

Building Talent from Within

Strengthening Your Workforce
through Apprenticeships

Ali, STAR

INTRODUCTION

Across industries, employers are struggling to find talent with the right skills, even as millions of capable workers are ready to contribute. STARS - workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor's degree - have developed valuable, job-ready skills through training programs, military service, community college, on-the-job learning, and other routes. But all too often, they're overlooked due to an invisible barrier, the "paper ceiling": a traditional hiring focus on degree requirements, previous employment, and pedigree.

One skill-building route that has gained new momentum recently is apprenticeships. Apprenticeships create new pathways into good jobs, while providing company- and industry-specific training to workers, offering a powerful, practical way to tear the paper ceiling.

WHAT IS AN APPRENTICESHIP?

An apprenticeship is a job that pays workers to learn a set of skills for a specific role through a combination of:

- *Hands-on, on-the-job training*
- *Structured instruction (classroom or online)*
- *Mentorship and support*

Programs typically last one year or more and often lead to full-time employment and career advancement. Many employers choose to register their programs with the Department of Labor, allowing participants to earn a portable, industry-recognized credential — a signal that helps standardize skills recognition and de-risk adoption of skills-based hiring practices. For a closer look at apprenticeships, review Opportunity@Work's [STARS Hiring Playbook](#).

WHY EMPLOYERS ARE INVESTING IN APPRENTICESHIPS NOW

Apprenticeships are applicable to every industry, but have shown recent momentum in healthcare, IT, and advanced manufacturing as a modern workforce solution.

Apprenticeships deliver clear, measurable benefits:

- ✔ **Build a reliable talent pipeline**
Apprenticeships allow you to train workers specifically for your roles, creating a steady flow of candidates with the exact skills your business needs.
- ✔ **Expand your talent pool**
Apprenticeships open the door to STARS — a broader, more diverse group of candidates beyond traditional degree-holders, many of whom can already demonstrate the skills needed for higher-wage work.
- ✔ **Reduce hiring risk**
Instead of making high-stakes hiring decisions upfront, you can assess talent over time while they learn and contribute.
- ✔ **Increase retention and engagement**
Employers consistently report higher retention among apprentices, who are invested in growing with the organization.
- ✔ **Improve productivity and performance**
Workers trained through apprenticeships are better prepared for their roles, leading to fewer errors, stronger performance, and higher productivity.
- ✔ **Future-proof your workforce**
Apprenticeships create pathways for reskilling and upskilling as roles evolve — especially in response to technology and automation, such as artificial intelligence, which is reshaping skill needs.

WHEN SHOULD YOU USE APPRENTICESHIPS?

Apprenticeships are especially effective for roles that are:

- *High-demand*, where building your own talent pipeline creates a competitive advantage
- *High-growth*, where demand justifies ongoing investment
- *Higher-wage*, where training delivers strong ROI for both the employer and the worker
- *Characterized by a clear skill set* appropriate for structured training
- *Suited to a natural learning curve* before full productivity
- *Not heavily licensed*, allowing for flexibility in program design and placement

QUICK TIP: Use these bullets as a checklist when evaluating roles for apprenticeship pathways.

WHERE APPRENTICESHIPS ARE GROWING TODAY

While historically concentrated in the trades, apprenticeships are rapidly expanding into new sectors — especially where talent shortages are most acute and where evolving skill needs are outpacing traditional degree-based hiring models. In our report with Lightcast, [The Changing Face of Apprenticeships](#), we found that apprenticeships, both registered and informal, now exist for the majority of job roles in the economy.

High-opportunity industries include (but are not limited to):

- Healthcare (e.g., medical assistants, nurses)
- Information technology (IT) (e.g., cybersecurity, software developers, computer programmers)
- Advanced manufacturing (e.g., engineers, general and operations managers)
- Business operations and analytics (e.g., management analysts, information security analysts)
- The public sector (learn how to build pathways for STARs in the public sector with The Council of State Governments Center of Innovation and Apprenticeship Colorado's [Public Sector Apprenticeship Toolkit](#))

Nearly

40%

of new apprenticeship programs now place workers into roles that traditionally required a bachelor's degree — showing how this model effectively supports skills-first hiring and contributes to removing barriers that limit access to qualified talent.



Kelly, STAR

How Trane Technologies Rapidly Launched a Successful Apprenticeship Program

[Trane Technologies](#), the first manufacturing partner in the [Tear The Paper Ceiling Coalition](#), launched a U.S. Department of Labor-registered apprenticeship program in just 90 days, challenging the notion that apprenticeship programs must entail a deep time investment. Trane's strategic use of external partners enabled speed, quality, and cost savings in curriculum design and delivery. The program scaled rapidly from 25 to 200 apprentices across 30 states in two years, and drove an 86% retention rate, proving its impact and sustainability and serving as a replicable model for other employers adopting skills-first talent strategies.

[Read the full story](#)

HOW TO BUILD AN APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

A successful apprenticeship program is built in clear, manageable stages:

Stage 1

Define your goals and target roles, securing leadership buy-in

- *Identify objective and target jobs:* Define corporate vision, need, and aligned opportunities for target role locations
- *Secure necessary internal support early on:* Leadership support and sponsorship is essential to success
- *Consider partnerships:* Identify aligned business, labor, government, and community partners and consider the advantages of working together in a variety of formats

Stage 2

Design the program structure and key program elements

- *Training model* (program time-based, competency-based, or hybrid)
- *Duration* (typically 12+ months)
- *Compensation and wage progression*
- *Mentorship and support network*
- *What is learned on the job vs. in the classroom*
- *Understand your funding needs*

Stage 3

Build a strong foundation

- *Identify optimal sourcing strategies:* Educational institutions, non-profit partners, and current employees are often the most effective sources for apprentice candidates
- *Conduct marketing* to build awareness, attract candidates, and engage secondary stakeholders
- *Establish screening process* and selection criteria that prioritize demonstrated skills over traditional credentials
- *Define support model:* Determine sourcing and incentives for the participation of current employees and identify necessary wraparound services
- *Define feedback mechanisms* and performance assessment parameters
- *Establish parameters* and opportunities for conversion to permanent employee

Stage 4

Launch, evaluate, and scale, building a repeatable, reliable talent engine

- *Start with a pilot program* in one role or business unit
- *Track outcomes* such as retention, performance, and cost savings
- *Refine your model* based on evaluation metrics and expand to additional roles or locations

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](#).

