

## CASE STUDY

# Practicing What We Preach

**How Virginia Works + Virginia's Department of Human Resource Management partnered to scale skills-based talent practices across state government**



# Executive Summary: Virginia's Journey to Skills-Based Talent



Virginia did not start with apprenticeship or job fairs. It started with a statewide shift in how government thinks about talent.



## ABOUT VIRGINIA

4.5m

Civilian labor force

106k

Commonwealth employees

56k

STARs employed by the Commonwealth

In May 2023, Virginia's governor issued a landmark [executive order](#) directing state agencies to eliminate degree requirements and preferences for nearly **90 %** of classified jobs — a major shift toward skills-based hiring meant to expand opportunity and strengthen the talent pipeline for government service.

At the same time, the Commonwealth consolidated fragmented workforce functions into a new workforce agency, Virginia Works, creating a unique moment for partnership with the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management.



The two agencies used this alignment of leadership mandate and organizational structure **to translate high-level policy into operational practice.**



JANET LAWSON

Director, Department of Human Resource Management



NICOLE OVERLEY

Commissioner, Virginia Works

# The Problem: Why policy alone wasn't enough



The Commonwealth had the right policy, but needed an operational bridge to make it real across agencies.

## Key Challenges

- **Program-based mindset:** Workforce programs spread across multiple agencies
- **“Alphabet soup”:** Employer services and talent programs difficult to navigate
- **Lack of policy adherence:** Degree requirements still appearing in job postings despite policy not requiring them
- **Old habits die hard:** Hiring managers defaulting to old practices
- **A system vs. practice disconnect:** Workforce system focused on skills training with limited connection to state hiring
- **Doing as I say, not as I do:** State encouraging employers to adopt skills-based practices without consistently modeling them

## The Gaps Virginia Needed to Bridge

### WHAT EXISTED

### WHAT WAS MISSING

Skills-based policy

Skills-based hiring practice

Workforce training programs

Direct pathways to state jobs

Employer services

State government modeling those services

Skills development

Skills recognized in hiring

At the same time, the Federal reductions in force was affecting large swaths of Virginia residents.

# Working Toward Solutions

Necessity Forged a Win-Win Partnership



Federal workforce reductions in D.C. and Northern Virginia created an immediate need to connect displaced and at-risk federal employees with new opportunities. In response, Virginia saw a clear opening to redirect that experienced talent into state roles, using layoffs as a catalyst to more promote Commonwealth jobs and strengthen coordination across its workforce and HR systems.



We stopped thinking about it as 'everyone should do this, it's a social good.'

Instead, changed the way we communicated to show what it does for their business and their goals.

**NICOLE OVERLEY**

Commissioner,  
Virginia Works

## GAP

HR policy wasn't changing hiring behavior

## THEY REALIZED

DHRM had access to HR leaders; Virginia Works had concrete talent models to show

## GAP

State wasn't modeling what it asked employers to do

## THEY REALIZED

Virginia Works is both a workforce agency and an employer; it could walk the talk

## GAP

Workforce system wasn't connected to state jobs

## THEY REALIZED

Virginia Works had jobseeker reach; DHRM owned the state job platform

## GAP

People didn't understand the value of workforce programs

## THEY REALIZED

Messaging focused too much on social good, not business ROI

# The Solution: The Actions They Took Together



Rather than launching one new initiative, the two agencies used their existing reach, tools, and influence to activate several parts of the system at once—at a critical time.

## Connected the workforce system to state hiring

### #1

Integrated the state job site into Virginia Works platforms and promoted state careers through newsletters, workforce centers, and career coaches

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### #2

Co-hosted virtual and in-person hiring events and helped jobseekers understand how to navigate the state hiring process

## Used apprenticeship as a scalable talent model for agencies

### #1

Mapped ~500 existing apprentices across state government and highlighted replicable occupations like frontline roles and procurement

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### #2

Educated and supported HR leaders through webinars, conference sessions, and hands-on help launching new programs

## Supported implementation of skills-based hiring

### #1

Modernizing screening tools and hiring practices through DHRM and notifying HR staff and supervisors on new expectations

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### #2

Reinforced policy changes with real examples and pilots from Virginia Works that agencies could see and replicate

## Modeled the practices internally (“Virginia Works tests first”)

### #1

Launched internal apprenticeships, fellowships, and career pathways within Virginia Works

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### #2

Built credibility with agencies by demonstrating the practices before asking others to adopt them

# Results: Evidence That the Partnership Worked

The partnership produced measurable gains in apprenticeship growth, jobseeker reach, and adoption of skills-based practices.



**15,100**

Active apprenticeships supported by the Commonwealth (42% increase in 3 years)

**175,000**

Reach of Virginia Works' Career Connections monthly newsletter

**82k**

STARs applications in FY 24-25

**\$6.8m**

Additional tax revenue from apprenticeship programs (3-to-1 ROI)



# Insights: Lessons from Virginia's Approach



Key behaviors helping DHRM and Virginia Works to move from policy to practice across state government.

## INSIGHT #1

Pair HR policy authority with workforce expertise

In many states, HR policy teams and workforce agencies operate alongside each other without intentionally coordinating their efforts. In Virginia, DHRM and Virginia Works aligned their work so that policy changes were reinforced by tangible talent models, apprenticeship programs, and jobseeker pathways. This pairing can help translate policy into visible, repeatable practice for agencies.

## INSIGHT #2

Use work-based learning to make skills-based hiring tangible

Rather than trying to convince hiring managers to think differently in the abstract, DHRM and Virginia Works used registered apprenticeship as a practical example. Defining apprenticeable occupations forced agencies to identify the real skills needed for jobs, which made skills-based hiring easier to understand and adopt.

## INSIGHT #3

Model the practices before asking others to adopt them

Virginia Works launched apprenticeships, fellowships, and career pathways inside its own 350-person agency. DHRM will work with agencies to adopt similar practices to those deployed by VA Works.

# Insights: Lessons from Virginia's Approach Continued

Key behaviors that helped DHRM and Virginia Works move from policy to practice across state government.

## INSIGHT #4

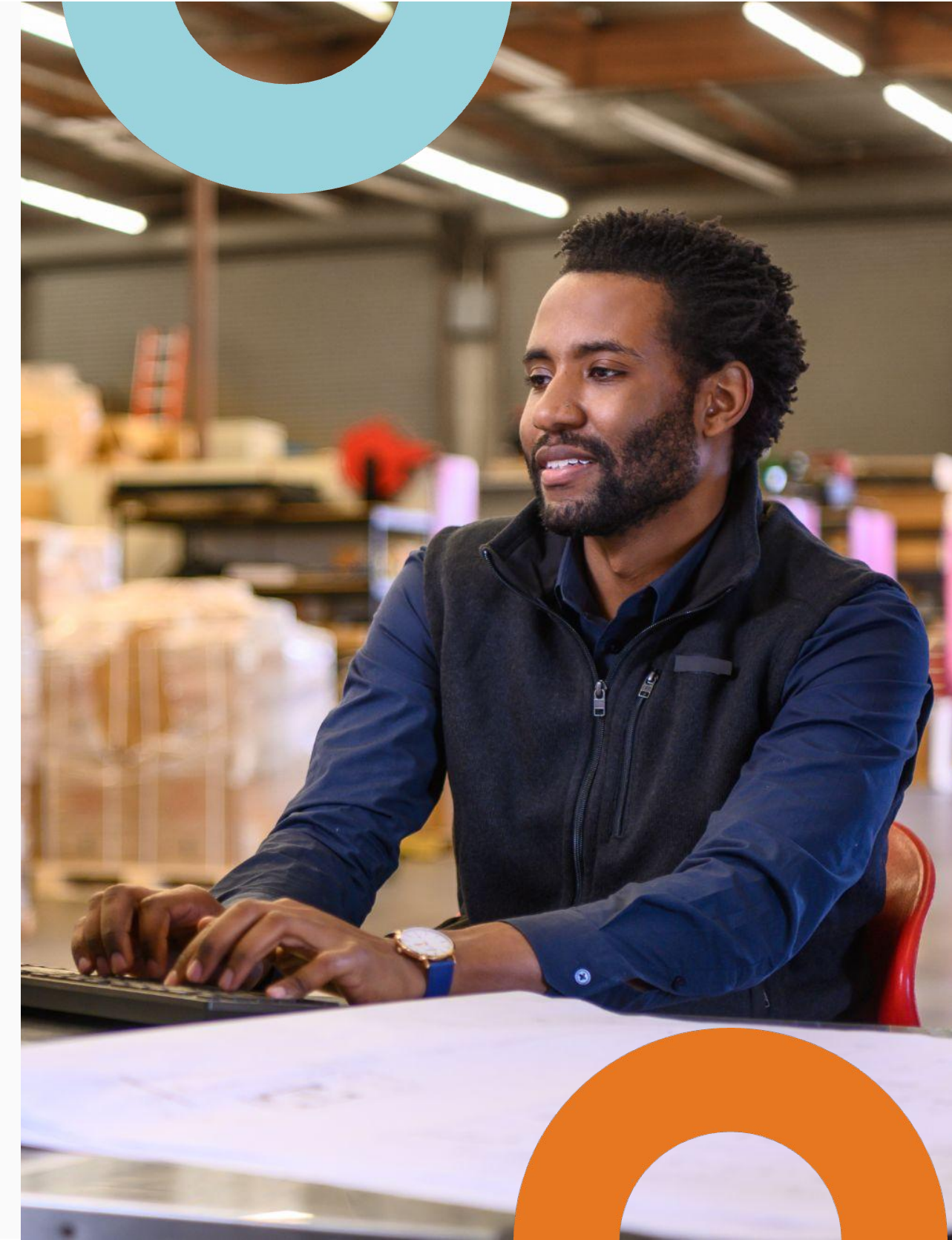
Speak to agencies in terms of business value, not social good

DHRM and Virginia Works found that messaging about equity or workforce ideals did not resonate as strongly as messaging about retention, pipeline development, and operational effectiveness. Reframing the talk track changed how agency leaders engaged with these practices.

## INSIGHT #5

Use existing communication channels as the delivery system

Instead of building new structures, DHRM and Virginia Works used HR listservs, conferences, webinars, newsletters, workforce centers, and hiring events to spread awareness and adoption. This allowed change to move quickly through channels agencies already trusted.



# 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.

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