

Dismantling Harmful Myths About STARs

Making the affirmative case
for skills-first hiring

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For several decades, the mainstream idea of what a bachelor's degree represents has become disconnected from the reality of today's labor market, rewarding degree attainment far more than skills gained on the job. In recent years, however, public attention on talent shortages has led to the rise of skills-first hiring while also inviting scrutiny on the value of skills and the qualifications of those who earn skills outside of a bachelor's degree.

Research from Opportunity@Work and other workforce experts disproves many commonly held beliefs about STARs — workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor's degree — and their skills. Opportunity@Work's [Reach for the STARs](#) report demonstrated that STARs earn skills in lower-wage jobs that qualify them for higher-wage work. A later report, [Rise with the STARs](#), found that on average it takes a STAR 30 years to earn what a college graduate earns at the very start of their career — a staggering devaluation of STARs' skills.

This document will use research to shed light on the realities of STARs and skills, with the goal of providing a clearer picture of the benefits of skills-first hiring practices and the potential systemic change that is possible if more American employers adopt them. Some of these myths are widely held; our purpose here is not to shame or blame those who believe them, but to offer up a fresh angle from which to consider and discuss them. Many do not withstand close scrutiny, but many are so common as to be rarely scrutinized.

Setting the baseline:

Key things to know about the U.S. workforce

Discussions about higher education and workforce development are often framed as “either/or,” but reality is “both/and.” A bachelor’s degree can be valuable—but it is not the only way to build job-ready skills.

- In the U.S. workforce, it’s common to have a bachelor’s degree. It is also common to not have one.
 - 50% of the workforce are STARs — workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes such as military experience, training programs, or work experience, rather than a bachelor’s degree.
 - 41% of the workforce has a bachelor’s degree.
 - The rest of the workforce has not attained a high school diploma.
- STARs are already working in most occupations in some proportion. Opportunity@Work’s research shows that as of 2022, 95% of occupations include STARs, but they are overrepresented in low-wage occupations and are often blocked from advancement due to degree screens and other barriers. (*Source: Opportunity@Work Analysis of the 2022 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement, IPUMS.*)

MISCONCEPTION 1

Dropping degree requirements means lowering quality standards.

Reality: Skills-first hiring doesn’t mean accepting “less” — it means advancing the right qualifications. It shifts focus from proxies — like degrees — to the competencies that matter most in getting the job done. Skills-first hiring ensures that the most capable individuals — regardless of their educational background — are in the right roles. Focusing on hiring for skills makes it less likely that someone is hired into a role where steep learning is required or where both parties discover that their interests and abilities are not aligned.

Degrees are one valid mechanism to acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities, but far from the only one. Other methods of skill acquisition include job training, apprenticeships, and self-paced learning to name a few. Using an assessment of the specific knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) a job needs rather than a generic degree screen can deliver better quality hires from within traditional talent pools while uncovering previously hidden talent that offers those same KSAs.

MISCONCEPTION 2

Skills-first hiring devalues bachelor’s degrees and the work and investment that graduates put into earning them.

Reality: The primary qualification for a job is skills — if you can do the job, you should be able to get the job. Therefore, the skills that a college grad earned through their degree programs have value and qualify them for good jobs, just as the skills that STARs learn from work experience, military service, community college, and other life experiences also qualify them for good jobs.

Skills-first hiring recognizes the value of a bachelor’s degree, but also allows that there are other ways to gain skills. College degrees remain valuable and necessary for many professions.

MISCONCEPTION 3

Completing a bachelor's degree is a sign of work ethic/perseverance, so those without a bachelor's lack these qualities.

Reality: 40% of students who start college never finish [according to the National Student Clearing House Research Center](#). It is common to begin pursuing a bachelor's degree but pause or stop — top reasons include:

- *Financial:* The biggest and most obvious reason for “stopping out” is financial. Whether due to the opportunity cost of lost income or the cost of post-secondary education, it is no secret that college is financially out of reach for many, and growing more so every year as college costs increase faster than inflation. While the growth rate of student loan debt is slowing, it continues to climb every year and as of 2021 totaled \$1.7 trillion in the US. The average federal student loan debt balance is \$37,667 while the total average balance (including private loan debt) may be as high as \$40,274 ([source: Education Data Initiative](#)). These costs place a disproportionate burden on lower-income students, who must overcome both academic and financial challenges to complete a degree.
- *Entrepreneurship:* In 2022, 7.6 million STARs were self-employed and 2.6 million of those are in incorporated businesses. (*Source: Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2022 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.*) For some young entrepreneurs, attitudes toward college completion have changed — especially in the technology industry and in the public sector, where many famous founders and public servants have normalized this choice.
- *Caretaking:* Caretaking responsibilities in various forms (children, parents, siblings, etc.) may prove to be too great a responsibility to coexist with a post-secondary education, especially if paired with the need to bear financial responsibility.
- *Significant personal life challenges:* These can include but are not limited to a number to health, economic hardship, or recovery issues. This can also include challenges related to neurodivergence, particularly given that many educational systems are not adequately equipped to support neurodivergent students.

MISCONCEPTION 4

Hiring STARs is risky.

Reality: [Research shows](#) that hiring for skills is five times more predictive of job performance than hiring based on educational credentials, and 2 times more predictive than hiring for work experience. [LinkedIn also recently found](#) that hirers finding talent using skills are 60% more likely to find a successful hire than those who are not relying on skills. STARs bring real-world, transferable skills they've developed through military service, community college, apprenticeships, and on-the-job learning — skills they've already demonstrated in practice.

In addition, workers without degrees tend to stay in their jobs 34% longer than college graduates, meaning STARs contribute to lower turnover and higher organizational stability ([source: McKinsey & Company](#)). Turnover caused by poor job fit is a major business risk; hiring based on proven skills helps mitigate that risk.

MISCONCEPTION 5

College teaches people how to learn, so workers with a college degree are easier/cheaper to train, are more adaptable (e.g., to new technologies), and achieve full productivity more quickly than STARS.

Reality: College may indeed be one avenue for practicing learning agility, but so is working in a small business, learning a new skill independently, or operating in other fast-paced environments. STARS' skills aren't learned in a single setting, but are developed across a multitude of experiences. This breadth of experience is a unique asset that exemplifies STARS' growth mindset and adaptability. Some examples of STAR agility include:

- *Self-directed learning:* A STAR who learned a new software program or technical skill on their own to advance their career.
- *Navigating different environments:* A STAR who successfully transitioned from a military role to a corporate job.
- *On-the-job training:* A STAR who quickly became proficient in a new system or process in a fast-paced environment.

MISCONCEPTION 6

STARS are not qualified for senior level positions.

Reality: STARS already lead teams, manage projects, and run businesses — many just don't have the title to show for it. [3 million STARS](#) are already thriving in high-wage roles, including senior positions across functions. Many have moved up the ladder within their organizations — they are successful examples of investing in STARS' potential for upward mobility, and STARS' dedication to staying with an organization that invests in them long term.

Leadership is honed by managing teams, handling conflict, making strategic decisions, and adapting to challenges in the workplace. Any worker is able to build skills outside of college that qualify them for leadership. STARS' alternative routes offer plenty of opportunities for developing leadership skills, whether that be through military service or on-the-job experience as a people leader.

MISCONCEPTION 7

If current early-in-career pathways are working well, we do not need to do the extra work to consider STARS.

Reality: Trends across U.S. employers show that hiring has become more challenging across many roles, with shortages of talent and longer lead times to fill roles. If you are one of the few companies to not be facing any hiring challenges currently, you might consider that the labor shortages in the market as a whole will eventually cause more competition for talent. To maintain the workforce you need, getting ahead of these trends by adjusting your workforce strategy to tap into broader talent pools is key. In a time of high competition for talent, overreliance on a homogeneous talent source is a risk. To maintain the workforce you need and build a resilient diversified portfolio of talent, you need to consider multiple talent pools.

MISCONCEPTION 8

If we are contractually obligated to staff engagements/agreements/contracts with bachelor's degree holders, we can't focus on STARs.

Reality: While contractual obligations may be a real obstacle, they need not be permanent. Employers with whom we work, including those who offer services contracts, look for receptive clients who see the limitations of these restrictive contract provisions. While the reality may not change overnight, the flexibility to staff contracts with skilled workers rather than skilled and degreed workers yields benefits for all concerned.

MISCONCEPTION 9

Our clients/customers expect us to hire the “best.” When our reputation depends on our ability to hire top [decile/ quartile] talent, we should look to degree-holders.

Reality: When you conflate “top universities” or even degree attainment with “top talent,” you narrow your view of the talent pool and privilege the most affluent students, reinforcing the growing economic inequality in our country. [Research from Opportunity Insights](#) shows that children with parents in the top 1% of the income distribution are 77 times more likely to attend elite colleges and universities than children with parents in the bottom 20% of the income distribution. Top talent should be determined by skill proficiency, which is not necessarily tied to educational attainment.

MISCONCEPTION 10

There simply isn't a diverse supply of candidates in my [field/industry/ role] and that's not a problem I can solve.

Reality: For employers seeking the benefits of diversity of all types, including diversity of skills and experience, it's worth examining the nuances of talent pools: Is it true that the talent pool you're looking for is homogeneous or might your sourcing pipelines be homogeneous?

[Research from Opportunity@Work](#) identified 51 “gateway jobs” that offer career mobility for STARs — and showed that STARs build relevant skills for those gateway jobs through hundreds of different “origin jobs.” Understanding the origin jobs in your local market can uncover where workers are developing and demonstrating the skills you most need in your roles. Employers that take a long-term view will also benefit from defining skills-based pathways into jobs that are accessible to STARs in the local labor market.