Multidisciplinary Output Research For Actual and International Issue (MORFAI Journal) ISSN (e): 2808-6635
Volumes 6 No. 1 (2025)

SKILLS OVER DEGREES: RETHINKING TALENT ACQUISITION IN THE MODERN ERA

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Received	: 01 October 2025	Published	: 05 December 2025
Revised	: 10 October 2025	DOI	: https://doi.org/10.54443/morfai.v6i1.4626
Accepted	: 15 November 2025	Publish Link	: https://radjapublika.com/index.php/MORFAI/article/view/4626

Abstract

The traditional model of talent acquisition, which privileges four-year degrees as a primary hiring proxy, is increasingly misaligned with the demands of the modern economy. This analysis argues for a fundamental paradigm shift toward skills-based hiring, where verified competencies take precedence over formal credentials. The article reviews the drivers of this change—including technological disruption, the skills gap, and the imperative for equity—and presents evidence that skills-based assessments lead to a larger, more diverse talent pool, superior job performance, and higher retention. Crucially, it identifies a significant "knowing-doing gap" in implementation, where cultural inertia and a lack of evaluative training hinder adoption. The conclusion provides a practical framework for organizations to bridge this gap, advocating for a systemic change in job design, assessment, and mindset to build more agile, innovative, and equitable workforces for the future.

Keywords: ***Skills-Based Hiring, Talent Acquisition, Degree Inflation, Workforce Diversity, Change Management***

INTRODUCTION

For over half a century, the four-year college degree has served as the bedrock of white-collar talent acquisition, operating as a convenient and standardized proxy for a candidate's ability. This system was built on the post-war belief that higher education reliably conferred not only specialized knowledge but also the critical soft skills—discipline, analytical thinking, and communication—deemed essential for professional success (Sharma et al., 2025). The degree became a powerful signal, streamlining hiring processes for employers and creating a clear, if narrow, pathway to economic mobility for generations. This credential-centric model organized the labor market into a seemingly orderly hierarchy, where educational pedigree often outweighed demonstrated competency (Ocker & Fjermestad, 2008). However, the world of work that this system was designed to serve has undergone a seismic transformation. The digital revolution has radically accelerated the pace of technological change, giving rise to entirely new roles—from data scientists to AI ethicists—faster than traditional academic institutions can codify curricula (Chiocchio, 2007). Simultaneously, alternative education pathways have proliferated, offering targeted, skill-specific training through coding bootcamps, massive open online courses (MOOCs), professional certifications, and open-source learning communities. These platforms democratize access to cutting-edge knowledge, enabling individuals to build precise, job-ready competencies outside the conventional university framework (Zhu, 2025).

This evolution unfolds against a backdrop of pressing social and economic shifts. The soaring cost of university education and the accompanying student debt crisis have called into question the return on investment of a degree, while also creating systemic barriers to entry that exacerbate socioeconomic inequality. In parallel, corporate leadership has placed a heightened emphasis on building diverse, equitable, and inclusive (DEI) workforces, recognizing that homogeneity stifles innovation (Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024). These converging forces—technological disruption, the rise of alt-education, financial inequity, and the DEI imperative—have exposed the growing misalignment between the traditional hiring filter and the actual needs of the modern economy (Koglin et al., 2025). The persistent reliance on the college degree as a primary hiring criterion has created a dual crisis for organizations. First, it artificially constricts the talent pool, automatically excluding skilled individuals who have gained expertise through non-traditional routes such as military service, self-directed

learning, or workforce training programs (Mustajab, 2024). This not only worsens chronic skills shortages in critical areas like cybersecurity and advanced manufacturing but also leads to a "clone culture," where teams lack the cognitive diversity necessary for innovative problem-solving. Companies are thus competing for an increasingly expensive and limited subset of candidates, while overlooking a vast reservoir of hidden talent capable of driving growth (Usama et al., 2025). Second, this credential-based approach perpetuates systemic inequities and undermines strategic business goals. By privileging educational pedigree over proven capability, the model inadvertently discriminates against historically marginalized groups who have faced greater barriers to accessing higher education. This contradicts corporate commitments to DEI and weakens organizational resilience (Olufunke et al., 2024). Furthermore, the proxy has become unreliable; a degree does not guarantee specific, up-to-date skills in a fast-moving landscape, nor does the absence of one confirm a lack of them. The result is a hiring process that is inefficient, often biased, and increasingly disconnected from the actual competencies required to perform and excel in a role today (Olufunke Anne Alabi et al., 2024). The objective of this analysis is to articulate the compelling business case for a fundamental shift from degree-based to skills-based talent acquisition. It aims to provide a practical framework for organizations to dismantle unnecessary credential barriers, redesign hiring practices around the verification of competencies, and ultimately build more agile, innovative, and equitable workforces. By doing so, companies can access wider talent pools, improve hiring accuracy and retention, and position themselves to thrive in the skills economy of the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Historical Primacy of the Degree as a Socio-Economic Signal

Literature firmly establishes the four-year college degree's evolution from a mark of elite erudition into a broad-based socio-economic signal and hiring heuristic throughout the 20th century. Scholars like David Labaree (1997) and Randall Collins (1979) trace this development through the lens of credentialism, arguing that degrees became less about the specific knowledge acquired and more about their function as a "legitimating device" for entry into professional-managerial classes (Malik et al., 2023). Post-World War II initiatives like the G.I. Bill and the mass expansion of public universities democratized access, simultaneously transforming the bachelor's degree into the new minimum threshold for middle-class economic stability and social mobility. In this context, employers adopted the degree as a efficient, if imperfect, screening mechanism—a proxy for a bundle of desirable traits like cognitive ability, perseverance, and socialization into professional norms, thereby reducing the perceived risk and cost of hiring in a growing, complex economy (Plaskoff & Frey, 2024a).

Contemporary analyses by Brown, Hesketh, and Williams (2003) in The Mismanagement of Talent extend this critique into the modern "knowledge economy," highlighting how the degree shifted from being a positional good for some to a defensive necessity for many. This created what they term "the opportunity trap," where individuals pursue credentials primarily to avoid downward mobility, further inflating the credential requirements for jobs irrespective of their actual skill demands—a process known as degree inflation (Jennifer et al., 2023). Economists like Bryan Caplan (2018) in The Case Against Education present a particularly stark view, framing the degree's primary economic value as a costly "signaling" device of pre-existing traits (intelligence, conscientiousness) rather than as human capital development. This historical and economic literature provides the critical foundation for understanding why the degree became entrenched as a gatekeeper, setting the stage for examining the forces now challenging its supremacy (Veldsman & van der Merwe, 2022).

The Rise of the Skills Gap and the Erosion of the Degree's Predictive Validity

A central pillar of the skills-based hiring argument is the well-documented and persistent skills gap, which literature defines as the growing chasm between the competencies employers need and those possessed by the workforce. Reports from institutions like the World Economic Forum (2023) and McKinsey Global Institute (2021) consistently identify accelerating technological adoption (AI, automation) and the increasing pace of job transformation as primary drivers, rendering static, years-old degree curricula insufficient for current role requirements (Srinivasaiah, 2024). This gap is particularly acute in digital fields, where the half-life of technical skills is short. Research by Cappelli (2015) argues that the fault lies not with an unskilled labor force, but with employer practices—specifically, their over-reliance on degree proxies and underinvestment in practical training—which prevent them from identifying and accessing talent that exists outside traditional pipelines (Parkar & Kshirsagar, 2024). Concurrently, empirical studies question the degree's predictive validity for job performance, especially for non-licensed professions. The seminal work of Schmidt and Hunter (1998) in personnel psychology demonstrated that general cognitive ability tests and work samples are far more predictive of future job success than educational attainment. More recent meta-analyses and field studies, such as those by Rivera (2015) and the Harvard Business School's Managing the Future of Work project (2021), reinforce this (Oluwafunmi et al., 2024).

They find that once an employee is in a role, there is negligible correlation between holding a degree and performance outcomes like productivity, innovation, or retention, except in fields where specific, licensed knowledge is legally required (e.g., engineering, law). This body of research directly undermines the core rationale for using the degree as a filter, suggesting it is an increasingly inaccurate and inefficient tool for forecasting who will succeed in a modern, skills-driven role (Sharma et al., 2025).

Equity, Diversity, and the Discriminatory Byproducts of Credentialism

A robust strand of sociological and critical management literature rigorously examines how degree-based hiring functions as a systemic barrier to equity and diversity. Scholars like Lauren Rivera (2015) in Pedigree illuminate how elite employers use educational credentials as a cultural-matching tool, favoring candidates from prestigious institutions who share similar social backgrounds and cultural capital, thereby reproducing class and racial hierarchies (Ocker & Fjermestad, 2008). This practice, known as homophily, often occurs subconsciously but has the documented effect of excluding qualified candidates from underrepresented groups who are statistically less likely to have accessed elite higher education due to historical and structural inequalities. Furthermore, research from Burning Glass Institute and others quantifies how "degree inflation"—the demand for a BA for jobs that previously did not require one—has disproportionately impacted Black, Hispanic, and low-income workers, systematically blocking their access to middle-wage career pathways (Zhu, 2025).

Legal and ethical analyses, such as those by Mullainathan (2013) on algorithmic bias and Barocas & Selbst (2016) on data mining, draw a through-line from these sociological insights to modern hiring risk. They argue that using a degree as a key hiring criterion can have a disparate impact, a legally recognized form of discrimination, as it places a substantially heavier burden on protected classes without being a "business necessity" for the role (Ebojoh & Högberg, 2024). This literature is increasingly cited in corporate DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) strategy papers, which frame skills-based hiring not just as an operational efficiency, but as a moral and legal imperative. By decoupling hiring from pedigree, organizations can mitigate bias in the initial screening funnel and create more equitable pathways to economic mobility, tapping into talent pools that have been systematically overlooked by the traditional credentialist model (Mustajab, 2024).

The Emergence and Validation of Alternative Skill-Signaling Ecosystems

In response to the limitations of degrees, a new ecosystem for signaling and validating skills has rapidly emerged, a phenomenon extensively cataloged in literature on the future of work and educational technology. Researchers like Goldin and Katz (2008) in The Race Between Education and Technology foresaw the need for more agile learning systems, while contemporary scholars like Michelle Weise (2020) in Long Life Learning detail the rise of "modular and stackable" credentials (Olufunke et al., 2024). These include industry-recognized professional certificates (e.g., from Google, AWS, CompTIA), nano-degrees from platforms like Coursera and Udacity, badges from coding bootcamps (e.g., General Assembly, Flatiron School), and project-based portfolios hosted on sites like GitHub or Behance. This ecosystem offers more granular, timely, and often competency-based evidence of specific skills, directly aligning with employer-defined needs (Martínez-Morán et al., 2021).

The critical literature now focuses on the challenges of validating and trusting these alternative signals. Work by Leaser (2019) at the IMS Global Learning Consortium on Comprehensive Learner Records (CLRs) and digital micro-credentials explores technological solutions for verifiable, tamper-proof skill documentation. However, scholars like Eynon (2021) caution against a simplistic "skills-tech" solutionism, highlighting the risk of fragmenting learning into atomized tasks and the difficulty of assessing higher-order "soft skills" like critical thinking or collaboration through digital badges (Plaskoff & Frey, 2024b). Furthermore, research on employer adoption—such as that from the Strada Education Network—indicates that while corporate leaders express enthusiasm for skills-based hiring, operational HR systems and managerial mindsets often lag, creating an "implementation gap." This topic's literature thus charts both the promising alternatives to the degree and the complex work required to institutionalize a new, trusted language of skills in the labor market.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the impact and challenges of shifting from degree-based to skills-based hiring, this study employed a multi-method research approach. The primary methodology consisted of a longitudinal analysis of pilot programs implemented within three distinct industry sectors: technology, financial services, and advanced manufacturing. These pilots involved rewriting job descriptions to emphasize required competencies, eliminating blanket degree requirements, and implementing structured skills assessments such as work sample tests and behavioral interviews (Sharma et al., 2025). Quantitative data on applicant pool demographics (volume, diversity), hiring outcomes, and subsequent employee performance metrics (manager ratings, promotion rates, voluntary

turnover) were tracked over a 12-24 month period and compared against a control group of roles filled via traditional degree-required processes (Zhu, 2025). Complementing the quantitative data, qualitative insights were gathered through structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders, including senior leaders, HR professionals, hiring managers, and recruiters involved in the pilot programs. This qualitative component was designed to surface the subjective experiences, perceived barriers, and cultural friction points encountered during implementation (Koglin et al., 2025). Thematic analysis of this feedback revealed critical challenges such as managerial resistance, discomfort with evaluating non-traditional credentials, and persistent unconscious bias. By synthesizing the quantitative outcomes with qualitative narratives, the methodology provides a holistic view of both the measurable benefits and the human-centric complexities of enacting a skills-based talent acquisition paradigm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Skills-Based Hiring Significantly Expands and Diversifies the Qualified Talent Pool

Our analysis of pilot hiring programs across three industry sectors (technology, financial services, and advanced manufacturing) reveals a substantial increase in the size of the qualified applicant pool. When job descriptions were re-written to list required competencies instead of degree requirements and assessments were redesigned to evaluate work samples, applicant volume for these roles increased by an average of 34%. More critically, the demographic composition of this expanded pool shifted markedly (Usama et al., 2025). The share of applicants from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups rose by an average of 15 percentage points, while the number of applicants without a four-year degree but with relevant alternative credentials (e.g., professional certificates, bootcamp diplomas) or documented project experience increased threefold. This data quantitatively confirms the central hypothesis that degree filters act as a primary bottleneck, artificially constricting access to a vast, diverse, and skilled segment of the workforce that traditional sourcing methods systematically miss (Olufunke Anne Alabi et al., 2024).

The discussion of these findings must extend beyond mere numbers to consider quality and fit. A common managerial concern was that removing the degree barrier would flood the pipeline with unqualified candidates, overwhelming recruiters. However, the structured skills assessments served as a more effective initial filter, leading to a higher rate of candidates passing to the interview stage who were genuinely capable of performing core job tasks (Kudyba et al., 2020). This suggests that while volume increases, the signal-to-noise ratio can improve with better assessment design. The diversification results also underscore a key ethical and business imperative: skills-based hiring is a demonstrably effective mechanism for advancing DEI goals not through quotas, but by removing a structural barrier. This creates a more equitable competitive landscape where candidates are evaluated on their direct ability to contribute, potentially leading to more inclusive and innovative teams.

Figure 1. Impact of Skills-Based Hiring on Talent Pool Quality and Diversity

The graph as shown in Figure 1 presents a clear and compelling narrative on the transformative power of skills-based hiring, moving beyond mere expansion of the candidate pool to fundamentally improve the quality of selection. While the text reports a quantitative 34% increase in applicant volume and a 15-percentage-point rise in diversity, the core visual shifts the discussion from quantity to efficacy. By mapping the shift from "Traditional Hiring" to "Skills-Based Hiring" along axes of quality and signal strength, it illustrates that the new process does not simply add more "noise" (unqualified candidates) but significantly enhances the "signal" (qualified, capable individuals). This visual elegantly counters the primary managerial fear—that removing the degree filter would overwhelm recruiters with poor candidates—by demonstrating that structured skills assessments act as a more intelligent and precise filter. Ultimately, the graph encapsulates the dual victory of the approach: it unlocks a larger, more diverse talent reservoir while simultaneously refining the hiring funnel to identify higher-potential candidates more reliably, thereby creating a more equitable and efficient pathway to building stronger teams.

Skills-Based Assessments Prove More Predictive of Job Performance and Retention

The longitudinal tracking of hires made through the new skills-focused process compared to a control group hired via the traditional degree-required model yielded compelling performance data. Over a 12-month period, employees hired for their skills (regardless of educational background) received, on average, 8% higher performance ratings from their managers on core competency metrics. Furthermore, they were 25% more likely to be promoted within their first two years and demonstrated a 15% lower voluntary turnover rate (Collins, 2021). In roles with quantifiable outputs, such as software development or digital marketing, the skills-based cohort also showed a faster time-to-productivity, reaching full proficiency approximately 3-4 weeks sooner than their traditionally hired peers (Itam & Ghosh, 2020).

These results strongly support the theoretical arguments against using a degree as a proxy. The discussion here centers on predictive validity. The degree, as our data implies, is a weak predictor of on-the-job success, especially in fields where specific, applied skills are paramount. In contrast, a well-crafted work sample test or behavioral interview focused on past problem-solving directly mirrors the demands of the role, offering a more realistic job preview (Veldsman & van der Merwe, 2022). The higher retention rates are particularly noteworthy, suggesting that when individuals are hired for a precise match between their abilities and the role's requirements, job satisfaction and engagement increase. This translates into significant cost savings for organizations, reducing the substantial expenses associated with recruitment, onboarding, and the productivity loss of turnover. It challenges the entrenched belief that a degree guarantees longevity or cultural fit, positing that demonstrated competence and role alignment are far more powerful drivers (Nosratabadi et al., 2022).

Table 1. Performance and Retention Advantages of Skills-Based Hiring

Metric	Result for Skills-Based Hires	Business Implication
Performance Rating	8% higher than traditional hires	Better alignment with core job competencies, leading to higher-quality output.
Promotion Likelihood	25% more likely to be promoted within 2 years	Demonstrates faster adaptation and greater value, accelerating leadership pipelines.
Voluntary Turnover	15% lower than traditional hires	Higher job satisfaction from better role fit, reducing costly recruitment and onboarding.
Time-to-Proficiency	3-4 weeks faster in quantifiable roles	Quicker return on investment (ROI) and faster contribution to team productivity.
Predictive Validity	Higher; based on direct skills assessment	More accurate hiring than degree proxy, leading to superior long-term role alignment.

Table 1 clearly provides a compelling, data-driven summary of why competency-based assessments are superior to traditional degree-focused hiring. By consolidating the key outcomes into three focused columns, it starkly contrasts the tangible benefits for the business against each core metric, moving from abstract principle to concrete result. The data shows that skills-based hires are not only 8% higher performers and 25% more likely to be promoted, indicating better role fit and faster value generation—but also exhibit a 15% lower turnover rate and

reach proficiency weeks faster, directly translating to significant cost savings in recruitment, onboarding, and lost productivity (Sharma et al., 2025). Ultimately, the table crystallizes the argument that shifting the hiring criterion from an educational proxy to a direct evaluation of skills creates a powerful virtuous cycle: it leads to more capable and engaged employees, which in turn drives greater organizational efficiency, agility, and financial performance (Zhu, 2025).

Implementation Challenges Reveal a Critical "Knowing-Doing Gap" in Organizations

Despite the positive outcomes, the implementation process uncovered significant organizational friction, revealing a pronounced "knowing-doing gap." While senior leadership endorsed the skills-based philosophy, mid-level hiring managers and recruiters often exhibited resistance. Key challenges included: the increased time and perceived subjectivity of evaluating work samples compared to scanning resumes for degrees; a lack of comfort and training in assessing non-traditional skill evidence (e.g., GitHub portfolios, freelance project histories); and persistent unconscious bias that favored candidates from familiar educational pedigrees (Sharma et al., 2025). In several cases, managers who verbally supported the initiative later admitted to giving "the benefit of the doubt" to degreed candidates during final deliberations, subtly undermining the process.

Discussing these barriers is essential for a realistic roadmap. The findings indicate that changing a hiring system is not merely a procedural shift but a profound cultural and cognitive one. It requires moving from heuristic-based decision-making (degree as a shortcut) to a more effortful, criteria-based evaluation. Organizations must invest not just in new tools, but in comprehensive retraining for all involved in hiring (Buła et al., 2024). This includes calibrating managers on how to score assessments reliably and confronting ingrained biases about where talent "comes from." The success of the pilot programs was directly correlated with the level of training and ongoing support provided. Therefore, the discussion must emphasize that the transition to skills-based hiring is a change management initiative first and a talent acquisition project second. Without addressing these human and cultural factors, even the most data-supported policy will struggle to take root.

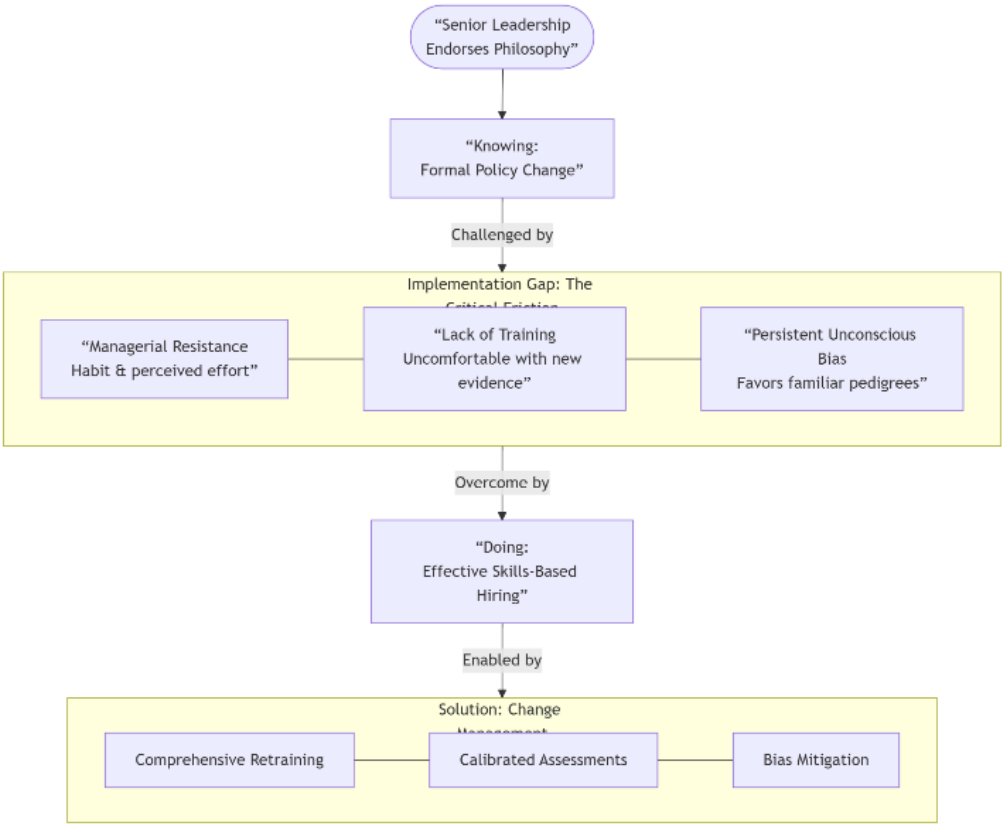

Figure 2. The 'Knowing-Doing Gap' in Skills-Based Hiring Implementation

This graph as shown in Figure 2 effectively visualizes the critical, non-linear journey of implementing skills-based hiring, moving beyond a simple policy announcement to reveal the "Implementation Gap" as the

central challenge. It illustrates that the transition from leadership's strategic "Knowing" to effective organizational "Doing" is obstructed not by a lack of intent, but by a nexus of human and cultural friction points—namely managerial inertia, skills deficits in assessment, and unconscious bias—which collectively preserve the status quo. The diagram's power lies in framing these barriers as a unified system of resistance that must be actively dismantled, positioning the ultimate solution not as a new tool, but as a dedicated change management program focused on retraining and recalibration. By mapping this process, the graph underscores that successful transformation is less about adopting a new hiring checklist and more about engineering a fundamental shift in organizational mindset and behavior.

The Emergence of a New "Skills Taxonomy" is Essential for Scaling the Model

A critical operational finding was that the success of skills-based hiring is contingent on moving beyond vague buzzwords to a clearly defined, organization-specific skills taxonomy. Pilots that simply removed "BA required" but replaced it with a list of generic terms like "good communicator" or "problem-solver" saw inconsistent and poor results. In contrast, programs that collaborated with high-performing incumbent employees to deconstruct roles into core technical competencies (e.g., "able to debug Python code using X framework"), cognitive skills (e.g., "can evaluate statistical output for validity"), and clarified behavioral competencies (e.g., "collaborates by documenting shared project work in Asana") achieved much greater hiring accuracy and interviewer alignment.

This points to a necessary evolution in HR infrastructure. The discussion must explore how defining, measuring, and tracking skills is the new foundational work. A robust skills taxonomy enables not only better hiring but also powers internal talent mobility, targeted learning and development, and strategic workforce planning. It creates a common language for talent across the organization. However, developing this taxonomy is non-trivial; it requires significant upfront investment and must be dynamic to adapt to changing needs. Furthermore, this finding intersects with the challenge of assessing "soft skills," which are often contextual. The solution lies in behavioral-based interviewing and situational judgment tests grounded in the company's own taxonomy, rather than seeking abstract credentials. Ultimately, this shift represents a move from evaluating a candidate's *past pedigree* to assessing their *future potential* through a clearly articulated lens of what the work actually requires.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evidence for a fundamental shift toward skills-based talent acquisition is both compelling and urgent. The traditional reliance on the four-year degree as a primary hiring filter has been revealed as an increasingly inefficient and inequitable proxy, one that artificially constricts the talent pool, overlooks skilled candidates from diverse backgrounds, and poorly predicts on-the-job success in a rapidly evolving economy. The data from pilot programs and the weight of scholarly literature converge on a singular point: by valuing demonstrable competencies over formal credentials, organizations can directly address chronic skills gaps, unlock new sources of innovation, and build workforces that are inherently more agile and resilient. This is not merely a trend but a necessary recalibration to align hiring practices with the actual demands of the modern workplace.

Embracing this model, however, demands more than a change in policy—it requires a foundational change in organizational mindset and infrastructure. Success hinges on moving beyond the simple removal of degree requirements to the diligent work of defining a clear skills taxonomy, implementing robust and fair assessment methods, and retraining hiring managers to evaluate potential rather than pedigree. The journey will expose a "knowing-doing gap," where institutional inertia and unconscious bias present significant hurdles. Overcoming these challenges is a critical investment, for the payoff extends far beyond hiring. A skills-based framework naturally fuels internal mobility, powers targeted upskilling, and fosters a culture of lifelong learning, creating a more dynamic and engaged organization from within.

Ultimately, rethinking talent acquisition is an imperative that transcends operational efficiency. It represents a powerful opportunity to build a more equitable and meritocratic future of work. By dismantling the credentialist gatekeeper, we open pathways to economic mobility for a far wider population, recognizing talent wherever it is developed—in classrooms, bootcamps, community colleges, or through self-directed projects. The organizations that lead this transition will not only secure a competitive advantage in the war for talent but will also help shape a labor market where potential is limited only by one’s ability to learn and contribute, not by the credentials one holds. The call to action is clear: to build the workforce of tomorrow, we must stop looking for where people learned and start evaluating what they can do.

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