

You're a STAR — And that's something to celebrate

Your Guide to Thriving
From your friends at Opportunity@Work

What It Means to Be a STAR

If you've built your professional skills **outside of a bachelor's degree** — through work experience, military service, community college, apprenticeships, bootcamps, workforce training, or learning on the job — you're a **STAR (a person who is Skilled Through Alternative Routes)**.

You're far from alone. **Half of the U.S. workforce — more than 70 million people — are STARS.**

STARS work in every industry and reflect America's full diversity. But much of the country — including many people making hiring decisions — don't understand the pathways STARS travel and don't see the skills that STARS have.

[Learn more about STARS](#)

The Challenge: The Paper Ceiling

Have you ever been held back by not having a alumni network, getting rejected automatically by biased algorithms and degree screens, facing negative stereotypes, and correcting misconceptions about your skills?

That's the paper ceiling: the invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree.

The paper ceiling impacts our entire labor market, but STARS feel it most. Millions of STARS have the skills to earn more, but are locked out of higher-paying jobs.

[Learn more about the paper ceiling](#)



Kelly, STAR

The paper ceiling keeps millions of STARS out of higher-paying jobs. It takes a STAR 30 years to earn what a college graduate earns at the start of their career.

The Opportunity: Skills–First Hiring

Together we can tear the paper ceiling, creating more opportunities for STARs while also helping employers fill critical roles. **Skills–first hiring** is the answer. It's an approach to hiring that focuses on what you can do — not just what's on a piece of paper.

When companies hire for skills, everyone wins:

- **STARs** access better jobs and higher wages
- **Employers** access a wider range of possible candidates, with proven skills

STAR Spotlight

Courtney

From Construction to IT Leadership

Courtney started in construction, moved into project management, and then shifted to IT through a training program. Today, he's a client services manager — blending technical know-how with people skills to lead complex projects. [Read more stories](#)



Your First Steps as a STAR

1. Know Your Skills

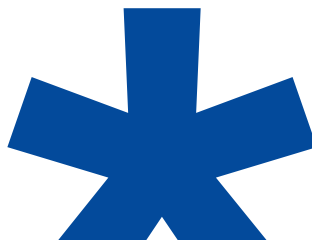
- Make sure you're accurately representing yourself on your resume. Write down your hard skills — including **technical** abilities — and soft skills — including things like leadership and problem-solving.
- Head to [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://tearthepaperceiling.org) to find resources and help for identifying your skills and updating your resume.
- Practice telling your STAR story in one or two sentences.

2. Tell Your Story

- The more STARs share their stories, the more employers will become aware of STARs' valuable skills.
- [Share your STAR journey with us](#), on LinkedIn, in interviews, or with friends.
- Awareness creates opportunity!

3. Connect with the STARs Community

- Join the [STARs community on Substack](#).
- Follow Opportunity@Work on social media for events, opportunities, and inspiring stories. [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [TikTok](#).
- Sign up to support the [STARs Movement](#).
- [Subscribe to the STARs Newsletters](#) to hear about new opportunities, upcoming events, and more.



4 . Explore STAR-Friendly Resources

- Visit TearThePaperCeiling.org/stars to see tools, guides, and job boards that work for STARs.

5. Encourage Skills-First Employers

- Ask your company whether they have adopted skills-first hiring practices.
- If not, share the **Tear the Paper Ceiling** campaign to spread awareness.

STAR Spotlight

LaShana

From Customer Service to Software Engineering

LaShana climbed from customer service to software engineering by learning new skills on the job and in training programs. Now she's the CEO of her own company – building tech solutions and mentoring others. [Read more stories](#)



Inspiration & Media

- [“Tear the Paper Ceiling”](#) — See the national campaign raising awareness of STARs and the paper ceiling
- [Paperless Pathways Podcast](#) — real STAR stories and conversations about skills-first careers and breaking barriers

You Belong Here

Being a STAR can feel isolating — but you're part of a **powerful movement**. [Opportunity@Work](#) is here to help you **work, learn, and earn to your full potential**. **We can't wait to meet you. Keep shining.**



[Opportunity@Work](#) is a nonprofit on a mission to **rewire the U.S. labor market** so skills — not degrees — become the currency of opportunity.

We:

- Publish [research](#) that proves STARs have skills
- Lead the [Tear the Paper Ceiling](#) campaign (in partnership with the Ad Council) to change national hiring norms
- Build tools to help employers find and support STAR talent
- Create platforms for STARs to share their stories, such as the [Paperless Pathways Podcast](#) and our [STAR story gallery](#).