

Skills-First Hiring Tear the Paper Ceiling Campaign Language Guidelines

Campaign Overview

In September 2022, the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work, in collaboration with a coalition of national organizations and companies, launched the Skills-First Hiring – [Tear the Paper Ceiling](#) campaign. The campaign empowers employers and STARS, workers **Skilled Through Alternative Routes** rather than a bachelor's degree, to tear the paper ceiling and close the opportunity gap that separates qualified workers from in-demand jobs.

The [paper ceiling](#) is the invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree. The lack of alumni networks, biased algorithms, degree screens, stereotypes, and misperceptions all contribute to the paper ceiling, creating barriers to upward economic mobility for STARS, and limiting employers from finding qualified, skilled talent. By giving the paper ceiling a name, we can acknowledge a previously invisible institutional obstacle to better hiring practices.

What can you do?

An easy way to continue to tear the paper ceiling is to use the campaign language and make STARS part of your or your organization's vernacular. Below, we've provided messaging guidelines to help you talk about STARS and the paper ceiling.

You can find additional resources at TearThePaperCeiling.org.

From	To
Using STARS as an adjective (i.e., STAR worker)	Using STAR as the noun (i.e., we hire STARS)
Referring to STARS as “people who ...”	Referring to STARS as “workers who”
Using language that is accusatory, condescending/belittling, or makes it seem like the problem is for STARS to fix.	Using language that is empowering, supportive, striking, and urgent. We can all work together to close the opportunity gap that separates qualified workers from in-demand jobs.
Using deficit-based language like “non-degreed” worker or referring to workers who “lack a college degree.”	Using language that positions not having a bachelor's degree as a statement of fact rather than an evaluation. When possible, the preference is to focus on the skills and potential STARS do have.
Positioning employers or higher education as the enemy	Positioning the paper ceiling as the enemy. When possible, include the “see also” part of the definition for the paper ceiling. The full paper ceiling definition is: “The invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree. See also: no alumni network, biased algorithms, degree screens, stereotypes, and misperceptions.”
Using too many statistics in a row	Making each statistic used easy to understand to help contextualize the issue.
Just saying “degree”	Saying “bachelor's degree”
Using the acronym STAR without defining it	Defining STARS, workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor's degree, upon first mention, and ensuring that the first letter of each word is capitalized
Defining, for the first time, the acronym STAR without the added “rather than a bachelor's degree” or “not a bachelor's degree”	Ensuring on its first use that the definition of STARS includes “rather than a bachelor's degree” or “not a bachelor's degree.” E.g., STARS are workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes rather than a bachelor's degree.
Skills-based hiring	Skills-first hiring. While some fields, such as the public sector, prefer to use the term "skills-based hiring", "skills-first hiring" should be utilized in the context of the campaign. Prioritizing skills in the hiring process is a competitive advantage for employers.