

Change Management Best Practices for Workforce Transformation

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The Compelling Case for Skills-First Hiring

In an era marked by talent shortages, declining college enrollment post-pandemic and rising concerns about higher education costs, employers in both the private and public sectors are increasingly moving from degree requirements to skills-first hiring practices. With over 72% of companies now implementing skills-based hiring, there is a widespread recognition of the value of prioritizing skills over traditional credentials. The return on investment (ROI) of skills-first practices is evident in multiple key areas:

companies adopting this approach report shorter time-to-fill for roles, accelerated time to productivity, improved retention and higher employee engagement.

In times of economic uncertainty, these advantages make skills-first approaches especially crucial, equipping businesses with the economic resilience and competitive edge needed to thrive.

Bridging the Gap: Turning Skills-First Commitment into Real Progress

While employers are increasingly committed to moving beyond degree-based hiring, true progress requires bridging persistent gaps between intention and application. To drive meaningful change, organizations need to align job postings with actual hiring practices. Many employers struggle to maintain skills-first standards across the board: while 37% of companies have successfully increased hiring of talent without four-year degrees, the majority—about 63%— have made limited progress or have regressed after initial efforts.

Another gap lies in the reliance on traditional hiring practices by individual hiring managers. Even when a degree is no longer required, hiring managers often default to using educational qualifications as a proxy for durable (soft) skills, particularly when under pressure to fill roles quickly.

This underscores the need for organizations to embed skills-first criteria into hiring processes, training and evaluation criteria to avoid undermining their commitment to inclusive hiring.

Furthermore, a lack of institutional support and process reform limit the sustainability of skills-first practices. Initial strides are often short-lived if core systems, leadership priorities and hiring processes aren't fully aligned with the skills-first approach. To bridge this gap, companies must go beyond revising job requirements, transforming mindsets and practices across all levels to build lasting pathways for talent without four-year degrees.

Real Case Studies, Proven Results

Many organizations are successfully turning their skills-first commitments into transformative action. By reimagining hiring processes, actively addressing biases, and investing in targeted improvements, these companies highlight the tangible power and potential of a skills-first approach. Their journeys serve as real-world examples of how intentional changes can bridge hiring gaps and create meaningful opportunities for talent without four-year degrees.

Case 1.

Cisco

Before joining the OneTen coalition as a founding member in 2020, [Cisco](#) almost exclusively hired talent with four-year degrees. Upon joining the coalition, Cisco committed to a skills-first transformation to drive equity and inclusivity in its hiring approach. Here are their lessons for turning vision into action:

- **Understand and Communicate Your “Why”**

An established values-driven company, Cisco leadership examined its role in advancing workforce equity and addressing challenges for underrepresented employees. Earlier initiatives, such as Cisco’s “12 Actions for Social Justice” launched in 2020, laid the groundwork for the company’s shift to skills-first hiring, setting the stage for impactful collaboration with OneTen.

- **Empower Leaders with Relevant Experience**

Cisco selected leaders with relevant personal and professional insights in diversity and equity to guide skills-first efforts, ensuring alignment with equity goals and fostering a culture where a four-year degree was no longer viewed as a determinant of success.

- **Secure Budget and Engage Stakeholders Early**

Upon joining OneTen, Cisco leadership made the decision to centralize funding for the program and conducted a comprehensive roadshow to build buy-in across senior leadership and hiring managers, promoting shared commitment to skills-first hiring.

- **Partner with Hiring Managers**

Cisco worked closely with hiring managers, educating them on valuing skills over traditional credentials. Managers received guidance on crafting skills-first job descriptions and equitable interview practices.

- **Prioritize the Needs of New Talent**

Cisco introduced cohort-based hiring for skills-first talent to foster community and belonging. Skills-first hires benefited from additional onboarding, ongoing training and frequent check-ins to support their first year.

- **Measure Results and Adjust as Needed**

Cisco tracked key metrics such as retention and promotions, finding that OneTen hires achieved a 96% retention rate and strong promotion outcomes. They monitored skills alignment to ensure hires had room to grow, adjusting placements as needed to avoid turnover.

Cisco’s skills-first approach not only enhanced talent retention but opened pathways for career growth based on skills and potential. Their experience and outcomes reveal that an unobstructed vision and an intentional approach, along with commitment, passion and collaboration, will lead to success.

Case 2.

Cleveland Clinic

In December 2020, amid Ohio’s economic challenges and a widening racial wage gap, [Cleveland Clinic](#) made a bold commitment to build, scale, and sustain a skills-first culture that would provide equitable career pathways for talent. As a founding member of the OneTen coalition, Cleveland Clinic partnered with OneTen to advance this mission through targeted actions and transformative practices:

- **Recredential Roles**

Using OneTen’s guidelines to determine which roles to target, Cleveland Clinic re-credentialled or rewrote more than 260 job descriptions to remove unnecessary four-year degree requirements and to rephrase the necessary and desired skills for the roles.

- **Listen to The Community**

The Clinic prioritized rebuilding connections with the local community through grassroots efforts by engaging directly with community members and talent developers and hosting career expos.

- **Create Career Mobility Through Apprenticeship Programs**

To create a strategic talent pipeline for full-time hires, Cleveland Clinic launched apprenticeship programs. These apprenticeships provided opportunities for individuals to gain new skills, build professional networks and secure full-time employment.

- **Provide Talent with Ongoing Support and Training**

Cleveland Clinic provided robust support for program participants including executive sponsorship and mentorship. The company also focused on removing barriers such as transit and childcare, which were identified as hurdles to talent retention.

The results were significant – By 2021, Cleveland Clinic had hired and promoted over 1,600 individuals from the OneTen talent pool, successfully creating more inclusive career pathways and achieving higher retention rates among non-degreed workers.

Case 3.

U.S. Department of the Interior

The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) traditionally relied on self-assessment questionnaires and resume reviews for hiring, with only a 50% success rate in candidate selection. In May 2022, DOI implemented a more skill-centric approach allowing candidates to demonstrate their skills through validated assessments. This approach created a more equitable and effective candidate selection process, allowing candidates to showcase their skills directly, reducing reliance on degrees, educational background, and self-reported skills.

- **Education and training**

The DOI educated its workforce through providing webinars, training sessions and industry demos alongside an Assessment Practices Guide detailing foundational assessment methods.

- **Policy and process development**

The agency updated hiring policies to shift away from self-assessments to skills-based assessments and introduced an automated online assessment platform.

- **Stakeholder engagement**

To ensure stakeholder input across DOI's bureaus, the agency conducted regular meetings with an assessment working group alongside listening sessions and town halls.

- **Monitoring and evaluation**

The DOI conducted an agency-wide evaluation to monitor progress and refine the hiring process, ensuring alignment with the initiative's goals.

These real-world examples illustrate the tangible impact of a skills-first approach, showing how companies have not only increased hiring efficiency and talent retention but also strengthened their workforce resilience and adaptability. While the shift to skills-based hiring presents challenges, these organizations have demonstrated that with a structured approach, it's possible to transform hiring practices to meet business demands, address talent shortages and achieve measurable outcomes.

10 Best Practices for Effectively Implementing a Skills-First Strategy

Building on these insights, we have outlined 10 best practices to help organizations effectively adopt and sustain a skills-first strategy. By leveraging proven strategies and tools, companies can overcome common obstacles and unlock the full potential of a skills-first transformation.

	Action and Rationale
1. Articulate the Vision for a Skills-First Strategy	Develop a compelling narrative that clarifies why skills-first hiring is essential for the organization's future, addressing issues such as skills gaps and outdated hiring practices.
2. Recredential Jobs and Establish a Skills Framework	Use OneTen's best practices checklist to recredential jobs to align with evolving skill demands. This involves developing a clear skills strategy assessing critical skills, leveraging technology for skills mapping, creating flexible career pathways, and fostering a culture of continuous learning. Research from OneTen indicates that skills-first job descriptions outperform traditional, credential-based job descriptions on key metrics including: candidates' likelihood to apply, clarity of qualifications listed, and perceived ability to meet job qualifications, which boost application rates.
3. Establish the Role of Technology	Highlight how technology, including skills mapping software, skills-focused applicant tracking systems (ATS), and AI-driven assessment tools, can streamline skills-first hiring.
4. Engage Key Stakeholders Early in the Process	Form a cross-functional team with HR, hiring managers, and department heads to co-create the skills-first process, incorporating regular feedback to address stakeholder concerns and build alignment. Engaging key stakeholders early in the process helps to build buy-in and reduce resistance.

	Action and Rationale
5. Clearly Communicate the Benefits of Skills-First Practices	Develop communication strategies tailored to different audiences within the organization such as senior leadership, HR teams and general employees highlighting the specific benefits for each group. Be transparent about the steps involved in the transition, what changes will be made and how they will impact current hiring practices. <u>Research</u> shows that clear and frequent communication is linked to more successful change management outcomes.
6. Provide Training and Development	Offer ongoing, specialized training for HR teams and <u>hiring managers</u> on assessing skills, including techniques like durable skills assessments, structured interviews, and simulations. <u>Studies</u> emphasize that equipping employees with these essential skills contributes directly to successful change adoption.
7. Pilot the Skills-First Initiative	Run a pilot to test the approach, gather insights, address challenges, and refine the process before a <u>full rollout</u> . Pilots allow for regular <u>evaluation</u> , ensuring the initiative meets objectives and is well-adapted to organizational needs.
8. Proactively Anticipate and Address Resistance	Identify sources of resistance, such as <u>concerns about durable skills, also known as soft-skills</u> among candidates without four-year degrees. Address them with additional training, support, and <u>case studies</u> of successful outcomes. <u>Research</u> shows that proactively addressing resistance helps “unfreeze” old habits, encouraging adoption of new practices.
9. Measure, Learn and Refine	Establish <u>key performance indicators (KPIs)</u> to monitor the success of the skills-first strategy and adapt the process based on the results. This continuous improvement approach ensures the strategy remains relevant and aligned with changing organizational needs.
10. Reinforce the Change	Celebrate short-term wins in the shift to skills-first hiring. Embed skills assessments into career development processes, such as management and career progression systems, to reinforce their significance. Leverage OneTen change management tools and OneTen's Communities of Practice and Learning Communities to connect with peers and stay informed on the latest effective strategies for skills-first transformation.

At OneTen, we're driving a skills-first movement to unlock career opportunities for talent without four-year degrees.

We create skills-first strategies and solutions that help companies build – and retain – a winning workforce. To learn more, visit:

oneten.org/skills-first

