

# COABE Joins National Movement to Tear the Paper Ceiling and Expand Opportunity for Half the U.S. Workforce

*After decades of lost opportunity, this coalition is proving that skills-first hiring work is opening doors for over 70 million workers*

TEAR  
THE PAPER  
CEILING



COABE  
LEAD/EQUIP/EMPOWER



Opportunity  
@Work



WASHINGTON DC, FL, UNITED STATES,

September 14, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Today, COABE announced its support of the growing national skills-first movement by joining the landmark [Tear the Paper Ceiling](#) public awareness campaign led by the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work. The affiliated Tear the Paper Ceiling Coalition calls on employers and decision makers to embrace skills-first hiring practices and

unlock the potential of the more than 70 million workers in the U.S. who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) — such as apprenticeships, certifications, military service, on-the-job training, and more — rather than through a bachelor's degree.

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COABE is proud to join the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work's Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign. Adult education builds skilled talent through apprenticeships, credentials, and integrated training.

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*Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO*

STARs make up half the U.S. labor market, yet they face a “paper ceiling” — the invisible barrier of degree screens, biased algorithms, stereotypes, and limited professional networks that blocks access to higher-wage jobs. Over the last 40 years, the wage gap between STARs and workers with bachelor's degrees has doubled; when adjusted for inflation, STARs now earn less on average than they did in

1976. STARs' exclusion hurts businesses too, artificially limiting their talent pool. Research from LinkedIn shows that hiring managers who start with skills are 60% more likely to find a successful hire.

During [Adult Education](#) and Family Literacy (AEFL) Week, COABE, the Ad Council, and Opportunity@Work are joining forces to amplify a shared message: skills and potential should open doors to opportunity—not be overshadowed by the absence of a degree. By tearing the paper ceiling, employers can recognize the talent, experience, determination, and skills that millions of adult learners and workers already bring to America's [workforce](#).

Along with COABE Tear the Paper Ceiling is supported by a coalition of leading national private sector and nonprofit organizations ranging from Fortune 100 employers to philanthropies and workforce development organizations. Together, the Coalition is leading the way in building a labor market that recognizes the tangible benefits – to workers and to businesses – of valuing skills from every route.

Since launching in 2022, the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign has grown into a national movement with measurable impact. The campaign's PSAs drive two million visits annually to [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://TearThePaperCeiling.org), and those who have seen the campaign are changing how they view talent. 83% of employers say they are more likely to hire workers without bachelor's degrees than they were 2–3 years ago. Overall, 92% of employers report they are interested in hiring people who have acquired skills through routes other than a degree.

According to Opportunity@Work's State of the Paper Ceiling report, collective action by employers and policymakers has halted the decades-long decline in STARs' access to good-paying jobs, yielding 783,000 more STARs in those roles than projected. And now, there's a clear path to open access to at least 10 million higher-paying jobs for STARs by 2030.

COABE is creating opportunities for STARs—workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes—by building pathways that help adult learners gain the skills, credentials, and connections they need to advance in today's workforce. Through national partnerships, COABE connects learners and programs to opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, including industry-recognized credentials and career training through Google, professional learning through eCornell, entrepreneurial skill-building through the Online Entrepreneurship Institute, and construction career pathways through our NCCER initiative. Together, these efforts demonstrate that talent is developed in many ways—and that apprenticeships, credentials, microcredentials, entrepreneurship, and work-based learning can provide powerful routes to economic mobility. By expanding access to these opportunities, COABE is helping adult learners turn the skills they have—and the skills they are building—into credentials, careers, and greater economic opportunity.

The latest Tear the Paper Ceiling PSAs, titled "Story Unfold," speak directly to employers, encouraging them to look beyond the paper and discover how skills-first hiring can help them find the right hire. Created pro bono by world-renowned creative agency Ogilvy and directed by STAR filmmaker Loris Russier, the PSAs use the metaphor of a crumpled paper that slowly unfurls to reveal STAR's face, encouraging viewers to look holistically at applicants and see the skills and experience that others might miss.

The campaign provides resources for both employers and STARs at [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://TearThePaperCeiling.org) — including playbooks and guides for getting started with skills-first hiring practices, case studies from organizations already hiring STARs, and career development resources for STARs. Join the movement by visiting [TearThePaperCeiling.org](https://TearThePaperCeiling.org),

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