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The AI Guide for STAR-Inclusion

A guide for building inclusive career navigation tools with AI



Opportunity
@Work.

Foreword

This guide summarizes the key ideas discussed during a recent Opportunity@Work conversation on how emerging AI tools can support workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) in navigating their careers. It highlights perspectives from leaders across the career-navigation ecosystem and distills the themes that matter most as technology reshapes the labor market.

Our aim is simple: to spark new thinking about how AI can be used responsibly to expand opportunity, reduce outdated barriers, and help millions of skilled workers access the jobs they deserve. At its core, this guide is meant to inform and inspire anyone interested in building a more inclusive, skills-first economy—one where talent, not pedigree, determines opportunity.



Designing for Trust and Empathy

Content adapted from insights by CareerVillage

Rebecca Gitomer of CareerVillage emphasized building AI tools, specifically their platform **Coach**, with **STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes)** as **co-designers**, not just end-users, focusing on transparency and quality to mitigate existing inequities in the labor market.

- **Co-design with STARs** is essential; the company built Coach with STARs, not just for them, which involves listening to them and the organizations that serve them to define what “helpful” means when navigating careers without a degree.
- The **biggest challenge is building trust** at both the individual and institutional levels. People are rightfully skeptical of AI, so tools must be designed with **transparency** (explaining reasoning, linking to credible sources, using plain language) to earn their confidence.
- Quality assurance must be rigorous, going beyond simple moderation to assess every AI interaction based on alignment with their mission: **does it feel human**, build trust, and move someone closer to opportunity?
- AI is a **magnifier of systemic problems** (e.g., inconsistent access) already present in career navigation. The focus should be on proactive collaboration to set standards and guardrails to ensure AI democratizes access instead of reinforcing inequities.
- The model prioritizes **equity in delivery**, making Coach free to individuals and utilizing institutional partnerships (workforce boards, community colleges) via a lightweight widget to reach STARs already being served.



Rebecca Gitomer
Director of Development



Accelerating Outcomes with Agentic AI

Content adapted from insights by Jobcase

Fred Goff of Jobcase views the current moment as a species-level event and asserts that AI, particularly [Agentic AI](#), must be used aggressively and purposefully to deliver immediate, measurable [outcomes](#) by cutting the friction and long timeframes currently plaguing the hiring process.

- Jobcase is focused on being an [Agentic AI-first company](#) that leverages communication and job tech to dramatically [reduce the time to hire](#).
- At Jobcase, [agentic AI empowers workers](#) by making the job search feel “less like a black hole” and helps employers by surfacing qualified candidates faster. Agents help process screening, scheduling, and interviews in microseconds.
- Fred’s advice to CHROs and HR leaders is to “[jump in right away](#)” and “[run to it](#)”. Fred cautions that they must be wary of “stasis and inertia” caused by over-concern about downside risks; the biggest risk is the downside of not moving fast enough to seize the opportunity.
- Builders and buyers must [watch for outcomes and beware of demos](#). Tools must be integrated with all underlying technology (scheduling, application, communication tech) to get things done, not just wow with surface-level conversations.
- Jobcase is designed for [blue-collar and frontline workers](#), serving as a complement to platforms like LinkedIn. The approach is to [design for STARs as the starting point](#), reducing bias by putting the “right people first in line, not last”.



Frederick Goff
CEO

Jobcase

The Shift from Novelty to Outcome-Driven Design

Content adapted from insights by SkillUp

Steve Lee of SkillUp detailed their evolution from a problematic chatbot to an in-product, outcome-driven AI, stressing the future advantage will come from proprietary data and purposeful design elements like empathy and memory.

- SkillUp's initial attempt with a generic **chatbot** was a "failure" — Steve shared that users were worse off using the AI than not. This failure taught them to pivot **from novelty to outcome-driven design**. *Tip: learn to fail fast to pivot to better outcomes.*
- The successful shift was to **integrate AI directly inside the product** (in-product experience) to solve for moments of **paralysis** (exhaustion, choice, and action paralysis). This change led to approximately a 50% increase in return rates and a third of users taking action on something they otherwise wouldn't.
- Steve makes the case that the future advantage will come from **data walled gardens—proprietary, consented data** that the public internet can't touch. This unique data is key to personalizing career guidance for STARS.
- Four elements are critical to success in AI for STARS: **walled garden data**, **scaling empathy** (because it's missing in large language models), **holding memory** over the long arc of a career, and keeping humans in the loop.
- His advice for building AI tools for STARS is the "**crawl, walk, run**" approach. Crawl by solving for one specific use case where clients face paralysis; this part isn't necessarily expensive. **Walk/Run** by building agents and partnering with others to solve for collective impact.



Steve Lee
CEO

SKILLUP



Philanthropy and Government

The panelists each shared advice for philanthropy and government on how to best support the responsible growth and equitable deployment of AI tools for STARs.

- **Philanthropy should focus on funding outcomes.** The tools are ready – today – to deliver outcomes for STARs, and philanthropy should underwrite that usage to prevent the creation of “have and have-nots,” users based on who can pay for premium agent-coaching services and those who can’t and are left behind. – *Jobcase*
- Philanthropy should also focus on **democratizing** AI by bringing different voices from across the field to the table, and pushing for greater **data intelligence** from large tech firms. – *SkillUp*
- **Philanthropy should be experimental** and shift traditional time horizons and notions of risk. Funders should have a higher risk tolerance and underwrite experimentation, even celebrating failure to learn and iterate quickly in this rapidly changing space. – *CareerVillage*
- For the **government** (especially state/regional), the focus should be on **moving fast**. The downside risk of not moving is greater than the downside risk of moving too fast, as inertia widens the **gap of inequality**. – *Jobcase*
- There’s a concern about the rapid privatization of the world we live in as feds/states collaborate with big tech. It’s crucial for smaller groups (like CareerVillage, EdSafe Alliance) to push for guardrails to prevent “social media déjà vu 2.0”. – *SkillUp*



TEAR THE PAPER CEILING™

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 by visiting www.tearthepaperceiling.org.

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