

CASE STUDY

Building careers from the ground up with apprenticeship

How the City of Charlotte turned
apprenticeship into a citywide
talent strategy



How Charlotte Rethought Public Sector Talent

ABOUT CHARLOTTE



Population in Charlotte Metro

9k

Employees across
Mecklenburg County

1.3m

All workers

47%

STARs in Charlotte Metro

23+

Departments across
city government

\$4.5B

Annual budget FY27

About Charlotte

Charlotte's commitment to skills-based talent practices did not start with the passing of a policy. It started with a crisis — and a conviction that the city could do better by its residents.

In 2014, Charlotte ranked last among 50 major U.S. cities on economic mobility, according to the Opportunity Insights report, [Where is the Land of Opportunity: The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States](#). That same year, the city was staring down a succession planning emergency: a third of its workforce was eligible to retire within three to five years. City HR leadership recognized that traditional hiring wasn't going to solve either problem. They needed a different approach — one built around skills, structured development, and direct pathways into careers.

The result was a citywide registered apprenticeship program that today spans 20 occupations, 120 active apprentices, and a 79% lifetime retention rate. Of those 120 apprentices, 44 are veterans using their GI Bill benefit to fund their training. Led by Sherri Jones, workforce development manager at the City of Charlotte, the program has become a national model and a strategic priority for city council.

Charlotte's Approach

- **Build sustainable work-based learning pathways into public sector careers.** Registered apprenticeships provide paid training and structured pathways into critical roles across infrastructure, transit, public safety, and city operations.
- **Strengthen long-term workforce pipelines.** Charlotte expanded apprenticeship programs to address hiring challenges, succession planning concerns, and growing retirement risk across key departments.
- **Create more equitable access to city careers.** Removing experience and degree barriers helped the city connect more residents to stable, well-paying public sector jobs.
- **Standardize talent and workforce development across departments.** Structured skills matrices, durable skills training, career coaching, and on-the-job training created more consistent talent development and knowledge transfer across city government.



SHERRI JONES

Workforce Development
and Program Manager
Charlotte

A workforce challenge years in the making

After Charlotte ranked last among major U.S. cities for economic mobility in the 2014 Opportunity Insights study, city leaders and departments began identifying critical workforce, succession planning, and talent pipeline gaps across government.

The 2014, *“Where is the Land of Opportunity?”* study ranked Charlotte last among major U.S. cities for economic mobility.

The findings highlighted a growing disconnect between residents and access to stable, well-paying careers while also reinforcing broader workforce and succession planning concerns emerging across city government.

Workforce analysis revealed a looming retirement cliff

At the same time, departments across city government were facing growing succession planning concerns.

Leadership identified that roughly one-third of the workforce would become retirement-eligible within 1–5 years, creating major institutional knowledge and staffing risks across operational departments.

Department-level needs analysis exposed critical hiring gaps

Charlotte Water and other departments conducted workforce and role-specific needs analyses to identify positions with:

- High turnover
- Persistent hiring difficulty
- Critical knowledge transfer needs
- Large annual hiring volume

This process helped the city prioritize which roles should become registered apprenticeships.

THE PROBLEM

What Charlotte uncovered after analyzing workforce gaps

As departments dug deeper into workforce and succession planning challenges, several patterns began to emerge across critical operational roles.

1. Retirement risk in the water sector threatened critical operations	2. Hiring pipelines were not keeping pace	3. Career pathways lacked structure and visibility	4. Traditional hiring narrowed the talent pool
• 30–50% of the U.S. water sector workforce is expected to be retirement-eligible within the next 3–5 years • Critical operational roles identified across multiple divisions, including field operations, customer service, engineering, and treatment plant operations • Institutional knowledge was heavily concentrated among long-tenured employees, increasing succession risk as experienced workers retired	• 48 utility technician openings filled annually • Critical operational roles took an average of 3–6 months to fill, compared with 2–4 months through the apprenticeship pipeline • Departments reported persistent difficulty recruiting qualified candidates for infrastructure, operations, and skilled trades positions	• Limited formal training pathways for entry-level operational roles • Skills and institutional knowledge were often undocumented • Many residents and employees lacked awareness of public sector career opportunities	• Degree and experience requirements reduced access to otherwise capable candidates • Departments struggled to identify candidates with transferable skills and long-term potential

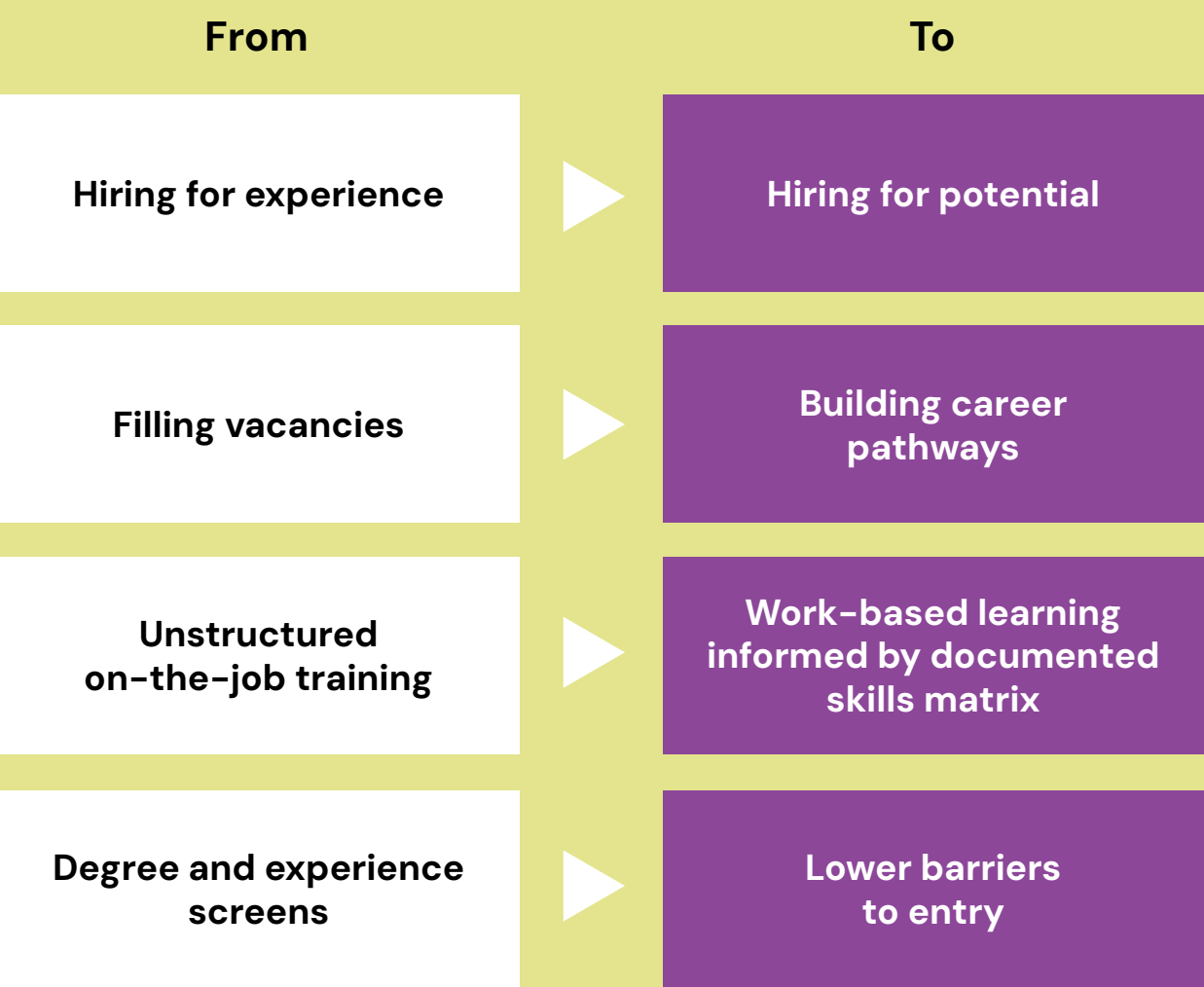
THE SOLUTION

Charlotte stopped hiring for skills and started building them

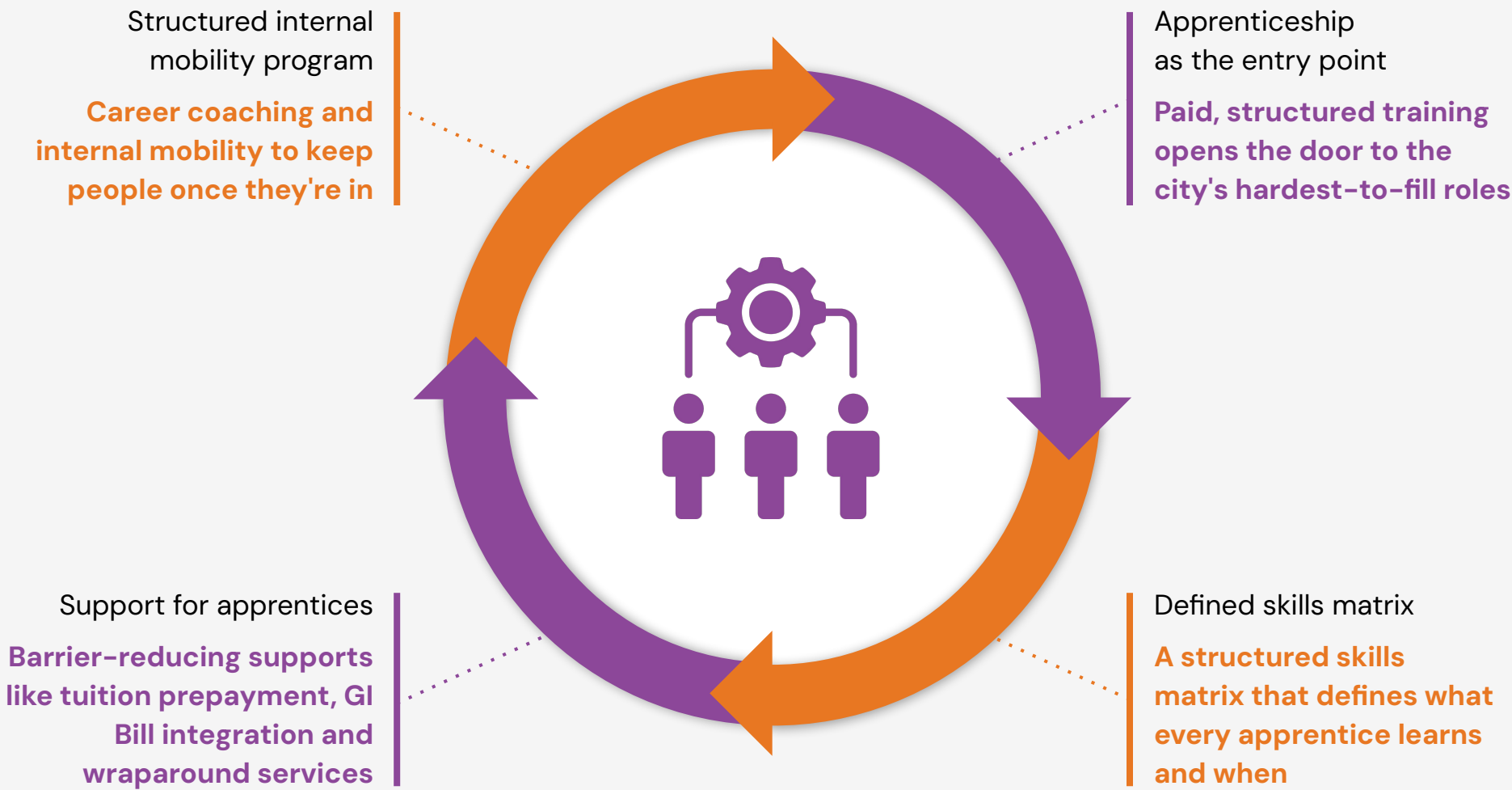


Apprenticeships gave Charlotte a way to develop the workers it could not find on the open market

Charlotte changed the question from, "who can already do this job," to "who can we develop to do it."

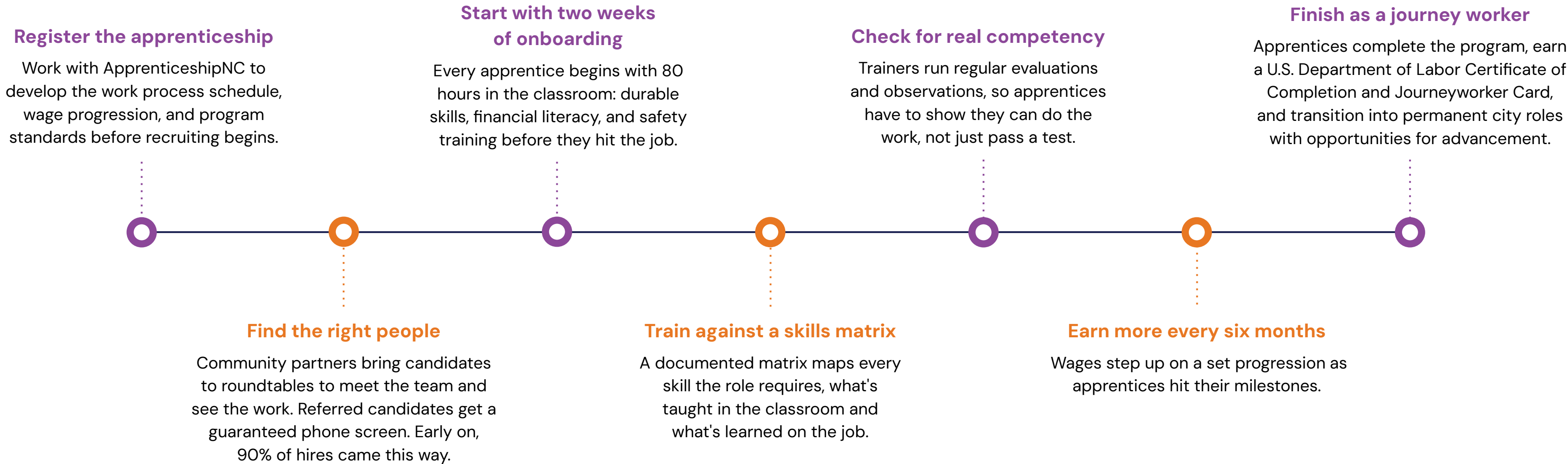


A citywide apprenticeship system



How Charlotte's apprenticeships work, start to finish

One repeatable pathway, from first contact to a permanent city career



Developing and registering a new apprenticeship occupation typically takes 3–6 months.
Each apprenticeship runs one year or more, with a minimum of 2,000 hours of on-the-job learning and 144 classroom hours.

One system, every corner of city government

Most apprenticeship programs cover a single trade. Charlotte runs one across seven departments.



20 registered occupations. 120 active apprentices. Roles that have almost nothing in common except how people now enter them.



Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police (CMPD)

- Police officer



Charlotte Water:

- Utility technician
- Lift station technician
- Water Facilities Management
- Wastewater Treatment

Department of Transportation

- Survey Technician
- Mason
- Heavy Equipment Operator

Solid Waste

- Sanitation equipment operator

General Services

- Diesel mechanic
- Office assistant

In some roles, apprenticeship is now the only way in. At Charlotte Water the **utility technician job** started as an experiment and became the sole entry point five years later.



Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT)

- HVAC technician
- Wayfinding and signage designer
- Conveyor load bridge technician
- Plumber
- Electrician
- Diesel mechanic (power-generation equipment)



Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS)

- Rail maintenance technician



Charlotte Fire Department

- Firefighter

Apprenticeships are designed to remove the barriers that usually stop people



Creating opportunity for people only works if you clear what can get in their way

Charlotte has designed a series of wrap-around supports to address common barriers to success to help apprentices thrive. Here are a few of them:

 Cost of Training	 Life Literacy	 Housing & Food
Apprentices are paid to learn Money is often the biggest barrier to starting a new career. Charlotte removes that barrier by paying apprentices from day one while covering the cost of their required training and education. • Earn while you learn. Apprentices receive a full paycheck while completing classroom instruction and on-the-job training. Time spent in required coursework is paid as part of the workday. • Progressive wage increases. Apprentices move through a structured wage progression with pay increases every six months, culminating in the full journeyworker wage upon program completion. • Full City benefits from day one. Apprentices receive the same benefits as other City employees throughout the program. • Veterans can receive additional support. Eligible veterans may use GI Bill benefits while participating in a registered apprenticeship, receiving up to approximately \$2,250 per month in addition to their wages.	People get set up to succeed, not just hired Hiring for potential only works when people have the support to succeed. Charlotte invests in workplace readiness from day one, building the skills apprentices need both on the job and throughout their careers. • A 16-hour, eight-session durable skills program covering financial literacy, generational diversity, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and communication • Safety built into every apprenticeship, from OSHA 10 and defensive driving to position-specific safety compliance • Structured onboarding and workplace readiness that equips apprentices with the professional and technical foundation needed for long-term success	Life outside work doesn't derail the work You can't focus on a career when you're not sure where you'll sleep, so a rough patch shouldn't end an apprenticeship that's otherwise going well. • Wraparound support with housing, food, and transportation through community partners, so apprentices facing a rough patch have somewhere to turn.



SHERRI JONES

Workforce Development
and Program Manager
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“ We had tuition reimbursement for years, but people kept telling me the same thing. They couldn't save the money to pay upfront, because life happens. So we flipped it. Now the city pays first.”

THE RESULTS

What the model produced



Charlotte’s apprenticeships have delivered tangible success, showing what’s possible with skills-based talent practices and positioning the City to continue to expand apprenticeships across its agencies.

79%

Retention rate across the life of the program

This is retention across the full history of the program, not a single year, and it runs at roughly double what the city sees from traditional hires.*

120

Active apprenticeships in roles across the city

Eighty people are apprenticing in city jobs right now, across seven departments. What started as one experiment at Charlotte Water is now how the city fills these roles.

20

Registered occupations with more in development

Each is a state and federally registered apprenticeship, built skill by skill into a real career path. The 20 range from plumbers to police officers, with 4 to 5 more on the way



[Changing Opportunity: Sociological Mechanisms Underlying Growing Class Gaps and Shrinking Race Gaps in Economic Mobility](#)

In 2024, Opportunity Insights did a 10-year update on their landmark research. Charlotte is now 38th, up from 50th, and one of the fastest-rising cities on the list. The city has committed to economic mobility across many fronts, and this apprenticeship program is one piece of that broader push.

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 HUB



Charlotte's Needs–Analysis Worksheet

Charlotte’s Skills–Matrix Model