

CASE STUDY

The State of Utah & 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

- 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



A Strong Policy Foundation with a Momentum Challenge



ABOUT UTAH



3.5M

Utah population

1.5M

Active Labor Force

53%

Utah workers who are STARs

21k

State employees

\$31.6B

Utah annual state budget

Utah’s Starting Point

Utah entered the cohort with strong policy signals and early evidence that skills-based talent practices work. Under Governor Cox’s leadership, Utah built on the foundation for skills-first talent practices that Representative Thurston passed in 2021 [through HB139](#), and reinforced Utah’s commitment to increasing accessibility to state jobs by [removing unnecessary degree requirements through skills-first talent practices](#) in 2022. Opportunity@Work supported the State of Utah through a 10-week pilot in early 2025 to build support for their HR leaders in advancing skills-based practices, that preceded their entry into the Transformers in the Public Sector cohort. Pilot data showed that STARs were hired at comparable rates to degree-holders once they entered the hiring process following executive action.

To sustain engagement, continued leadership attention was needed to keep skills-first practices visible, aligned with statewide priorities, and reinforced across agencies. Through the Transformers in the Public Sector cohort, Utah focused on:

- **Sustaining leadership engagement** to keep skills-based talent practices aligned with the Governor’s workforce and economic priorities.
- **Expanding STARs awareness and attraction**, particularly to high-wage and hard-to-fill roles where STARs remain underrepresented in the applicant pool
- **Using data to reinforce adoption**, demonstrating that STARs perform at comparable rates once in the hiring process.
- **Embedding skills-first practices into day-to-day hiring**, so implementation extends beyond pilots and becomes a consistent way of working across agencies.



JOHN BARRAND

Chief HR Officer
for the State of Utah



GREG HARGIS

Assistant Director, Department
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JENNIFER WAKEFIELD

State of Utah, Director of Recruiting &
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Translating Skills-Based Practices into Day-to-Day Hiring

Through working sessions with HR Generalists, hiring managers, field directors, and leadership, Utah identified four key challenges that were preventing skills-based talent practices from being applied consistently across agencies.

1.

HR and hiring managers did not feel equipped to translate “skills-based” into job postings and screening

Although Utah had a competency model and examples to pull from, many HR Generalists and hiring managers did not feel confident turning those ideas into job postings, questions, and screening approaches. Under time pressure, they relied on old job descriptions and years-of-experience requirements instead of building postings around skills.

Downstream Effect: Hiring practices defaulted to familiar, credential-driven approaches because they felt faster and easier to execute.

2.

Skills-based hiring felt like extra work

As Utah explored scaling skills-based practices, HR teams were also preparing for a new talent system while managing heavy workloads. Using new job materials and approaches felt like an added burden rather than support to their work.

Downstream Effect: Even motivated staff deprioritized skills-based practices due to limited capacity and change fatigue.

3.

Hiring managers were unclear what skills-based hiring meant for them

While leadership had discussed skills-based hiring, many hiring managers were unaware of the initiative or unsure how it applied to their roles. Skills-based hiring was often seen as an HR concept rather than a practical way to improve hiring outcomes.

Downstream Effect: Hiring managers continued using familiar methods because they did not see how skills-based practices would help them hire better candidates.

4.

Hiring practices varied widely across agencies

Each agency — and often each HR generalist — had developed their own way of building job postings, writing questions, and screening candidates. Without a shared, standardized approach, it was difficult to scale what was working or create consistency across state government.

Downstream Effect: Inconsistency limited the state’s ability to share best practices and scale skills-based hiring effectively.

THE SOLUTION

Making skills-based hiring easier to do than the old way



Rather than introducing new frameworks, Utah focused on removing the practical barriers that were making it hard for HR Generalists and hiring managers to apply skills-based practices in real hiring situations.

How did the cohort support Utah?

- 1

Engaged leadership at key moments to connect the work to broader state priorities

Utah 's leadership, including John Barrand, connected skills-based hiring to the Governor's priorities around rural opportunity, workforce participation, and economic mobility, helping staff see how the work connected to the state's mission.
- 2

Developed practical templates, question banks, and examples to reduce the burden of starting from scratch

Utah created shared resources that made it easier for HR staff to translate skills into postings and screening tools without reinventing the process each time. They focused on updating their competency bank to equip HR staff and hiring managers with tools to implement skills-based practices.



Governor Cox

Through the cohort, John Barrand, Chief HR Officer for the State of Utah, showcased how skills-based talent practices supported Governor Cox's agenda.



John Barrand

Because he was closely connected to both the Governor's office and HR teams across the state, he played a key role in cascading the message and carrying frontline feedback back to leadership. He helped to underscore the holistic impact skills-based practices would have on Governor Cox's ['Built Here'](#) agenda.



HR Leaders Across Utah

THE SOLUTION

Making skills-based hiring easier to do than the old way



Rather than introducing new frameworks, Utah focused on removing the practical barriers that were making it hard for HR Generalists and hiring managers to apply skills-based practices in real hiring situations.

How did the cohort support Utah?

3 Worked directly with HR Generalists and STARs on real job postings and hiring situations

Instead of theoretical training, Utah teams worked through active recruitments, helping HR staff rewrite job descriptions, build better questions, and test new approaches in real time. They also learned from STARs about their experiences in the hiring process and used that to inform updates.

4 Demonstrated publicly that Utah is a state that supports STARs via external messaging

By launching the [Skills-Based Hiring Pathways webpage](#), and featuring two STARs who work for the State of Utah, Utah demonstrated to their community and workforce that Utah is a state that supports STARs contributing to its workforce.

Utah STAR Spotlight



RESULTS

Connecting Leadership Vision to Day-to-Day Hiring Practice



Through direct engagement with the CHRO and hands-on work with HR Generalists and STARs, Utah strengthened the link between the Governor’s priorities and how hiring happens across agencies.

Utah learned the value of hands-on implementation support and, through the cohort, developed practical approaches that helped translate skills-based hiring from a leadership priority into day-to-day hiring practice across agencies.

A unified statewide vision connecting skills-based hiring to Governor Cox’s agenda	Practical tools created: strawman JDs, question approaches, competency translation help
Direct engagement of the CHRO as a conduit between the Governor’s office and HR teams	STAR interview guide and employee story approach created
Live job postings rewritten and tested using skills-based approaches	A communication and cascade plan to reach 3,800 hiring managers

” It has been an incredible experience collaborating with everyone. There is a real sense of community here; hearing your stories and shared challenges proves that we really are all in this together. Even on the days when it feels like we are just keeping our heads above water, the truth is we are swimming—and achieving some great successes in the process.”

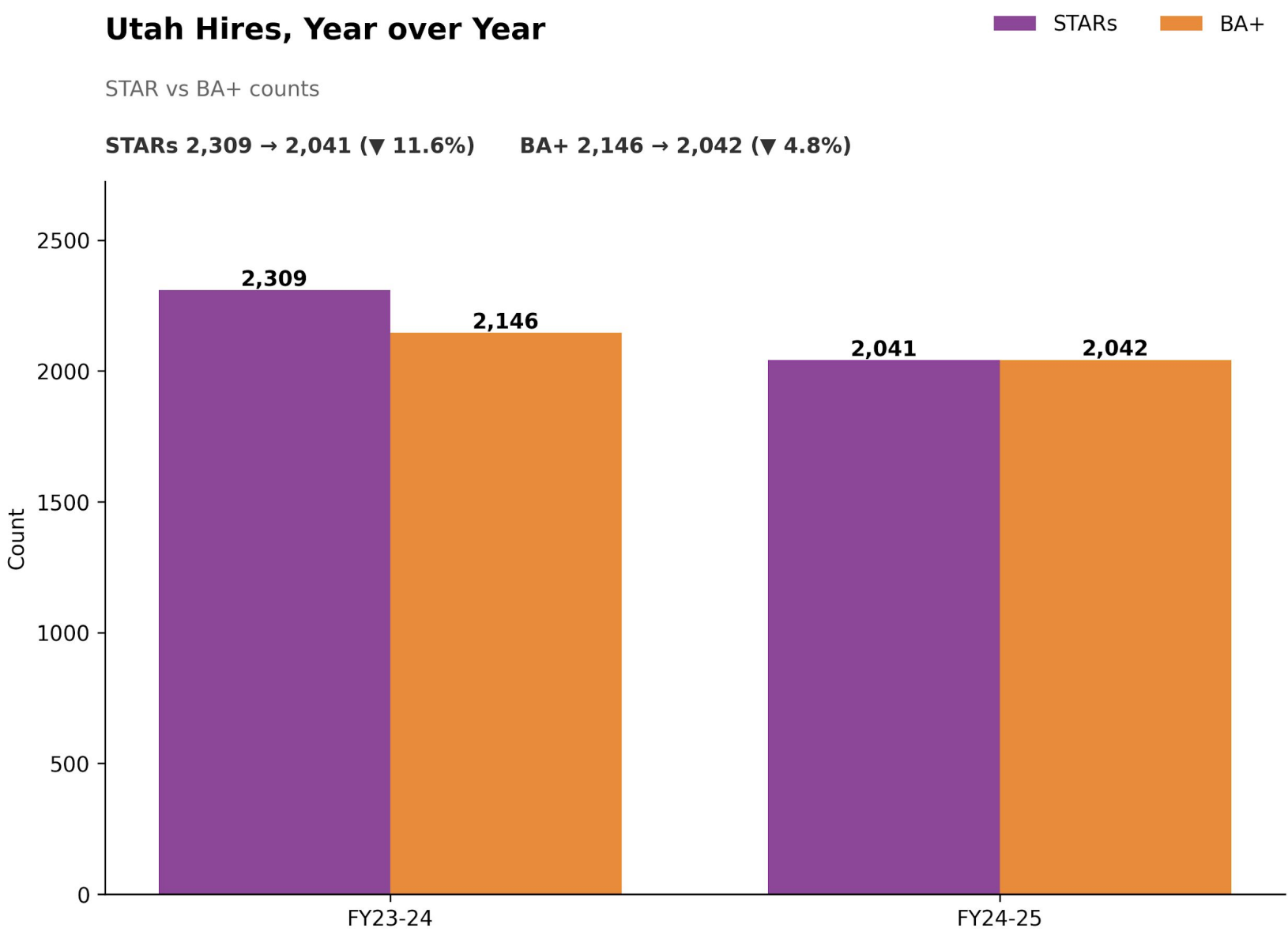
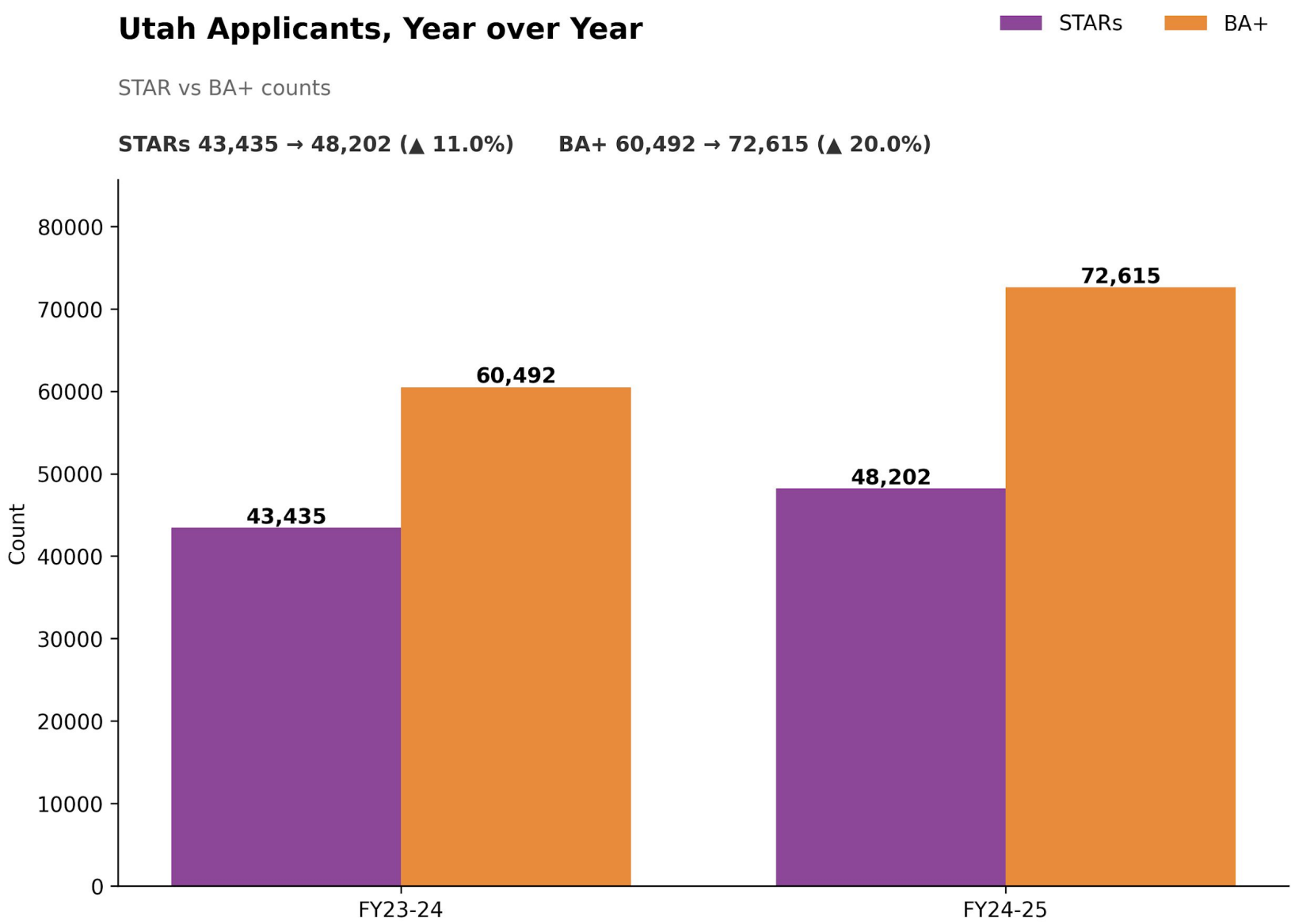
KATHY THIRIOT

HR Program Manager,
Division of Human Resource Management

RESULTS

Utah's efforts show promise

Between FY 23-24 and FY 24-25, the number of STAR applicants increased by 11%. While the number of STAR hires was slightly lower year-over-year, the trend aligns with the overall hiring trend, which was slightly lower.



KEY INSIGHTS



The Power of a Committed Advocate at the Top

Utah’s experience showed that when a senior leader actively champions the work and connects it to day-to-day practice, skills-based hiring can move from a priority on paper to consistent action across agencies.



A deeply bought-in advocate at the top is critical, with support down to the hiring manager level

Utah’s progress accelerated when the CHRO became an active champion of skills-based hiring, helping connect the Governor’s priorities to the daily work of HR teams and hiring managers. Having a leader who could both influence upward and engage downward made it possible to move from intention to action across agencies. By building in executive leadership along with frequent engagement with hiring managers, Utah was able to build momentum across their entire HR department



Hiring managers need to see how this helps them hire better and engaging STAR champions helps demonstrate the value of advancing change

Skills-based hiring gained traction when it was framed as a way to solve hiring managers’ challenges in finding qualified candidates, not as an HR policy change. When STARs were engaged through the pilot and cohort meetings, it helped demonstrate both the value STARs brought to the Utah workforce and illuminated additional opportunities to improve the experience for state employees and STARs



HR Generalists need to practice, not just to be trained

Utah found that confidence grew when HR staff worked through real job postings and screening questions together. Hands-on working sessions were far more effective than theoretical training in helping staff apply skills-based practices.



Leadership messaging must be translated into operational guidance

Even when skills-first priorities were discussed at the executive level, they did not reach hiring managers until they were translated into clear guidance for how hiring should actually be done.

WHAT'S NEXT

The Next Phase of Utah's Skills-Based Hiring Journey



Utah is building on the momentum from the cohort by strengthening the systems, tools, and messaging needed to make skills-based hiring consistent across state government.



About Opportunity@Work



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

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

[JOIN THE STARS PUBLIC SECTOR HUB](#)

