

Skills-First Hiring Tear the Paper Ceiling Campaign Overview

Campaign Background

In September 2022, the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work launched [Tear the Paper Ceiling](#). The campaign empowers employers and **STARs**, workers **S**killed **T**hrough **A**lternative **R**outes rather than a bachelor's degree, to close the opportunity gap that separates qualified workers from in-demand jobs.

Campaign [PSAs](#) give a name to the invisible barrier that comes at every turn for STARs, and encourage **employers to hire skills-first** and visit [TearThePaperCeiling.org](#) to learn more.

STARs are the over 50% of the U.S. workforce that have developed valuable skills through alternative routes like military service, community college, training programs, partial college completion, or – most commonly – on-the-job experience.

The [paper ceiling](#) – comprised of degree screens, biased algorithms, lack of alumni networks, stereotypes, misperceptions, and more – holds STARs back from opportunities for upward mobility and limits employers from finding qualified, skilled talent.

Impact

Since the campaign's launch, we've seen strong awareness of the "paper ceiling." and positive movement among **employers** and supporters of this issue including the following:

- **6.1M sessions** to the campaign's website (launch through December 2025)
- Those who have seen or heard the PSAs are significantly more likely to **take action**:
 - Employers who are ad aware are **more likely to consider hiring STARs** for more jobs now than 2-3 years ago (81% vs. 75%).*
 - Employers who are ad aware are **more likely to have changed degree requirements** in at least one job description (43% vs. 33%).*
 - STARs who are ad aware are more likely to have **described themselves as a "STAR"** to someone else (34% vs. 13%).**
- Since introducing the concept of the "paper ceiling" in 2022, we've seen over **800k jobs** opened up to STARs, reversing the trend of the past 20 years. This is thanks in part to the commitments of the campaign's more **than 85 coalition partners**; as well as **32 states** pledging to removing barriers for STARs in their own hiring.
- The "paper ceiling" has **taken off as a term in culture**, cited as a business "buzzword" in publications like [Bloomberg](#), [Fortune](#) and [Harvard Business Review](#).

*Employers Wave 7 tracking survey fielded September 2025
**STARs Wave 13 tracking survey fielded September 2025

About STARs

- STARs are defined as individuals at least 25 years old, currently active in the workforce, and having a high school diploma but not a bachelor's degree.
- STARs are half the U.S. workforce at over **70 million strong**.
- STARs are all around us and can be found in **every sector of the workforce**
- Hiring STARs is key to a workforce that taps into everyone's talents. STARs reflect our country's racial, ethnic, and cultural differences.
- The paper ceiling has severely impacted STARs' economic mobility. **Over the last 30 years, the wage gap between STARs and workers with bachelor's degrees has doubled.**



Campaign Recognition

