



How CareerVillage Utilizes AI to Provide Tailored Career Support for STARs at Scale

“Coach” offers AI-powered career guidance that levels the playing field, helping STARs move from uncertainty to action.



Opportunity
@Work.



CareerVillage.org

CHALLENGE

CareerVillage.org set out to expand access to high-quality career guidance for under-resourced jobseekers, including STARs — the more than 70 million U.S. workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor's degree. All too often, these workers are excluded from traditional systems, leaving them without timely, relevant support during critical career moments like job loss or career transitions.

SOLUTION

In partnership with Opportunity@Work, CareerVillage developed and deployed *Coach*, an AI-powered career guidance tool embedded on TearThePaperCeiling.org. Co-designed with STARs, *Coach* delivers personalized, skills-based guidance, helping users understand their transferable skills, explore new pathways, and take concrete next steps toward better jobs.

IMPACT

Together, CareerVillage and Opportunity@Work demonstrated how inclusive, skills-first AI tools can scale access to career support. In its first year, *Coach* facilitated over 1,000 coaching sessions with 100% positive user ratings, equipping STARs with actionable guidance and helping them move from uncertainty to opportunity. The pilot surfaced key design principles for the broader talent technology industry, including the importance of embedding tools where STARs already are, grounding guidance in local labor market data, and complementing rather than replacing human advising.

It Takes a Village

[CareerVillage.org](https://www.careervillage.org) works alongside educators, workforce leaders, and career development experts to refine and scale AI-powered career coaching and support. Central to CareerVillage's mission is making career information and guidance for all underrepresented learners from a wide range of backgrounds accessible — whether or not a college degree is in their past, present, or future.

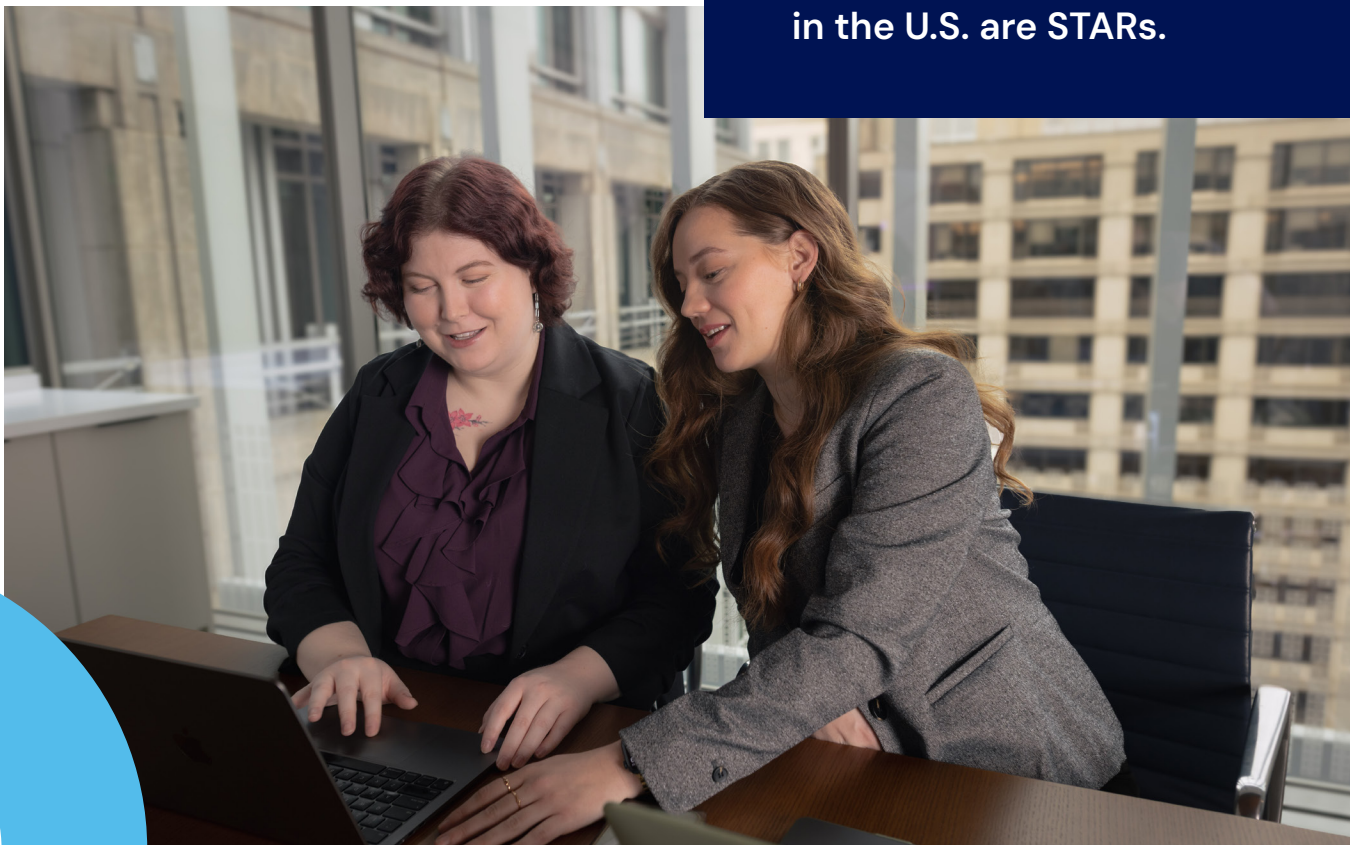
Half of the working population in the U.S. — over 70 million workers — are **STARs**: workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes such as community college, apprenticeships, certificate programs, and on-the-job experience, rather than through a bachelor's degree.

With the goal of providing instant, on-demand answers to every question about every career, CareerVillage knows intimately the looming nature of the "**paper ceiling**" that STARs face, made up of the barriers blocking career opportunities from those who've built their skills outside a bachelor's degree, including degree screens, biased algorithms, stereotypes, and exclusive professional networks. In an effort to democratize career navigation, CareerVillage's technology is designed to support every job-seeker, including STARs.

1/2

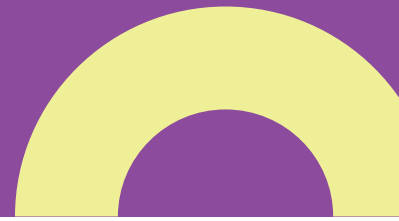


of the working population
in the U.S. are STARs.



Paige and Kelly, STARs

STARs as Co-Designers — Not Just End-Users



With the proliferation of AI tools in recent years, the CareerVillage team saw the opportunity to utilize new technology to further their mission, reach those who have historically been left out of the broader career conversation, and shape the future of career navigation. They partnered with many organizations — including Opportunity@Work — and in 2024 they launched [Coach](#).

Built for learners and jobseekers who lack quality support as they navigate early-career journeys, *Coach* provides opportunities for continuous learning and career development through a range of activities delivered via AI-powered chats. Jobseekers looking to optimize their application materials, master interview techniques, or to navigate the job market with confidence can obtain personalized support by *Coach*.

CareerVillage has emphasized building AI tools, specifically *Coach*, with STARs as co-designers, not just end-users, focusing on transparency and quality to mitigate existing inequities in the labor market. Integrating STARs involves listening to them and to the organizations that serve them, such as Opportunity@Work, to define what “helpful” means when navigating careers without a degree.

Coach is designed for workforce programs, online learning platforms, and colleges to scale guidance, close skill gaps, and improve employment outcomes for students and job-seekers.

CareerVillage is one of dozens of forward-thinking workforce organizations in the “Tear the Paper Ceiling” Coalition — a group affiliated with the national public awareness campaign of the same name led by Opportunity@Work and the Ad Council. With tens of thousands of STARs visiting [TearThePaperCeiling.org](#) weekly, CareerVillage and Opportunity@Work saw a chance to test at scale directly with STARs. They knew that STARs were visiting the campaign website at moments of uncertainty and high stakes: after a layoff, in search of higher wages, or when feeling stuck in a long-tenured role. Many arrived asking broad questions about what to do next but had no access to structured, personalized support to help them translate inspiration into concrete career plans.



Paige and Ali, STARs

Coach's capabilities were the perfect vault over some of the barriers STARs face in the job market — most notably the exclusivity of professional networking. Together, the CareerVillage and Opportunity@Work teams co-developed a “Tear the Paper Ceiling” branded **Coach Widget**. Opportunity@Work selected offerings from *Coach's* [full menu of “activities”](#) that would be most relevant for STARs visiting the website, such as learning about and fighting imposter syndrome, addressing employment gaps, and translating experience to a new field during a career transition.

When embedded directly onto the campaign website, the *Coach Widget* was designed to:



Provide STARs with relevant, personalized career-searching resources and guidance in the moment they need it — including recommending unique resources offered by CareerVillage’s coalition partners



Explore how AI can facilitate faster and more relevant career support for STARs



Gather feedback from STARs about how their career searching needs differ from degree holders, validating which types of resources are most valuable to them

With joint goals to gain an improved understanding of the needs of STARs, CareerVillage and Opportunity@Work agreed to share all analytics and make regular updates based on STARs’ feedback. Today, with a single click, visitors to TearThePaperCeiling.org/STARs can open *Coach* and begin a structured conversation about their skills, options, and next steps, without leaving the site.

Impact

In the first year after launch, CareerVillage's *Coach* Widget supported **over 1,000 in-depth coaching conversations** with STARS, providing career support and reinforcing the campaign's positive narrative for STARS. Among users who chose to complete the post-chat survey, it received **100% positive ratings**, displaying strong user trust. Users consistently described the guidance as **helpful, informative, and well-structured**.

What STARS asked for

Across hundreds of conversations with *Coach*, STARS' needs fell into three primary categories:

- 1 Career exploration & transition**
Many STARS were navigating transitions such as job loss, stagnant roles, or a desire for higher wages and more fulfilling work.
- 2 Skill development & transferability**
STARS frequently asked how to translate experience — in such roles as an auto mechanic, military manager, homeschool parent, or talent acquisition specialist — into new roles or industries.
- 3 Job search & application support**
STARS sought practical help: where to find openings, how to tailor resumes, how to follow up after interviews, and how to stand out.

These themes mirror Opportunity@Work's own [research on STARS' systemic barriers](#): they are rich in skills and experience but often lack access to tailored guidance that connects those skills to quality opportunities.

Coach consistently shifted from general guidance to **tactical, step-by-step support** as users' questions became more focused, helping STARS leave each conversation with clearer direction and practical next steps.

How STARS used *Coach* to turn uncertainty into action:

Re-energizing a 20-year career

One STAR shared, "I've been in my career for over 20 years and stuck." *Coach* outlined four concrete strategies for them to consider: skills enhancement, networking and mentorship, shifting career focus, and exploring entrepreneurship. When the user chose to focus on a career shift, *Coach* provided a step-by-step plan to assess interests, identify transferable skills, research new paths, learn from others, and pilot new roles through projects or volunteering.

Navigating second-chance employment and local labor markets

In Memphis, a user with a past criminal charge wanted to work as a caregiver. *Coach* provided local wage data for home health aides in the Memphis metro area, explained the career outlook, and offered a practical set of next steps for finding agencies and employers to contact.

What the *Coach* pilot teaches us about talent technology

CareerVillage is committed to continually learning and refining the *Coach* experience for all learners based on feedback — such adding a “Partner Specific Prompting” feature that allows *Coach* to recognize the term “STARs” in this labor market context as distinct from other uses of that word. But their approach to *Coach* has lessons for the broader industry of talent, HR, and career services that can break down the barriers of the paper ceiling and accelerate opportunity for STARs.

The challenges that STARs face demonstrate that our labor market operates on an uneven playing field. Building a labor market that works for everyone requires tools and services that account for the unique needs of those who build skills through the many pathways outside of a bachelor’s degree program. STARs are a massive addressable market for talent technology companies, and they’re currently underserved in this industry. **CareerVillage’s experience building and modifying *Coach* for STARs surfaced a few design principles worth sharing with peers to help close this gap and tear the paper ceiling:**

1

Meeting STARs at the moment of need

The most effective tools show up where STARs already are (job portals, LMSs, resource hubs) so support is available at the exact moment someone is searching, scrolling, or asking “what do I do next?”, rather than on a separate, unvetted site.

2

Moving STARs from confusion to concrete action

Beyond answering questions, look for tools that help people progress from “I’m stuck” to specific roles, skills to build, employers to research, and steps to take in the next week. The value is in that progression, not just in chat volume.

3

Guidance grounded in local labor markets

Many STARs need to understand what opportunity looks like in their city or region. Prioritize solutions that can reflect local wage ranges, example employers, and realistic role options in the places you serve.

4

Extending — rather than replacing — human advising

Career tools should handle common questions and early-stage exploration so staff can focus on higher stakes, more complex cases. Look for options that complement your advising model and, where possible, make it easy to share insights or transcripts with staff when a handoff is needed.

5

Implementing and governing with reasonable lift

Embedded or integrated tools should be straightforward for IT and program teams to stand up, respect your data privacy and security standards, and provide clear analytics so you can understand who is using them, when, and for what.



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.



About CareerVillage

CareerVillage exists to democratize access to career information and advice to all underrepresented youth from a wide range of backgrounds. With the goal of providing instant, on-demand answers to every question about every career, they've built a movement of millions of learners and over 200,000 volunteers. Learn more at www.careervillage.org and aicareercoach.org.