

45 Skilled Through Alternative Routes - Why STARs Matter to the Workforce



Join us in Episode 45 to discover a groundbreaking partnership between ACT and Opportunity at Work. Georgia Gillette, VP of Strategic Alliances at Opportunity at Work, shares insights on STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) and the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign. Discover the challenges faced by STARs, the impact of hiring misperceptions, and the mission to bridge the gap between job opportunities and workforce skills. Explore the data-driven strategies, success stories, and a comprehensive playbook aimed at closing skill gaps with STARs.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 45



Georgia Gillette, VP of Strategic Alliances
[Opportunity at Work](#)
[LinkedIn](#)

Links and Resources

- [Episode 45 of Podcast](#)
- [Tear the Paper Ceiling Campaign](#)
- [STARs Hiring Playbook](#)
- [STARs Tear the Paper Ceiling PSA Video](#)
- [STARs Success Story: LaShana Lewis](#)
- [STARs Success Story: IBM](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)

Transcript of Episode 45

Jingle Open with Music: [Let's Get Ready for Work](#)

Georgia: 70% of the new jobs that were posted require a college degree. That's shutting out 60% of American workers. So keep that 60% of American workers are STARs, yet 70% of new job postings are requiring a bachelor's degree. That's a big barrier.

Jasen: STARs matter to the workforce! Skilled Through Alternative Routes, or STARs for short, are essential to closing skill gaps. Coming up on episode 45, Learn more about ACT's new partnership with Opportunity at Work and the campaign Tear the Paper Ceiling.

[Ready for Work Jingle Open](#)

Jasen: In episode 45, Georgia Gillette, VP of Strategic Alliances with Opportunity at Work, discusses the collaboration with ACT. The project aims to understand the experiences of rural workers, identifying barriers and pathways to mobility for this often-overlooked workforce.

ACT's partnership with Opportunity at Work, highlighted at the recent Workforce Summit, is part of the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign. The episode begins with a plenary presentation by ACT CEO Janet Godwin introducing Georgia. Both Janet and Georgia emphasize important roles of helping these individuals, who possess extensive work, education, or military experience, overcome screening obstacles and find jobs that align with their skills and experience.

Janet: I'm actually really excited about introducing Georgia, who's going to come up and talk to us. We are starting a new partnership between ACT and Opportunity for Work, and I'm very excited to give it a little bit of an overview before Georgia comes up and talks about it. But the project's focused on ensuring that employers can realize the full potential of the labor market to meet their pressing needs for talent. It helps people have extensive work, education or military experience, but no bachelor's degree and find jobs that fit their skills and experience. These workers are called STARs, Skilled Through Alternative Routes. Our study showed that tens of millions of STARs have the in-demand skills required for higher wage jobs but are still not getting them. On average, STARs need 30 years of work experience to earn as much as their peers with a bachelor's degree.

This is a systemic failing with no simple fix, but it is a solvable problem that we can begin to correct. It requires coordinated actions to correct misperceptions, strengthen market signals and change standard talent management practices. That's why ACT is collaborating with Opportunity at Work to better understand the experience of STARs in labor markets. We will focus on rural areas, home to two out of three STARs, and many active Work Ready Communities. We'll examine the barriers STARs face and their pathways to mobility, ultimately allowing us to capture the potential of this critical and often untapped part of our workforce. We've also joined the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign. It's a national coalition organized by Opportunity at Work to recognize and uplift the more than 70 million American workers who are STARs. That's half, half, of our country's workforce. It is a mission of helping people achieve workplace success demands that we take these actions. So please watch this brief video to learn a bit more about this program.

Video: [STARs Tear the Paper Ceiling PSA](#)

Janet: That's wonderful. So, I'm very happy to announce and introduce Georgia Gillette, Vice President of Strategic Alliances for Opportunity at Work. Thank you.

Georgia: Thank you so much, Janet. And thanks to ACT and all of you for being part of this movement here at Opportunity at Work. We really couldn't think of a better partner to be part of this coalition that's changing hearts and minds and redefining who is skilled so that if you have the skills for the job, you can get the job. That video, that PSA, it's designed by our partners at the Ad Council and the design firm Ogilvy. And every time I've seen it, and I've seen it a lot of times in the past year, it still gets me. It still chokes me up. What makes me proud is there are no actors in that video. They're all actually real STARS. The guy at the keyboard was our I.T. person, and actually director of the film, as they call it in the advertising world, was a STAR. So, it really meant a lot to the people who produced that video. And that's only a small part of what this coalition is doing.

When we Tear the Paper Ceiling, employers gain access to a massive and diverse pool of skilled candidates for hard to fill jobs, while STARS get a fair chance to earn higher wages that lead to upward economic mobility. So, who are we here at Opportunity at Work? We're just the organizers of a big coalition. Really happy ACT is joining us with 50 other partners. We're a social enterprise nonprofit whose mission is to rewire the American labor market so that talented workers who are STARS. Somebody said it today. We've got a lot of acronyms in our world. We'll help you remember this one. STARS can have the thriving lives and careers that they deserve. We're on a mission to build the business case and to build the infrastructure for employers to implement skills based, inclusive hiring and for millions of STARS to access higher wage jobs. Today, we know that there is a gap between the jobs that need filling and the skills of those seeking employment. With AI and other emerging technologies, I had to get AI into this presentation, we know that that gap is set to widen.

We were talking about our majors in college at my table, and I was a history major in college. So, when I think about the future, I naturally start thinking about the past. There's a parallel period in American history, one that ACT probably knows pretty well. The high school movement began at the turn of the century in this country when faced with the massive change in labor demand, communities all around the country started new secondary school systems to churn out graduates children for the modern job opportunities that awaited them in factories and in offices. Get this. Between 1910 and 1940, high school enrollment exploded from less than 10% in 1910 to nearly 75% as new schools opened and churned out these graduates with skills to equip them in the new economy. The challenges we face today require the same change on a similar scale.

While the infrastructure of this world class education is mostly in place in our country, it's time to modernize the way we educate people of all ages to succeed in this new economy and to update hiring systems and change employer practices to keep up with the changing market. This is what

it means to rewire the labor market to meet the demands of today's and tomorrow's employers by creating on ramps necessary to grow a more inclusive and capable workforce. Like all of you know in this room, this work is hard and it's really important because what most people don't know, you guys already probably know it, Janet just mentioned it, is that most people in our country don't have a bachelor's degree, a higher percentage in rural areas. Not only that, but over 50% of hiring managers believe that the majority of the workforce has a degree. So, this mismatch in perception leads to STARs being overlooked. And often because employers assume that no degree means no skill.

All of us know STARs. There are many STARs. They're our family, our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors. We know the skills, the experience, the determination that they bring every day into their work. For more than 50 years, ACT and the WorkKeys curriculum has been used by you and others like you close the skills gap and to transform the earning potential of millions of STARs as the world has shifted to one that requires a degree for 70% of roles posted.

The work you're doing in Work Ready Communities is core to ensuring that STARs across the country get access to the support they need to improve career readiness and get connected to the jobs they have. We're really grateful that ACT has joined the Tear the Paper Ceiling coalition because it's a movement that's just starting. It's a year into effect and we're just gearing up for the year ahead. Movements are made for, with, people. Transformational movements that are really breaking down inequitable systems like hiring today, begin with partnerships like this one and with people like you. We're excited to be on this journey together and we're looking forward to sharing more about who STARs are, what are the skills they have, where do they live, and how to tear the paper ceiling in your communities. I have a session coming up after this one, so join me there and we can start to tear the paper ceiling together and see the STARs beyond. Thank you so much.

Jasen: Let's go now to the workshop you heard Georgia mention during the plenary introduction. We've summarized the workshop with Georgia's presentation on data, personas of STARs, more on the campaign and the coalition, and steps you can take to elevate STARs to help close gaps in your region's workforce.

Georgia: One of my first jobs was I was a temp for a temp agency, and I was working at a big oil tradeshow, and I had to stand in a tradeshow booth and serve frozen yogurt alongside Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders. I was a high school student. I was pretty gangly. I was not wearing a cheerleading uniform, but I had to sit there and talk to all kinds of people often about things I didn't know a whole lot about. So, oil industry, at age 16, hopefully I'm talking about something I

know a little bit more about today, but I just remember like having to shake hands, having to smile, having to talk to everybody and serving yogurt was that was the easy part. Talking to the people, that was the skill that I built. So, the point is, we have skills that we learn and we build in all kinds of places. And sometimes we have to work a little harder with industry in the labor market to figure out how to see those skills, make them visible, and so that employers can recognize them.

Jasen: Georgia makes a strong case for the campaign with compelling data on the disconnect of employers screening out otherwise qualified candidates.

Georgia: I'm going to start with some data here because the partnership that we're actually kicking off today here with ACT is all about data. And so, I got to start with some data. And you can see here that there's a huge chasm between job openings. You guys know this because you're living and breathing it every day between job openings and hiring. And it's the widest the gap has been in. So that there's thousands of jobs there sitting vacant every day. You know, we've got to figure out how to shorten this gap between job openings and hiring, and the skills gap in the workforce challenges. That's the easy part. That's what you can see in the data. But there's a bunch of stuff that is invisible that you can't see in the data. Things like degree inflation, shifting the perceptions about workforce, biased algorithms, training gaps for emerging technologies, and low labor force participation rates. These are all things that are under the iceberg the way we think about them.

We talked about STARs and I'm here today to tell you that there are 70 million workers who are STARs in our workforce. There's 140 million workers in the labor market today, and STARs represent over half of our workforce. You heard Janet say, what are these? Alternative Routes are the ones that you guys think about all the time. They're boot camps. They're the military. They are certification programs. We consider community college and an associate's degree to be an alternative route. Over half of the workforce are gaining their skills and learning in this way.

Jasen: Next Georgia paints a picture to help us better understand the lives of STARs

Georgia: Let's take a quick look at a deeper dive on who STARs are. We spend a lot of time and Opportunity at Work talking to employers. And this is the slide that I think probably gets them to perk up the most when you think about STARs you're thinking about all kinds of workers. You're thinking about 62% of black workers in our country, 54% of Hispanic workers in our country, 50% of female workers in our country. What's exciting for us and the partnership we're building with ACT is that we're going to start looking at this one, in which of 65% of rural workers are STARs. If

an employer comes to us and we say you don't have a STARs talent strategy, you're really missing out on half the workforce in all kinds of diversity in our country.

So, this is who, when we see degree requirements going up in jobs. This is who is getting screened out automatically before they can even be screened in to see if they're a viable fit. At Opportunity at Work, we think about what we call skills, competencies, skills, adjacencies. We've done a study of 130 million job transitions in our labor market and STARs have skills. We think about what we call an origin job. Retail salesperson: the average wage is about \$18.75 an hour. And look at all these skills that you're gaining in retail that we all know: persuasion, active listening, speaking, critical thinking. Those same skills show up in a different job at a much higher wage rate. Over here, our sales representative makes a lot more, \$31.25 an hour. Same kinds of skills - just shows up in different proportions. The kind of theory of change here is that we need to learn that STARs can go into those higher wage roles if we're doing a better job of recognizing and building those critical skills that they have.

Jasen: Opportunity at Work partnered with the AD council on a PSA video campaign to shift the narrative to lift up STARs and the world of work.

Georgia: So, you saw the video It's a good one, because every time you have a different response to it. But this is a video that is a PSA. It's running on TV. You may be seeing it on the Football Network. It's running a lot of times on NBC. It's a partnership that we started with the Ad Council last year. The Ad Council came to us and said, you know, we really like that acronym STARs . We want to start to build a common, and asset based, a positive narrative, about workers in our country. Let's do an ad campaign together. And I'm not sure, quite frankly, we were ready when they called, but we did a lot of work with Ad Council to say we're going to be really data based. We're going to be really evidence based. And while you really want to be STARs-focused, our job at Opportunity at Work is to be employer focused. And so, we want it to be a dual audience campaign. This is going to mean something for the workers, for the STARs who see this, work and for the employers.

The paper ceiling is the set of invisible barriers that come at every turn for workers who don't have a bachelor's degree. And let me be really clear, because I'm talking to ACT in a room probably full of educators. It's not that a college degree isn't an amazing pathway. A college degree is a really important and amazing pathway. It just can't be the only pathway. But the paper ceiling, we like to think of it as all those other things kind of under that iceberg, all those invisible barriers that we're going to talk about in a second.

When Ogilvy, who was the design firm who helped us come up with concept, they said, when you're doing advertising, you have to sort of have a common enemy. You've got to tell a story. You got to have bad guy. We did not want employers to be the bad guy because that would just shut it down. So, we came up with this idea of the paper ceiling. It's sort of invisible. It's on both sides of the equation, quite frankly. It's pretty pervasive. And we've gotten really good feedback and we've learned a lot over the past year. We've introduced the paper ceiling.

Jasen: Let's listen in on another video from the STARs campaign on the success of LaShana Lewis and her journey with LaunchCode in St. Louis.

Video: [STARs Success Story: LaShana Lewis](#)

Georgia: One thing in the video that I think is interesting, though. The woman at the end, LaShona Lewis, is actually the head of our STARs advisory council. She is amazing. She has a story how she learned from a program called Launch Code in Saint Louis. She learned everything she did. She owns her own IT consultancy now. And she was at an event with us where someone said, you know, you're just really impressive. You're one in a million. And she just said, I am not one in a million. I'm one of millions. And that's a big difference. We just loved that line. And to think that that made it into the ad always makes me happy.

Jasen: Next, Georgia shares common challenges of STARs and the absence of social networks needed to launch careers.

Georgia: 70% of the new jobs that were posted between zero nine and 2019 typically require a college degree. that's shutting out 60% of American workers. So, keep that 60% of American workers are STARs, yet 70% of new job postings are requiring a bachelor's degree. That's a big barrier, I don't think we really raised this, but the data proves and about lack of a social network. STARs don't have access to the same kinds of social networks that you might get at an institution, a four-year college. They're not as active on LinkedIn. They just don't have the social networks that other bachelor's degrees workers have. And then the one that I think surprise us that I mentioned earlier in my presentation is that it's so pervasive in our society that hiring managers mostly assume Americans have college degrees, and they're, you know, 50% of hiring managers said, yes, half the workforce has a degree. So, there's a real misperception out there. These are just again, some of the data backing up this paper ceiling.

Jasen: Shifting gears now to learn more about Opportunity at Work, Georgia fills us in on the coalition of stakeholders and their important roles in the mission.

Georgia: We're talking about this Tearing the Paper Ceiling coalition and it started out as a campaign. It started out a year ago with that PSA that you saw from the Ad Council. You may have seen it on billboards when you work with the Ad Council. They're a nonprofit partner of ours. They bring donated media to this partnership. So, we're not paying for these ads to run on TV or for these billboards. But it's a real benefit. Millions and millions of dollars of donated media impressions have been made available because of the partnership. When we talk to the Ad Council, we knew that we were going to have this first year of, let's build the awareness, let's start to build the campaign.

But what was exciting to me in my role is that we're building a coalition of people. They're carefully curated. We didn't open this up to anybody. This isn't a campaign where you can sort of put your logo on the page or pay to play and just have hundreds of logo soup. All the people that you see on this slide, Donna and Cindy can attest, we have real conversations about what it really means to be part of this Tear the Paper Ceiling coalition. Each of these organizations is bringing something unique, something authentic. They're bringing money, they're bringing jobs, they're bringing research, they're bringing speaking opportunities. They're bringing media, they're bringing STARS. It's really become in the past year, we sort of wanted to see what would happen when we launched this. This is a group of people that are rolling up their sleeves and really starting to have hard and honest conversations about what it means to change their employer practices. So, I spend most of my time with champions and the allies, most of those are the employers. And we've got an important and growing list of supporters, and we're going to be growing this coalition as the year goes on.

Jasen: Storytelling is an important tactic for Opportunity at Work, especially for employer engagement.

Georgia: One of the things we do with our employer partners, this campaign is about storytelling. So, a big part of changing employer practices is really changing hearts and minds and perception. And so we've got to do more storytelling than ever before and talk to our employers about, really finding their STARS. And believe it or not, you can go to these big employers they know they have STARS. They don't actually always know how to find them, much less how to tell their story. So, we've been doing some storytelling. The reason I want to focus on IBM is because it takes place in West Virginia, and our partnership with you all is around rural. Cindy was a cosmetologist before she did the IBM apprenticeship, and now she is well on her way to a new career in I.T. and is doing amazing things with IBM.

Video: [STARS Success Story: IBM](#)

Georgia: So, each of those stories sort of features that employer and the STARs perspective, which is kind of neat show you where the Tear the Paper Ceiling website is. What are we going to be doing with ACT to Tear the Paper Ceiling? We are going to be looking at rural STARs. Like I said, this is a population of STARs that's huge. Opportunity at Work has been looking for the right partner to think about research, to go deeper, to dig deeper and really understand competencies, skills, variations, regions, and just uncover the story behind rural STARs. We're going to be starting that this year. You'll probably hear and see more about it next year, but we are really just very grateful to ACT. Hopefully that means maybe we'll get to do stories or research on some of you, but that work is going to be starting and we're thrilled.

That's just the beginning. We understand that opening up the jobs for STARs is one thing. Getting them hired is another thing. But we can't get them hired until we open up those roles. So, you might be sitting there thinking, okay, this is great. What can I do? What resources can I gain? Secret sauce? Somebody was talking about secret sauce earlier today. Opportunity at Work. Our secret sauce by far is our research and insights team, the reports that they have done. These are all available on Opportunity at Work's website.

There's this first one where we really wanted to define STARs as a talent category, and we talk about it like that with our employers, like they all do in university recruiting. They spend tons of money on university recruiting, which is important and good, but we want them to think about STARs recruiting and putting that same intentions, quality, and that same level of investment and research into STARs just as much as they go to college campuses.

Then we have Navigating with the STARs and Rise with the STARs that goes into those frameworks that I showed you about the skills, adjacencies and talks about the transitions. And then there are a couple other stories here. There's a Black STARs data story, and the Hispanic STARs data story. All of this is available online.

Jasen: In our final clip from Georgia, we hear a call to action with the opportunities for the workforce ecosystem to break barriers, leverage resources, and engage employers with a playbook on skills-first hiring.

Georgia: This is probably my favorite trick, hack, tip, for you guys. Opportunity at Work is all about collective solutions. And it's not going to be one nonprofit that's going to change things for starters. It's going to take those 50 partners, plus a whole bunch more, plus all of you. So, everything that we do, we try to make publicly available and our data being one of those things we try to make publicly available. So go to stellarsite.org, write it down. Put it in your phones.

Now this is a site where, I think, the most beautiful data visualizations you might ever see about STARs in the world. They're the only data visualizations you'll ever see about STARs in the labor market right now, because we're the ones earlier doing that work on STARs. But you can go and look at 50 MSA's, and very soon, as in the next couple weeks, we'll start having state level data where you can drill down and you can see beautiful visualizations to show you the skills competency. So, this kind of site can help you do a lot of workforce planning. it's pretty amazing.

By being part of ACT you're part of the campaign now, would love for you check it out. They're easy things you can do. You can sign a pledge, like any individual any organization can sign a pledge in support of Tearing the Paper Ceiling. And that means a lot to us. That gets you into our email system. And lots of other resources will be coming at you that way. We want to use this opportunity to hear from STARs, to have more STAR stories. There are templates for social media where you can have the STARs that you're working with tell their story, post it. That would be a great way for them to get involved and get connected eventually to other STARs.

There's a resource library on this Tear the Paper Ceiling website, and again having a high bar for quality and curation. We went to all those partners and said, what are the resources that you guys have that you could put into our resource library to help people understand inclusive hiring skills versus hiring? So, there are over a hundred and growing everyday resources that those partners are putting out in that resource library.

And then last but certainly not least, is a hiring playbook. The name doesn't do it justice. This is everything we know. This is what we're sharing with our employers every day about building a STARs strategy starting from the beginning. This playbook has case studies. It has talking points. It has data. It has everything that we're sharing with our national employers about how to hire STARs, how to remove degree requirements, where to start. How do you think about building the strategy? How do you build champions in a company? If we're really lucky, we'll get one or two at a company. But Walmart is, you know, a really big company. So, we got to build champions across companies. And this playbook has tips for building champions because that's a big part of that. Definitely go to [Tearthepaperceiling.org](https://tearthepaperceiling.org) and check all those resources out.

I'm Georgia, again, Georgia at Opportunity at Work. Please feel free to reach out to me. This is just the start of our partnership with ACT. We've got lots, lots more work to do. I would love to hear from any of you. Please check out those resources and help us Tear the Paper Ceiling.

Jasen: 2024 looks to be an exciting year for Opportunity at Work and coalition partners like ACT. Thanks again to Georgia Gillette, VP of Strategic Alliances with Opportunity at Work, for inspiring

us in episode 45. You can connect with Georgia in our show notes and check out links to the campaign, the video segments we highlighted, and resources to help STARs reach their highest potential.

Closing with Jingle: Ready for Work is a service from your friends at ACT, a mission-driven non-profit dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Discover more at act.org/readyforworkpodcast. Now, let's get to work!