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# The AI Guide for STAR-Inclusion

*A guide for building inclusive career navigation tools with AI*



## Foreword

Dear Reader,

On October 16, 2025, Opportunity @Work hosted “[Career Navigation for a Better Tomorrow: How AI-powered tools are helping STARs find the right path forward](#)” [full recording.] The following guide aggregates the key insights shared by each panelist, *Rebecca Gitomer (CareerVillage)*, *Frederick Goff (Jobcase)*, and *Steve Lee (SkillUp)* on five key-topics surrounding the conversation about Artificial Intelligence (AI).

We hope the insights shared spark new ideas for how we can collectively leverage technology to build a truly inclusive labor market, as well as to reinforce why this guide, and the work behind it, is so important.

### Why We Must Act Now

The core of Opportunity@Work’s mission is to advocate for the more than 70 million STARs across the country—individuals who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes, developing robust talents through military service, community college, certifications, and on-the-job experience. These are skilled Americans, yet for too many, opportunity remains out of reach.

The biggest barrier they face is the Paper Ceiling - a metaphor for the complex combination of barriers based on outdated hiring practices, entrenched bias, stereotypes, and, yes, even technology platforms that rely on degree filters. Requiring a degree for a job that can be done without one simply makes no sense at all. It’s an invisible barrier that is keeping millions of skilled workers— in which 33 million STARs have the skills for higher-wage work today—from reaching their full potential.

The technology discussed in the webinar—Artificial Intelligence (AI)—is a massive force for change. We believe it can and must be a tool for good. By adopting skills-first strategies and powering them with AI, we have the chance to “amplify intention” and scale a skills-first labor market.

## Call to Action

For me, this work is deeply personal. I spent 12 years in HR and talent acquisition, passionately working to help people find great jobs. Not only did I encounter many skilled candidates without college degrees, I also encountered many hiring managers who wouldn't give their resumes a second look, simply because their education history looked different. Then, I hit the Paper Ceiling myself. Despite great experience, I was told it was "too bad you don't have a degree". This forced me to pivot, but it also showed me the urgency we have to tear that paper ceiling down.

Every single one of us has the power to decide how we use this technology. I ask you to join us in this movement if you have not already. Here's how:

- *Learn more about our award-winning [Tear the Paper Ceiling](#) campaign).* While on the site, view our pilot of the [CareerVillage Coach](#) widget in action. Visitors coming to the campaign website are leveraging this tool daily to translate their experience into new career paths, or to identify skills they need to learn to advance their career.
- *Learn more about [Opportunity at Work](#)'s mission to rewire the U.S. labor market and unlock opportunities for millions of STARs.*
- *Partner with us.* Connect with our Platform Partnerships team to collaborate on building solutions that are truly inclusive.

Let's challenge the status quo together and ensure that everyone's skills and experience are valued.

With deep appreciation,



**Natalia Lara**

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# Designing for Trust and Empathy

Content adapted from insights by CareerVillage

Rebecca Gitomer of CareerVillage emphasized building AI tools, specifically their platform **Coach**, with **STARs** (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) as **co-designers**, not just end-users, focusing on transparency and quality to mitigate existing inequities in the labor market.

- **Co-design with STARs** is essential; the company built Coach with STARs, not just for them, which involves listening to them and the organizations that serve them to define what “helpful” means when navigating careers without a degree.
- The **biggest challenge is building trust** at both the individual and institutional levels. People are rightfully skeptical of AI, so tools must be designed with **transparency** (explaining reasoning, linking to credible sources, using plain language) to earn their confidence.
- Quality assurance must be rigorous, going beyond simple moderation to assess every AI interaction based on alignment with their mission: **does it feel human**, build trust, and move someone closer to opportunity?
- AI is a **magnifier of systemic problems** (e.g., inconsistent access) already present in career navigation. The focus should be on proactive collaboration to set standards and guardrails to ensure AI democratizes access instead of reinforcing inequities.
- The model prioritizes **equity in delivery**, making Coach free to individuals and utilizing institutional partnerships (workforce boards, community colleges) via a lightweight widget to reach STARs already being served.



**Rebecca Gitomer**  
*Director of Development*



# Accelerating Outcomes with Agentic AI

Content adapted from insights by Jobcase

Fred Goff of Jobcase views the current moment as a species-level event and asserts that AI, particularly [Agentic AI](#), must be used aggressively and purposefully to deliver immediate, measurable [outcomes](#) by cutting the friction and long timeframes currently plaguing the hiring process.

- Jobcase is focused on being an [Agentic AI-first company](#) that leverages communication and job tech to dramatically [reduce the time to hire](#).
- At Jobcase, [agentic AI empowers workers](#) by making the job search feel “less like a black hole” and helps employers by surfacing qualified candidates faster. Agents help process screening, scheduling, and interviews in microseconds.
- Fred’s advice to CHROs and HR leaders is to “[jump in right away](#)” and “[run to it](#)”. Fred cautions that they must be wary of “stasis and inertia” caused by over-concern about downside risks; the biggest risk is the downside of not moving fast enough to seize the opportunity.
- Builders and buyers must [watch for outcomes and beware of demos](#). Tools must be integrated with all underlying technology (scheduling, application, communication tech) to get things done, not just wow with surface-level conversations.
- Jobcase is designed for [blue-collar and frontline workers](#), serving as a complement to platforms like LinkedIn. The approach is to [design for STARs as the starting point](#), reducing bias by putting the “right people first in line, not last”.



**Frederick Goff**  
CEO

**Jobcase**

# The Shift from Novelty to Outcome-Driven Design

Content adapted from insights by SkillUp

Steve Lee of SkillUp detailed their evolution from a problematic chatbot to an in-product, outcome-driven AI, stressing the future advantage will come from proprietary data and purposeful design elements like empathy and memory.

- SkillUp's initial attempt with a generic **chatbot** was a "failure" — Steve shared that users were worse off using the AI than not. This failure taught them to pivot **from novelty to outcome-driven design**. *Tip: learn to fail fast to pivot to better outcomes.*
- The successful shift was to **integrate AI directly inside the product** (in-product experience) to solve for moments of **paralysis** (exhaustion, choice, and action paralysis). This change led to approximately a 50% increase in return rates and a third of users taking action on something they otherwise wouldn't.
- Steve makes the case that the future advantage will come from **data walled gardens—proprietary, consented data** that the public internet can't touch. This unique data is key to personalizing career guidance for STARS.
- Four elements are critical to success in AI for STARS: **walled garden data**, **scaling empathy** (because it's missing in large language models), **holding memory** over the long arc of a career, and keeping humans in the loop.
- His advice for building AI tools for STARS is the "**crawl, walk, run**" approach. Crawl by solving for one specific use case where clients face paralysis; this part isn't necessarily expensive. **Walk/Run** by building agents and partnering with others to solve for collective impact.



Steve Lee  
CEO

**SKILLUP**





# Philanthropy and Government

The panelists each shared advice for philanthropy and government on how to best support the responsible growth and equitable deployment of AI tools for STARS.

- **Philanthropy should focus on funding outcomes.** The tools are ready – today – to deliver outcomes for STARS, and philanthropy should underwrite that usage to prevent the creation of “have and have-nots,” users based on who can pay for premium agent-coaching services and those who can’t and are left behind. – *Jobcase*
- Philanthropy should also focus on **democratizing** AI by bringing different voices from across the field to the table, and pushing for greater **data intelligence** from large tech firms. – *SkillUp*
- **Philanthropy should be experimental** and shift traditional time horizons and notions of risk. Funders should have a higher risk tolerance and underwrite experimentation, even celebrating failure to learn and iterate quickly in this rapidly changing space. – *CareerVillage*
- For the **government** (especially state/regional), the focus should be on **moving fast**. The downside risk of not moving is greater than the downside risk of moving too fast, as inertia widens the **gap of inequality**. – *Jobcase*
- There’s a concern about the rapid privatization of the world we live in as feds/states collaborate with big tech. It’s crucial for smaller groups (like CareerVillage, EdSafe Alliance) to push for guardrails to prevent “social media deja vu 2.0”. – *SkillUp*

# Acknowledgements

This guide is a joint-effort of Opportunity@Work, a not-for-profit social enterprise, and member organizations of the Tear the Paper Ceiling Coalition: CareerVillage, Jobcase, and SkillUp Coalition.

The Tear The Paper Ceiling Coalition is a national initiative of over 80+ [organizations](#) in the nonprofit, private sector, and philanthropic sectors, with a shared mission to “tear the paper ceiling”—the invisible barrier that prevents qualified workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes, (STARs), rather than a Bachelor’s degree, from advancing in their careers.

Organizations like *CareerVillage*, *Jobcase*, and *SkillUp Coalition* have already proven that upward mobility for millions of STARs is possible by developing and testing innovative, skills-first hiring solutions. But the work is far from done — continuing to invest in workforce strategies that value skills and responsibly harness AI is how we build a more equitable future of work.

This guide would not be possible without the participation of our esteemed panelists, the dedicated leaders and tireless efforts of the many individuals who contributed to several partnership initiatives and pilots over the last several years:

- **CareerVillage:** Jared Chung, Founder and Executive Director; Donna Curry, Business Development Lead; Eric Fershtman, Marketing Lead; Michelle Gan, UX Researcher; Natalie Dunn, Director of Product; Olutosin Sonuyi, Director of Engineering; Rebecca Gitomer, Director of Development; Yoonji KIM, Chief of Staff and Head of Operations; and Charla Bennaji, Partner Success Associate
- **Jobcase:** Fred Goff, CEO; Hilary Dionne, SVP of Member Experience & Operations; Christopher Scranton, Nonprofit & Government Partnerships; Heath Alva, VP of Member Identity; Garret Friedman, Chief Revenue Officer; and Sam Burt, Engineering Manager
- **SkillUp Coalition:** Steve Lee, CEO; Desiree Jewell, SVP, Marketing & Communications; Elissa Salas, SVP, Strategy & Operations; Mariangeles Chinelatto, Senior Marketing Manager, Product & Partner; and Erin Ravenscraft, Senior Operations Manager - Strategy & Operations
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Most importantly, we wish to acknowledge the millions of STARs lighting up our world across the American workforce, who are showing up every day to solve problems in the workplace, are diving deep into “hands-on” learning, and fearlessly tackling barriers for a better tomorrow. Their dedication and optimism inspires our work and mission daily, and their personal stories are shaping the future of work.

*With gratitude,*

*Natalia Lara & Scott Gullick on behalf of Opportunity@Work*

Full recording:

[“Career Navigation for a Better Tomorrow: How AI-powered tools are helping STARs find the right path forward”](#)

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