

CASE STUDY

The State of California & Opportunity@Work



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 provided 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	HOW THE COHORT WORKED
- 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	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

Implementing Skills-Based Hiring with Measurement and Buy-In

ABOUT CALIFORNIA



40M

Population

8M

STARs in State

247,000

State employees

482

Cities and unincorporated communities

\$228B

2026 Budget

California’s Starting Point

When California joined the Transformers in the Public Sector cohort, the state had already taken meaningful steps toward modernizing public-sector hiring, including Governor Gavin Newsom’s [Executive Order N-11-23](#) directing CalHR to remove unnecessary degree requirements from state jobs.

At the same time, California’s size and complexity created a distinct implementation challenge. With nearly 150 departments, extensive civil service rules, and strong labor involvement, the central question was not whether to pursue skills-based talent practices—but how to do so in a way that was credible, measurable, and broadly applicable across the system.

As California moved toward implementation, they keyed in on four strategies to support broad adoption:

- **Advance skills-based pathways for external candidates**, including STARs
- **Track and measure adoption** and impact of skills-first hiring practices
- **Build buy-in among departmental HR offices** to reduce bias in hiring decisions
- **Develop a strategy to engage labor and civil service partners** to revisit job descriptions and education requirements



SALLY LY

Deputy Secretary –
Workforce Development,
California Government
Operations Agency



CHRIS DAINARD

Chief, Selection Division,
California Department of
Human Resources

THE PROBLEM



Implementing Skills-Based Strategies in a Complex State System

Despite clear policy signals, the complexities of California’s hiring system made it difficult to translate skills-based hiring goals into consistent statewide practice.

1.

Fragmented systems limited skills-based pathways for external candidates

With more than 2600 job classifications, applicants experience difficulty understanding jobs that are available to them based on their skills and experience. The state has made progress toward identifying skills-based pathways for STARs. However, additional steps can be taken to make the information more comprehensive, centralized, and easily accessible.

Downstream Effect: Even where opportunities existed, they were difficult for candidates to find, understand, or navigate.

2.

Lack of shared measurement infrastructure

The state did not have a consistent, system-wide way to track adoption or assess the impact of skills-based talent practices across departments.

Downstream Effect: Progress was difficult to quantify, making it challenging to demonstrate results, identify effective practices, or guide decision-making.

3.

Scale and decentralization slowed cultural change

With nearly 150 departments and thousands of hiring managers, California lacked a consistent narrative, training approach, and reinforcement mechanism to build shared understanding of skills-based hiring and advancement.

Downstream Effect: Buy-in varied widely, resulting in uneven application of practices and limited bias reduction.

4.

Collaborative governance and stakeholder engagement shaped the pace of reform

Revising degree requirements in state job classifications involves a formal review and approval process through the State Personnel Board, as well as thoughtful engagement with labor partners. These governance and partnership structures help ensure that any changes reflect principles of equity, worker voice, and operational effectiveness.

Downstream Effect: Without an early and coordinated engagement strategy, progress on policy revisions and implementation guidance moved more slowly, as stakeholders needed time and space to review impacts, provide input, and align on a shared approach.

THE SOLUTION

Building the Conditions for Skills-Based Strategies at Scale



The Cohort provided California with a framework to align stakeholders, test approaches, and begin putting durable systems in place to support skills-based talent practices.

How did the Cohort support the state of California?

- 1 Tested recruitment tools to bring greater awareness to career pathways open to STARs**
With the support of the Volcker Alliance, California cohort team members designed recruitment tools (like the one pictured to the right) to outline core competencies and map skills-based pathways for in-demand roles. The state also participated in a Public Sector Hiring pilot with Opportunity@Work and [SkillUp](#), a job board and career exploration platform designed exclusively for STARs.
- 2 Refined narrative framework for skills-based talent practices**
During the narrative building workshop, California cohort members developed talking points to address common misconceptions about skills-based hiring and reinforced support using data-driven insights on the number of STARs within the state's workforce. Cohort team members applied these learnings to build buy-in for statewide adoption of skills-based talent practices and incorporated this narrative framework into hiring guides, hiring manager trainings, and recruitment tools.
- 3 Developed a guide to measuring the adoption of skills-based talent practices**
To track progress toward statewide adoption of skills-based talent practices, cohort team members developed metrics and key indicators including completion rates of skills-based hiring trainings, hiring actions that used the skills-based hiring framework, as reported by hiring managers, and percent of STARs hired into target roles (see appendix for the full [evaluation guide](#)).

BUILDING A CAREER WITH CALIFORNIA STATE GOVERNMENT

We want to help Californians to build a career from the ground up. The state provides on-the-job training and professional development, and many positions do not require previous experience or a degree.



SKILLS-BASED CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM AND HR ANALYSTS

California state government is at the forefront of skills-based hiring—opening doors to Californians whose expertise was earned on the job, in the military, through apprenticeships, or other routes. State government is looking for what candidates can DO rather than where they went to school, broadening our talent pool and opening doors to rewarding careers to serve Californians.

Two roles that we are hiring based on skills are Program Analyst and Human Resource Analyst. This brief outlines the core competencies those jobs demand, maps realistic career pathways, and highlights related roles that build on the same competencies.

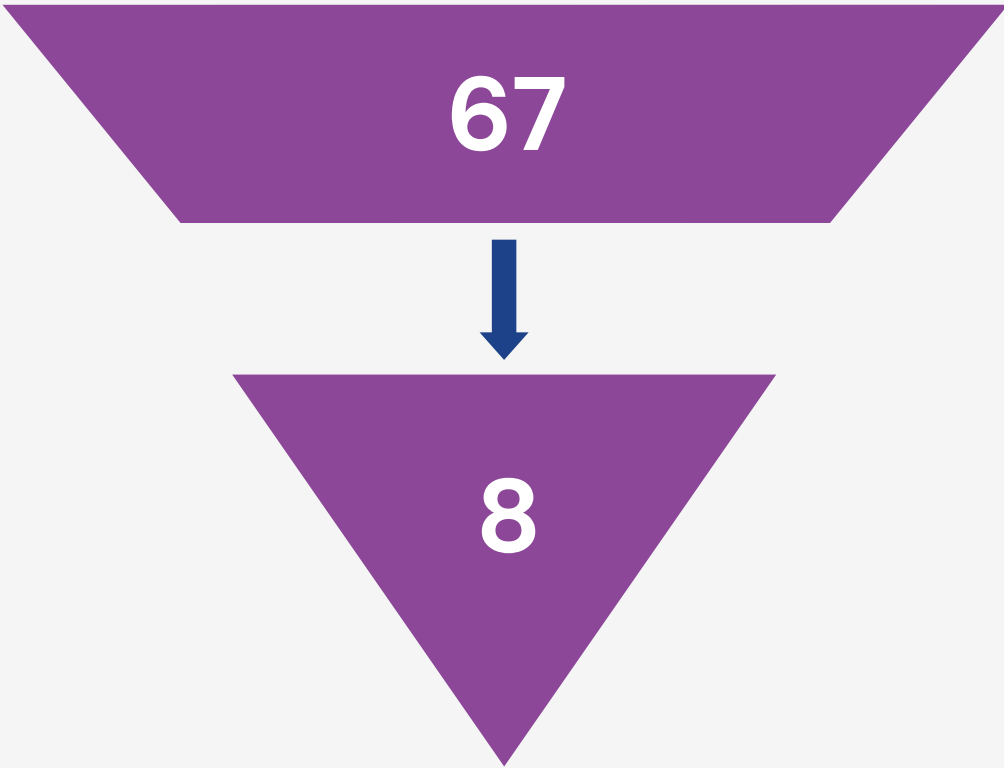
RESULTS

Early Outcomes and System-Level Progress



The cohort period produced early, tangible outcomes that positioned California to continue advancing skills-based hiring across state government.

**From 67 Job Generalist
Classifications, Down to 8**



Throughout the Cohort engagement, California consolidated 67 Generalist job classifications into 8*, simplifying a fragmented system that makes skills-based hiring difficult to scale.

Fewer classifications make it easier to clarify skills expectations, reduce reliance on degree requirements, and create clearer entry points and career pathways for external candidates, including STARs.

This change also supports more consistent hiring practices across departments and improves talent mobility within state government.



Participating in this cohort has greatly deepened my understanding of how to advance skills-based hiring in state government.

It has truly been a pleasure collaborating with such a smart, passionate, and talented group of professionals.

SALLY LY

Deputy Secretary – Workforce Development,
California Government Operations Agency

*For more information on California’s Classification Consolidation:
<https://www.calhr.ca.gov/about-calhr/divisions-programs/personnel-management/generalist-class-consolidation/>

MORE RESULTS



Early Outcomes and System-Level Progress

The cohort period produced early, tangible outcomes that positioned California to continue advancing skills-based hiring across state government.

30,000+

State job descriptions modernized to include clearer skills-based pathways

California’s Generalist classification consolidation broadened minimum qualifications and removed unnecessary educational barriers, expanding skills-based pathways to entry and upward mobility for more than 30,000 roles.

100%

Skills mapping for Research Data Analyst series

The California Department of Human Resources partnered with ioPredict to conduct competency analyses and develop competency-based assessments for the Research Data Analyst series. The state will pilot the use of competency-based assessments with the Research Data Analyst series and expand to other job classifications, aligning with the state’s commitments to skills-based hiring and expanding access to STARs.

53%

STAR applicants for Research Data Analyst roles

Based on analysis of October 2023 – October 2024 application data for the Research Analyst data series, 53% of applicants were STARs. The state is working toward increasing the number of STAR applicants to research data analyst positions by 25% and developing a strategy to track STAR hiring outcomes.



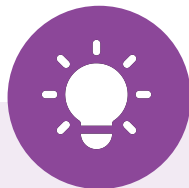
“ We are so incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have worked with you all on this and thank you for all of your support, patience, and collaboration over the time together. Looking through the journey and the evaluation guide, it is somewhat amazing the progress we’ve been able to achieve together, and it is refreshing to see everything collected, updated, and placed together in something cohesive.

CHRIS DAINARD

Chief, Selection Division,
California Department of Human Resources

What California’s Experience Reveals About Advancing Skills–Based Hiring in Complex Systems

California’s experience highlights that in large, decentralized state systems, progress on skills–based hiring depends on aligning classification structures, measurement, and stakeholder buy–in—not just policy direction.



Shared understanding is necessary for scale

In a large, decentralized system, skills–based hiring could not spread without a clear, trusted explanation of what it is and why it matters.



Measurement enables momentum and accountability

Without clear ways to track adoption and impact, progress was difficult to assess. Establishing an [evaluation framework](#) helped move skills–based hiring from concept to practice.



Systems reform unlocks pathways

Classification consolidation and assessment modernization proved critical to creating visible, navigable skills–based pathways for external candidates, including STARs.



Buy–in must extend beyond HR

Support for skills–based talent practices must extend beyond executive leadership and HR. Sustained change requires engaging hiring managers, collective bargaining units, and civil service stakeholders.



Change at scale takes coordination, not just intent

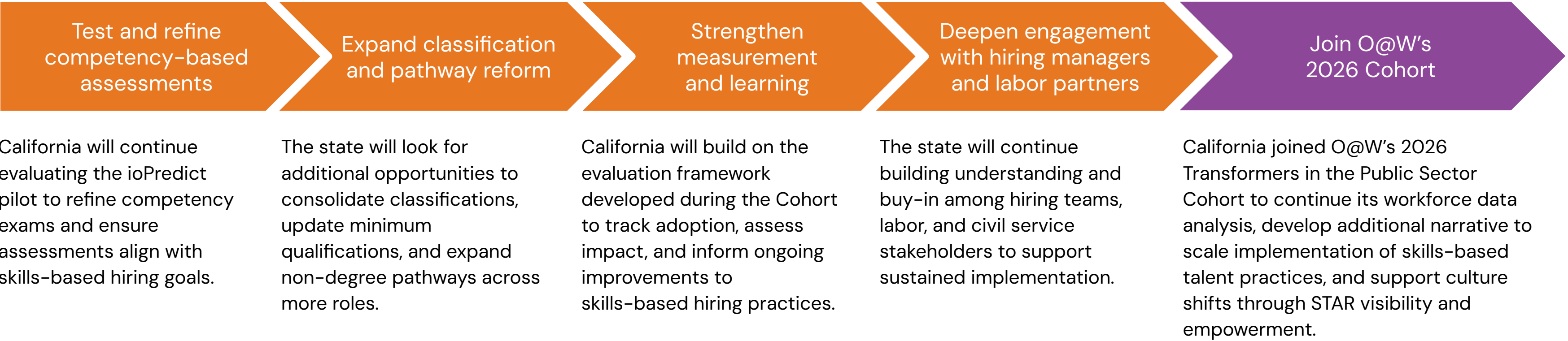
California’s experience underscored that advancing skills–based hiring across a complex state system depends on alignment, sequencing, and sustained cross–agency collaboration.

WHAT'S NEXT

Continuing System-Level Reform



Building on progress made during the cohort, California is focused on refining systems, expanding pathways, and strengthening long-term adoption of skills-based hiring.



APPENDIX

Tools and Resources Developed During the Cohort

CA Skills-Based Journey

A comprehensive brief of California Department of Human Resources and Government Operations Agency's participation in the 2024-2025 Transformers in the Public Sector Cohort.

California Jobs for STARs - Accounting and Finance

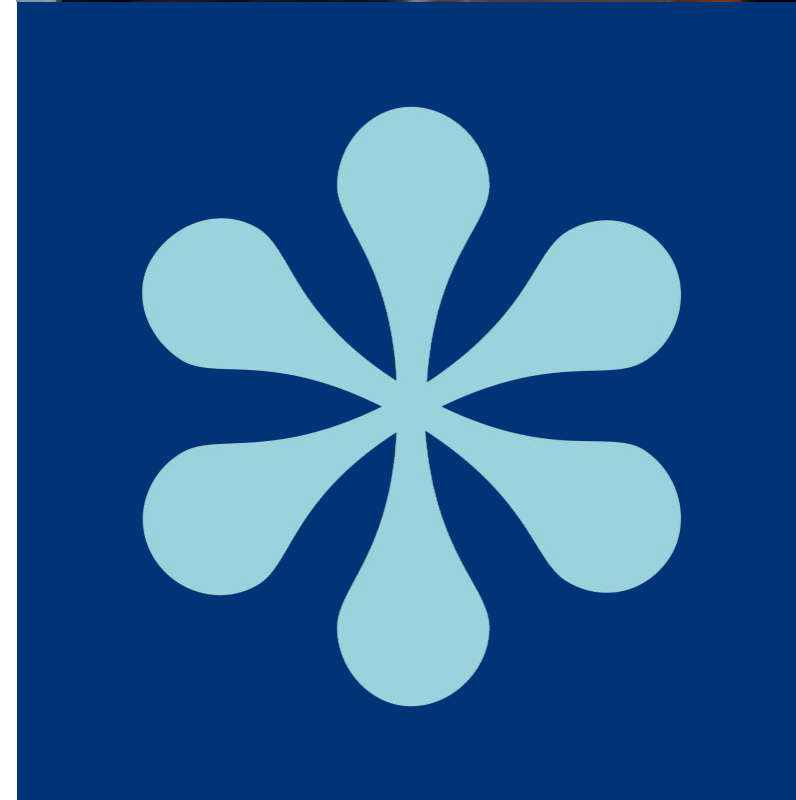
A recruitment tool developed to outline core competencies and map skills-based pathways for entry-level to managerial accounting and finance roles.

California Jobs for STARs - HR Analysts

A recruitment tool developed to outline core competencies and map skills-based pathways for entry-level to managerial HR and program analyst roles.

CA Skills-Based Talent Practices Evaluation Guide

A three-part framework for measuring impact of skills-based talent practices including a summary of California'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

