

## CASE STUDY

# The State of Colorado & Opportunity@Work

Making Skills-Based Hiring Stick



# About the 2025 Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort



**Transformers in the Public Sector** is a 12-month, peer-learning community designed to help states implement skill-based talent practices. The cohort brings together state HR leaders to set clear priorities, test approaches, and learn from one another through monthly meetings, individualized coaching, and technical assistance.

The cohort is supported by [Opportunity@Work](#) and the [Volcker Alliance](#). Together, we provide expertise on skills-first talent practices and pathways for all workers including those skilled through alternative routes (STARs). We support states in strengthening public-sector workforce systems, advancing civil service reform, and developing tools to measure progress and impact.

## WHAT THE COHORT WAS DESIGNED TO ACCOMPLISH

- Support states in making **tangible progress toward skills-based talent practices**
- Help teams **move from policy intent to implementation**
- Build internal capacity to **hire, advance, and retain all workers using skills-based talent practices, especially STARs**
- Create accountability through **time-bound goals, peer learning, and test-learn-refine loops**

## HOW THE COHORT WORKED

- **12-month engagement** structured around two **14-week implementation sprints**
- **Monthly virtual cohort meetings** with peer states and subject-matter experts
- **Monthly 1:1 technical assistance and office hours**
- Shared access to custom **workforce and STARs data**, implementation tools, and playbooks
- Focus on **learning-by-doing**, helping to shift from theory to practice

2025 PARTICIPANTS:

ARIZONA

CALIFORNIA

COLORADO

LOUISIANA

UTAH



# Strong Commitment, Real Constraints

## ABOUT COLORADO



**6M**

Population

**~1.3M**

STARs in state

**28,000**

State employees

**272**

Cities and unincorporated communities

**\$40.6B**

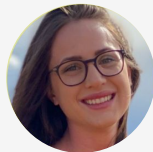
2024-2025 Budget

## Colorado's Participation in the Transformers Cohort

By the time Colorado joined the Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort, the state had already [demonstrated strong leadership](#) commitment to skills-based hiring, supported by Governor Jared Polis's [executive order](#) formally transitioning the state to skills-based hiring. Even with the state's leading edge practices, translating these behaviors into consistent, statewide practice is challenging – particularly as the state seeks to scale the work and sustain it over time.

**To address these challenges, Colorado joined the Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort to bring structure, prioritization, and sustained support to the next phase of implementation.**

- Consistently **embed skills-based talent practices** into agency workflows and hiring culture.
- **Broaden the talent pool** through a sustainable, statewide effort.
- Explore opportunities to **establish permanent resources** dedicated to implementation.



JENNIFER CECERE

Talent Pathways Team Manager,  
Colorado Department of Personnel &  
Administration



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Colorado Department of Personnel &  
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## THE CHALLENGE

# Colorado Needed Additional Support to Move from Policy to Practice



Despite strong executive leadership and early progress, Colorado faced challenges translating its commitment to skills-based hiring into a consistent, statewide practice.

### WHY COLORADO JOINED THE COHORT

Colorado had strong executive leadership and clear policy direction but needed support beyond executive orders to drive consistent, on-the-ground change.

The Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort provided structure, accountability, and hands-on technical assistance to build a common understanding of what skills-based hiring looks like in practice, help the Department of Personnel and Administration (DPA) support agencies in applying skills-based talent practices consistently, and build durable infrastructure to sustain statewide implementation.



#### Executive orders alone were not enough

1

Governor-led executive orders set clear direction, but agencies lacked a shared implementation roadmap.

**Downstream Effect:** Skills-based hiring was interpreted differently across agencies, slowing statewide adoption and limiting measurable progress.

#### Degree-based practices remained embedded in hiring culture

2

Many hiring managers continued to rely on degrees as a proxy for skills, even when alternatives were permitted.

**Downstream Effect:** Qualified STARs were still being screened out or didn't apply at all.

#### Inconsistent capacity and confidence across agencies

3

HR professionals and hiring managers had uneven access to training, tools, and support for applying skills-based practices.

**Downstream Effect:** Effective use of skills-based practices in job postings, screening criteria, and interviews varied widely, undermining consistency and scalability.

#### Sustainability required more infrastructure

4

Skills-based hiring depended heavily on trades, entry-level roles, informal champions, and executive attention.

**Downstream Effect:** Without agnostic tools and reinforced policy, progress risked stalling or reversing over time.

# Participating in the Cohort to Operationalize Skills-Based Talent Practices

Colorado used the Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort as a vehicle to set real, achievable implementation goals and translate executive intent into consistent, statewide skills-based hiring practice.

## How did the cohort support the state of Colorado?

- 1 Established clear priorities and accountability.**  
The cohort supported Colorado in **defining objectives and key results and a roadmap for completion** in alignment with the state's Wildly Important Goals (WIGS).
- 2 Built practical tools to support behavior change.**  
Through **hands-on technical assistance and shared problem-solving**, Colorado developed and refined skills-based job posting language, position description analysis processes, supplemental questions, and interview guides to help hiring managers more effectively assess candidates based on skills.
- 3 Strengthened HR and hiring manager capacity.**  
Through structured workshops, peer learning, and cohort check-ins, the Cohort equipped DPA with the tools and training needed to prepare their staff to apply skills-based practices with greater confidence and consistency within existing systems.

### STATE

Governor Polis signed executive orders to formalize the state's commitment to [skills-based hiring](#) and [work-based learning](#). Together, these send a clear signal that building a state government hiring and advancement system based on skills is a priority for his administration.

#### ▶ Cohort contribution:

Translating executive orders into time-bound OKRs and implementation priorities

### AGENCY TARGETS

Governor Polis' orders set specific targets to guide a collective effort, including goals and annual milestones at the agency level for the removal of degree requirements and the creation of work-based learning programs.

#### ▶ Cohort contribution:

Supported DPA in equipping agencies with the tools and training to operationalize skills-based talent practices

### INDIVIDUAL TARGETS

To facilitate transition to an ambitious vision, Governor Polis allocated a \$700K budget for staffing and other related expenses.

#### ▶ Cohort contribution:

Strengthened capacity of DPA to support statewide adoption of skills-based talent practices

# Participating in the Cohort to Operationalize Skills-Based Talent Practices

Colorado used the Transformers in the Public Sector cohort as a vehicle to set real, achievable implementation goals and translate executive intent into consistent, statewide skills-based hiring practice.

## How did the cohort support the state of Colorado?

**4 Used data and peer learning to refine approach.**  
The cohort provided access to workforce and STARs data, **as well as real-time feedback from peer states**, enabling Colorado to test assumptions, strengthen its skills-based talent practices narrative, and adjust implementation strategies.

**5 Focused on sustainability from the outset.**  
With cohort support, Colorado paired practice changes with longer-term infrastructure, including permanent staffing, standardized resources, and policy reinforcement to support continued adoption beyond the cohort.



“ We had the vision and the policy support going into the cohort. What we didn't yet have were the processes to make that vision stick. The Opportunity@Work cohort helped us build those processes so this work wouldn't fade once the spotlight moved on.

JENNIFER CECERE

Talent Pathways Team Manager, Colorado  
Department of Personnel & Administration

## THE RESULTS

# From Vision to Practice



Over the 12-month cohort, Colorado moved from early experimentation to execution — developing and documenting process improvements, building capacity, and strengthening the foundation for sustained skills-based hiring.

## Tangible program outcomes

- 1 Completed priority implementation goals**  
Delivered multiple core skills-based hiring tools and trainings, including position description analysis workshops, supplemental question guides, and job posting templates.
- 2 Improved consistency across agencies**  
Increased confidence and consistency among HR professionals and hiring managers applying skills-based practices within existing systems.
- 3 Created a foundation for measurement and refinement**  
Put data, feedback loops, and tracking mechanisms in place to assess progress and guide future improvements.

**Skills-based Hiring for HR Professionals**

START COURSE



Through the Employer of Choice initiative, the State of Colorado aims to increase your candidate pools and the diverse talents within them. The best place to start is by attracting the right talent to fill vacancies with Skills-based Hiring.

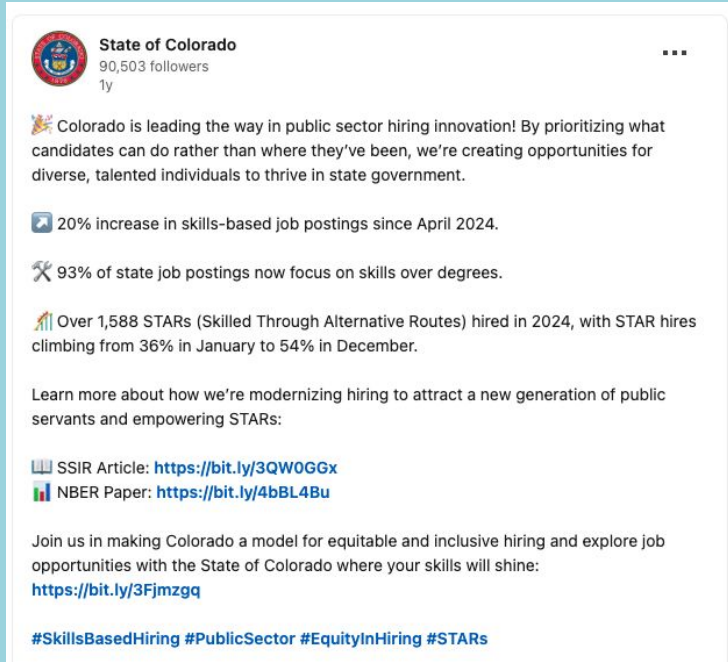
**Skills-based Hiring for Supervisors and Hiring Managers**

START COURSE



# From Vision to Practice

During their participation in the cohort the State of Colorado [reported](#):



The screenshot shows a LinkedIn post from the State of Colorado. The post text reads: "Colorado is leading the way in public sector hiring innovation! By prioritizing what candidates can do rather than where they've been, we're creating opportunities for diverse, talented individuals to thrive in state government." It includes three bullet points: "20% increase in skills-based job postings since April 2024.", "93% of state job postings now focus on skills over degrees.", and "Over 1,588 STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) hired in 2024, with STAR hires climbing from 36% in January to 54% in December." The post also includes links to an SSIR Article and an NBER Paper, and ends with the hashtag "#SkillsBasedHiring #PublicSector #EquityInHiring #STARs".

The state has also formalized infrastructure to track, measure, and increase progress toward skills-based hiring including:

- \* Developing WIGs (Wildly Important Goals) focused on increasing the number of STAR applicants to skills-based eligible job postings, targeted outreach to STAR talent pools through career informational events, and developing guides and resources to support applicants
- \* Building an internal dashboard to track the application-to-hire funnel and understand where STAR candidates drop off in engagement
- \* Establishing a NEOGOV community of practice for hiring managers to improve data accuracy and workflow to advance skills-based hiring



# What Colorado's Experience Reveals About Implementing Skills-Based Hiring in State Government

Colorado's experience shows how states can overcome implementation barriers and translate skills-based hiring policy into consistent, on-the-ground practice.



## Dedicated ownership is key

Skills-based hiring could not be sustained through policy or goodwill alone. Dedicated staff with clear responsibility were essential to driving follow-through, supporting agencies, and maintaining momentum.



## Peer learning compressed the learning curve

Regular engagement with other states helped Colorado pressure-test ideas, learn from others' challenges, and move faster than it would have working in isolation.



## Tools are necessary — but behavior change takes support

Even with strong tools and templates in place, hiring managers and HR professionals require ongoing guidance, reinforcement, and practical examples to consistently apply skills-based practices.



## Sustainability must be designed early, not added later

Planning for permanent staffing, standardized resources, and measurement from the outset made it easier to transition from cohort work to long-term implementation.

# Strengthening and Scaling Skills-Based Hiring

Building on progress made through the cohort, Colorado is focused on deepening implementation, expanding adoption, and strengthening long-term sustainability of skills-based talent practices across state government.



## APPENDIX

# Tools and Resources Developed During the Cohort



### CO Skills-Based Journey

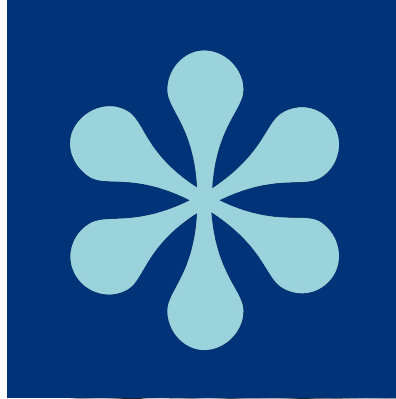
A comprehensive brief of Colorado Department of Personnel and Administration's participation in the 2024–2025 Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort.

### Skills-based Job Posting Considerations

A guide offering strategies for refining job descriptions and posting language to attract a broader pool of candidates, especially STARs, for Human Resources roles in the state of Colorado. The guide includes a job posting template, private sector job title comparisons, and examples of skills commonly associated with HR roles.

### CO Skills-Based Talent Practices Evaluation Guide

A three-part framework for measuring impact of skills-based talent practices including a summary of Colorado's progress and suggested next steps to measure success.



# About us



Opportunity@Work works directly with federal, state, and local governments to modernize hiring, expand career pathways, and implement skills-based talent practices that open public sector jobs to workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs).

**We provide the data, tools, guidance, and peer learning environments** that help public sector leaders remove unnecessary degree requirements, improve hiring efficiency, and build more inclusive and effective workforces.

**JOIN THE STARS PUBLIC SECTOR HUB**

