

## CASE STUDY

# How to Get Started Tearing the Paper Ceiling in Your State Government: Learnings from Iowa's Auditor of State



Opportunity  
@ Work

**STARs**  
SKILLED THROUGH  
ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

# Iowa's Auditor of State took action to determine the best pathways to transforming its state workforce



## STATE OF IOWA FACTS



1.6M

Active Labor Force

57%

Percentage of active labor workforce that are STARs

~25K

State government workers

32%

Percentage of state government workforce that are STARs

\$8.5B

2024-2025 Budget

The Hawkeye State

State Nickname



I hope our analysis prompts the Iowa Department of Administrative Services to rethink its educational requirements where appropriate, which would allow more Iowans to thrive professionally while serving their state, as well as bolster our state's workforce.

ROB SAND

Iowa State Auditor



In Iowa and across the country, college degree requirements are often impediments to attracting employees for public sector jobs. In many instances, these requirements limit the pool of applicants, locking out workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs), even though their skills and work experience make them an excellent fit.

In 2022, while facing unprecedented hiring challenges, the Iowa Auditor of State (AOS) began accepting applications for accounting positions from workers with associate degrees in an effort to expand their hiring pool. Enthusiastic about the quality of the job candidates, **AOS partnered with Opportunity@Work (O@W) to recommend additional positions where bachelor's degree requirements could be removed.** O@W's analysis showed 28 positions, which included roles in six different job series, where the State could expand eligibility and improve its talent pipeline.

The AOS recognized the importance of opening up opportunities to STARs as a critical piece of filling roles and delivering services to residents. Their work of reviewing their jobs and considering the best set to get started to begin their shift to skills-based talent practices is a model for other state and local governments looking to leverage the talent of STARs.

## THE BIG PICTURE



# The State of Iowa is intentional about offering opportunity to all of its residents

The state has existing programs, pathways, and job requirements that provide opportunities for STARs to enter state government jobs.

They **accept certificates** and college coursework qualifications.

They are less inclined to require degrees for certain jobs than private employers.

They have programs for high school students to explore future career paths in state government.

The state has **expanded pathways into healthcare jobs through investments** in registered apprenticeships.

But even with this flexibility, the Iowa AOS believed the state could **do more** to expand pathways into good state jobs.

# The Iowa AOS adopted an analytic approach to opening pathways

In collaboration with Opportunity@Work, the Iowa AOS approached their journey to removing degree requirements and skills-based hiring through a five step process.

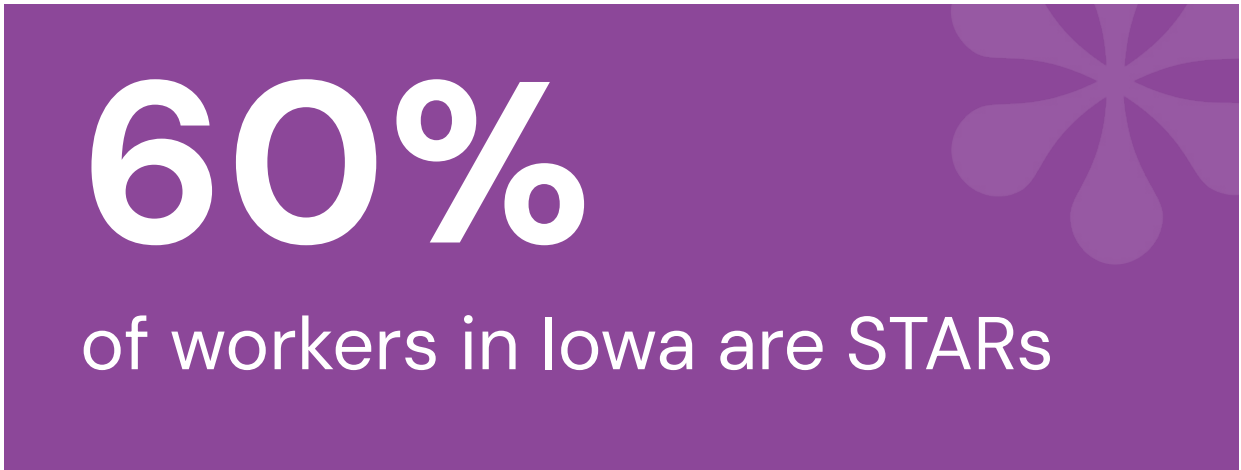




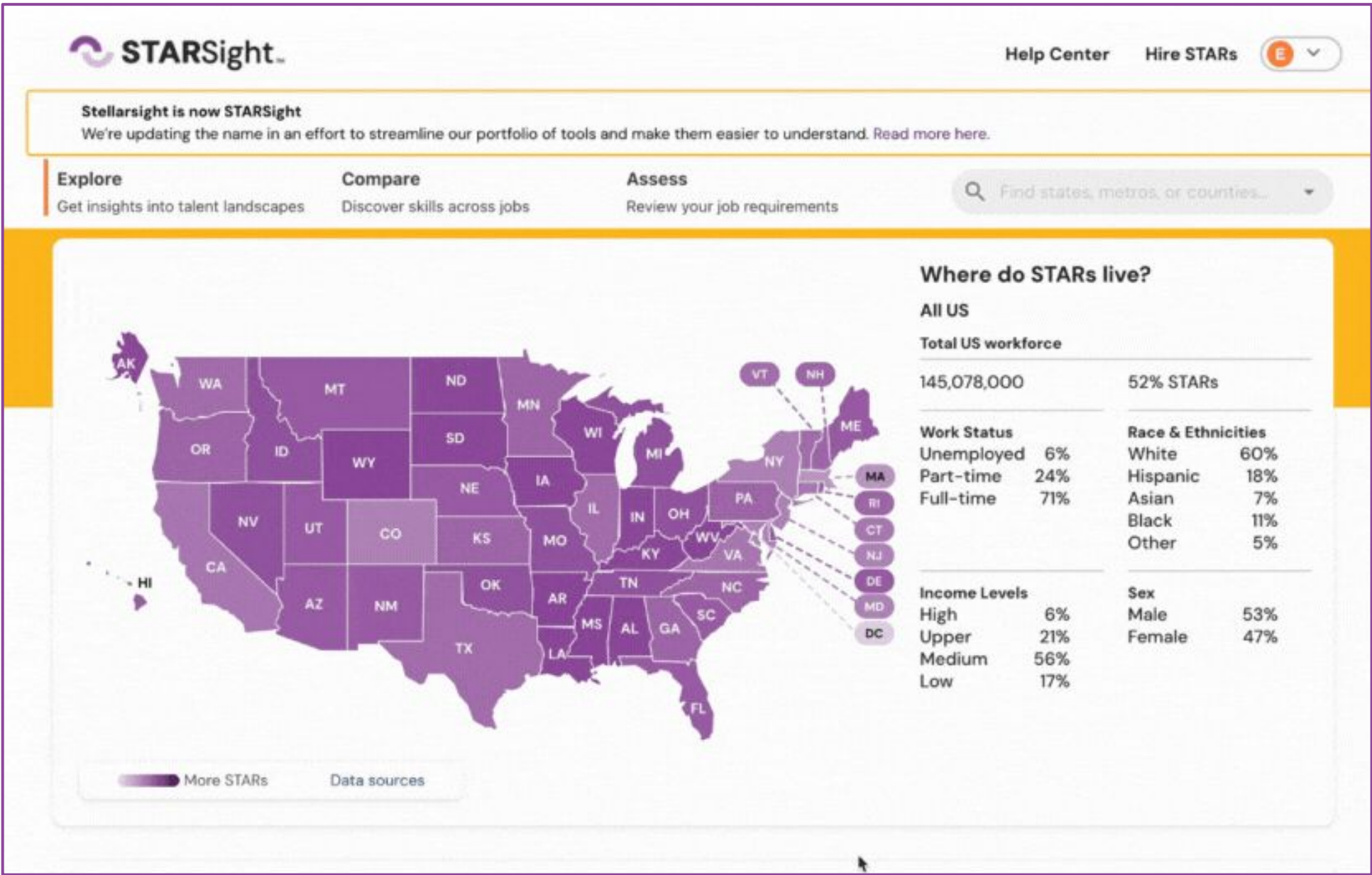
# Examine data on STARs, jobs, and skills to understand the potential opportunities for STARs in the State



O@W utilized various data sets to help the Iowa AOS size up the opportunity. We collected data on the number of STARs in the state, where they reside, the job opportunities potentially available to them statewide, and their applicable skills. You can size up the opportunity in your state using our data on STARs that is publicly available through our tool STARsight.



STARsight is an interactive digital dashboard that synthesizes the latest national labor market data – about jobs and workers – into intuitive actionable insight.



Note: We exclude workers under the age of 25 from our analysis of the labor force to ensure that the majority of the population studied has completed their education.  
Source: Opportunity@Work analysis of the 2019 1-year American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series.

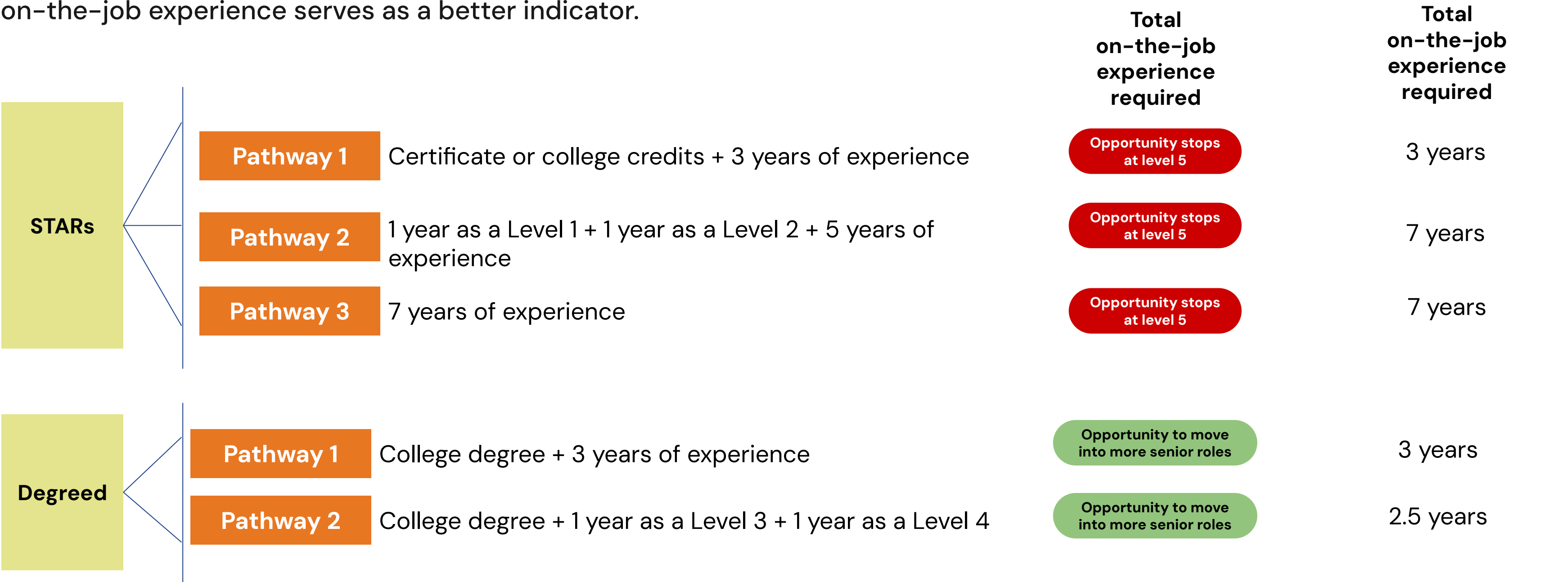
# Identify the state jobs that can offer opportunity for STARs

O@W then analyzed a list of 764 job postings from the State of Iowa. From this analysis O@W established five key criteria to identify roles that should be part of the State's review process. Analyze postings from your state to determine criteria that best fit your state.

- 1 STARs are already working in the role.** The State determined that if 3,000 STARs were already working in a role across the State, that was a proof that STARs could successfully fill the role.
- 2 Other employers do not require degrees for the role.** If the majority of private employers in the State do not require degree requirements in their job postings for the role, the State respected that as an indicator that the requirement could be removed from the State's job description.
- 3 The state already permitted an educational equivalency.** The State of Iowa already offers a lot of flexibility in their hiring requirements, as seen in the IT Specialist role. However, if an alternative pathway has already been identified, even the mention of a degree requirement can act as a significant discouragement for STARs.
- 4 The role provides upward mobility.** AOS used Opportunity@Work's [list of Gateway and Destination jobs](#) to identify roles that are on pathways to higher wages for STARs.
- 5 The role has traditionally been available to STARS.** Opportunity@Work has identified 30 jobs that have historically been available to STARS but have become less available in the past two decades. AOS included these jobs in the list of roles to evaluate.

# Insight: STARs face a steeper climb to higher-paying jobs than than workers with degrees for some roles

Consider the job pathway for an Information Technology Specialist, a role that has five levels. A STAR’s pathway is longer and ends at Level 5, whereas a college graduate can move quickly to Level 5 and then move on to higher paying roles. College degrees were treated as qualifications for higher level roles beyond Level 5, irrespective of the major, even though on-the-job experience serves as a better indicator.



# Examine the roles for exclusionary requirements

When the state reviewed the roles that met their criteria, they found that they were unintentionally screening STARS out of jobs. Here are just two examples:

Two promising pathways for STARS	Administrative Assistant	Current State Requirements	Recommendation	Rationale
		Degree OR 4 years experience	Remove degree requirement and lower years of experience required.	Administrative Assistants is an excellent entry level role that allows workers to develop skills for higher wage work. By eliminating the degree requirement and lowering the years of prior experience required, the state can make this role more accessible to STARS and put them on a path to higher wage work.
	Human Resources Program Coordinator	Current State Requirements	Recommendation	Rationale
		Degree AND 5 years experience	Remove degree requirement	The skills used by a Human Resources Program Coordinator are learned on the job through interactions with people, policies, and systems. A worker who achieves these skills through five years of work experience should not need a degree to demonstrate their readiness for the role.



# Help state agencies understand the findings and what they mean for state hiring efforts

With support from Opportunity@Work, the **AOS produced a detailed report** that clearly explained the reasons for this review, its methodology and findings, and the implications of those findings for state hiring practices.

The office also hosted a press conference, during which the State Auditor stressed **the importance of providing all Iowans pathways to state job opportunities** regardless of educational attainment.

By explaining the **data**, highlighting the **opportunities**, and celebrating the **benefits** of hiring STARs, AOS sought to generate **buy-in** across agencies

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**It's hard for us to grow as a state** or even to sustain our population if you don't have more working-age people in the state so what we're doing today is talking about finding one, a particular way to make sure that we can match our workforce with the jobs that are available.

**ROB SAND**  
Iowa State Auditor



# Move beyond job requirements to identify other opportunities for inclusion

Removing degree requirements from target roles is an impactful first step. Additional action can further expand opportunities to make the State an employer of choice for STARS.



## Improve job postings

With a better understanding of skills needed for their roles, the state can develop job descriptions and hiring processes that screen candidates in for their skills rather than screening them out for lack of degrees.



## Improve hiring metrics

Assess the representation of STARS and other excluded groups in state roles, relative to their population in the state, to assess whether the Iowa workforce reflects its population.

# Lessons Learned

The work accomplished in the State of Iowa thus far provides just one example of how a state can get started address pressing public sector workforce needs and open good job opportunities for its residents. Three lessons revealed through this initiative are:

## THE MORE SENIOR THE ROLE, THE LESS RELEVANT THE DEGREE.

While this may seem counterintuitive, most senior level roles require years of on-the-job experience and training. After so many years in the role, a four year degree has little relevance to current skills.

## DEGREE REQUIREMENTS CAN BE EXCLUSIONARY EVEN WHEN THEY ALLOW FOR ALTERNATIVES.

Because of traditional preferences for degrees, alternative qualifications tend to be deprioritized by recruiters and hiring managers. It is therefore preferable to remove the degree requirements all together.

## JOBS THAT CAN BE OPENED TO STARs ARE NOT HARD TO IDENTIFY.

Because work-based learning is so important to most jobs, skills-based pathways for STARs are plentiful.

**Join the STARs Public Sector Hub for insights, learning sessions, and examples of how states like Iowa are approaching skills-based hiring!**