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.

A four-year college degree can be a ticket to a good job and a great career, but it's not for everyone. In fact, it's not for most workers. More than half of US workers do not have a four-year bachelor's degree. They're what's called STARs, skilled through alternative routes, and they get their start through community college, work experience, military service and credentialing. But too many employers still use a bachelor's degree as a barrier to entry, depriving many STARs from higher paying jobs and career growth and depriving the companies of top talent. Last week I attended the South by Southwest EDU conference where I moderated a panel on the invisible barrier to economic mobility. Here we had a conversation about how STARs can break that so-called paper ceiling. Joining me on stage were Bridgette Gray from Opportunity @Work, Patti Constantakis from walmart.org and Kenny Nguyen of ThreeSixtyEight. Here's that conversation.

Hello everybody. Thank you for joining us this morning. We appreciate it. We're going to keep this pretty informal. We all know each other, so we figured it'll be a conversation and if you guys have questions at the end, feel free to join in. We appreciate any input or any questions. So I'm Ramona Schindelheim, I'm the editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. We're a nonprofit news organization and we're focused on that intersection of education and work. So the whole idea behind what we cover is how can we make sure there are good career pathways for people to get jobs and then to get promotions to move up in a job. Part of the conversation has been centering around skills-based hiring. We want to be very clear at the beginning, we have no judgment on a four-year bachelor degree, but there's only 33% of the working adults in this country who actually have that four-year bachelor degree.

Most of the people in the workforce are people who have attained their jobs through work experience, military experience, and certifications. And we'll talk a little bit more about that definition, but so starting out, we want to make sure people understand. We're not saying don't get a four-year degree. We're saying, if you're an employer, look around you and look at the people. If you are a coworker, look around and look at the people and the skills that they have. So I'm going to ask everybody here to start by a little introduction of themselves. And Bridgette, I'm going to have you go first and then Kenny and then Patti.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

So good morning everyone, and thanks to WorkingNation for actually hosting for this panel and all my colleagues over here. So my name is Bridgette Gray. I'm Chief Customer Officer at Opportunity@Work. Opportunity@Work is an organization, it is a national nonprofit, but we're a social enterprise focused on what we call rewiring the labor market. And that means so that workers in the US who do not possess a four-year bachelor's degree are seen equally as those who do possess a bachelor's degree. And then employers are not struggling for talent, but they're looking at the full spectrum of what talent looks like in the US. I've spent 30 years in this space with various organizations and so I'm just really happy to be here today, to have this conversation with all of you.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Hey everybody, I'm Kenny. I am from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, go Tigers, but I can't technically say that because I am a STAR, right? I didn't graduate from a traditional four-year degree institution. I own a strategic creative and technology shop, but I have the honor of being on the STARs Advisory Council with Bridgette's organization Opportunity@Work where we do advocacy about STARs, people that are skilled through alternative routes like myself. And so I'm super excited to have this conversation today because I would love to bring more awareness about different pathways to success.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

Hi also, thank you Ramona for having us here today. I am Patti Constantakis, and I'm with walmart.org, which is the Walmart Foundation, not to be confused with the Walton Family Foundation, we are the Walmart Corporate Foundation. And so at Walmart, we really believe that we can both do well as a business and do good in society at the same time, we also believe in changing systems. Our big shtick, I suppose is the right way to think about that, is really changing systems. And we try to do this both through our business because if you think about Walmart, is a giant business, so if anything we do... if we were to be able to move the needle a little bit on the workforce, we would have a huge impact because of our size and our voice, but then we compliment that with philanthropy.

So the work that I do is actually twofold. I work both as a grant maker and a funder in a lot of the work in society and we're trying to change things in society, but I also work as a subject matter expert in our business as well. So everything that we are doing out here as part of the work that we fund philanthropically, we are also trying to implement inside of Walmart as well. So you'll hear me today speak about some of the things that we're trying to do as part of some of these organizations, but I'll also talk about some of the things we're trying to do within Walmart, the business itself.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So we started talking a little bit about the term STARs, skilled through alternative routes, and that is a concept that Opportunity@Work has embraced and has shared with employers and nonprofits and employees. So this idea that again, you don't need the four-year degree, and I want Bridgette to give us some of the numbers because they're pretty shocking about how many STARs there are out there.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

So just grounding us in a definition of STARs, again, it's skilled through alternative routes. And so alternative routes are community colleges or military service. It could be a workforce training organization, but most importantly it's how people transfer from one job or move from one job to another. So when you start to transition from job to job, you're continually building your bank of skills and you take those where you go. So out of the 140 million US workers, 70 million of them are STARs, which means that 50% of US workers don't have a bachelor's degree, which is crucial when you start to think about the talent pipelines. But STARs actually make up the full diversity of our labor market, which is interesting when you start to look at the numbers. So I'm going to go through these numbers really quickly. 61% of Black workers are STARs. 55% of Hispanic workers, 53% of white, 31% of Asian American Pacific Islanders, 48% of women, 66% of rural workers of all backgrounds are STARs and 61% of veterans.

So that is the full diversity of our labor market. So when you start to think about jobs and when an employer is posting roles where they're screening out STARs, because bachelor's degrees are the primary credential that someone is looking at, you're actually screening out the bulk of US workers. And so STARs have underutilized transferrable skills that are actually really valuable in the workplace. All of us know STARs, whether you have a bachelor's degree, we all know them. And so when we start to think about this, we really want to make sure when an employer is thinking about DEI and they're thinking about diversifying their talent pipelines, this is the way to think about that. And then lastly, I'll say STARs are actually a talent category and it's really important to land STARs as a talent category because people need to know what category they fit in. It's not a labeling, but it's really so that you will know, oh, there are 70 million people out here like me and employers, there are 70 million people that I don't have access to. How do I get that? So STARs are actually a talent category.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Kenny, you have already said it, you're a STAR, you didn't get a degree and you started your own business and you're very successful and you're a good example of the skills that you have being put to use. Tell us a little bit about your story.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Well, even though we have found some great financial success, I still am not qualified for a bunch of jobs I think I should totally be qualified for. Louisiana is one of those states that have not gotten rid of that ban where there's a lot of government jobs that still requires degrees, and I think that's wild. For me, I had the unconventional route of dropping out of college and I'm one of the few Asian Americans that I even know that even have that kind of story.

And I think what's the power behind STARs is there are other ways that you can find success versus that traditional pathway, but I find that the people that I talk to today, especially during my advocacy work for Opportunity@Work is that people are just so shocked to hear that you can be somebody and not go through that four year institution. I'm a firm believer of letting your misery be your ministry, and for me, it's like I know that shame, I know that of imposter syndrome and that's why any chance I can get to talk about why you should own your skills versus just that piece of paper is so important in you developing as a professional.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Before we move on to Patti, I want to know, did you always want to be an entrepreneur because an entrepreneur takes the skills they have and creates a business, is that the pathway you went on?

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Always. Well, here's the thing. When I dropped out of college, it's like I better be successful. There's like no other way turning back, I felt like during that time, because I did feel that during that time is if I fail, the only thing I have left is a four-year degree or I can't get any job. Obviously, I think different now, but I do think there's a lot of folks that do have that same feeling that I did and that is paralyzing.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

So I think for us at walmart.org, the foundation in particular for us, this whole movement is really about equity. I think that that is the key piece here. STARs, they've existed for a very, very long time, like we have existed for a very long time, but they've been long ignored and their skills are just generally invisible. And so I feel like for us it's about how do we create a system that capitalizes on folks' skills, so both capitalizes and helps build. In our world, we're really trying to figure out what does that look like? What are those alternative routes? How do we think about skills? How do we standardize a language of skills? How do we help employers recognize those skills and value them rather than just degrees, et cetera? I just think we've been looking at it wrong for a very, very long time, and if we can shift the narrative here and see value in the skills and competencies that are there, we'll go a long way to a more equitable workforce system.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

For a lot of particularly big employers, it's hard to screen all the candidates that maybe apply for a job. So a job may have 400 applicants, especially when you could do it online and a degree can be a easy screening tool, but that leaves a lot of people on the table. So how can educators help signal whether you're helping with certificates, community college or the four-year degree actually focus on the skills. How can we do that part of it?

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

It's important for educators to actually really align with business. So oftentimes curriculum in those things are created in its own space without a conversation with employers, it's really important for employers to be at the table, but for them to be at the table, there also has to be a push around if you have this particular role and you remove the degree requirement, what are the actual skills that you're looking for people to bring in the doors? There are technical skills that people are looking for. There are behavioral skills that employers are looking for, and we have to get employers to the thought of let's remove the degree and let us dig down and think. The reality is there are always going to be roles that a degree needs to be prevalent for. You can't get away from the degree for certain things, but there are a lot of roles that degrees are not required for.

So if you have that conversation with an employer, it's really about, as an educational organization, how do we align across the competencies that you're looking for versus the degree? So that's the one thing that has to happen is just that alignment. I won't take up all the airspace, but I have another thought too. And then on the other thought there is this place where, with Opportunity@Work, we really build a platform which is called Stellarworx, which is a way to think about how do you screen people in based on skills only. And so employers and Walmart is one of our partners, they will post their positions on Stellarworx and they're only listing the skills.

So we use SkyHive as a smart AI to scrape for skills. And when those positions are posted and a STAR builds their profile, there is a match that happens based on skills, not the educational level. We know recruiters have a really tough job, employers have a tough job. You need bodies right now in seats and sometimes to do skills based hiring, it takes a lot of effort and work to do that. And so the reason why Stellarworx is important is because it's the only platform that's designed specifically for folks that do not have a bachelor's degree. So you literally are thinking about the skills component of that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That goes to the idea, what you just said about the employer working with the educator too so if an employer can identify the skills that they need very clearly, communicate it to different organizations, whether it's the community college or a training program, that's already beginning to use a language. Patti, we were all talking about this earlier, this idea of a common language to be able to identify the skills that we need.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Look, if you want me to speak to educators directly, if you're working with children and you tell them the only way to success, this is probably controversial, that's why you all got me probably. But if the only way to success, quote unquote "success", financial success is that you have to go to a four-year degree, that kind of stuff grows up with you and it feels very lonely when you deviate from that path, especially Asian culture where it's like either you get a degree or else, and that is some of the tough convos we have to have at home. So I would encourage everyone here that's in education is that learn about the additional pathways that someone can take. Because if you're telling kids growing up, you have to go to a four-year institution, you have to get your master's to be someone in society, that sticks with you. Does anyone here can think to their head of a STAR in their life, someone that doesn't have a traditional four-year degree? Come on, several folks here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Majority.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

They probably had that sense of imposter syndrome and that imposter syndrome comes from, yo, I'm not good enough because I don't have that degree and that stems from when they're younger. When [inaudible 00:15:38] younger, that message is constantly reinforcing, if you don't get into the college of your choice, you don't get into this, you can't make it. It's crazy how many people, even though I advocate for STARs and people are like, thanks for fighting the great fight for us saying that out there and being a STAR yourself and I ask them to share their story, they refuse to do so because there's still that sense of imposter syndrome and shame. We got a lot of work to do. I think that starts when people are children, is to destigmatize that shame.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

Yeah, I love that. The narrative changes is super important in all of this. And I think interestingly, as all of you raise your hand, you at least know a STAR or whatever [inaudible 00:16:16]. So I'm just come back to Walmart for just one second. It actually, probably a little known fact, 75% of our managers today, there's 5,000 stores [inaudible 00:16:27] and home office and all. We have 1.5 million workers in the United States. 75% of those managers or people at management level or above were hourly associates at one point. So we've been doing this for a very, very long time, but we feel a little bit like we may be forgotten, we got into the sort of little bit narrative rat race of we need the best and the brightest and they must need college degrees and we should hire people... and it's turning out that isn't working as well as actually organically really building the skills from the folks who really know the work.

So that is a key piece, I think that the narrative, I think I'm totally on board with you on that. Just to come back to your two points, one of them on that sort of creating pathways to a job, I would say we try to talk about it as multiple pathways to success. Take whatever pathway it is that works for you for whatever the reasons are. But what has happened is that the pathway, the pathway that is the one that's supposed to be about success has been the one that's been around a four-year degree at least. So how do we change number one, that narrative, but the bigger issue is how do we create a system that allows for that multiple pathway to actually happen? If you've gone through this alternative route of building your skills and you come across a job that says only a four-year degree, you're stuck.

So how do we start getting employers to drop that, to open their minds, to think about how do we hire this way and so on and so forth. The employer part of it, the educational pathway is an important piece too, and I'll just echo everything that you were saying, but the aligning with the skills of today and tomorrow sounds like a very nice vague thing to say, but that is actually what employers need. So we at Walmart are struggling actually at the moment on trying to figure out what are the skills that we need? How do we define those? We need that common skills language, how do we define them and then how do we talk about them in a job description and then how do we interview for them and so on.

So again, this is a big system change if you think about it. It's a whole way of thinking, years and years and years of thinking that we need to change and if we can do all that, if the employers could communicate all of that to educators and we could align around what those skills are, then you really can build multiple pathways so you can get those four year degrees that are aligned there. You can get the work and learn type of experiences aligned there to all of that. I could keep going. I'm going to let somebody else talk for a second.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

I actually think this is a really, really important point because when you think about the common skills language, common competency language, I talk to employers every day and every role I've had for the last 30 years is engaged with employers. Every employer will explain a specific role differently, the skills. So if there's a foundation, I'll say software developers, every employer will say they need a software developer and all the skills are different. And I'm like, well, how is that possible? There are certain things you need for your company, but then there are just foundational skills that a software developer should have. When we can land that plane, then it helps educators really understand, okay, great, we can get the foundational skills that are here and there may be some additional things that need to happen with that. That's one thing.

Community colleges are the largest trainers of STARs. They are the largest, they have the most adult workforce going to community colleges. I actually think community colleges should be leaders in this space around skill building. And I really think that workforce organizations should actually be teaching the way that community colleges are teaching because they need to be aligned. If you're not aligning that, then you've got everyone out here just training people, bootcamp training people, but it's not aligned around a set of competencies and skills that it's a common language. And then you have to think about STARs in themselves are not just blue collar workers.

The other thing is employers will think, oh, I can just remove degree requirements on my jobs that are blue collar or what people will deem as not professional. What does that mean? Every job should be a professional job. Every role should be a professional role. And so STARs are equipped to do every type of job that you can think of within a company, but it is really an incumbent upon us to start to clearly define what skills, what the foundation looks like, and then every company has their own set of nuances that they need to add into that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I would add too, that software developer, let's use that as an example. So there's specific skills that you need, but you can get those skills many different ways. You can get them through a certificate program, Google offers it through some employers and they also offer it on their own. You can get it in a four-year degree. The bottom line is you're walking away with the skills that those employers need and that you can demonstrate. And I kind of go back to this because I'm a little obsessed with this idea, then how do we signal those and is it in that common language and Walmart's doing a good job at it, how do you get everybody to embrace that and say, here's how we talk about Python, here's how we talk about Java. Those are the two languages that I've heard.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

I'm so impressed.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

CSS. We hire software developers too and so for us, it's like there is completely a base level understanding of can you do this or not? Everything added on top is great. I'd like to see if we can push the [inaudible 00:22:02] with something interesting is that all three of us said the word of success, right? Success, success, success. What is the definition of success that educators typically have when coaching a child? What is the definition? Because is the definition of success tied to a four-year education? Is that the only pathway? Do we have to redefine what success is? That's me thinking on a philosophy like soapbox, but that's how I was raised. The only way you're successful, what's in your pocketbook? What pops up when you log into your Chase account? I think sometimes we might have to re-look at what success is and how we're coaching our kids.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

And I think the way to get to success, we have to really think about how we're actually teaching and skilling and training. So we go back to software developer for a second. Language is one part of it. The other part is how do you talk about that to an employer? And that's the other place where it's really, really important for people to be aligned. So I was Chief Impact Officer [inaudible 00:23:02] for seven and a half years, we did tech training.

And what was interesting to me is I was over our training org and I would pop into classes to listen to them and they were teaching people to interview in the same way across any job. And I'm like, wait, that's a very different job. You can't interview for a software developer [inaudible 00:23:20] interview for cyber security. It's very different things because there are skill sets you need around business to end-to-end business. When you're a project manager, you have an end-to-end business component to that. How are you training people to do that? So we go back again to there has to be an alignment around anyone that is responsible for training. There has to be a requirement that training is aligned, skills are aligned, competencies are aligned. Otherwise, we just help people in offshoot and employers are still struggling to find the talent.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

From a walmart.org point of view, we are trying hard to fund work that is related to that alignment and skills. It is difficult because we have lots and lots of industries and we have lots and lots of sectors and we have lots of roles within there, but there is definitely work going on in various ways. I point to Burning Glass Institute, there's several different organizations out there that are trying to do this, but it is going to not be a national standard of these are the skills. It's probably not going to be that, but we're going to get closer I think to... I want to use the word taxonomies, skills, libraries that can be used. More than likely, the way I would see that is that's going to end up being sector by sector. It's a bunch of work, but it's stuff we already, in particular as educators, we kind of already know what those are. We just need to categorize them and think about them and then actually just help employers think about them because most of the time we're like, I don't know, what skills?

But the other point I would make here too is actually where you were talking about how are we hiring and thinking employers differently and well, I'll tell you what Walmart has started to do, Walmart has a long history also of their own education benefits, and I'll come back to that in a second. But what's new for Walmart has been, huh, if we are thinking about removing a degree requirement, which a lot of our jobs don't have them in the first place, but some of we're starting to think through, okay, we have some that we could remove as well. The key piece there is like, okay, but then how are we changing our hiring, et cetera.

So the first thing I think we're doing is really thinking about our hiring sources. A lot of our recruiting teams just got very used to, oh, we're going to the college fair and we're going to go recruit from there. Or anybody who comes in our door, because here we are Walmart because people come in the door and they need a job. But for our tech positions, because we have a large tech organization, we're quickly becoming one of the bigger tech organizations that there are in the country just because of who we are. But with our tech jobs, our supply chain jobs, some of those other kinds of jobs that are not your frontline jobs, we are trying to figure out where do we source? And so when you think about it from a STARs point of view, we are starting to think, okay, could we go to those boot camps?

Could we go? Where can we go? Can we go to community colleges? How do we establish in particular in regions relationships with those community colleges? That's very different for our hiring managers to think about. They also... I get questions all the time. How do we write a skills-based job description? We don't even know how to do that. There are organizations out there, the Markle Foundation being the one that I would say has a job posting generator that can be used. It's a great place to start in terms of... [inaudible 00:26:42] one by one. And so for Walmart, there's so many roles, how do you do it? But how do you build a job posting? How do you work with hiring managers to ask the right questions? How do you make it not be all about number of years of experience, those sorts of things.

So our teams are doing this and they're struggling, and I think I'm really happy to see that they're struggling because it means that they're really trying hard to do it instead of being like, yeah, we'll give lip service to this. I think they're really trying. And what we're finding... I'll tell you this, we're also starting apprenticeships at different levels that we hadn't done before. We're doing store level apprenticeships. So we're bringing returning citizens in through an apprenticeship program and having them take supervisory roles right from the start, which we think is awesome, but it's also a pilot and we're like, and how will this work? And how do we create the right pathway for them and so on. Everybody is willing willing, if you look across our talent organization, people are willing to give it a shot, which I think is the best news ever across the country. And if we can all keep saying that, yeah, let's give it a shot. I think we can go a long way.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So I want to go back to a thing Kenny said just a few minutes ago, this idea that there's a certain shame and how do we get rid of that shame? Because I say this all the time, I'm a STAR. I quit school because I got a job that paid me well and before that, I didn't have the money to finish school. But I am accomplished. I've won awards, I've worked at a lot of places and I've been hired from job to job based on my skills and what I learned. So both this idea of there's a shame and I never would say it before. I didn't broadcast on my LinkedIn that I didn't graduate, but I learned skills. So two ideas in here that came to me is one, the shame and two, the skills that you learn in a transition from job to job. So first let's talk about the shame part.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Yeah, the shame really comes from am I enough? That degree just gives you that sense of security that I am enough. But really at the end of the day, it's so funny where when you're a STAR, what you think about all the time is that, oh my God, am I going to be exposed? Are people going to find out? I don't have a degree. I remember talking to my friend who's like a CMO of an awesome organization, and when he said, "I'm going to help back you, I'm going to sign the pledge and all that," and I'm like, "Cool, post it on LinkedIn." He's like, "Nah, I'm not going to do that." I thought that was wild. I'm like, "Why?" He's like, "Because then my boss will find out that I'm a STAR." I'm like, "But you make them millions of dollars. Who gives a shit?"

And it was so funny because he's like, "They do." I was like, "Do you think that? Did you ask him that?" And he's like, "No." I'm like, "What happens if you do?" He's like, "I don't even want to cross that bridge." That's how deep that shame is, is that you can be so kickass at your job, but if somehow it leaks that you didn't graduate. And he didn't even lie about it. They just didn't ask. It's so deep. I would ask you, Ramona, people have never ask you about that yourself?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

No, nobody has. And I think that's my skills and my competency. And that's what we're talking about here is if you can do the job and somebody sees that you can do the job, it didn't matter. Nobody ever asked me.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

But it's also people didn't ask-

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

But I didn't tell them.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

But people didn't ask because the assumption is that everyone has a degree. That's why people don't ask. If you think about it, we use certain language in this country around traditional, non-traditional, right? Well, who determined that college was the traditional pathway? We have grandparents who went through apprenticeships and trades. They didn't go to college. No one would've ever said traditional to them. So no one asked the question because they don't know. I can go to a networking event. The first thing people will say, oh, what school did you go to? Because the assumption is ingrained that everybody went to college. But then when you start to peel back the layers and you look at the numbers, 50% of US workers do not have a bachelor's degree. Employers are stunned when we tell them that. Patti was stunned when we first told her because the assumption is everyone has a bachelor's degree.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And I thought it was only 30.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Yeah, it's 50% of US workers do not have a bachelor's degree.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I grew up and my parents were farmers in Arkansas and then worked in factories and a waitress. To my parents, having the college degree was the American dream for their kids to do better, but in their mind it was that college degree was that doing better. I didn't recognize this until later. That didn't define me. But in my head, that did define me. And I think for a lot of employers it defines the employee.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

It does, but it's also one of the biggest places of inequity because when you make that assumption, you have to realize not everyone has... college is a privilege and it's an access piece. You don't have the privilege or the access to be... you don't have the privilege to be able to access it and inequities begins to set in. And I just want to say on this shame piece, which is interesting to me, this is why we created the talent category STARs, because we don't want people to be shamed or sitting in shame in silence because they don't have a bachelor's degree. Let's create a talent category so people know I can identify with this person because we're all in the same boat.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And that equity issue is very important because as you said, access and mentors, people who can help somebody get into a college in high school, what is it? One counselor for a thousand kids probably. And they can only help the really good students maybe get into college and try to help get the really bad or disciplined problems on the right path. It's a tough job. So if you don't have that mentor at home, how do you get that? So I think the equity issue is very, very important.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

There's a term that I've been using recently, this notion of occupational segregation. So the other things that has happened to STARs for years is that they end up in certain types of jobs and not really having access to the kinds of jobs that'll actually... to use terms like family sustaining wages and so on, they just don't have access to the good paying jobs over time because they've been sort of funneled into certain types of jobs. Now we need to be a little bit careful to be honest around the skills and competencies piece, we need be careful that same segregation doesn't happen. I would love you, Bridgette to talk a little bit about origin gateway and transition types of jobs because I think there's a key unlock right there that I think is a really important piece of this.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

So we've defined roles as origin roles or origin jobs or those that build those foundational skills. They're typically underpaid, but those are the ones that build foundational skills. And then from an origin job, someone has built enough skills to move into what we call a gateway role. That's when you start to see middle wages come in, middle skills that employers start to look for. And then gateway jobs move into what we call destination. What's interesting is when you start to... it's harder to move from a gateway to a destination because that's where you start to see the proliferation of degrees come in. So then you get blocked from moving to higher wages. And so we've defined them clearly so that people can understand we're actually talking about a pathway, a continuum of how someone moves from foundational skills they're building to higher skills, higher wages.

And so we are working in this space of really trying to figure out how do we move people from gateway to destination roles? Because there are 30 million STARs in gateway jobs. How do we move them to destination? There's only 4 million STARs in destination roles, which you start to see the $65,000 a year and higher. But pathways are really, really crucial. As Patti has mentioned a couple of times, STARs can't get stranded in the first job you hire them in, otherwise you're still not moving and start along a pathway. And so social capital is also really important because when we talk about... when Patti mentioned most employers go to colleges to recruit. Well, if you go to community colleges or go to workforce training organizations, most people find their jobs through their social capital. STARs may not have that social capital so we have to become part of that social capital for them.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

You got to keep giving it to them too because we have four STARs, including myself. We're in high wage jobs that you would consider but what do we notice? Every single STAR that came in did not have that social capital. You have to give it to them is that they have those attributes to make them great, but there are certain things they're missing and that social network around them was the big common one, was that we had to fill that in every single time.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And I want to invite anybody that might have a question to go ahead and line up at the mic, we're happy to take a couple if you would like. Go ahead.

Speaker 5:

Hi, thank you so much. First of all, this has been really good. I work in a space where I'm constantly trying to help folks move along the spectrum and get into the details of it. One of the things I'm always talking about with them is what does it look like today? And as we transition, what does that shift look like and how can we bridge the gap? Because most of the time they're stuck in this area and they need to figure out how that hybrid will work.

And to that point then I wanted to just ask about, and I'd love to hear the perspective across the board as you think about employers shifting from this very traditional, use that word, way of hiring to thinking about more this skill-based. How do you then help them think about bridging the gap between what they're already doing today, especially given that in the educational system today when somebody goes to a four-year college, the reality is some of these colleges, the rationale for them being able to charge as much as they do is because they're telling these students that you can get these types of jobs and it will make whatever the investment you've put into this worth it.

And so employers are building organizations to funnel that. How do you then think about bridging the gap with helping them see the skill-based pathway, but also kind of balancing that with what they're already used to on the four-year college and making sure that you don't increase kind of the inequity that happens with pay and inequity with workforce development across the board. Just [inaudible 00:37:35] perspective on that. Thank you.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

That is the big question right there still, because it's a system change effort I think there's several different efforts that are going on right now to try to hit some of those things. The first one really is to your point, let's just change the mindsets first. We need employers and I think educators both to value the skill, okay, skills, competencies, we agree on that's an important piece here. Then I think there's an analysis that employers have to do, which is of the jobs that we actually have, what do we really need in terms of competencies here? Do we domain expertise as a software developer? Okay, let's figure that out. Can I teach that domain expertise while they're on the job? That's another point of analysis, let's put it that way, et cetera. So there's analysis that I think employers have to be open to, and we're doing a lot of work with employers across the country and a lot of the work that we're funding at this point, we're working with large employers through the business round table.

We're working with large employers through the One Ten initiative if people have heard of that. And then we have a slew of different grantees that are working with small and medium-sized businesses in different regions across the country. But it's kind of exactly that, what are the skills you need? Because what's happening is employers have definitely recognized there's a weird talent shortage right now too, because we don't know if we're in a recession, we don't know. But there's a weird talent shortage at the moment and in particular, there's a talent shortage around certain types of jobs.

And so employers are feeling that. So they're willing to think, what are the other ways that we can get the talent that we want? I think they're in a place where, okay, how could we help them do this analysis? I believe strongly in a collaboration then with whoever those education and training providers are. Some of them, Walmart have them internally, but most people don't. So how do we collaborate to create that true pathway? And to your point on the gap, how do you look at all of your jobs this way? Not necessarily just your high... all of your software development jobs, you need to look at all of them. If this is the approach you're going to take to hiring, you need to do it all the way across the board.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

If you look at the employees and you see that they are problem solvers, that they are collaborative, they're quick learners, you can, as you said, take those people, give them that other training by working with educators and that. So did either of you want to say anything? Shall we go on?

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

We probably should go on.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, we'll go on. Next.

Speaker 6:

So I know that we talked about programming and software development. Right now I'm learning about machine learning and about deep learning, which are both in artificial intelligence. I do have a mentor who teaches me but something that I realize from coding boot camps that they don't teach you is that there's a lot that goes into software development and it is about calculus, statistics, creating algorithms, understanding the theory, which people might argue that this is why they have to go to university. So how would you respond to that?

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Yeah. So STARs, there is a definition even when we talk about age, so STARs at a minimum have a high school diploma, a high school diploma or the equivalent because math, numeracy, and literacy are really important when you start to think about roles. And so it doesn't mean that everybody that went to college was great in math. I just want to be really clear about that. I was not great in math. I can balance a checkbook, but don't ask me to do calculus or anything beyond balancing a checkbook. And so my conversation would be with someone, with an employer, are you speaking about an employer or just the STAR themselves?

Speaker 6:

Employer.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Yeah. So with an employer, it would really be again, drilling down to the specific skills that they're looking for. And you have to assess for those things. There are assessments that have to happen. Let's be really clear because you have to assess for certain skills. And so if people don't have those particular skills, that's okay, let's figure out can we help them build those skills or can we help them find a role that actually fits for them? Everyone that wants to be a software developer may not be able to be a software developer. We have to be honest about that. And it's okay, there's a role, but there's an aptitude that people have that we have to build upon the aptitude that they come into the doors with and then the ability to continue to grow that. And kudos to you for having a really good mentor.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

So just from experience for us, we don't have degree requirements when you come in. Software development is what we do hire for, our CTO just tests them. We have a test that if you can pass this, you have at the minimum you can be able to do this job. And it's awesome when we see like, oh, you didn't have a degree. We don't tell them that. That's awesome. But when I see that it's like maybe I should tell them that though.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You should.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Yeah, I should. Yeah, I should do that. Thank you for that. That comes from that though, is that I think you have to have a minimum baseline test that you can immediately suss out competency and that's worked really well for us.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

So the other thing that I've seen is programs to build the skills that you need in order, so an on-ramp to some of these higher level skills. And if you can do that... I actually happen to know we do that at Walmart. We have figured out that people don't quite have the math skills that they might need for certain kinds of things. And so we've built a program which is just about those skills. So you don't need to go to university necessarily to go figure out this piece. When we think about creating pathways and multiple pathways, it really can be, well, let's start this way and then, oh wait, I'm missing this skill, so let me quickly get that skill and then keep going. I think that's important. So if we can modularize, I used to be [inaudible 00:43:50] structural designer and I'm like, if we could just do this in modules in some way and allow for people to get the skill they need in the moment that they need it and then keep going, that would be amazing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you so much.

Christian Martinez:

Hello everyone. My name is Christian Martinez. I'm also a presenter here tomorrow. I have a session called Redefining Success. I come from East Oakland and I just came from Harvard doing this presentation about redefining success to a lot of their students in the education school. And my question to you is, a lot of people where I come from see as super radical to be thinking no degrees and you want to get jobs. But my question for Patti, for walmart.org, there's organizations, I'm starting a program called Camino Program, find your path. And I wonder for organizations that are closer to the [inaudible 00:44:37], how do we get to what I call the back, the money to make sure we make that change in those communities?

I've been an educator for about 12 years. I'm also a co-founder of the school and I am a STAR, no degrees, and I was able to do that. But now during the pandemic I realized that lot the kids are losing fundamental growth in high school and then now they're graduating with no skills. So I decided to start this Camino Program. So question for you and also for STARs members, how can we partner up to make this a movement nationwide?

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

I love that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And there is a movement that we were going to talk about Tear The Paper Ceiling, which you can go to tearthepaperceiling.org. Can you show us your t-shirt? And it's a lot of employers who have partnered with Opportunity@Work and Walmart is one of those employers as well. WorkingNation, we are one of the partners on it and it is trying to put the stories out there and the best practices I would say.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Yeah, if you could see it, you could be it. I think that goes for kids, right? You can see it, you can be it. I love what you're doing. You said you're a STAR too?

Christian Martinez:

Yeah.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Wow. That's freaking awesome. First off, thanks for admitting that too.

Christian Martinez:

For sure.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Just owning it, that's part of the beauty of this. Bridgette, why don't you mention a little bit about Tear The Paper Ceiling as well, because I think that is such a great funnel into understanding the movement together.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Yeah, I'll be really quick because I know there's a bunch of people behind you. So it's tearthepaperceiling.org. It is the invisible barrier that prevents STARs from being able to move into higher wage careers based on the skills that they have. And it's the removal of biased algorithms. They're impacted by bias, algorithms, no social network, no alumni group. And so this coalition of partners and companies that have banded together for this movement of tearing that paper ceiling and making sure that the 50% of workers in the US have access to really well paying careers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And we would be happy to talk to you about it right after as well.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

He was like, I'm going to ask Patti directly and Patti never answered. But yes, I think the challenge is in fact where is the money to make all that? But to me, it's funding, it's the right partnerships, it's the right access to sort of this whole movement but happy to talk to you about it after.

Christian Martinez:

Thank you. I appreciate you all.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Okay.

Alison Lands:

Hello. Alison Lands, full disclosure. I work at SkyHive Technologies and we are really proud to partner with Opportunity@Work. We are also part of the Paper Ceiling campaign. And I was just going to ask, recognizing that we've been formally tearing the paper ceiling since last fall, if you had any stats or success stories to share about what's coming out of the Opportunity@Work, Stellarworx, Tear The Paper Ceiling efforts and just would welcome anyone to talk to us about it or to join the campaign or to encourage your own employer to hire STARs. Would love to just hear some high level stats because they're so inspiring.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

We've seen more employers join and more partners actually join the coalition of Tearing The Paper Ceiling. It is a partnership with the AD Council, so there is a commercial that may play in your market and you get an opportunity to see that. We also saw a 40% increase of STARs actually posting their skills on Stellarworx, which was fascinating because before Tear The Paper Ceiling, the platform was used with talent developers, training providers who would invite their STARs. Now we have organic signups, so we saw a 40% increase of STARs saying, oh my God, I identify as a STAR. I need to come here and I need to post my profile. And then we've seen a 25% increase of employers actually coming and completing and posting their roles and wanting to know more. The third thing we've seen is an increase, we offer advisory services to employers and that is employer practice change. And so we've seen an increase of employers coming to us asking can we help them figure out how they can tear the paper ceiling and how they can hire more STARs, which is really crucial.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

And I would add to that if at an even higher level than that, if you start thinking about who is dropping degrees, so the state of Pennsylvania and for their government jobs, the state of Maryland, the state of Colorado.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

I live in Maryland, so I actually worked with, at the time Governor Hogan's administration to remove degrees. But I'm also working with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts right now. And what's interesting is a lot of the states will tell you for state jobs, there are state jobs we haven't required a degree. What they're doing now is putting this into a much more structured process. The state of Tennessee passed a bill and they're actually using very specific language in their bill they passed for state work. The state of Tennessee removed degree requirements on any state roles. And we've worked with New Hampshire. So we are having this massive increase of states calling now saying, how do we do this? And we even had a state recently, I think it was Arizona, actually put a bill in and they used STARs as a talent category throughout their entire bill, which was fantastic-

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That's awesome.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

... to see.

Alison Lands:

If you think Walmart's buying power is big, take a look at state, local, and federal government.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

That's right.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Come on to Louisiana.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Yeah, Louisiana next, we working on that.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Yeah.

Cesar Flores:

Good afternoon. My name is Cesar Flores. I'm an adjunct professor at Lone Star College and I teach data analytics and one of my big things is I try to tell my students that they don't need a four-year degree to be able to succeed, but it's one thing to say something and it's another thing to be able to show them. I want to know if you could point me to some resources that I could take to my students when I walk out of here and be able to let them know these are some resources to show you that I'm not just telling you you don't need a four-year degree, you can actually be successful in data analytics and tech by just either pursuing this degree or pursuing some kind of certificate.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Are you in Lone Star College in Houston?

Cesar Flores:

Yes.

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

Oh, I have a great story. So we're working with API, American Petroleum Institute and the energy sector right now and they have signed on to agree to hire STARs. And so we're working with them right now in Lone Star. If you give me your information afterwards and we can also send you information too about resources to show [inaudible 00:50:54].

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And for anybody in the audience who is not at Lone Star, there are stories at tearthepaperceiling.org that may be relatable to your students.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

Yeah, they have a whole bunch of profiles on there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And our final question.

Adam Cota:

Hi, I'm Adam Cota, I'm with Western Governors University and the child of two STARs and the pathways that they went through changed the trajectory of all generations after. I thank you so much for the work that you're doing. We talked about traditional, non-traditional, it's like we're struggling for the right language here. I'm curious, have you applied the alternative assessments to students or applicants that have had traditional degrees and is there anything in the results there that may suggest that the traditional degree may actually be a false positive in several cases where we expect that they have the skills, because I think as many people that are hiring managers, we assume people have skills and then we find we actually have to train them once they come in. So just something about the false positive, maybe this isn't the alternative path, maybe this is the correct path and the more direct path to developing skills.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

I love it just from a... I'm like, let's go do that research, because there's probably a lot to that, but your concept there is I think exactly right. And I think we intuitively, because we've all hired a lot of people and you're like ahh. But again, maybe it's a question of domain knowledge versus what are the categories of skills there that as we made a whole big assumption that you were getting in college that didn't come. And so now what do we do and how do we create a pathway that allows anybody to build those skills along the way?

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

I love WGU and your work, and thank you for being a partner in the [inaudible 00:52:43] campaign too. One of the things, when I have conversations with employers, the first question they'll ask me is, how do you validate the skills of someone without a four-year degree? And the first thing I say is, how do you validate the skills with someone with a four-year degree? And their first thought is, well, they have a degree. That's not validating someone's skills. I worked with a bank, I won't mention the bank's name, and the CISO of that bank told me one time, he said, I literally hate seeing people come through the door with a four-year degree in cybersecurity because they immediately think they know everything and we have to teach them all over. And so the reality is that research needs to be done. We are a research organization, so maybe we'll take that on.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you so much. We only have a couple of minutes left, so I'm just going to let each of you maybe, what do you want people to walk away with? What thought do you want them to walk away with?

Bridgette Gray, Opportunity@Work:

There is a world of talent out here called STARs, and STARs are an actual talent category and I want people to walk away with everyone has a responsibility here. Educators have a responsibility. Employers have a responsibility, but STARs also have a responsibility as well. And so that's what I would leave people with. There's a huge skills bank that people have, and so we want to make sure that we're all sharing some of that same language, but the talent is there and if anyone's an employer, the talent is there. It's just how you source your talent, that's what we should be thinking about.

Kenny Nguyen, ThreeSixtyEight:

I'm a firm believer in to-do's over takeaways. You all going to have a bunch of things this week. If I encourage you, everyone that raises their hand that they know a STAR like in their lives, show them tearthepaperceiling.org. Show them that they're not alone. We got to stigmatize this and I think that website shows that, wow, there are people here. If you could see it, you could be it. Your misery becomes your ministry. When you see stuff like that, you can then say like, wow, I can be something. I think we should share that website everywhere or get a shirt, call Bridgette, she'll get you a shirt.

Patti Constantakis, Walmart.org:

And I think I would go to the long view on this. I think the takeaway in the action here is creating those pathways. So we as educators here, how is it that we create those aligned pathways to employers? So wherever you are, if you're at a community college, wherever we all are, in our own communities, how do we connect employers with the education providers and actually start to really create these skills-based pathways? I think that's a key important unlock to all of this.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, I want to thank my lovely panel, very smart panel and very informed panel. So thank you very much and thank you to the audience and everybody who asked questions. That was our invisible barrier to economic mobility panel at South by Southwest EDU conference. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.