

TEAR THE PAPER CEILING™

Millions of unfilled jobs spark employer frustration.

The mission was to rewire the broken and biased U.S. labor market. We quickly learned that degree discrimination is a major contributor to this problem. And that companies struggle to find a skilled, diverse workforce.

Highly skilled, but without the paper to prove it

Over 70 million workers in the U.S.—half the workforce—don't have a bachelor's degree. But they do have in-demand skills gained through alternative routes.

Another 'ceiling' to break?

While exploring how similar situations were overcome in the past, we uncovered a striking parallel. The Glass Ceiling is a widely recognized movement born to fight gender discrimination. This issue is unnervingly similar, with qualified workers held back due to degree discrimination. Leveraging the equity in The Glass Ceiling could be a launchpad to jumpstart the mission.

A modern take on an established metaphor

We can't solve a problem we can't name or fix what we don't understand is broken. Giving the problem a name and driving awareness would begin to establish it in culture, giving us a shortcut to driving adoption of the idea and change faster.

"Tear The Paper Ceiling" became our campaign and rallying cry.

Employers cite a dearth of talent and an inability to fill important roles. Our analysis of O*NET and U.S. Census data suggests there is an overlooked talent pool of skilled workers.

You're overlooking 70+ Million STARS

60m have BA degrees (age 25+)



71m are STARS¹



14m lack a high school diploma (age 25+)



13m have a high school diploma (age 18-25)



 = 10m

¹Includes 3 million Opportunity Youth - STARS have at least a high school diploma or equivalent certification and do not have a BA degree.

Unlock opportunities for millions of qualified, yet overlooked, workers in America

The Ad Council came to us to help the non-profit Opportunity@Work's mission to rewire the broken and biased U.S. labor market. We quickly learned that millions of open jobs go unfilled due to degree discrimination. And companies are growing frustrated as they struggle to find skilled workers and reach their DE&I (diversity, equity, and inclusion) goals.

Over 70 million workers in the U.S.—half the workforce — don't have a bachelor's degree. They're called STARS: workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes. Though lacking a bachelor's degree, they have in-demand skills gained through community college, military service, on-the-job experience, bootcamps, or certificate programs, among others.

This issue disproportionately affects Black, Hispanic, and veteran workers.

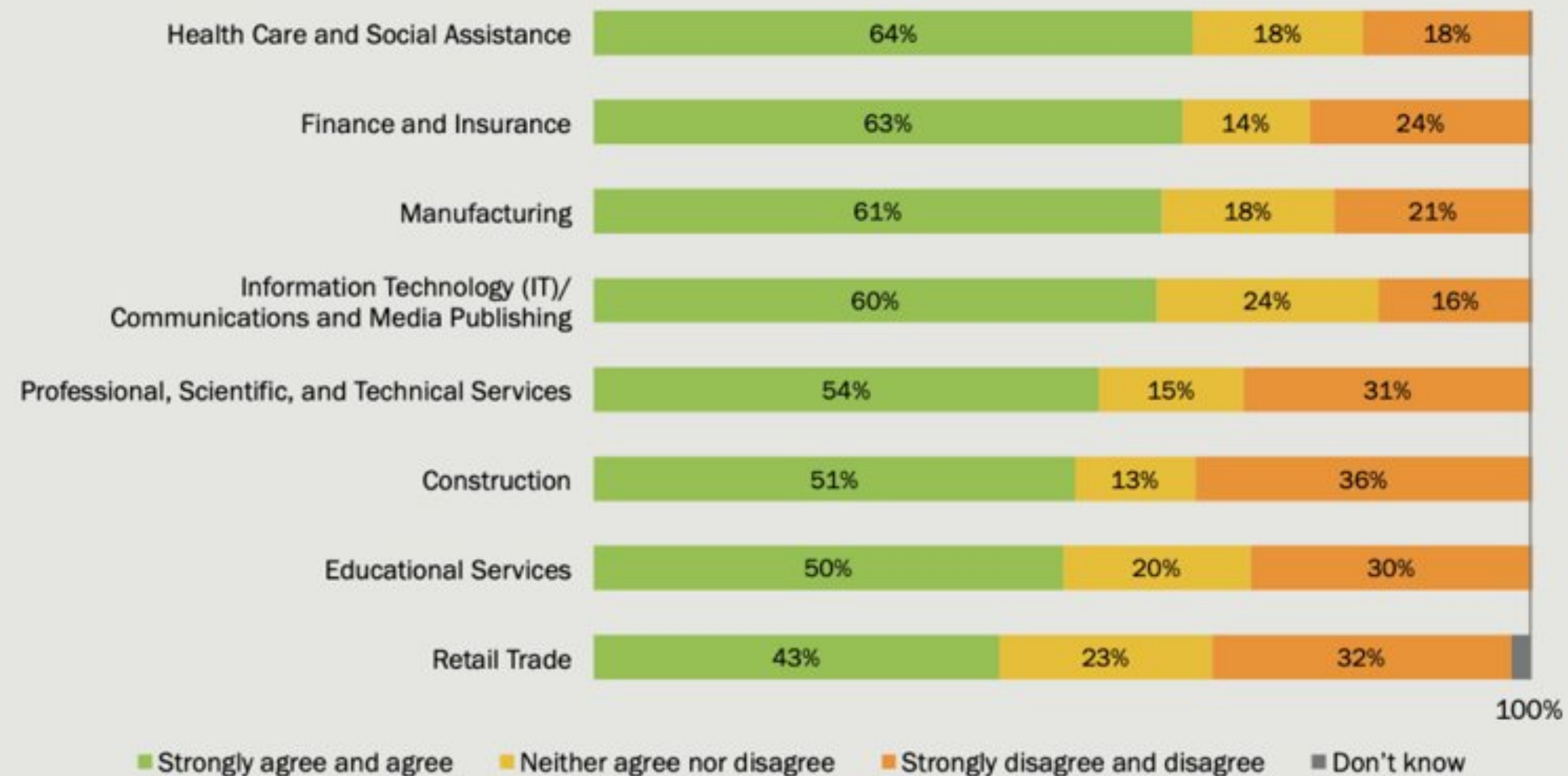
They're also screened out by hiring practices that rely heavily on algorithms that automatically dismiss resumés without a bachelor's degree. They're held back from higher wage job opportunities and upward economic mobility.

Unfortunately, tackling degree discrimination is a sensitive topic in America. It's rooted in racial and class inequality. For decades, attending college was integral to the (extremely costly and too often inaccessible) American dream. It's become so normalized that people didn't realize that this trend was contributing to the degree gap and inequalities that have continued to widen over decades.

Degree discrimination is real...and so is its impact on the economy

FIGURE 12: EMPLOYERS ACROSS INDUSTRIES ACKNOWLEDGE THEY FILTER OUT QUALIFIED TALENT BY RAISING EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS TO A COLLEGE DEGREE

Employers were asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: "We reject some individuals who have the skills and experience to be successful in a middle-skills job because they don't meet the requirement of having a four-year degree."



Source: 2016-2017 Accenture, Grads of Life and HBS Project on Managing the Future of Work, Hiring and Talent Management Survey.

ECONOMY | U.S. ECONOMY

Aug, 9th, 2021

Unfilled Job Openings Outnumber Unemployed Americans Seeking Work

Openings rose to a record 10.1 million in June; some economists see unfilled jobs leveling off this summer

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Pain of a Longer Vacancy to the Business

- Risk of losing highest-quality candidates to competitors
- Lost productivity in the role
- Damaged productivity of employees who depend on the vacant role
- Higher burnout and disengagement for role's immediate network while it compensates for the vacancy
- Increased spend on temporary staffing
- Higher recruiter and hiring manager time spend

Source: CEB Analysis, 2015

Initiate a cultural shift that rewires the labor market to inspire employers and the public at large to join the fight against degree discrimination, rethink hiring practices, and unlock a new pool of talent.

STARs

Workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes

They're held back and overlooked for higher-wages jobs, regardless of their skills—whether earned through on-the-job experience, certification programs, community college, bootcamps, military service, or apprenticeship, among others.

They don't have a fair shot at getting a fulfilling job, having a rewarding career, or living a better life for themselves and their families. And they don't see a clear path forward to putting their skills to work, leaving them feeling marginalized and defeated.

- 61% of Black workers are STARs
- 55% of Hispanic workers are STARs
- 61% of veterans are STARs

Employers

Company leadership, HR professionals, recruiters and key decision makers at small, medium, and large businesses as well as state and local governments.

These employers have inadvertently contributed to the perceived talent shortage problem by leaning too heavily on the bachelor's degree as a proxy for specific skills and qualifications.

In fact, over 99% of Fortune 500 companies use automated software to scan resumés to speed up hiring processes. Further, they put a bachelor's degree requirement on most jobs without pausing to consider whether that degree is really needed to do the job.

The majority have also committed to achieving big DE&I goals but are struggling to deliver on them, not realizing that it's their own hiring procedures that are holding them back.

Research and audience interviews led us to two insights from which a truth emerged

Most Employers don't fully realize they are contributing to the problem they are trying to solve.

Beyond being overlooked and screened out, STARs lack advocates and recognition, both personally and from the broader public.

For the campaign to work, the tone had to be non-threatening for employers and bachelor's degree holders, so that they would not feel villainized while still advocating for STARs.

Find a common enemy for both Employers and STARs to unite and fight

Our research journey led us to realize the complexity of the problem. STARs face numerous barriers - misrepresentation, biased algorithms, and unnecessary degree requirements. They lack advocates and recognition in their personal and professional lives. Meanwhile, **Employers struggle to find talent and reach DE&I goals. They don't realize they're actually creating the problem when relying on a bachelor's degree as a proxy for being skilled, and are heavily reliant on automated screening.**

To succeed, we needed to elevate the conversation and craft a galvanizing message while **avoiding villainizing Employers and diploma holders *and* empowering STARs rather than victimizing them. And since we can't fight what we can't name, we needed to name our common enemy.**

While researching, we uncovered a **striking parallel to a past societal issue. *The Glass Ceiling* was born to fight gender discrimination.** Women were held back not due to their skills, but solely based on their gender. We realized that we could leverage the inherent equity in The Glass Ceiling as a launchpad for a brand-new metaphor that would jumpstart a cultural conversation.

We launched a survey among African American and Hispanic STARs to explore the recognition of the term and ensure we were on the right path. **The fact that two-thirds recognized the metaphor gave us the confidence to move forward with a new one.**

THE PAPER CEILING

(noun): The invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree.

*See also:
no alumni network,
biased algorithms,
degree screens, and
misperceptions.*

We can't solve a problem we can't name.

Giving the problem a name was the critical first step in establishing it in culture. The paper ceiling represents the barrier that workers without a bachelor's degree face. This modern twist on the concept gave people a shortcut to understanding and adopting the idea faster.

It's time the world listened

We invited people to join us in tearing this paper ceiling to see the world of possibilities beyond it. Where "qualified" means qualities, not just degrees. A world working on building a more equitable and inclusive labor market based on skills, not degrees; performance, not pedigree; and inclusion, not exclusion.

“There are 70+ million talented applicants where their limiting factor is not having a degree. That’s a lot of people” — Adam R. | Employer

“Outstanding. Personally, I relate to this 100%. I always felt that the emphasis on a degree is far too great than experience. The paper ceiling is brilliant. Overall, the campaign is a positive experience.” — Johnathan K. | STAR

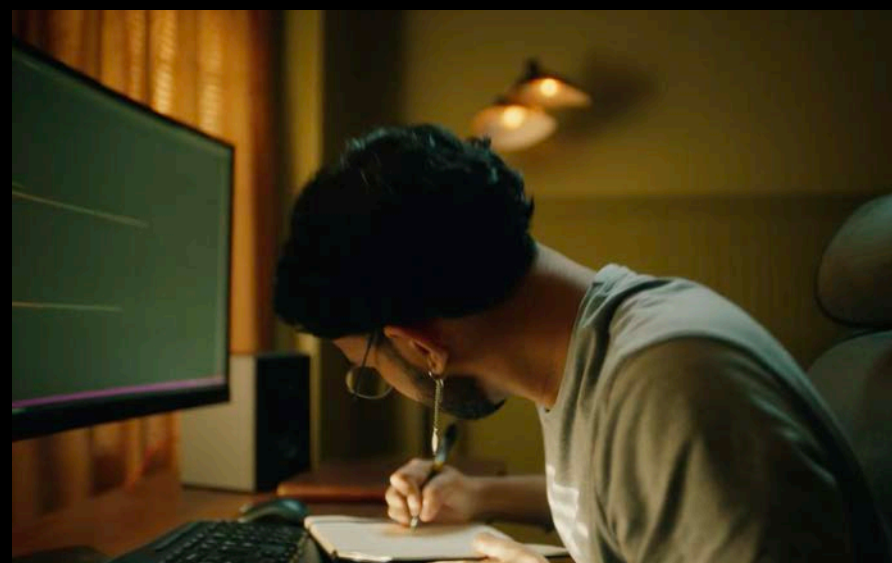
“One of the first things that popped into my head was, ‘Man, why didn’t I think of that?’ Great concept!”
— Brigette N. | STAR

“I’m going to revisit the posting I just shared for a Project Manager. I don’t think that this role actually needs a 4-year degree” — Willa B. | Employer

A long overdue beacon for change

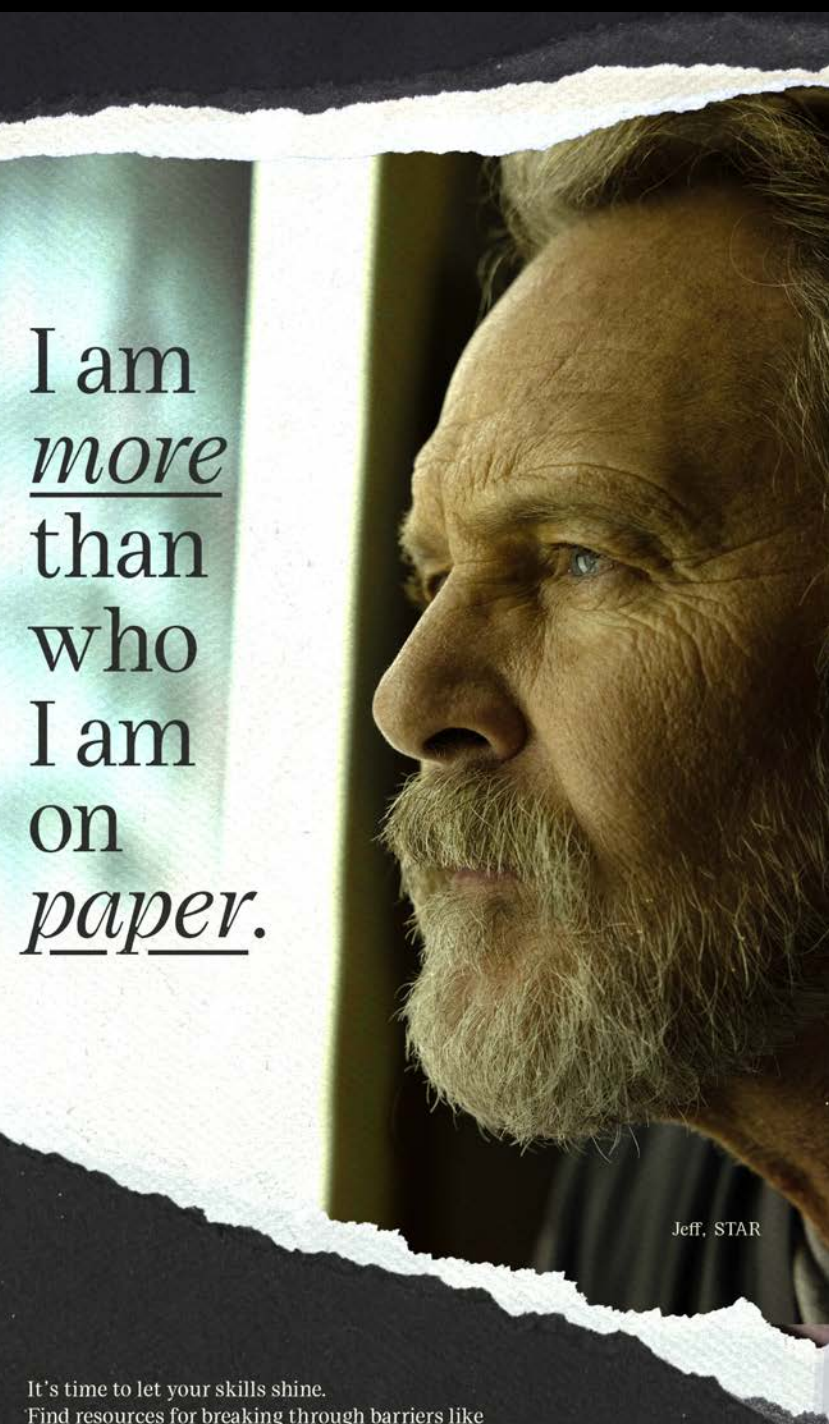
In-depth focus groups ensured the idea and execution would hit the mark. Since this was a public service announcement campaign, we tested a storyboard of our hero film and a variety of targeted assets, such as print, OOH, a landing page and social posts, each with specific messages and a clear call-to-action targeted to each audience.

The results of our efforts were remarkable. Our campaign not only resonated equally well with both target audiences, but it also ignited excitement and enthusiasm for tearing down the paper ceiling.



A provocation for employers and workers to tear through the barrier holding back millions

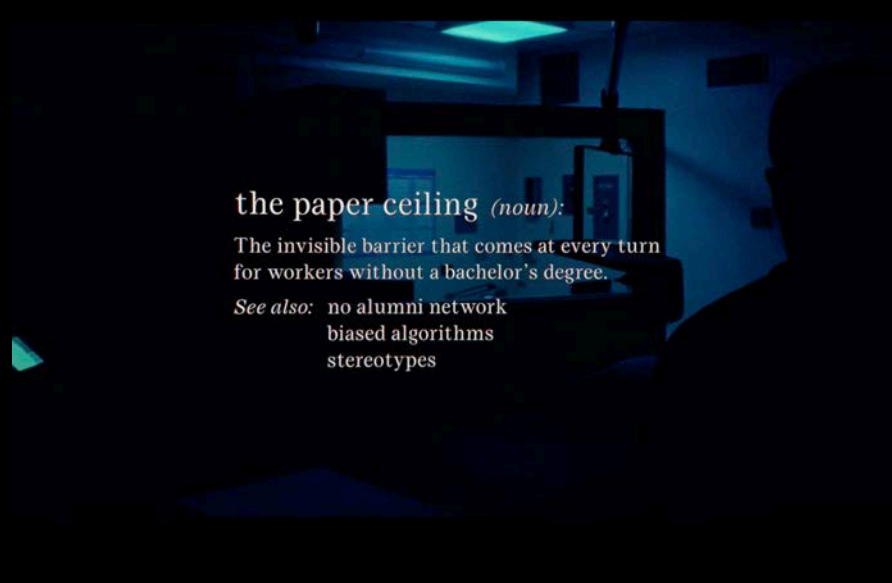
We launched the campaign in September 2022. Along with a nationwide PSA campaign with 60s, 30s and 15s films, billboards, and print, we created digital and social assets catered to each audience, all driving to a landing page, ThePaperCeiling.org. The campaign branded landing page was set to be a portal for Opportunity@Work to show the breath of their existing work and ambition. To maximize appeal and impact on social, the campaign focused on two intentional hashtags: #TearThePaperCeiling and #HireSTARs.



THE PAPER CEILING

(noun): The invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree.

the paper ceiling (noun):
The invisible barrier that comes at every turn for workers without a bachelor's degree.
See also: no alumni network, biased algorithms, stereotypes

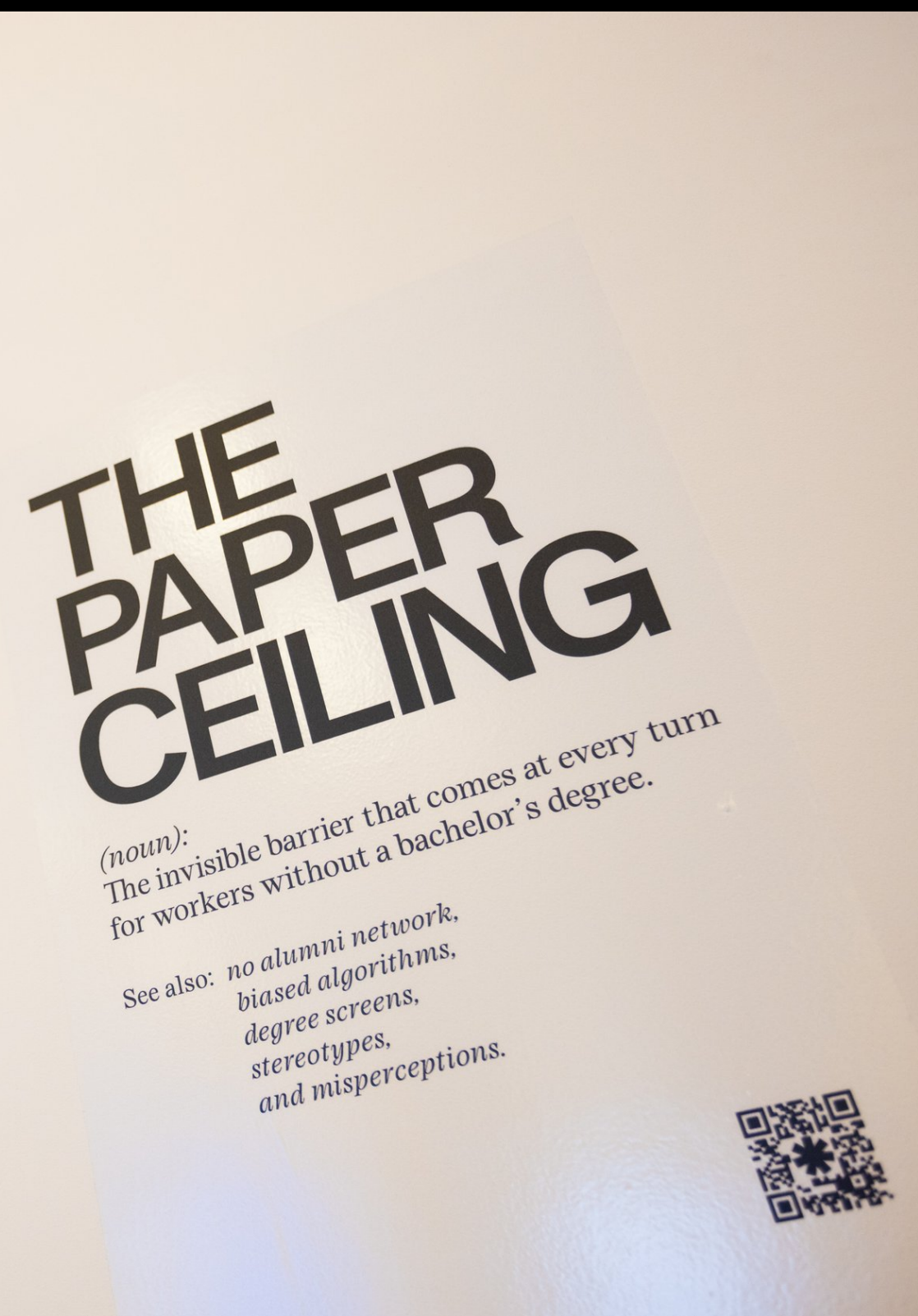


See also:
no alumni network, biased algorithms, degree screens, and misperceptions.

It's time to let your skills shine. Find resources for breaking through barriers like degree screens and stereotypes. It's time to tear the paper ceiling limiting STARs: workers *Skilled Through Alternative Routes* rather than a bachelor's degree.



Rethink bachelor's degree requirements and discover a world of talent.



THE PAPER CEILING

(noun):
The invisible barrier that comes at every turn
for workers without a bachelor's degree.

See also: no alumni network,
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A physical expression of The Paper Ceiling to inspire action

To boost our PR coverage and the social conversation, we set an unexpected reveal at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES), the Tech mecca. As a major employer in America, the Tech industry knows that their ever-changing nature makes it difficult to rely on a four-year degree as the only source of talent mining.

We set up an immersive art installation to reach the 100,000+ attendees and potential employers, designed to help them grasp the scope of the problem. The installation featured 30,000 resumés, allowing people to physically experience the size and scope of The Paper Ceiling. By engaging with real stories of STARs, attendees could confront their own biases and begin the process of tearing them down.

THE RESULTS

2.3B

Impressions

“See workers as workers, not as a college credential”

The New York Times

197M+

Twitter shares

“Add ‘Paper Ceiling’ to the growing list of workplace buzzwords”

Bloomberg

1,124

Press mentions

“Employers are more open to new ways of finding and evaluating job candidates”

CNN

768K+

Website visits

“Because of degree requirements, millions of Americans can’t ever get an interview”

TODAY

6

U.S. States changed their hiring policy

“Getting a college degree shouldn’t be a barrier to getting a great job in tech”

— Jesse Haines, Google

100K+

New job opportunities created

“Here’s an example of a smart policy that gets rid of unnecessary college degree requirements and reduces barriers to good paying jobs. I hope other states follow suit!” — Barack Obama

The first ever campaign turned movement to make degree discrimination history

Over seven months, the campaign generated outstanding results.

Enabling change

Beyond buzz, the campaign drove impact. The Paper Ceiling is becoming part of culture and a powerful tool in driving change. Six states – Maryland, Pennsylvania, Alaska, Utah, North Carolina, and New Jersey – have now passed executive orders removing degree requirements for thousands of jobs in each state.

These are critical steps to building a more equitable and inclusive labor market based on skills, not degrees.

THE STORY WAS PICKED UP BY SOME OF THE BIGGEST MEDIA COMPANIES ACROSS THE U.S.

