

SKILLS-FIRST HIRING

Tear The Paper Ceiling Campaign Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Who is involved in this campaign?

The Ad Council partnered with Opportunity@Work and more than 50 national organizations (in 2022) on a groundbreaking campaign to **“Tear the Paper Ceiling”** – the invisible barrier that holds back the over 50% of U.S. workers who don’t have a bachelor’s degree.

What does STARs stand for?

STARs stands for workers **S**killed **T**hrough **A**lternative **R**outes rather than a bachelor's degree.

What is the paper ceiling?

The paper ceiling represents the biased algorithms, automatic degree screening, the lack of alumni networks, and the stereotypes and misperceptions that block career opportunities for more than [70 million workers in the U.S. who are “STARs”](#) - Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor’s degree.

Who does the paper ceiling affect?

- STARs represent over 50% of the U.S. workforce today and have developed valuable skills through alternative routes such as military service, community college, training programs, partial college completion, or, most commonly, on-the-job experience.
- STARs have valuable skills for in-demand jobs, but they face a barrier between better jobs and employers in need of their talent.
- Additionally, the paper ceiling has had a negative impact on diversity in the workforce. 62% of Black workers, 54% of Hispanic workers, and 66% of rural workers of all races are STARs.
 - [Learn more about STARs!](#)

How to Tear the Paper Ceiling?

- There are deliberate choices managers, companies, industries, and regions can make to *Tear the Paper Ceiling*.
- By moving to skills-first hiring and valuing skills developed through any route, employers can begin to build more flourishing, resilient, and equitable talent pipelines.
 - If you’re just starting out, begin by identifying the roles in your organization that are well-suited to skills-first hiring and intentional STAR sourcing and retool your hiring processes for skills-first hiring.
 - 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.

- At [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://tearthepaperceiling.org), the campaign provides resources for employers to expand their own STARs hiring, and invites STARs to share their own stories.
 - Employers can access a suite of tools that includes the "Case for STARs" to help you get started with skills-first hiring practices in their organization.

What is the problem you're trying to solve?

STARs have the skills for higher-wage work but are systematically shut out by the paper ceiling. Between 2012 and 2019, 69% of new jobs created were in occupations which typically require a bachelor's degree or higher for entry – even when there are other ways to acquire the relevant skills. This left only 31% of new jobs available to the 50% of the workforce who are STARs. As a result, the wage gap between STARs and workers with bachelor's degrees has doubled over the last 40 years.¹ STARs now earn less – when adjusted for inflation – than they did in 1976. This hurts the STARs who can't translate their learning into earning, but also the employers in need of skilled talent.

Who is this campaign targeting (intended audience)?

This national PSA campaign will reach both employers and STARs to change the narrative around the value and potential of workers without bachelor's degrees.

We're inspiring employers to adopt skill-first hiring practices and encouraging STARs to see themselves as part of a valuable community that can advocate for themselves and pursue rewarding careers.

Who benefits from tearing the paper ceiling?

Tearing the paper ceiling benefits all of us:

- Employers gain access to a massive and diverse pool of skilled candidates for hard-to-fill jobs.
- STARs get a fair chance to earn the higher wages that lead to upward economic mobility.
- And we create more equitable opportunities for Black, Hispanic, rural and Veteran workers – all of whom are overrepresented among STARs.

What is the campaign website?

The PSAs drive to [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://tearthepaperceiling.org), where STARs can share their stories, and employers can access resources and toolkits to get started with skills-based hiring practices.

Why is this an important issue right now?

- We have seen seismic changes to the workforce over the past several years - not only during the pandemic but also beforehand.

¹ See Figure 1.2 in [Navigating with the STARs: Reimagining Equitable Pathways to Mobility](#).

- The majority of jobs created in the past decade require skilled labor, with growing demand in fields like healthcare, green energy, data analysis, and cybersecurity. These are not necessarily jobs that require a bachelor’s degree to succeed, but so many employers still default to that as a requirement.
- The pandemic made us rethink so many things about work. It’s also an ideal moment to rethink how we value skills.
- The labor market is tight – but there’s **an opportunity gap, not a skills gap.**
 - STARs have the skills to succeed, they just aren’t being given a chance to show it, because of the paper ceiling.
 - Skills-first hiring simply makes good business sense, and that’s what the members of the “Tear the Paper Ceiling” coalition are embracing.
- We have an opportunity to **help shape the conversation and create cultural change** – within the field and with the general public.

Why are STARs an important audience?

- Many employers today believe “no degree” means “no skills.”
- Faced with that message, many STARs lose the confidence to advocate for themselves and go after better career opportunities – even when they ARE capable of doing the work.
- We’re driving a narrative change that is based on highlighting what STARs bring to the table – the skills to succeed – instead of what they lack (a bachelor’s degree.)
- When we **help STARs change how they think about themselves**, they can be part of helping us drive this change. They can see themselves as part of a valuable community that can advocate for their value.
- We want more employers to open the door to opportunity for STARs– and also inspire more STARs to walk through that door and encourage other STARs to join them.

What can organizations and individuals do about it?

Everyone has a role to play in helping tear the paper ceiling and change the narrative around STARs and their value in the workplace. At [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://tearthepaperceiling.org), the campaign provides resources for businesses, talent developers, STARs, and their supporters. Employers can access a playbook to help you get started with skills-first hiring practices in your organization and develop more equitable talent strategies; STARs can share their stories; and all supporters can sign a pledge to support STARs and download shareable social media assets.

How does tearing the paper ceiling benefit employers?

STARs represent over 50% of the U.S. workforce today and have developed valuable skills through alternative routes such as military service, community college, training programs, partial college completion, or, most commonly, on-the-job experience. Our research shows that 32 million STARs already have the skills needed to do jobs that pay on average 70% more than they are currently

earning, and employers can tap that skilled – and diverse – talent by removing barriers and opening up new pathways to opportunity.

How does tearing the paper ceiling benefit STARs?

The paper ceiling unfairly holds STARs back from opportunities—even when they’ve demonstrated skills for higher wage work. When we challenge misconceptions about what it takes to be a qualified candidate, STARs can access more equitable job opportunities and let their skills shine.

- [Learn more about STARs!](#)

Have you involved STARs’ voices into this work?

STARs’ stories and experiences are at the center of the *Tear the Paper Ceiling* campaign. STARs were closely involved in its development throughout research and production, including real STARs appearing in the national PSAs. A key part of the *Tear the Paper Ceiling* movement is STARs to share their own stories, via the TearThePaperCeiling.org website and on social media, to create a shared sense of identity, community and self-advocacy among STARs.

Additionally, the STARs language has been developed and tested in various forums over the past three years, including one-on-one interviews with STARs (2019), ethnographic research with STARs (2020) and most recently, during the Ad Council’s creative testing with STARs (2022). The STARs language has also received overwhelmingly positive feedback from Opportunity@Work’s advisory panels of STARs and academic researchers, as well as workforce development practitioners.

In both formal and anecdotal research with STARs, this language has consistently generated enthusiasm and excitement. When referred to as STARs, these workers feel seen, understood, validated and empowered.

When and where will the PSAs appear?

Beginning in late September 2022, the multiyear campaign began appearing nationwide across all advertising formats: TV, radio, digital, social media, out-of-home, and print. Per the Ad Council’s model, the PSAs will run in placements donated by the media, including Comcast NBCUniversal, LinkedIn, Meta, Reddit, TikTok and YouTube, among others.

Is Tear the Paper Ceiling Anti-College?

College cannot be the only path to success, but in America today, a four-year college degree represents the most direct route to securing middle- and high-wage work. And unfortunately, employers have turned college from a bridge to opportunity to a drawbridge that gets pulled up if someone hasn’t gotten through. College is a clear pathway to upward mobility and it should be; however, it shouldn’t be the only pathway to this opportunity.

Do STARs need additional training to secure higher-wage work?

The skills profiles within the STARs talent pool vary. By analyzing the skills required for their current job, we segmented STARs based on their skills-readiness for higher-wages. The results reveal three distinct STARs segments, each with specific implications for employers, workforce development organizations and analysts. Our research shows that:

- 4 million Shining STARs are already in high-wage roles today. These people offer proof that STARs can succeed in high-wage work when given the opportunity.
- 32 million Rising STARs have the skills and potential to earn (on average) 50% more – a prospect that would transform their lives if only they got the chance to show what they can do.
- 35 million Forming STARs, currently working in low- and middle-wage jobs, have the skills to achieve smaller wage gains through more limited employment pathways. Further training would help Forming STARs to develop additional job skills.

Are you asking employers to lower their standards? Are they paying STARs less for the same job?

There exists a false narrative that hiring STARs means you're lowering standards or deskilling the roles, but it's crucial people understand *tearing the paper ceiling* has nothing to do with standards – or pay being lowered. What it actually means is that by removing those barriers, STAR candidates can now apply for the open roles they are no less capable of doing the job just because they don't have a degree. In fact:

- 4 million STARs are already in high-wage roles today. These people offer proof that STARs can succeed in high-wage work when given the opportunity.
- 32 million STARs have the skills and potential to earn (on average) 50% more – a prospect that would transform their lives if only they got the chance to show what they can do.

Isn't the problem that there aren't enough skilled workers?

There is a persistent – and faulty – narrative that there's a “skills gap” or “labor shortage” holding back employers from accessing the talent they need today. Employers say they can't find talent, but the reality is that's happening because they're looking in the wrong places. STARs are everywhere, yet they are largely invisible to employers. STARs can be found in every part of the labor market, from retail, travel, and hospitality to health care, information technology, manufacturing, and more. However, STARs are invisible in a culture that falsely equates low-wage jobs with a lack of skill and even in the U.S. labor market data, which classifies workers only in terms of education level, not in terms of skills. Perhaps most damagingly, STARs are invisible in employers' talent sourcing strategies and applicant tracking systems because they are automatically screened out for not having a degree.