

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Joining me on the podcast today is Byron Auguste, CEO and co-founder of Opportunity @ Work, and we are here to talk about the new Hire STARS campaign that launched last week. Byron, thank you for joining me on the podcast.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Before we talk about the campaign, let's talk about STARS. That may be a concept some people don't understand or know about, and they should. So, give me your definition of a STAR.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

It's true, Ramona. Lots of people don't know what the term STARS means, but everybody knows STARS. So, STARS are over 70 million Americans who are skilled through alternative routes. That's what STARS mean, skilled through alternative routes, STARS.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, STARS don't have bachelor's degrees. They typically do have high school degrees or equivalents, and they are working. And that's important, because skilled through alternative routes, there's a variety of routes. For example, you might have an associate's degree. You might be in community college. Tens of millions of STARS have been to college, have a lot of college credits, but haven't completed college.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

They might have done military service. They could have gained their skills in a whole array of certificate programs, whether in person or online, or boot camps, or employer-supported training. But most of all, STARS have gained those skills by working. And if you think about it, that's really intuitive because every one of us would say that most of the skills that we deploy in our jobs, whether we're STARS or not, are skills we've learned by working.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

I mean, school's important. Everyone's gone to school. But whatever schooling you've done, what you learn on the job is typically even more relevant. And I think the most important thing people need to understand about STARS, is that while they come from a variety of roots, they do have job-relevant skills.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And Opportunity @ Work has a data set that shows it. We have the receipts of 70 million STARS. 5 million STARS are already in high-wage jobs, doing jobs that everyone would recognize requires a high

degree of skill, pay more than twice what the average job pays. And then you've got 30 million STARS who actually have the skills today for jobs that pay 50% more than the jobs they're in. It's an incredibly important talent pool for this country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What's important for people to understand is that while we put a premium in our society, and we have for a long time, on a college degree, only one-third of the workforce actually has that four-year degree. So, what you're saying about gathering these skills and experience, and the ability to succeed at jobs, doesn't have to come with that degree. You're not saying don't do it, but you're just saying there's just so many more people out there who don't have that four-year diploma.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Yeah. It's interesting. It's actually a relatively recent development that people got the idea that in order to do a good job at work, you have to have a college degree. That's not actually a very old idea. It's a very new idea, and it's kind of a bad idea, really.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Which is not to say that college is a bad idea. College can be a really amazing bridge to opportunity, and that's a great use for it. And frankly, we need more high-quality college seats than we have in this country, and we need more support for people to complete college. That said, just because college can be a bridge to opportunity doesn't mean that it should be a drawbridge that pulls up, and if you can't cross it, you don't have any other path to opportunity. That doesn't make sense. You don't have to be against college to be for a whole variety of routes.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

There should be many, many ways for people to succeed. There's thousands of different kinds of jobs. There's all sorts of talents, there's all sorts of moments when people can discover what they're passionate about, what they want to do. There's absolutely no reason why we should have only one route to success.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And in fact, we don't. I mentioned that 5 million STARS are in highways jobs. So, in other words, you couldn't do all this work without STARS. STARS are already doing this work. There are many job categories where most of the people doing the work are STARS, and yet employers are still posting those same jobs saying you need a bachelor's degree. You don't need a bachelor's degree to do those jobs. But by making it some kind of sense of that, oh, the norm is you have to have a bachelor's degree, even though that's not really the norm, you discourage people.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

We're spending billions of dollars to stop people from trying, and that's ridiculous. People should value, companies should value, skills, however someone got them, and I think the smartest companies get this. And more and more, you're seeing companies actually say, "Yeah, we want ways to find skills, whether you graduated from college or not."

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And what we do at Opportunity @ Work is we help work with, what are the screen-in signals? College is being used to screen people out. The lack of pedigree is screening people out from even being considered, from even understanding what their skills are. We understand that a company can't interview everyone who applies, so you need to have some way to create a short list. So, we are working to create screen-in signals.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

What are all the diverse ways you can tell that someone has a skillset that's relevant for a job? And that's what we need to do both for companies, for entire industries, and for the economy of this country. Because if half your skilled workforce is shut out, right, or barriers put in their way before they can even get started, that's a pretty terrible way to run an economy, and we need to move past that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Something you said really kind of struck, and kind of at the heart of what I was trying to say. Which is, there was this thing when I was growing up, the societal idea that college was the way in. The college was the way out. I grew up in a lower-middle-class family. No one went to college in my family. Six kids, I'm the only one that went to college. And I have told you this before. I didn't graduate. I ran out of money. I wasn't a particularly good student, either, but luckily someone took a chance on me.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

But I think the idea is a misperception, that you have to have that degree or you don't succeed, because you've given us the example. There are so many people out there who are succeeding, but companies are screening out a very big talent pool. And I wanted to ask you about a number. I had read in something you had written before, that from 2007 to 2016, three-quarters of all the new jobs required a bachelor's degree. Have you gotten an update on that number? Is that still a relevant number?

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

It's interesting. We talk about requiring a bachelor's degree, like a job requires a bachelor's degree. I try not to say it that way for the most part now, because those jobs don't actually require a bachelor's degree in the normal sense of the word require.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, take administrative assistants or executive assistants. That's a job that requires a lot of organization. Right? I mean, it's a very skilled job, and it's an incredibly important gateway job. Admin assistants become project managers. Maybe they become scrum masters. They become all sorts of things. It's a really, really important gateway job. And to this day, two-thirds of admin assistants do not have bachelor's degrees, but 75% of the job listings for admin assistants say a bachelor's degree is quote-unquote required. How can something be required when two-thirds of the people doing the job don't have it?

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

It's not required. It is a screen that is arbitrarily reducing the set of folks who can come into this field. And, by the way, it means that two-thirds of today's admin assistant can't even apply for three-quarters of the new jobs in their field. And this matters not only to the companies that are deprived of their talent, and it certainly matters to the admin assistants themselves, but it also means if an admin

assistant can't become a project manager, well, then, a barista can't become the admin assistant. And then, someone who maybe is unemployed, who's getting back to the market, can't become a barista.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, we're freezing up the market. We are stopping advancement across the board when we say, "Don't tell me about your skills until I know you have a degree." That doesn't make sense.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, let's turn to the campaign. Last week you kicked off Tear the Paper Ceiling. Tell me the message behind it, and tell me how you brought everybody together to share that message.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

The Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign is anchored by Opportunity @ Work, and very importantly the Ad Council. So, I think many people know the Ad Council. It's a nonprofit network in which media companies contribute to public service advertising. Smokey the Bear and forest fires, the one everyone tends to know from a while back. But they do great, great work. And we are so proud. We had done a lot of work at Opportunity @ Work on STARS, and also on the term STARS.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Because a lot of work, not only with employers, but very much with STARS themselves, about what it said to them. And to an extent I hadn't ever seen before, the STARS very much associate with this term of STARS, and skilled through alternative routes. Partly because it's a positive term, as it should be, partly because it emphasizes what they have, not what they lack.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

They have skills. Isn't that what you asked for? Skilled through alternative routes. So, it's sort of a non-sequitur. They don't have a degree. I'm sorry, did you ask for degrees, or did you ask for skills? You asked for skills? Here are STARS. They are skilled through alternative routes.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, I think that resonates, and the actually notion of alternative routes resonates, because STARS who've kind of quote-unquote made it have typically had to be under a barbed wire fence, get through the back gate, through the side door. STARS tend to feel like, "I don't even know how I got here because it didn't seem like anyone was trying to help me."

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And it's like, "Do I belong here?" And that's another thing. It's like there's this tremendous sense of tentativeness sometimes, of like, "Am I allowed to do this?" It's so amazing when you actually just recognize... You say, not just, "Oh, yeah. Okay, it's okay. You're allowed to be here." No. We are looking for STARS.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And the alternative routes come in because there are many routes. They tend to be small scale. There might be a nonprofit program, it might be community colleges. Right now, employers tend to think of those as a nice to have. A big message of this STARS campaign is, STARS are 70 million Americans. This is

the other skilled workforce in this country. And if you're a company, and you don't have a STARs talent strategy, a STARs hiring strategy, a STAR... You don't have a talent strategy. You might have half a talent strategy.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And so, it is absolutely essential that you have an alternative route strategy. And the idea of Tear the Paper Ceiling as the theme, it's to contrast this kind of arbitrary bureaucracy and red tape. And why is it that this matters more than someone's skills?

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, on the other side of this, you have much more ability for people to realize their potential, to contribute to a company's success. At the end of the day, Ramona, work is solving problems. STARs are not problems to solve, STARs are problem solvers. And what the company's problem is that they're putting this paper ceiling in between themselves and STARs talent. And when they stop, they're going to see how much talent they can get. And that's been designed very much with STARs, by STARs, partly for STARs, but frankly, partly for companies and for employers.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Because, again, STARs tend to know a little bit what they can do, and it's kind of like, "Put me in, coach." Give them shot. And we've got way too many people that we're holding back from their full potential.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And the final thing I'll say, when you tear the paper ceiling, there's going to be a lot of people who aren't STARs who will also benefit from having a culture of, we're going to judge you by what you contribute and how you perform and what skills you offer, not by our preconceived notions of what you're able to do. It's a better culture, period, a culture that supports STARs' development, and companies are also realizing it.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And so, I think in that sense, the STARs campaign, this Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign, can absolutely be a way for companies to kind of modernize their culture and make it more adaptive and more future facing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've already brought up screening, and you're saying let's screen-in and not screen-out. Tell me how AI is adding to this barrier.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Artificial intelligence does not set its own objective function. It does not set the goal, and it does not set the constraints. We do that.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

But the way the current situation came about, I think you need to look back 25 years, 30 years, before we had AI, which is this. We started to have digital job search, and job boards, and all the rest of it. And the way that mattered is because before, you might have a want ad or whatever. Maybe 30 people

applied for the job, and you could go through 30 resumes. And maybe you preferred people with college degrees, that's up to you. But you could see something in a resume. "You know what? This person looks like they might do it." However they got it, you could judge that as someone who was looking for someone who could do the job.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

But when you go to digital job search, say, and as that became a bigger thing, well, what if you got 600 applications for the job instead of 30? Well, at that point, a person, the person who actually understands what the job requires, you can see why they wouldn't go through 600 resumes.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, now you have to have some way to shortlist it, to screen it down. What I'm saying is not that you don't need to screen it down, not that somebody could go through 600 resumes. But at the time, there weren't that many ways to screen. I mean, it was just a simple keyword search. So, one of the things that was locked in on was college degrees, right? Because that was a well-defined field, and so you started doing that.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Somewhere along the line, people forgot that this is just a convenience and started to think that this was a statement of who could do the job or not. It's not. It was just a simple convenience to get a more efficient short list.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

People ask me sometimes, "Well, on average, don't you think people with college degrees might be better at this job?" Well, I don't know. That's a statistical question. But why does it matter? How many people are you hiring? If 10% of people with bachelor's degrees would be good at this job, and 8% of STARS would be good at this job, does it make sense to cut out 40% of the people who might be good at this job, just because of an average? That doesn't make any sense.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And so, I think one thing I really want to get across, and I think this campaign is really important, these pedigree-based barriers, to say you have to have a bachelor's degree before we will try to understand your skills, I think a lot of people think of this as almost like quality control today, but it's not quality control.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

It's really kind of very simplistic, backward looking. It's blinding yourself. It's self harm. Because if the best you can do in today's age of big data and analytics, if the best you can do is split the world between who has a college degree and who doesn't, I'm going to say you're way behind the times.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Because there's lots of different ways, there's lots more sophisticated ways to use data, including to use AI. But what you've got to be using it for is not to say who's got the pedigree, but who's got the skills. What are the indicators that someone might have the skills? Because you're going to miss a lot of people as an individual company if you don't look at skills directly.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

But for the economy as a whole, and for industry as a whole, there's a second-order problem, and it's a really, really big problem, which is this: If you can get a better job by having skills, there's a way you can get new skills. It's called learning, and that's something that's existed before civilization existed. Humans are learners, all the time.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

But if you can only get a job based on your pedigree, a better job... Well, pedigree is history, okay? You can't change your history. You can change your skills. Changing your skills is learning. Changing your history is lying. And so, if we define skills gap as, "We don't have enough people without college degrees," we're not ever going to solve the skills gap. If you define the skills gap as, "We don't have enough people with the skills," well then, check out people's skills. Screen-in based on skills.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

That's the fundamental message. And companies that have started to find better ways to screen-in on skills are doing better in the talent war, and they will continue to do better. And what we are trying to do as Opportunity @ Work, and what we're trying to do in this whole movement, to tear the paper ceiling and remove this layer of corporate bureaucracy that stops employers from getting to the talent they need, is to say, we'll all be better off.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Because, by the way, if you let STARs show what they can do, and then they start doing it, well then, you're going to have more skill. Because, again, most of our skills are gained at work.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

So, it's really backwards to say, "Oh, we have a skills gap, and therefore we can't let you do the work," because it's in doing the work that you fill the skills gap.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We all know STARs in our lives. We may not recognize them, or call them STARs, but these are people who have learned on the job. Your father is a good example. You've talked about where he started out and where he went by trailing... So, your father's a good example, so tell me his story.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

My father's story... I mean, this is in the 1970s. This is like 50 years ago. He was a shipping clerk in a factory in a small business, a family-owned business. There were three non-family members in the business. Two of them carried stuff back and forth from the dock, and the other one... and my father wrote down what was carried either way. So, that was his job, but he didn't think he was going much of anywhere.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And one day, he saw an ad in a newspaper saying, "Learn COBOL and punch your own ticket," which turns out to be a COBAL joke. But anyway, he didn't know that was a joke. He didn't know what COBOL was. He had to look it up.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And so, that, as you probably know, was IBM's mainframe software language. It was a huge demand for it, so that was growing really, really quickly. And there were not enough COBOL programmers. And, by the way, there weren't college programs to teach you COBOL, either, and so everybody had to learn it from scratch.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

My dad responded to the ad, and it was what we would now call kind of a coding bootcamp. And my mom had a job as an architect assistant at Detroit Edison, we're in Detroit, and he studied COBOL for five or six months. I still have his certificate, a copy of his certificate, somewhere. And my mom talked someone in what was then called the MIS, now the IT department, at Detroit Edison, to give him a job shadow, to just sort take him around, see what he can do. And they put him in front of some code, and I don't know how much code he could write, but he could read it. He knew what it was, and he knew what it did.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And they were like, "Okay, well, we could work with that." And he got a job as an entry-level programmer. That's where our family started to move into the American middle class. That was the moment of the trajectory shift, when my father, who had never worked in technology, who had never even worked in an office, had a chance to learn, and then had a chance to earn, based on what he'd learned.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And what's interesting to me, and I think about it all the time, presumably in the 1970s, there was more discrimination against my father as a Black man in the workplace than maybe there would be today, but there was actually less of a barrier because he only had a year of college. He was a STAR. We didn't have that term, but in a way, we didn't need that term because there was less screening, right, in many, many jobs.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And then I think about someone, LaShana Lewis, who's the CEO of her own consulting company now, and who's the chair of Opportunity @ Work's STARs Advisory Council. LaShana and I met in 2014, so eight years ago. LaShana had far more technical training. She's also a STAR, but she had far more technical training, and she was very adept with computers from the beginning. But she couldn't finish college because of family issues. It's a very, very common thing. You run out of money, lots of things happen. She went back home to East St. Louis, and she thought, "Well, at least I know how to do this stuff so I can get a good job."

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

She didn't get an interview in technology because she didn't have a bachelor's degree. And she would have these sort of frontline jobs in call centers or bus drivers, and she would literally fix the database in the call center, or she was bus driver to school, she would be the substitute teacher for the computer class.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:



But then, when the actual job came open that she'd already shown she could do, she wasn't allowed to get the job. It was incredibly frustrating. And so, eventually she went through an alternative route, this is a nonprofit called Launch Code in St. Louis. And they didn't teach her how to code, they validated. They saw what she could do, and they had a set of employers in St. Louis that trusted them. And so, she got a job at MasterCard. She was promoted after about a year. She did great. And she was offered another promotion, but she ended up going to be the CTO of another company, and then eventually, she decided to start her own company.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

This is an example of somebody who today, you absolutely want LaShana on your team. And it's interesting, because of the 5 million STARs who are in high-wage jobs, the two most common job categories are software developer and CEO. Why CEO? Because many, many STARs decide that if a company can't recognize their skills, if they're constantly questioned because of something that's a piece of paper that they don't have, well, they're going to take their chances with clients. They're going to show what they can do that way.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

And I think it's very, very important that companies understand that this is an exceptionally important talent pool, and if a company doesn't know how to take advantage of STAR's talent, and it's constantly second-guessing it, they're going to lose out.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Byron, thank you very much for joining me on the podcast.

Byron Auguste, Opportunity@Work CEO & co-founder:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Byron Auguste, CEO and co-founder of Opportunity @ Work. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.