

Open the Door to STARs

Writing Skills—First Job Descriptions and Unlocking Expanded Candidate Searches

Shayan, STAR

In today's labor market, employers can't afford to overlook skilled talent. Yet millions of workers are hidden from opportunity — not because they lack ability, but because traditional hiring practices filter them out before they even reach a hiring manager. These workers are [STARs](#) — Skilled Through Alternative Routes — who have built in-demand skills through community college, military service, training programs, and on-the-job experience, rather than through a bachelor's degree.

STARs make up more than half of the U.S. workforce. Millions already have the skills for higher-wage jobs, but barriers — like outdated job descriptions, opaque screening algorithms, and degree requirements when a degree isn't actually needed for the job — create a [paper ceiling](#) that blocks them out. Expanding your candidate search and writing job descriptions that open the door to STARs will help you build a stronger, more diverse, and more resilient talent pipeline.

EXPANDING YOUR TALENT SEARCH BEYOND DEGREES

STARs are Everywhere — If You Know Where to Look

More than 70 million workers in the U.S. are STARs, making up half of our workforce. STARs are the majority of workers across most demographics, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or geography, and are represented across

every industry and sector. They are overrepresented among rural workers, veterans, Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous workers. They include essential workers, community college grads, returning citizens, parents re-entering the workforce, and beyond. STARs are critical to meeting the talent needs of our labor market and bring a wealth of skills and experience — STARs work in every industry and sector.

Yet STARs are often hidden from employers due to limited sourcing strategies and the use of degree-based filters in applicant tracking systems.

Reimagine Your Sourcing Strategy

To find STARs, you need to shift away from traditional sourcing strategies to a skills-first approach. This requires expanding your sourcing channels to include:

- *Community colleges & public workforce boards:* Connect with career centers at community colleges and American job centers.
- *Training and credentialing programs:* Build relationships with local bootcamps, apprenticeships, and workforce programs.
- *Veteran, reentry, and youth employment orgs:* These groups are full of STARs with practical, proven skills.
- *Inside your organization:* Many STARs are already working in your organization developing the skills and business-specific experience that you are looking for.

Traditional Sourcing Often...	Skills-Based Sourcing Instead...
Relies on a standard set of legacy sources	Takes a comprehensive view of the workforce ecosystem and recruiting landscape and expands talent sourcing to include new pipelines
Assumes candidates will come from the same or similar jobs in businesses in the same field or industry	Looks for candidates with similar skill sets in many different jobs and across industries
Involves minimal analysis of the talent pipeline to understand the effectiveness of individual sources	Carefully analyzes the performance of the talent pipeline within the context of specific hiring and diversity goals

Rewire Hiring Mechanisms

We have many more tools in our hiring toolbox than simply screening resumes, interviewing and hiring. Here are other ways to assess skills of potential candidates:

1. *Leverage internal mobility.* Many of your existing employees likely have the skills and business expertise you seek, and yet we tend to overlook them — especially if they are STARS.
2. *Creative apprenticeship and internship opportunities.* Apprenticeships and internships allow the worker to learn critical skills on the job while providing the employer a chance to evaluate their skills and potential. Apprenticeships typically last longer than internships and provide a more structured learning environment.

3. *Contract for work prior to making a final decision.* Contract-to-hire arrangements offer a trial period where an employer can assess skills prior to bringing a worker on permanently.
4. *Assess your supply chain.* Encouraging the use of skills-based hiring across your supply chain will strengthen their talent pipelines and by extension, yours as well.

WRITE JOB DESCRIPTIONS THAT SIGNAL INCLUSION — NOT EXCLUSION

An effective skills-first job description gives a clear picture of the role's responsibilities and the skills needed to meet them. This focus on responsibilities (like project management or customer service) over requirements (like degrees or years of experience) gives the HR team and hiring managers the latitude to think more broadly about the candidates who are capable of succeeding in the role. It also inspires potential candidates who have developed relevant skills in other industries, jobs, or life experiences, to see themselves in the role.

Traditional job descriptions often:

- List *degrees as default requirements*, even when not truly necessary



Find data on STARS in your region on [STAR Sight.org](https://starsight.org), Opportunity@Work's data visualization platform specifically designed to help employers build STARS-inclusive talent strategies.

- Emphasize *years of experience* rather than actual capabilities
- Use *jargon or vague soft skills* that are hard to assess

That creates a signal to STARS: “This role isn’t for you.”

HR professionals may be most familiar with writing job descriptions, but they are also the closest to the kinds of traditional experience-based and pedigree-based denomination of qualifications you are trying to change. Be sure to include a diverse range of input and

intentional checks and balances across all stakeholders — from HR to the department — when rewriting those descriptions.

The best input is often at the source — direct managers and those succeeding in-role who truly understand what it takes to do the job, or in certain cases, those training individuals in the role. Engage them deeply in the process of redefining role qualifications; this is also a great way to win their buy-in to your new hiring approach and fortify their skills-first mindset.

A STAR-Friendly Job Description Starts with Skills

Skills-first job descriptions clarify what a candidate must be able to do, not what background they must have. To begin, articulate the 5 to 10 core responsibilities and tasks of the role. Specifically, how does the person in this role spend their day, week, or month? What must they accomplish? Leading with this allows potential candidates to evaluate their own skills for the job and make a case that they have transferable skills or relevant experience from another role or field.

Action	Why It Matters
Replace degree requirements with “skills required to succeed in this role”	STARS gain skills outside of college — and you open the door to more talent.
Focus on <i>day-to-day responsibilities</i> and key outcomes	Clarifies expectations and allows candidates to self-assess.
List both <i>technical</i> and <i>transferable</i> skills	Helps STARS see how their experience applies, even if they’re changing industries.
Use clear, inclusive language	Avoid jargon or acronyms that deter applicants from non-traditional paths.
Differentiate “ <i>required</i> ” vs “ <i>preferred</i> ” qualifications	Encourages more STARS to apply if they meet the must-haves.

► Learn more and get examples of skills-first job descriptions in [Opportunity@Work’s full STARS Hiring Playbook](#).

Example

Before: “BA required, 5 years in customer service, knowledge of CRM software”

After: “Experience managing customer inquiries using a CRM (e.g., Salesforce); able to troubleshoot client issues and communicate resolutions in writing or by phone”

Case-in-Point: State of Maryland's Willingness to Change

When the state of Maryland evaluated their job descriptions, they discovered that some position descriptions had not been altered in decades. No one could remember how their qualification requirements became part of the job description but, over time, everyone from hiring managers to recruiters had accepted the requirements, especially degree requirements, as “given.” The willingness to challenge these historical norms is critical for a meaningful reassessment of job descriptions and skill requirements.



Katya, STAR

Including STARs helps you see talent others miss

Broadening your search and rewriting your job descriptions isn't just about being fair — it's about being effective. When you remove unnecessary barriers and signal openness to STARs, you tap into a vast pool of skilled, diverse, and motivated talent. And you take the first critical step in tearing the paper ceiling for good.

Tear the Paper Ceiling with Opportunity@Work

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.

Learn more about [tearing the paper ceiling with us](#), and [download Opportunity@Work's full STARs Hiring Playbook](#).