



Half a Preparation

Why the STARS Your Program Is Preparing May Not Believe an Employer Would Want to Hear From Them

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Workforce development has spent decades getting better at one thing: preparing STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) to do the job. Résumé writing. LinkedIn profiles. Interview practice. Occupational credentials. These are real skills, and the field has built real infrastructure to teach them.

But there is a second preparation the field has not consistently made. It has not addressed the belief that prevents a significant portion of STARs from using the job search tools they have been given.

That belief is not complicated to state. It is this: I am not someone an employer would want to hear from.

It is a belief shaped by experience. By generational patterns of limited opportunity. By credential filtering systems that repeatedly, in many forms, said this person did not qualify. By a labor market that relies heavily on referrals and connections that were never available. The belief is not irrational. It is a reasonable conclusion drawn from a lifetime of evidence.

It is also the belief that makes proactive job search feel out of reach, not merely difficult, for the STARs who carry it most deeply. The résumé sits unused. The LinkedIn profile goes unvisited. The outreach never happens. Not from laziness. From a deeply held conviction that reaching out would only produce more evidence of what the STAR already believes about their place in the labor market.

The field has built real tools for job seekers who have already cleared this barrier. That curriculum, designed specifically to address the belief underlying the tools, is not yet consistently present across the field.

Teach two skills equally: the skill to do the job, and the skill to get the job, beginning with the belief that getting it is possible.

What the Field Is Getting Right

The workforce development field has made genuine progress on occupational preparation. Employers increasingly recognize credentials from workforce programs as valid signals of competency. Skills-based hiring initiatives, led by organizations like Opportunity@Work and supported by major employers and policy leaders, are systematically removing the degree screens that once blocked STARs from consideration.

The demand side of the labor market is changing. That is not a small thing. It represents years of sustained advocacy, research, and employer education. The paper ceiling is cracking.

On the supply side, programs have invested heavily in job search tools. Participants leave with résumés. They have LinkedIn profiles. They have practiced answering interview questions. Many programs include job search support, coaching, and post-graduation employment assistance. The field knows how to deliver these things, and it delivers them at scale.

That is half a preparation. It is a real and valuable half. But for the STARs who carry the deepest doubt about their place in the labor market, tools alone do not move them. Something else must change first.

The Barrier the Tools Do Not Address

Consider the STAR who completes a workforce program with genuine occupational skills, a polished résumé, and a LinkedIn profile their career counselor helped them build. They know how to answer interview questions. They have been told to network. They understand, in the abstract, that proactive outreach generates better results than passive application.

And then they go home. And they open their laptop. And they do not reach out.

This is not a tools problem. The tools are there. This is not an information problem. The information was delivered. This is a belief problem. Reaching out to an employer directly, uninvited, before a position is posted, requires the STAR to act on a belief they do not yet hold: that an employer would want to hear from them.

For STARs whose worldview has been shaped by generations of limited opportunity, by institutional systems that filtered them out, and by a labor market that has too often chosen someone else, that belief does not arrive from a workshop. It does not arrive from a résumé. It arrives from experience — from the moment a real employer responds to a real message the STAR sent, and the STAR realizes, for the first time in a concrete and personal way, that they were someone worth hearing from.

That moment can be transformative. For STARs who are ready to receive that evidence, it does not just change behavior. It begins to alter the habits of mind and points of view that shaped the behavior in the first place — the beginning of a different relationship with opportunity.

The barrier for many STARS is not a skills gap or a credential gap. It is a belief gap. And belief changes through experience, not instruction.

Why the Experience Changes the Belief, Not Just the Behavior

A structured, proactive job search methodology does something that job search tools alone cannot do. It creates the conditions for a STAR to have a real experience of being responded to, before they have applied, before the system has had a chance to filter them out. That experience is not incidental to the methodology. It is the methodology's most important outcome.

When a STAR drafts a real outreach message, sends it to a real person at a real company, and receives a real response, something shifts. Not for every STAR, and not immediately. But for those who are ready to receive that evidence, the response becomes the first piece of a new story about who they are in relation to the labor market.

This is why the methodology must be taught, not described. A session can explain proactive outreach. It can provide scripts, templates, and checklists. What it cannot do is produce the experience. Only structured, coached, repeated practice in real-world conditions, with accountability and peer support, produces it, and that practice has to continue until the STAR has sent real messages and received real responses before the program ends.

That is the same standard the field already applies to occupational training. A participant does not leave a welding program having only watched someone weld. A STAR should not leave a job search program having only watched someone reach out.

Proactive job search behavior is not information, and it is not a checklist. It is a set of behavioral habits that run directly counter to what many STARS have learned to believe about their relationship with opportunity. The default is passive: submit applications, wait, repeat. The structured, proactive alternative requires not just instruction but experience, repeated, real, successful experience that accumulates into a new conviction about what is possible.

A session introduces the concept. A curriculum builds the habit. Only real-world practice, with coaching and accountability, produces the experience that changes the belief. For STARS who do not have a fallback network and cannot rely on someone knowing someone, the stakes of getting this right are especially high. They need a methodology that works without those advantages, and they need to have practiced it enough, in real conditions, that the belief has already begun to shift before they are on their own.

Two STARS, Six Months After Completion

Consider two STARS, both of whom completed a workforce development program. Both have strong occupational skills. Both left with a résumé and a LinkedIn profile. Both were encouraged to network.

The first STAR was prepared with the tools of job search but without a structured methodology for proactive outreach, and without the experience of having used it successfully before the program ended. Six months later, this person is still searching. The applications go out. The silence comes back. The belief that was already present before the program (*I am not someone an employer would want to hear from*) has been quietly confirmed by every unanswered application. Discouragement has set in. The job search has become a waiting game, and the waiting is winning.

The second STAR was taught both skills with equal emphasis. This person left the program with a structured methodology for proactive outreach, a list of target companies in the small and medium business sector where hiring managers are accessible, and competition is lower, practiced scripts for direct contact, and, critically, the experience of having already sent real messages and received real responses before the program ended. The belief had already begun to shift. Six months later, this person is meaningfully further along, with active employer conversations in motion and a methodology they know how to use.

The difference between these two outcomes is not talent. It is not credentials. It is not the labor market. It is one thing: whether the program addressed the belief underneath the tools, and whether it created the conditions for that belief to change before the STAR was on their own.

The difference between these two outcomes is not talent. It is whether the program created the conditions for the belief to change.

What the Field Would Have to Do Differently

Closing the gap requires three things that current practice does not consistently provide.

First, it requires a theory of change that goes beyond tool delivery. Programs that treat job search instruction as the provision of tools, résumés, profiles, and interview practice are preparing STARS for a hiring process that assumes the belief barrier has already been cleared. For many STARS, it has not. The curriculum must be designed around the belief change, not just the behavior change.

Second, it requires qualified facilitation. Teaching a proactive job search methodology to STARS who harbor deep doubt about their place in the labor market is not the same as delivering a résumé workshop. It requires facilitators who understand behavioral change, can coach participants through the discomfort of real-world outreach, and can sustain the accountability and encouragement that repeated practice demands.

Third, it requires evidence of real-world completion before the program ends. Participants should leave having drafted and sent actual outreach messages, having built an actual contact list, and having received responses they know how to handle, executed in the real world, with coaching, before they are on their own. The experience is the outcome. Everything else is preparation for it.

A Call to the Field

The skills-based hiring movement is making a genuine and overdue correction to the demand side of the labor market. Employers are removing degree requirements. Credentials are gaining legitimacy. The paper ceiling is under sustained pressure.

But the paper ceiling is not the only barrier. For a significant portion of the STARs workforce development programs serve those whose worldview has been shaped by generations of limited opportunity, by credential filtering, and by a labor market that has too often chosen someone else. The barrier that remains after the credential barrier falls is the belief that they are not someone an employer would want to hear from.

Skills-first hiring creates the conditions for STARs to succeed once they are in the conversation. It does not create the conviction that they belong in the conversation. That conviction must be built. It is built through structured, proactive, real-world practice that produces the experience of being responded to, before the system has filtered them, before the application process has rendered its judgment, before the waiting game has begun.

Many programs are making a genuine attempt to prepare STARs for the labor market. The gap is not in intention. It is in the theory of change. The field has invested in tools. It has not yet invested equally in the curriculum that addresses the belief the tools cannot reach.

That is the gap. It is a teachable gap. It is a closeable gap. But closing it requires the field to ask a harder question than whether placement milestones are being met.

The question is this: are we preparing STARs to reach out to employers with the conviction that they are worth hearing from, and are we giving them the real-world experience, before they leave our programs, that makes that conviction possible?

If the answer is not clearly yes, the preparation is half finished.

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