

Skills-First Hiring Tear the Paper Ceiling Campaign Language Guidelines

Campaign Overview

In September 2022, the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work, in collaboration with nearly 50 national organizations and companies, launched the Skills-First Hiring – [Tear the Paper Ceiling](#) campaign. Uniting both workers and employers, the campaign gave a name to the invisible barrier that comes at every turn for [STARs](#), workers **S**killed **T**hrough **A**lternative **R**outes rather than a bachelor’s degree. STARs are the over 50% of the workforce that have developed valuable skills through alternative routes like military service, community college, training programs, partial college completion, or – most commonly – on-the-job experience.

The [paper ceiling](#) is the invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor’s degree. The lack of alumni networks, biased algorithms, degree screens, stereotypes, and misperceptions all contribute to the paper ceiling, creating barriers to upward economic mobility for STARs, even though they have demonstrated skills for higher-wage work. By giving the paper ceiling a name, we can acknowledge a previously invisible institutional obstacle to better hiring practices.

What can you do?

An easy way to continue to support STARs and tear the paper ceiling is to use the campaign language and make STARs part of your or your organization’s vernacular. Below, we’ve provided messaging guidelines to help you talk about STARs and the paper ceiling.

You can find additional resources at TearThePaperCeiling.org.

From	To
Using STARs as an adjective (i.e., STAR worker)	Using STAR as the noun (i.e., we hire STARs)
Referring to STARs as “people who ...”	Referring to STARs as “workers who”
Using language that is accusatory, condescending/belittling, or makes it seem like the problem is for STARs to fix.	Using language that is empowering, supportive, striking, and urgent.
Using deficit-based language like “non-degreed” worker or referring to workers who “lack a college degree.”	Using language that positions not having a bachelor’s degree as a statement of fact rather than an evaluation. When possible, the preference is to focus on the skills and potential STARs do have.
Positioning employers or higher education as the enemy.	Positioning the paper ceiling as the enemy. When possible, include the “see also” part of the definition for the paper ceiling. The full paper ceiling definition is: “The invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor’s degree. See also: no alumni network, biased algorithms, degree screens, stereotypes, and misperceptions.”
Using too many statistics in a row.	Making each statistic used easy to understand to help contextualize the issue.
Just saying “degree”	Saying “bachelor’s degree”
Using the acronym STAR without defining it	Defining STARs, workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor’s degree, upon first mention, and ensuring that the first letter of each word is capitalized
Defining, for the first time, the acronym STAR without the added “rather than a bachelor’s degree” or “not a bachelor’s degree”	Ensuring on its first use that the definition of STARs includes “rather than a bachelor’s degree” or “not a bachelor’s degree.” E.g., STARs are workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor’s degree.
Skills-based hiring	Skills-first hiring. Prioritizing skills in the hiring process can help employers develop a stronger talent strategy by broadening access to candidates, diversifying the pool of candidates, increasing the likelihood of a quality hire, improving retention rates, and positioning the workforce to be more competitive.