

The majority of Americans lack a college degree. Why do so many employers require one?

Auguste, Byron . The Washington Post (Online) , Washington, D.C.: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post. Jul 20, 2021.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

While companies scramble to find talent amid perceived "skills gaps" and "labor shortages," their job postings exclude millions of qualified Americans. These applicants do not face this dispiriting experience because of race, ethnicity, gender, age or disability –these reasons would be illegal, and rightly so. Instead, they are excluded because they're among the roughly two-thirds of U.S. workers who lack a bachelor's degree.

Employers will never discover their aptitudes and mind-sets since they screen out these applicants before assessing their skills. Degree discrimination is not illegal, but it is a damaging bias that's blinding companies to talent they need and reinforcing existing economic inequalities.

It wasn't always this way. In 1971, my father left his job as a factory shipping clerk to study computer programming for six months. He had no technology experience, never worked in an office and dropped out of college. But a company allowed him to shadow a colleague on the job, tested his skills and hired him as a junior programmer. His career change launched our family firmly into the American middle class. Despite the discrimination my father faced as a Black man in 1971, the lack of a bachelor's degree didn't stand in his way. Fast forward 50 years to today, and my father likely would not have the same opportunity.

Employers have been sleepwalking into a system that screens out the majority of workers, including millions of people who possess sought-after skills. As applications per job listing surged with the rise of online job-searching, employers looked for automated ways to screen applicants. Upcoming research by Joseph Fuller of Harvard Business School shows how little thought often goes into the process, as "requirements" are habitually cut and pasted from one job description to the next.

College-degree discrimination has become so widespread that many take it for granted. Almost three-quarters of new jobs from 2007 to 2016 were roles in which most employers typically "require" bachelor's degrees –but fewer than 4 in 10 American workers have that credential. Going to war against arithmetic is a bad idea, and our post-pandemic skilled-worker shortage is a wake-up call.

Requiring a medical degree to treat patients or a civil engineering degree to design a bridge is common sense. By contrast, requiring a generic college degree to be considered for jobs such as office manager, sales representative, digital marketer or data-center technician may be common, but it makes no sense.

Some say a bachelor's degree signals cognitive skills, commitment and a capacity to learn. However, college is not the only way to learn, nor the only source of skills. Our workforce includes more than 70 million workers who don't have bachelor's degrees but who are "skilled through alternative routes," or STARS. Some of these unconventional paths include military service, certificate programs and community college. Mostly, STARS learn by doing, on the job.

We all witnessed the commitment and ingenuity of essential workers during the covid-19 pandemic; two-thirds of these workers are STARS. Employers spend time and money to recruit college-educated workers who might have the required degree and skills while overlooking STARS who could do those very same jobs.

These three seemingly innocuous words –"bachelor's degree required" –are causing serious damage to our

workers and economy. The damage falls hardest on Black, Latino and rural workers —screening for bachelor's degrees excludes nearly 80 percent of Latino workers, almost 70 percent of African Americans and more than 70 percent of rural Americans across all backgrounds. The impact is particularly damaging for midmarket and smaller businesses, which struggle to find workers while the highest-profile companies poach pedigreed employees from one another and from their own suppliers and customers. Blocking advancement for such a large part of our workforce is economically toxic.

Smart employers are taking notice, reworking job descriptions to focus on relevant skills, not how those skills were gained. For example, IBM's New Collar jobs initiative removed degree barriers and opened up thousands of jobs based on skills. Companies pledging racial inclusion in hiring are realizing that to attract and develop a more diverse workforce, they must move beyond sending a "virtue signal" to sending a clear "skills signal," with emphasis on talent and relevant experience over degrees.

Even online job platforms may be changing. LinkedIn's CEO, Ryan Roslansky, recently committed to piloting skills-based tools to encourage accessible paths to high-paying jobs and to meet the demands of today's economy. Last month, the Biden administration issued an executive order advancing inclusive hiring within the federal government, our single largest employer.

Let's hope the exclusionary, degree-based hiring is destined for the ash heap of history. The skills gap is an opportunity gap in disguise. Employers played a leading role in building it, but they can also lead in dismantling and replacing it.

Byron Auguste is the CEO of Opportunity@Work and served as deputy director of the National Economic Council from 2013 to 2015.

DETAILS

Subject:	Higher education; Workers; Hiring; Employers; Cognition & reasoning; Pandemics; Community colleges; COVID-19; Workforce
Business indexing term:	Subject: Workers Hiring Employers Workforce
Publication title:	The Washington Post (Online); Washington, D.C.
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Jul 20, 2021
Section:	Opinions
Publisher:	WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post
Place of publication:	Washington, D.C.
Country of publication:	United States, Washington, D.C.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	26419599
Source type:	Blogs, Podcasts, & Websites

Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Opinions, Commentary
ProQuest document ID:	2553409326
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/majority-americans-lack-college-degree-why-do-so/docview/2553409326/se-2?accountid=44910
Copyright:	Copyright WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post Jul 20, 2021
Last updated:	2021-07-22
Database:	U.S. Major Dailies

Database copyright © 2021 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)