



# The Future of Hiring is Skills-First

How Indeed and Opportunity@Work  
are Unlocking Job Seekers' Potential  
Through Skills-First Hiring



Opportunity  
@Work™





The outdated resume leaves millions of job seekers behind. Traditional hiring practices screen out half the US workforce: STARs (workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes) who have the skills to do the job but lack a four-year degree. This isn't just unfair—it's bad business. Skills-first hiring unlocks human potential, widens talent pools, and creates stronger matches between employers and candidates.

This case study shows how Indeed and Opportunity@Work joined forces to embed skills-first practices across Indeed's platform and hiring ecosystem, demonstrating that the future of hiring is skills-first at scale.

The partnership combines Indeed's global reach and technology with Opportunity@Work's deep expertise in the skills-first movement and connection to the STAR community. Together, they're breaking down barriers for STARs through product innovation, thought leadership, and cultural change. The impact is measurable: [those using Indeed's AI-powered Career Scout are 38% more likely to get hired](#).<sup>1</sup> But the real story is in the lives changed. As Lindsey Perez, Executive Assistant Manager at Indeed, puts it: "When managers are open-minded and focus on what people can do rather than if they have a degree, or where their degree came from, it creates a culture of trust and motivation." This case study reveals how Indeed and Opportunity@Work are making that culture the norm, not the exception.

Those using Indeed's AI-powered Career Scout are

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed test data, US, May 2025, based on the average hires per apply

# Resumes Can't Capture A Job Seeker's Potential

## Barriers to STARS – Job Seekers Skilled Through Alternative Routes

STARS make up half of the workforce; more than 70 million workers. They have developed valuable skills through military service, community college, training programs, partial college completion, or most commonly, on-the-job experience. But despite their unique paths and hard-earned skillsets, STARS face systemic barriers, often getting screened out of higher-wage jobs due to the “paper ceiling”: The invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree, created by biased algorithms, degrees screens, stereotypes, misconceptions, and a lack of alumni network. In the last 20 years, STARS have been screened out of over [7.5 million good-paying jobs](#) they're otherwise qualified for.

[Research by Grads of Life, Accenture, and the Harvard Business School](#) found as many as 90% of large companies use some form of automated applicant tracking system to screen resumes, filtering out about half of all applications. That same research revealed that more than 61% of employers rejected *otherwise qualified candidates* simply because they did not have a bachelor's degree. This lines up with the reality STARS job seekers are experiencing — [a recent Indeed survey](#) reported that 64% of job seekers believe they've been overlooked for a job they were otherwise qualified for because they did not hold the degree listed in the job application. The irony? [92% of hiring managers agree](#) that the best place to acquire skills is on the job. Despite this obviously broken aspect of hiring, [employers say that technology and outdated practices are among the primary barriers to adopting skills-first hiring](#). As the world's #1 job site<sup>2</sup>, Indeed is uniquely positioned to support millions of employers in this transition. Indeed understands the skills that employers require, and leverages that knowledge to help them break down those barriers, implement a skills-first strategy, and match with quality candidates.

“Underestimating the qualifications and skills of someone who does not have a degree is a missed opportunity.”

– Monique, STAR

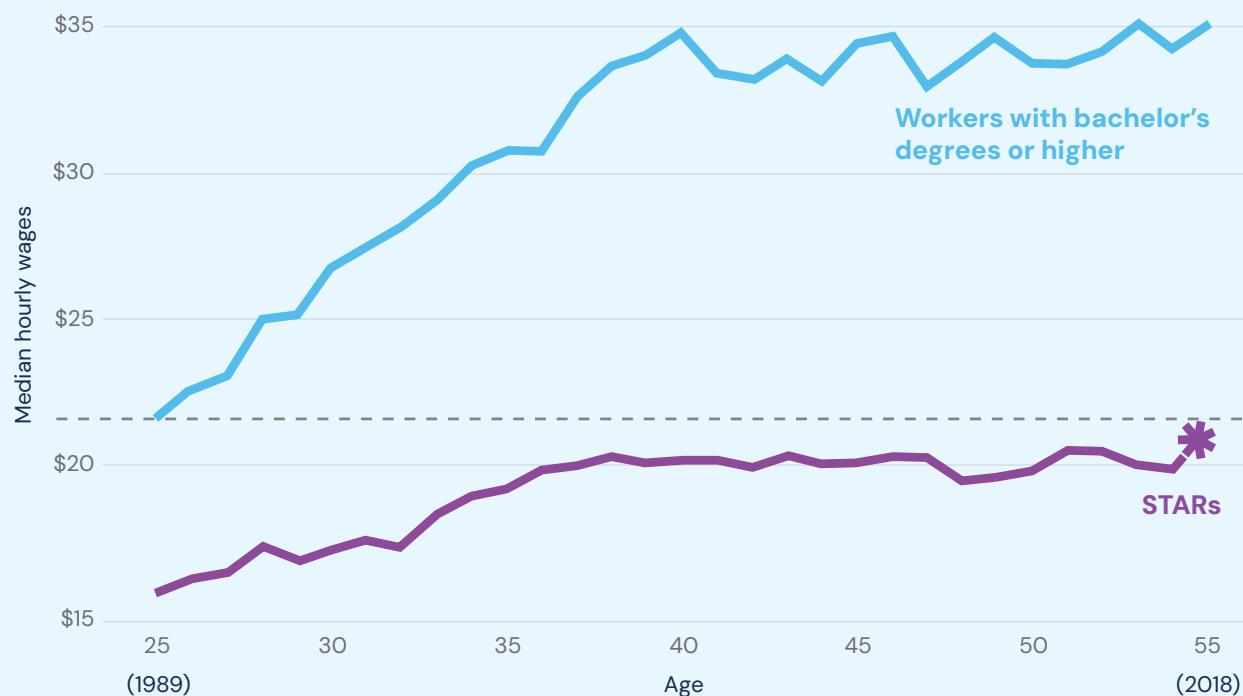
<sup>2</sup> #1 job site rank measured by traffic as determined by SimilarWeb, Comscore or Médiamétrie depending on the country, July 2025



While getting their foot in the door is STARs' biggest problem at the start of their career, earning the wage they deserve is a shadow that looms throughout their career. According to a [2022 study by Opportunity@Work](#), it takes 30 years on the job for STARs to earn the same wage that college graduates earn on day one of their careers. This has resulted in a doubled wage gap between STARs and workers with bachelor's degrees over the last three decades.

### It takes a STAR 30 years to reach the starting wage of a college graduate.

The average 25 year old STAR in 1989 started their career making \$15.66 an hour. In 2018, at the age of 55, that same STAR was earning \$21.77 an hour, having almost achieved the wage that a worker with a bachelor's degree earned on their first day out of college in 1989. (All wages reflect 2019 dollars).



A new, skills-first approach is urgently needed — not only for STAR job seekers, but for employers themselves. In a recent report, [87% of companies](#) said they had a skills gap or expected to have one in two years. We are in the midst of a severe opportunity gap, but it's not because the talent isn't there; simply put, traditional hiring practices are excluding half the workforce.

# The Partnership: Indeed + Opportunity@Work

Indeed's mission to help people get jobs is rooted in the belief that talent is universal, but opportunity is not, and that job seekers everywhere should have an opportunity to find fulfilling employment that suits both their skills and aspirations. In the same vein, Opportunity@Work aims to rewire the U.S. labor market so STARs can regain upward mobility, enriching their careers and communities.

## Indeed: Tearing The Paper Ceiling

When Indeed joined Opportunity@Work's Tear The Paper Ceiling Coalition in 2023, the company reinforced its commitment to parent company **Recruit Holdings' ambitious goal of helping 30 million job seekers who face barriers get jobs by 2030**. What began as a social impact initiative has evolved into a driving strategy across multiple teams throughout the organization. Indeed was committed to helping both STARs and employers fill the opportunity gap and sought expert guidance to ensure they got it right. That's where Opportunity@Work came in. This strategic partnership pairs Indeed's scale and technology with Opportunity@Work's research and advocacy, unlocking job opportunities for millions of overlooked, qualified candidates, and arming the skills-first movement with all the tools necessary to reach even the most skeptical or hesitant employers.

"Certainty is the greatest enemy of innovation. Skills, not degrees or pedigree, are the real currency of hiring, and when we lead with them, every organization gains access to the talent it needs to grow. The data are unmistakable: talent is everywhere — and through our partnership with Opportunity@Work, employers can finally reach it."

– Aidan McLaughlin, Director of Strategic Thought Leadership at Indeed

“Indeed’s embrace of skills-first hiring and STARs as a talent category is a powerful amplification of the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign. Our partnership is evidence of the importance and impact of baking skills-first practices into the core of any Talent Tech platform and Indeed is leading the way by working with Opportunity@Work to develop a deeper understanding of STARs skills and the career pathways they follow to find economic mobility.”

– Scott Gullick, Vice President of Platform Partnerships at Opportunity@Work

Indeed’s partnership with Opportunity@Work has strengthened this mission by deepening its reach within the STAR community. The collaboration takes many forms: co-created thought leadership, shared narrative change efforts, joint marketing campaigns, and product innovation informed by STAR insights. Together, these efforts empower job seekers while advancing the skills-first movement.

Indeed and Opportunity@Work hold a shared vision for a workforce that truly prioritizes and invests in all workers reaching their full potential — a workforce that looks beyond the common assumptions of a standard applicant, and recognizes the plethora of paths job seekers can take to earn valuable skills. Part of this shared vision includes amplifying STARs’ voices and stories across all sectors to shift the narrative, which Opportunity@Work has been instrumental in driving. Elevating these messages is critical to educating and catalyzing employers to get behind the skills-first hiring movement.

**Skills-first hiring isn’t just good practice — it’s essential business strategy. Indeed and Opportunity@Work equip employers with the tools, insights, and proof points to make the shift successfully. The results speak for themselves: better matches, broader talent pools, and stronger hires.**

“If STARs make up half the skilled workforce and you don’t have a STARs talent strategy, you don’t have a talent strategy.”

– Byron Auguste, CEO & Co-Founder of Opportunity@Work

# Indeed's Commitment: Skills-First as a Business Strategy

At Indeed, skills-first hiring isn't a social impact initiative, it's a core business strategy. This commitment stems from a fundamental reality: [more than half of the US workforce \(51%\) are STARs](#). Credential-first hiring overlooks large pools of talent facing structural barriers, for example, people with disabilities ([only 22.7% employed in 2024](#)), foreign-born workers ([19.2% of the labor force](#)), and the [more than 25% of people in active workforce with a criminal record](#). Veterans and [individuals lacking access to work essentials](#), such as reliable transportation, childcare, or broadband, also face significant hurdles to work access. When traditional hiring practices screen out this much of the talent pool, with many individuals facing multiple, intersecting barriers, skills-first is essential to business growth and competitive advantage.

The business case is clear: better matching creates more value for everyone. Employers don't need a thousand applicants — they need a few qualified candidates with the right skills for the role. Job seekers don't want just any job — they want opportunities where they can succeed and live up to their potential. Skills-first hiring delivers both, creating stronger matches that serve Indeed's mission to help people get jobs.

Indeed's partnership with Opportunity@Work focuses specifically on STARs. Research shows that [more than 30 million STARs](#) have the capabilities to transition into higher-paying roles if given the opportunity. Yet they're systematically screened out before employers ever see their qualifications. Removing this paper ceiling unlocks enormous potential, not just for individual job seekers, but for employers struggling to fill roles and for the economy as a whole. Indeed's work with Opportunity@Work demonstrates how skills-first hiring can create this access at scale.

This commitment extends across Indeed's entire ecosystem: From how job seekers build profiles that showcase their skills and experience, to how employers write job descriptions that focus on required capabilities rather than credentials, to how Indeed's AI-powered tools match talent to opportunity based on skills rather than degrees, skills-first principles are embedded throughout the platform. The result is more inclusive hiring, that's smarter and more efficient, helping employers find the talent they need and helps job seekers find work where they can thrive.



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# Product Innovation Through Partnership

Indeed's commitment to skills-first hiring extends beyond philosophy into product. Over the past few years, Indeed has built a suite of tools designed to connect talent and employers based on skills rather than credentials, with insights from Opportunity@Work helping to ensure these products authentically serve STARS and all job seekers.

The result of Indeed's focus, informed by insights from Opportunity@Work and other partners, is a hiring ecosystem where skills take center stage. SmartSourcing uses AI to match candidates to jobs based on skills and highlights those skills first in candidate summaries, helping employers stay focused on what matters most: whether someone can do the job. Indeed's AI-powered agents, Career Scout and Talent Scout, represent this commitment at scale. Career Scout acts as a personalized career coach for job seekers, learning about their skills, experience, and preferences to help them discover and land the right opportunities. Talent Scout works as an intelligent hiring agent for employers, providing real-time insights and sourcing qualified candidates through a conversational interface. Early data shows the impact: [84% of job seekers find Career Scout valuable, and job seekers using Career Scout are 38% more likely to get hired](#)<sup>3</sup>.



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## Skills-First Hiring Benefits All Job Seekers — Not Just STARS

Opportunity@Work served as subject matter experts at key points in this process, offering consulting that brought both excellence and authenticity to product development. Opportunity@Work has delivered Indeed compelling job-level data, recommending roles where degree requirements could be removed, and innovative product adjustment recommendations like mapping job mobility pathways to support STARS in navigating upward mobility. By incorporating the lived experiences and perspectives of STARS into the design process, Indeed gained invaluable insights into the barriers job seekers face and the language, features, and functionality that would best serve them. This partnership informed the development of multiple products across Indeed's platform, ensuring that skills-first principles were embedded from the ground up.

Designing with STARS in mind created better products for everyone. Skills-first hiring benefits all job seekers because it evaluates what people bring to the table rather than screening them out based on outdated proxies like degree requirements. For employers, this means access to a broader pool of quality candidates and better matches. For job seekers, it means being seen for their capabilities and potential. The partnership with Opportunity@Work not only improved products for STARS, it improved the entire hiring ecosystem, demonstrating Indeed's ongoing commitment to help people get jobs.

<sup>3</sup> 84% Indeed Data, US

38% Indeed test data, US, May 2025, based on the average hires per apply



# Voices of STARs at Indeed

Behind every hiring decision is a person with skills, experience, and potential. For STARs at Indeed, skills-first hiring not only opened a door, it validated years of hard-won expertise and removed barriers that had nothing to do with their ability to excel. These are their stories.



## The weight of degree requirements

For many STARs, the job search process meant encountering the same obstacle repeatedly, no matter how qualified they were for the role.

"Whenever I would find a job that I really liked, I would scroll to the bottom of the description only to find that the role required a college degree. **This would feel like a gut punch**, that you eventually kind of grow numb to," says Jared Rogers, Partnerships & Brand Activations Program Manager. "So finding roles that remove that requirement is truly an exciting feeling, like I really just might have a chance. We all exist in this society knowing that **a good career can change the trajectory of your life**, so it truly felt like a life line was cast for me."

Erik Dieckert, Engineering Manager, experienced Indeed's proactive approach firsthand. "The internal **Indeed recruiters approached me**. It felt really nice that a company like Indeed saw my long experience history and even though I had no formal education, they gave me a chance! As I learned more about Indeed culture, it made me want to apply more!"



## What skills-first hiring signals

Removing degree requirements is about more than access: It sends a message about what a company values and how employees can grow.

"Honestly, it was validating to have my experience valued without the additional hurdle of having to prove my capability," says Alyssa Varela, Senior Program Manager, Brand Operations. "That **emphasis gave me a better sense of the potential future**. If this is the expectation for getting in the door, there's probably a good chance that how you grow your skills will also be valued once you're there."


Lindsey Perez, Executive Assistant Manager, found that skills-first hiring removed doubt she'd carried into applications. "Seeing job postings that focused on skills and experience instead of requiring a four-year degree was really encouraging. It took away that little bit of doubt I sometimes felt when applying for certain roles. I've always known **I can deliver high-quality work and add real value, I just needed the chance** to show that to an employer who values ability and experience over formal credentials."



## The reality of STAR talent

STARs bring something employers often overlook: resilience built through navigating systems that weren't designed for them.

"STARs have had to make their way through the world by being extremely polished with little room for error," Rogers explains. "We're accustomed to the pressure because we've had to survive through consistent pressure. As long as the experience and skills are present, there's **no reason a piece of paper should deter you** from giving a qualified candidate a fair shake."



## Growing beyond the hire

At Indeed, skills-first hiring doesn't stop at the job offer. It shapes how employees develop and lead.

"Being in an environment that values curiosity and learning is something that's really built by the people around you," Varela reflects. "My best work has absolutely come from being given the trust, encouragement, and space to explore. **Our skills aren't static.** I feel really, genuinely lucky that my manager, team, and leaders share an inquisitive mindset. That kind of naturally pushes everyone forward."

The culture of respect extends across all levels. "The respect and kindness everyone shows, regardless of role or level, is something you don't often find in a large company," says Perez. "When everyone is aligned around one mission, helping people get jobs, it's easy to stay motivated and do your best work."



## The ripple effect

Perhaps most powerfully, STARs who break through don't simply change their own trajectories, they open doors for others.

"It not only changed my life but also **allowed me to come in and change others' lives** for the better as a leader and a manager at Indeed," says Dieckert. "I am very grateful."

# Outcomes and Proof Points

There's no way around this truth: **Prioritizing skills in the hiring process creates a more effective and adaptable workforce.** Skills-first hiring helps employers develop stronger talent strategies and overcome a challenging hiring landscape by:

- Broadening access to candidates
- Diversifying the pool of candidates to include STARs
- Increasing the likelihood of a quality hire
- Improving retention rates
- Positioning their workforce to be more competitive in the coming years

Research shows that hiring for skills is [5x more predictive of job performance](#) than hiring for education, and [2.5x more predictive than hiring for work experience](#). Employers who find talent using skills are [60% more likely](#) to find a successful hire than those who are not relying on skills.

And successful hires stick around: STARs tend to stay in their jobs [34% longer](#) than employees with college degrees. Companies with high internal hiring keep their employees 41% longer than those with low internal mobility, which carries a significant weight for a company's bottom line: Employee turnover due to a lack of future career opportunities costs an average-sized organization [\\$49 million per year](#). There is potential for significant impact on employers and job seekers as Indeed continues to roll out and build skills-first features into their products. The roadmap built by Opportunity@Work and its network of partners like Indeed is delivering systemic change, and reaching employers with the message that if a job seeker can do the job, they should be able to get the job.

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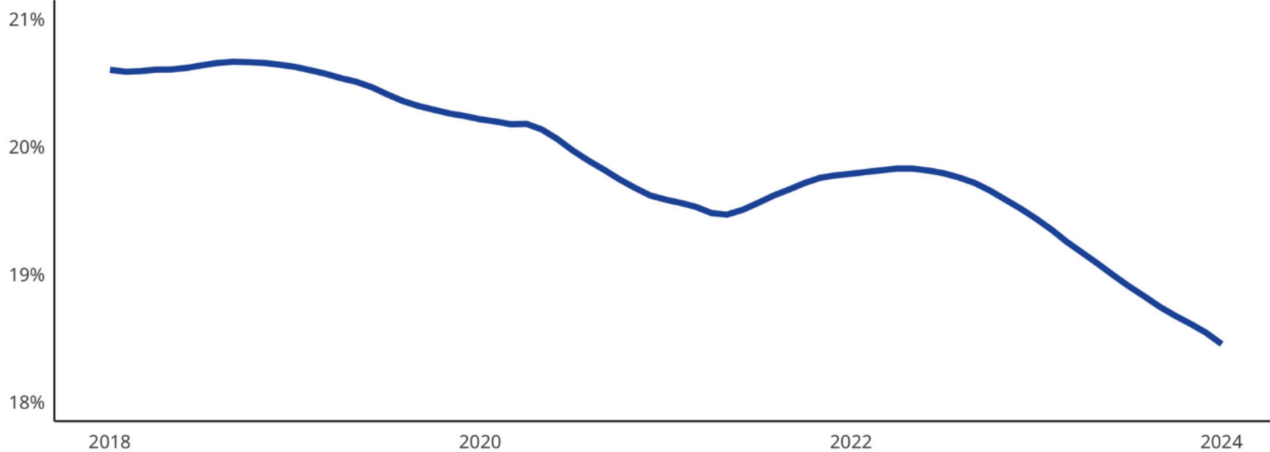


## O@W and Indeed's Partnership Is Making a Difference

In early 2024, for the first time, [a majority \(52%\)](#) of US job postings on Indeed did not mention any formal education requirement. This milestone aligns with findings from Opportunity@Work's 2025 *State of the Paper Ceiling* report, stating that since 2020, STARs have regained more than 10% of the roles they lost in the past two decades — an increase of 783,000 jobs open to STARs.

### Employers are becoming less likely to include college degree requirements in job postings

Share of US job postings requiring at least a bachelor's degree



Source: Indeed. 12-month moving average.  
Data is adjusted for changes in occupational mix over time and is based on lowest requirement mentioned



STARs are active  
in more than

**96%**

of occupations in the US.

Source: Opportunity@Work Analysis of 2023  
ACS national detailed occupation data



# The Future of Hiring is Skills–First

## Taking Action

The path to skills–first hiring doesn't require a complete overhaul overnight. It starts with examining where degree requirements appear in your hiring process and asking a simple question: Does this job actually require a four–year degree to be successful? For many roles, the answer is no. Removing unnecessary barriers is the first step. From there, companies can update job descriptions to emphasize required skills and competencies, train recruiters and hiring managers to evaluate candidates based on what they can do rather than where they learned it, and adjust applicant tracking systems to surface qualified candidates who might otherwise be filtered out.

Indeed and Opportunity@Work continue to innovate together, working to make skills–first hiring easier to implement and scale. As Indeed expands its AI–powered products and deepens its understanding of skills across occupations, the partnership ensures that STARs remain centered in product design and that the insights gained benefit the entire hiring ecosystem. Other employers can join this movement by learning more about the [Tear the Paper Ceiling Coalition](#).

## A Vision Worth Building

Skills–first hiring isn't a trend — it's the foundation of a more just and prosperous economy. When companies hire for skills rather than credentials, they unlock talent that's been overlooked for far too long. They build stronger teams. They create pathways to economic mobility for millions of workers. And they prove that the systems we've inherited don't have to be the systems we keep.

The future of hiring is already here. It's in the engineering manager who got a chance despite decades of being screened out. It's in the program manager who finally saw her experience valued without the hurdle of proving capability. It's in the executive assistant who knew she could deliver but just needed an employer willing to see it.

**The future of hiring is skills–first, and it's being built one open door, one qualified candidate at a time.**



### **About Opportunity@Work**

Opportunity@Work is a nonprofit social enterprise dedicated to advancing economic opportunities for the more than 70 million U.S. workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) instead of through a bachelor's degree. Opportunity@Work's research capabilities inform the nation's understanding of STARs and uncover insights that show how to make positive change within regions and industries. The organization engages with corporate, public sector, and philanthropic partners to directly address the barriers that STARs face and equip organizations to make hiring STARs for higher-wage roles the norm. Learn more at [\*\*www.opportunityatwork.org\*\*](http://www.opportunityatwork.org).