior-based.

When removing a requirement for a degree, recognize that this does not lower standards, it raises the bar on what the right standards are.

*When done well, this retooled hiring process can result in higher volume and better quality matches for the work that needs doing. In a true win-win, screening for what you need directly instead of a poor proxy can deliver improved diversity in terms of demographics and perspectives. This is possible when you intentionally combine skills-based hiring with incorporating the STARS population into your talent strategy.*

## **STAGE 2: IF YOUR ORGANIZATION IS READY TO RECRUIT STARS**

### **3. Rethink your talent sourcing routes, including internal talent pathways.**

Employers embarking on a STARS hiring journey commonly find that they have the opportunity to either rethink or expand their sourcing strategy. In the same way that many employers have steady pipelines from a select set of colleges and universities, a similar model can be applied to include a wider range of post-secondary institutions (including community colleges), training providers, and local or regional workforce development organizations. Additionally, your organization likely has some programmatic sourcing efforts aligned to groups like veterans that rely on networks built around membership.

One talent source that requires a different approach, however, is on-the-job experience. This under-appreciated route is one that STARS and those with degrees have in common, and is one that requires a mindset shift to screen for proactively.

Once your target roles have been structured to support skills-based hiring, identifying whether there are internal roles with skills adjacency can be a valuable source of talent. Consider creating internal mobility pathways. Such pathways may travel within a business unit or cross separate functions. Either way, promoting from within makes use of institutional knowledge by retaining and rewarding talent that has already demonstrated work ethic and workplace culture compatibility. *The opportunity for and encouragement of upward mobility can also enhance your employment value proposition for potential candidates and existing workers in the feeder roles.*

Purposeful sourcing from lower-wage roles has the added benefit of boosting progress on diversity goals into mid- and senior-level positions. Occupational segregation and the overrepresentation of STARS in low-wage work contributes to a phenomenon of substantial drop off for underrepresented groups in higher ranks of organizations. Recognizing the value of skills earned on-the-job can unblock the seeming scarcity in the pipeline for some occupations that struggle to attract demographic groups without established track records in substantial numbers. For example, rather than treating degree attainment in decades past as a rigid marker for representation in that discipline, identify workers who are 10, 20, or 30 years into their careers with relevant skills earned from alternative paths to change what's considered possible. Implement hiring mechanisms to make these alternative routes mainstream.

## STAGE 3: WHEN YOU'RE READY TO ENABLE STARS TO THRIVE AT SCALE

### 4. Reimagine onramps and onboarding where needed.

No worker is fully productive on day one, but employers often implicitly expect an unrealistic level of readiness, particularly for those employees who are early in their careers or are making career transitions. The cost and risk of hidden onboarding is borne at the team level and therefore too often inadequately addressed. Leading organizations have, however, moved beyond an onboarding section on the company intranet to deepen their insight on what is needed for an employee to succeed in a role, particularly if that role is high volume or has had historically high turnover. Employers have an opportunity to make huge strides by creating more intentional onboarding programs and bridging the gap between what a worker typically knows when they are hired and what they need to know to thrive.

### 5. Continue to strengthen your pipeline for the future.

In the US, there are 32 million Rising STARS who are skilled for higher wage work today, but you can extend your influence and seed the ground for your future talent needs with longer-range planning and a talent ecosystem perspective.

- *Design targeted upskilling and reskilling initiatives:* If you anticipate a need for specialized skills or are creating new-to-world roles in your organization, STARS may be a great place to look for potential talent. Beyond that, however, as an employer, it is incumbent upon you to send clear demand signals to your community, training, and post-secondary partners about what skills you will need in the future and what proficiency looks like.
- *Avail yourself of established upskilling/reskilling programs:* For those skills that are common across employers (e.g. many IT, project management, cybersecurity roles, etc.), a wide range of upskilling programs already exist. Their graduates are an eager pipeline and working with the sponsors/developers of these programs can be a way to ensure your future needs are met.
- *Link arms with your value chain or local employer ecosystem:* A single organization can make significant progress to meet its own talent needs, but coalitions can drive network effects that transform labor markets and even economies. Consider the partnerships, supply chains, or other associations that could enable you to build pathways that are not limited to your four walls. One relatively easy way to get started is to examine and adjust vendor contractual requirements that may inadvertently bake a degree bias into your supply chain.

# Call to Action

Depending on where your organization is on its journey to inclusive hiring, your starting point may differ, but we invite you to start now. Employers with whom we work typically identify a targeted point of entry for STARS hiring. Many choose to remove degree requirements from a role or job family, or from all entry-level roles, for example. Other employers create a plan to comprehensively address a particular hard-to-fill role (i.e., sourcing, recruitment, skill building, and onboarding).

Here are four ways you can start your journey:

1. Socialize STARS as a critical, but overlooked talent category.
2. Eliminate unnecessary degree requirements in your job descriptions.
3. Develop a STARS sourcing strategy.
4. Identify and deploy the hiring mechanisms that best match your organization's key roles, particularly those that are high volume and hard to fill.

The payoff is nothing short of a more functional labor market for all.

If you're interested in learning more about bringing STARS into your organization or helping to Tear the Paper Ceiling, please email: [employer@opportunityatwork.org](mailto:employer@opportunityatwork.org).

*Note:* Future installments in this series will provide more detailed guidance and case study examples on the following topics:

- Building a STARS strategy
- Skills-based hiring
- Internal sourcing
- Internships
- Apprenticeships and work-based learning
- Contract-to-hire
- Vendor contracting

## The STARs Hiring Framework

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### Mechanisms to expand the talent pool:

- *Skills-based hiring:* This is the best approach for a wide range of roles where there are significant hiring needs and higher than average turnover, creating the need for a broad labor pool, combined with proven “origin” roles where candidates develop core skills for the target role. This is also an effective hiring approach in roles where industry certifications (rather than degrees) are a known proxy for a skills assessment or where there is a common industry assessment approach (such as a coding test). In these roles, the risk of a “bad fit” hire is lower overall, making other investments in mainstreaming unnecessary.
- *Internal mobility:* This is really a special form of skills-based hiring approach, effective in organizations with large pools of “origin jobs” in-house today and the potential to leverage this talent pool as a consistent source to fill other roles across the organization. This provides the lowest hiring risk for the company as the candidates moving from these origin roles to new roles are known entities to the company — they have current managers who can attest to their skills and performance as well as documented work history and performance reviews. The one caveat to this approach: it does require the organization with the origin roles to have a strong hiring and onboarding mechanism on behalf of the entire company, not just the individual group’s needs.

### Mechanisms to improve onramps and onboarding:

- *Internships:* This approach is best for roles where soft skills and a few (but not an overwhelming

level) of hard skills can be learned in ~3 months.

At the end of most internships, companies can assess fit and ability to perform a specific role. Internships are commonly (but not exclusively) used for sales/services/support type roles (as well as college summer hires in many roles); they are also used as a mainstreaming mechanism after candidates complete targeted training programs such as boot camps where companies want to validate both soft skills as well as the skills learned in the boot camp.

- *Apprenticeships:* This approach is the best fit where the role requires a significant level of hard skills that are not commonly taught in the education/training ecosystem and/or the skills are unique to your company. Apprenticeships provide the combination of training and assessment necessary to validate these skills before offering durable employment. Apprenticeships are commonly used in manufacturing/production industries where processes and skills are deemed company-unique and in situations where full-time workers have a durable contract post-hire, increasing the cost of hiring errors.

### Mechanisms that provide employers with leverage and opportunity for broader impact:

- *Contract to hire:* This approach is most commonly used in high-volume roles that have common industry definitions where an ecosystem of vendors/contractors has arisen to provide contract employees for these roles. This contract labor ecosystem can effectively hire/train a labor pool for these roles and is often supportive of employers hiring contract employees from their

ranks for a modest placement fee. This model enables a “try before you buy” for employers, ensuring they have direct visibility to the skills of individuals over the course of their contract.

- *Vendor hiring requirements:* Changing the required qualifications and/or hiring practices of vendors that work for a company does not

change the composition of your enterprises’ workforce. However, for enterprises with vendors as an important part of their overall workforce model, reducing contractually mandated hiring constraints (such as required college degrees) for the staff your vendors provide you will enable them to hire from a broader pool of talent.

## Using Opportunity@Work’s Jobs Framework to identify promising mobility pathways

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In Navigating With The STARS<sup>7</sup>, we published insights from a study of 130 million job transitions that surfaced the struggle that STARS face on their path to higher wage work. But that study also helped create a framework for understanding how STARS could achieve greater mobility.

Our research identified three categories of occupations that enable deeper understanding of how STARS can ultimately achieve mobility in the labor market. For employers, these categories can provide clues to sourcing, hiring, and advancing STARS. By measuring the skills distance between pairs of occupations, and observing the number of actual job transitions from one to the other in labor market data, we have defined three categories of occupations.

- *Origin jobs* are lower wage roles that require skill-building that positions workers to move into similarly skilled but higher paid work.
- *Gateway jobs* are uniquely suited to skills-based wage mobility, as they are higher paid but similarly skilled to multiple origin jobs, and in turn also

share skill similarity to multiple higher wage occupations beyond them. These roles are like skeleton keys that unlock multiple economically advantageous pathways for STARS.

- *Destination jobs* are high-wage roles that lend themselves to access via skills-based transitions, rather than via formal, traditional education routes, and they are not narrow professions regulated by legal standards bodies. These destination jobs have 20% or more STARS working in them today.

This categorization can be useful to employers who have identified high priority roles for which to build pathways based upon skills. Once your target roles have been structured to support skills-based hiring, identifying whether there are internal roles with skills adjacency can be a valuable source of talent. If your prioritized roles are Destination roles, assess what Gateway jobs represent meaningful talent sources. Similarly if they are Gateway roles, identify origin roles that could feed viable talent into your talent acquisition function.

## 30 Jobs to Turn the Tides

Data and analysis from Lightcast shows that employers have decreased the number of degree requirements over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> However, job posting data in the table below shows there remain many roles where employers can improve access for STARS.

Occupation <sup>2</sup>	Number of Workers (1,000s)	Pct. STARS	Pct. of Job Openings Requiring a Bachelor Degree <sup>3</sup>
Industrial Engineers	198	20%	100%
Computer & Information Systems Managers	698	19%	94%
Business Operation & Mngmt. Specialists, All Other	790	26%	88%
Financial Managers	1,321	31%	88%
Comp. Scientists, Network Analysts & Web Developers	1,713	29%	88%
Managers in Marketing & Public Relations	1,234	26%	87%
Compliance Officers, Non-agricultural	276	26%	87%
Medical & Health Services Managers	759	26%	84%
Human Resources Managers	370	23%	84%
Chief Executives & Legislators	1,622	22%	82%
Computer Programmers	481	21%	76%
Managers, All Other	5,808	38%	75%
Purchasing Agents	184	45%	71%
Human Resources & Training Specialists	1,010	29%	68%
Teachers & Instructors, All Other	658	32%	67%
Meeting & Convention Planners	210	17%	59%
Sales Representatives, Wholesale & Manufacturing	1,136	49%	55%
First-Line Supervisors of Admin. Support Workers	1,250	59%	54%
Computer Support Specialists	539	45%	45%
Police Officers & Detectives	866	52%	44%
Registered Nurses	3,327	26%	40%
Accounting & Auditing Clerks	1,037	74%	37%
Sales Representatives, Services	498	40%	34%
Designers	819	33%	30%
Real Estate Brokers & Sales Agents	1,131	41%	29%
First-Line Supervisors of Sales Workers	4,138	60%	21%
Diagnostic Technicians	440	50%	20%
Secretaries & Administrative Assistants	2,206	62%	16%
Customer Service Representatives	1,961	62%	11%
Office Clerks	1,059	69%	10%

<sup>1</sup> Levanon, G., et al (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Occupational categories are based on the 2010 Integrated Public Use Microdata Series harmonized occupation coding scheme.

<sup>3</sup> Calculated as the proportion of national job postings from January 1, 2021 to November 31, 2021 with listed educational requirements where a bachelor's degree was the minimum requirement. Data from Burning Glass Technologies: Labor Insight. 2021.

# For Further Reading

## Research Reports

[Bridging the Advancement Gap: What Frontline Employees Want—and What Employers Think They Want](#), Cara Collective and McKinsey & Company, July 2022, Swathi Bhaskaran, Andrew Davis, Christophe Desbrière, and Sara Wasserteil

[Building an Equitable Remote Work Strategy: Lessons from 2020](#), Grads of Life, 2020

[Degrees of Risk](#), Jobs for the Future (JFF) and American Student Assistance (ASA)

[Dismissed by Degrees](#), Grads of Life, Accenture and Harvard Business School, December 2017, Joseph B. Fuller and Manjari Raman

[Employer Practices Working Knowledge & Research](#), WorkRise

[Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent: How leaders can improve hiring practices to uncover missed talent pools, close skills gaps, and improve diversity](#), Accenture and Harvard Business School Managing the Future of Work, September 2021, Joseph Fuller, Manjari Raman, Eva Sage-Gavin, Kristen Hines

[Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent](#), Accenture and Harvard Business School, September 2021, Joseph B. Fuller, Manjari Raman, Eva Sage-Gavin, and Kristen Hines

[Making Alternative Credentials Work: A New Strategy for HR Professionals](#), Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 2022

[Meet the low-wage workforce](#), Brookings Institute, November 2019, Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman

[Meeting the World's Midcareer Moment](#), Generation, July 2021, Mona Mourshed, Ali Jaffer, Helen, Cashman, Karen Salazar Ruiz, and Jennifer Sikes

[Moving the Goalposts: How Demand for a Bachelor's Degree Is Reshaping the Workforce](#), Burning Glass Technologies (now Lightcast), September 2014

[Navigate with the STARS: Reimagining Equitable Pathways to Mobility](#), Opportunity@Work

[Reach for the STARS: Realizing the Potential of America's Hidden Talent Pool](#), Opportunity@Work

[Rise with the STARS: Building a Stronger Labor Market for STARS, Communities, and Employers](#), Opportunity@Work

[Rise with the STARS: Can sourcing workers without degrees build a stronger labor market?](#), People + Strategy Journal, Society for Human Resources Management Spring 2022, Shad Ahmed and Angela Briggs-Paige, Opportunity@Work

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*About Opportunity@Work*

Opportunity@Work is a nonprofit social enterprise with a mission to increase career opportunities for the more than 70 million adults in the U.S. who do not have a bachelor's degree but are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs). For STARs, the American Dream has been fading due in part to an "opportunity gap," in which access to the good jobs required for upward mobility often depends less on people's skills and more on whether and where they went to college, who they know professionally and socially, or even how they look. We envision a future in which employers hire people based on skills rather than their pedigree. We are uniting companies, workforce development organizations, and philanthropists in a movement to restore the American Dream so that every STAR can work, learn, and earn to their full potential.

Visit us at [www.opportunityatwork.org](http://www.opportunityatwork.org).



*Tear the Paper Ceiling*  
*Hiring Playbook for Employers*

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CASE STUDY

# How the State of Maryland Expanded Access to State Jobs for STARs



# How the State of Maryland Opened Its Doors to STARs



## State of Maryland

**38,000**

State employees

**1.35M**

STARs workers in the state:

58% Black

46% Hispanic

63% rural

Recovering from the pandemic labor shock, the State of Maryland was motivated to address the needs of workers across their state. Consistent with conventional wisdom about “workers without degrees,” their initial hypothesis was that their primary role would be to invest in upskilling workers. Upon seeing data describing the existing skills of people who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) across Maryland, they shifted their lens: from policymaker to employer. A coalition of stakeholders – starting at the top with Governor Hogan – realized the more immediate and significant opportunity was to change their own hiring practices to tap into the pool of talented STARs.



**Governor  
Larry Hogan**  
State of Maryland



**Amelia Alcivar**  
Chief of Staff



**Joe Farren**  
Chief Strategy Officer,  
Department of Labor

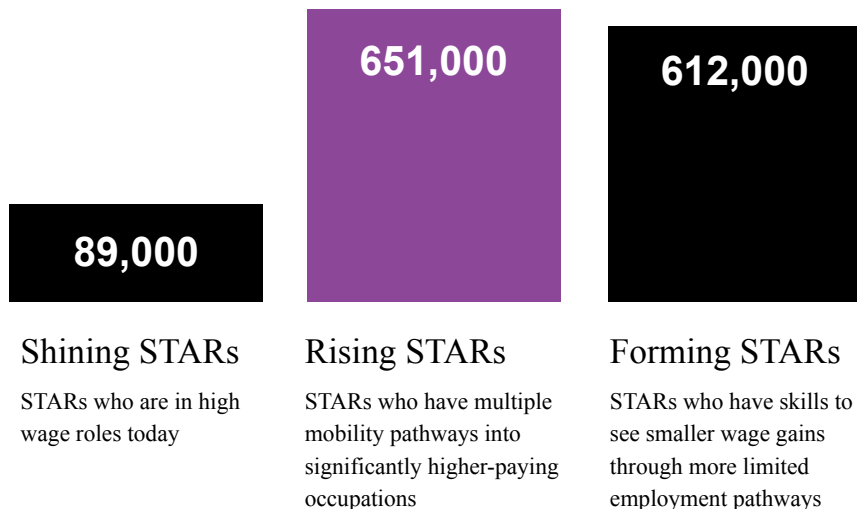


**Mark Townend**  
Director,  
Recruitment

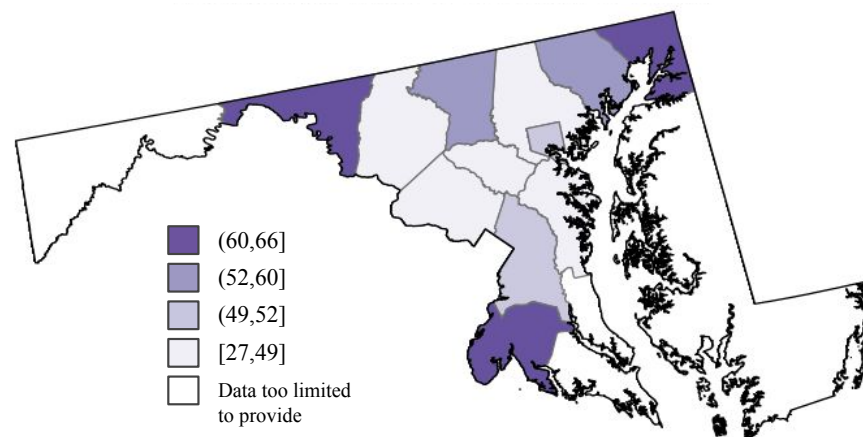
# Recruit from the broader skilled workforce, rather than the subset of degreed workers to surface Rising STARS

In Maryland, Rising STARS represented an additional talent pool of 651,000 skilled workers. Those workers in turn were positioned for critical jobs (e.g. IT, Administrative) that pay up to 50% more in their state.

## STARS in Maryland



## 2019: STARS as a Percent of the Maryland Labor Force: by Counties



Source: Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2019 1-year American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample.

# Identify those stakeholders whose incentives are naturally well aligned with hiring STARs

This initiative highlighted the universality of STARs as a talent category that meets multiple employer needs.

*Need:* Create a meaningful impact on the lives of constituents that leads to economic mobility & build an inclusive state workforce.

*How STARs Address It:* STARs are present in every demographic group.

**Executive Leadership**



*Need:* Communicate that the State was fulfilling their mission: to make Maryland work for Marylanders.

*How STARs Address It:* The STARs messaging allows a clear, understandable message to reach all Marylanders.



**Communications Leader**

**Human Resources,  
Hiring Managers, Recruiters**



*Need:* Find qualified candidates for State jobs and fill them as quickly as possible.

*How STARs Address It:* STARs vastly increase the size of the labor pool.



**Strategist, Talent Strategist,  
Workforce Planner**

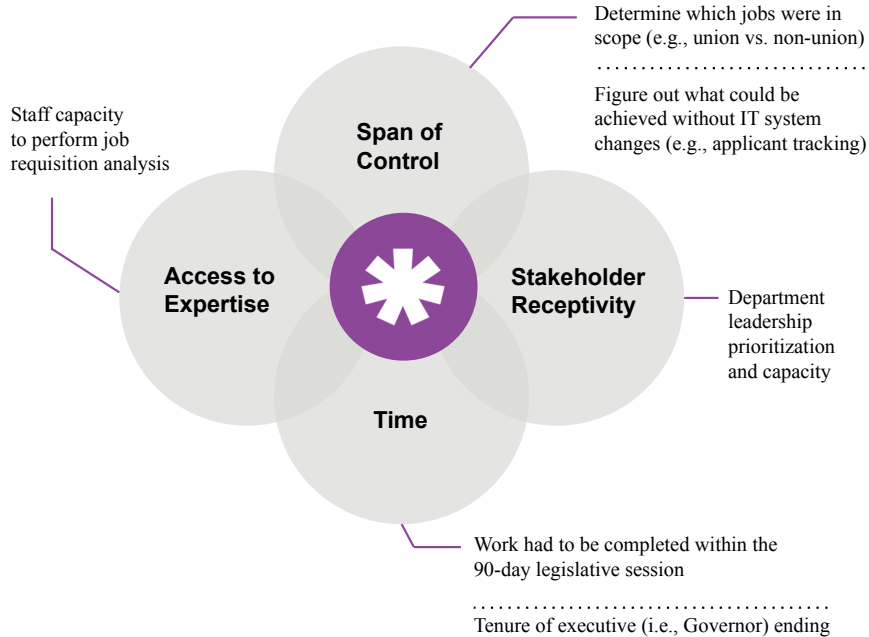
*Need:* Reshape the Maryland workforce to become more diverse and representative of the state population. Fill hard-to-fill roles. Establish durable pipelines.

*How STARs Address It:* STARs live in all geographies and demographic groups, and have skills for high priority and hard-to-fill roles.

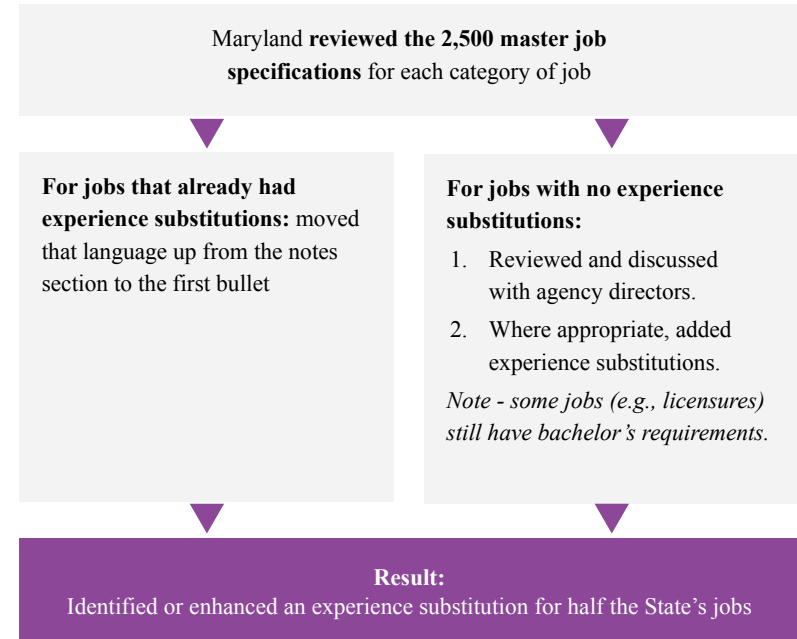
# Identify your constraints, and scope within them so you can start and act quickly

The “No Degree, No Problem” initiative was a rapid proof-of-concept to remove degree requirements from half the State’s jobs.

## Initiative Constraints



## Initiative Scope



# Acknowledge the change — and keep communications simple, universal, personal, and powerful

The administration built support by crafting a message with broad appeal, emotional resonance, and “inescapable logic.”

## “SUPP” Change Communications Framework



### Simple & Memorable

It's not hard to understand who STARs are and the barriers they face.

*Do you have someone who works for/with you right now who doesn't have a degree?*



### Universal & Inclusive

STARs were an apolitical “handle” that appealed to everyone.

*“Black, Hispanic, rural, urban...you can pull the string through the state and everyone was included.”*



### Personal

Everyone knows (and likely loves) a STAR.

*The State's Chief Information Security Officer – a beloved and respected colleague – is a STAR.*



### Powerful Reframing

STARs are half the workforce. Skill development should be respected regardless of whether it's gained on the job or through education. It's not either STARs or college graduates with a bachelor's degree – it's both/and.

*“Shouldn't a worker with 15 years of experience at the state be eligible for a promotion?”*

50%

of the state's 38,000  
jobs no longer have  
degree requirements

34%

year-over-year increase  
in STAR applicants in  
the first 6 months

75+

Press hits

*“It’s more important than ever that we work together to find new ways to build a steady pipeline of talented, well-trained, skilled workers for the jobs of the future”*

— Governor Hogan