



The Employer Collaborative for Skilled Credentials

2023 Evaluation Summary

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About SHRM Foundation & Jobs for the Future

SHRM Foundation

Founded in 1966, the SHRM Foundation is the 501(c)(3) philanthropic arm of the world's largest HR professional society, SHRM. SHRM represents more than 300,000 HR professionals across the globe, impacting 115 million workers and their families. The SHRM Foundation mobilizes the power of HR for positive social change in the workplace. Its robust resources, meaningful partnerships, and evidence-based programming educate and empower HR professionals to hire diverse talent, build inclusive workplaces, prioritize workplace mental health and wellness, develop, and support the next generation of HR professionals, and help employees find purpose at work and beyond.

Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. JFF does this by designing solutions, scaling best practices, influencing policy and action, and investing in innovation. JFF forges deep partnerships with employers, investors, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and education and workforce development providers to break down barriers and reimagine what's possible.

Executive Summary

Key learnings from the Employer Collaborative for Skilled Credentials can drive the widespread adoption of skilled credentials in the workplace.

Employers today are experiencing rapid shifts in talent needs, driven by factors such as demographic changes, global events, and technological advancements. These transformations necessitate innovative approaches to hiring and upskilling. For example, younger individuals are increasingly skeptical of traditional institutions and are less inclined to pursue degrees as a means of career advancement.¹ Furthermore, the aging population in the United States is resulting in enduring labor shortages that require proactive solutions. In response to these challenges, employers have recognized the potential of short-term (skilled) credentials to accomplish hiring and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) objectives. However, despite the promise of skilled credentials and skills-based talent practices, many organizations face internal barriers that hinder their implementation.

To help address these issues, the Employer Collaborative for Skilled Credentials (ECSC) brought together a diverse cohort of nine employers representing various sizes, geographies, and sectors. With underwriting from the Charles Koch Foundation, the SHRM Foundation (SHRMF), in collaboration and partnership with Jobs for the Future (JFF), created the ECSC to drive the widespread adoption of skilled credentials, also known as non-degree credentials, in the workplace. Over the course of the eight-month program, employers implemented and tested interventions to identify effective strategies for promoting skills credential adoption and advancing skills-based talent practices across their organizations.

Key Findings

- **Employer Background:** Employers with existing initiatives surrounding non-traditional hiring and advancement, as well as those with champions who had capacity and influence, encountered the fewest roadblocks in skilled credential adoption. Large employers faced more change-management related roadblocks, while small employers faced more capacity related road blocks.
- **Facilitators and Barriers:** Focusing on one department (especially IT) with hiring or retention challenges, then leveraging company data to change hearts and minds proved crucial to skilled credential adoption. Though cultural norms and perceptions of skilled credentials sometimes created barriers, companies found that focusing on upskilling internal talent before addressing recruitment and hiring often helped mitigate these challenges.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/why-more-americans-are-skipping-college>

- **ECSC Program Model:** Individualized coaching and project support proved to be the most valuable ECSC supports, providing employers with thought partnership, accountability and extra capacity. While employers requested more opportunities to collaborate, virtual group meetings were often difficult to attend and could have been more effective with the addition of content summaries beforehand reflections afterward.

Key Outcomes

Through the ECSC, employers collectively achieved the following outcomes:

- 101 jobs were made more accessible for people with skilled credentials.
- 423 current employees were impacted.
- 11 new career pathways were created.
- 11 job postings were revised.
- 139 staff members in 52 departments were engaged.
- 142 applicants were impacted.

At the end of the program, participating employers reported an increase in positive perceptions and behaviors related to skilled credentials and expectations that this change can continue to shape the future.

Key Recommendations

For future employer collaboratives.

- Employers recommended adding more opportunities for **peer support**, such as a buddy system or an online space for collaboration and discussion.
- Future employer collaboratives should provide **clarity** around time commitment, supports employers will receive, and the wide variety of available project options at the beginning of the program to help ease concerns about capacity.

For employers.

- **Establish a champion or team of champions** and measure their readiness for leading a major change initiative. Readiness is a combination of capacity, influence, and resilience.
- **Measure company readiness** through outreach to HR and operational leadership, inventorying existing initiatives that could be leveraged, and gathering feedback on talent management challenges. This preparation process should inform where in the HR lifecycle companies can begin skilled credential adoption for maximum impact.
- **Start small by identifying a single department** with a felt talent management need that could be addressed through skilled credential adoption. Choosing a department with more familiarity surrounding skilled credentials is also an advantage (e.g. there is often more existing knowledge and acceptance of skilled credentials among IT leaders).
- **Use turnover, performance, promotion, and DE&I data** to change hearts and minds of key stakeholders. Continue to collect this data throughout skilled credential adoption to demonstrate impact and make the case for future scaling.

- **Adapt project plans to evolving organizational dynamics and priorities**, centering change management considerations at every juncture.
- **Reference the SHRM Skilled Credentials Action Planner** for additional strategies and tools for successful skilled credential adoption. The Action Planner will be released in Summer 2023.

ECSC – Program Background

The ECSC was a unique pilot program that convened, educated, and supported employers seeking to further their adoption of skilled credentials.

Previous research conducted by SHRM highlighted that human resource (HR) professionals, hiring managers, and executives see potential for **short-term (skilled) credentials** to help meet their talent needs and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. Skilled credentials also help workers, especially untapped talent groups, demonstrate an industry-approved level of skill and expertise without a degree through certificates, licenses, and digital badges. Despite recognizing the potential of these credentials, many employers face organizational behaviors and perceptions that hinder the adoption of skilled credentials in their talent practices.

To address these challenges, SHRMF and JFF partnered to establish the Employer Collaborative for Skilled Credentials (ECSC). Through the ECSC, SHRMF and JFF partnered with a diverse cohort of nine employers of various sizes and sectors to test interventions for adopting skilled credentials within their workplaces. The program aimed to:

- Support a cohort of employers in executing an **action learning project** focused on implementing skilled credentials at different stages of the employee lifecycle.
- Activate a network of industry leaders ready to champion the long-term advancement of skilled credentials.
- Identify actionable recommendations for other HR practitioners regarding interventions, conditions, and support systems conducive to skilled credential adoption.

At the program kickoff in September 2022, employers worked with SHRMF and JFF coaches to identify an action learning project tailored to their organization's needs, goals, and readiness level. As they executed their action learning projects, employers received comprehensive coaching, including bi-weekly calls, resource sharing, project management and data analysis support. Monthly meetings provided opportunities for knowledge exchange among ECSC participants, as well as subject matter experts. The program concluded in April 2023 with a virtual finale, during which employers presented their project outcomes and outlined plans for sustained skilled credential implementation beyond the program.

Program Components

The ECSC pilot was comprised of a holistic set of services and activities to support employers in furthering skilled credential adoption within their organizations through action learning projects (see Table 1).

Table 1. ECSC Timeline

| Activity | Timeline | Description |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Project Kickoff | September 2022 | Hybrid daylong kickoff event familiarizing ECSC employers with key concepts and research surrounding skilled credentials, as well as facilitating collective brainstorming on action learning project topics |
| Coaching Calls | September 2022- April 2023, Biweekly | Regular touchpoint on action learning project progress, allowing ECSC coaches to provide thought partnership and accountability |
| Action Learning Project Support | September 2022 – April 2023, As Needed | Extra capacity and expertise provided by ECSC coaches in the form of tools, templates, and project management support |
| Community of Practice | October 2022 – April 2023, Monthly | Monthly sessions connecting ECSC employers to subject matters experts and providing a forum for collaboration on action learning projects |
| Data Analysis Support | January 2023 – April 2023, As Needed | Assistance analyzing baseline data and developing an evaluation plan to measure project impact |

Evaluation Design

To better understand successes and challenges associated with the ECSC, JFF conducted a series of evaluation activities to answer questions regarding ECSC processes and outcomes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Evaluation Questions by Project Area

| Project Area | Evaluation Questions |
|---------------------------|--|
| Employer Background | Who are the employers who participated in the ECSC? What experiences do employers have in adopting alternative routes to hiring? How did employer background impact success around their Action Learning Projects? |
| Facilitators and Barriers | What approaches were implemented in action learning projects? What were the challenges and facilitators of implementing these approaches? |
| Outcome | What were the self-reported changes employers experienced from participating in the pilot? What were the outcomes of the action learning projects? |
| Collaborative | What did employers find most useful about the collaborative? How could it improve ? How can an employer collaborative scale the adoption of skilled credentials? |

To answer these questions, the research team conducted qualitative and quantitative data collection activities (see Table 3).

Table 3. Evaluation Questions by Project Area

| Data Collection Activity | Purpose |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Baseline Survey | Survey conducted at the beginning of the pilot measuring attitudes and current practices around skilled credentials and talent management |
| Baseline focus group | Focus group conducted in the second month of the pilot with a sample of employers to better understand current practices and beliefs around skilled credentials |
| Employer Data | Aggregate hiring and employee data collected throughout the pilot that measures baseline indicators around skilled credentials |
| Post-survey | Survey conducted at the end of the pilot measuring change in employers' attitudes and practices around skilled credentials and collecting feedback on their experience in the program |
| Exit Interviews | Interviews conducted with each employer individually at the end of the pilot to better understand employer experience in the program and how employers intend to sustain changes |
| Industry Interviews | Interviews with non-ECSC employers to provide context for skilled credential adoption in industries beyond those represented in the pilot, including finance, healthcare, and transportation, distribution & logistics |

Employer Data

In addition to data collection activities that were solely evaluation-focused, the project team partnered with employers to collect employee-level data on a variety of workforce indicators. This data fulfilled several purposes by:

- Providing employers a baseline against which they could measure action learning project results and track changes over time (e.g. this data could allow companies to demonstrate higher numbers of employees without degrees over time, or that hiring these employees increased company diversity).
- Supporting employers in building their business case for skilled credential adoption (e.g. this data helped employers demonstrate that performance is not necessarily tied to education level).
- Allowing JFF to identify unique and unifying trends across employer outcomes, workforce compositions, and data collection practices.

Table 4 details the metrics the JFF team requested by employee lifecycle phase.

Table 4. Employer Data Metrics

| Phase | Data Point |
|--------------------------|--|
| Preparing to hire | Breakdown of current workforce by race, gender, and educational attainment level (4 year degree, 2 year degree, credential, or high school degree or equivalent) |
| | Any concrete DEIA+ goals and status toward them |
| Recruit | Breakdown of total applicant pool by race, gender, educational attainment level (4 year degree, 2 year degree, credential, or high school degree or equivalent) |
| Hire | Number of individuals hired in the past year broken down by race, gender, and educational attainment level (4 year degree, 2 year degree, credential, or high school degree or equivalent) |
| Retaining/Growing | Anticipated hiring needs for the coming year (titles removed) broken down by required educational level. |
| | Job performance broken down by race, gender, and educational attainment level (4 year degree, 2 year degree, credential, or high school degree or equivalent) |
| | Catalog of current professional development programs offered and any associated credentials |
| Offboarding | Turnover broken down by race, gender, and educational attainment level (4 year degree, 2 year degree, credential, or high school degree or equivalent) |
| | Number of open positions filled through internal promotion over the past year |

Data Feedback Loops

To validate data, the team continuously shared information gathered through evaluation activities with employers to help identify key findings. This occurred through two key mechanisms:

- Hosting a data party at the project midpoint to outline initial findings and ask for feedback.
- Ongoing conversations with employers about their baseline data and how it fits into their action learning project.

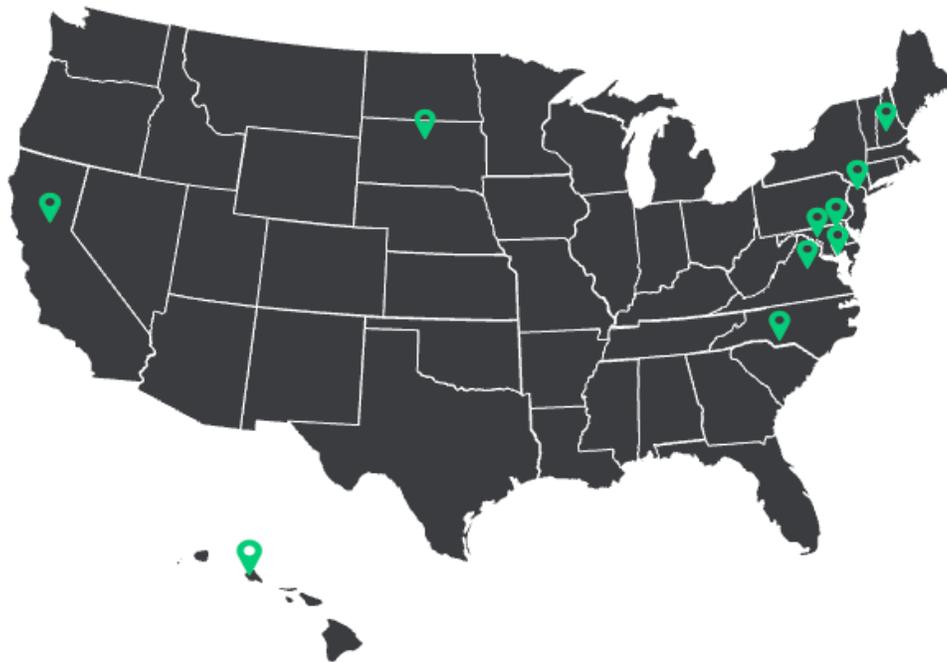
Key Findings

Employer Background

Members of the ECSC represented a diverse range of HR professionals.

Employers in the ECSC represented a range of industries, including manufacturing, tech, utilities, government, and nonprofit. Employers also represented a range of locations across the US (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. ECSC companies represented a range of locations but were mostly concentrated on the East coast.



Employer participants in the ECSC represented a range of roles, including managers, recruiters, directors, and department heads. Employers represented a range of company sizes, from 30 employees to over 100,000. Employer representatives also came with a range of HR experience. Some were in their first year in HR after transitioning from other roles, and others had more than a decade of HR experience.

Many employers had experience in exploring alternative routes to hiring and promoting employees. These previous experiences laid the groundwork for Action Learning Project success.

In the baseline survey and focus group, many employers reported having experience exploring alternative routes to hiring, such as:

- Building training partnerships with community-based organizations that work with specific populations, such as indigenous people and women.
- Developing training programs for individuals with minimal work experience.
- Creating pilot programs to hire two-year college graduates and individuals from the neurodiverse community.

In addition to addressing talent needs, employers appreciated that these initiatives supported company DEI goals. Employers reported wanting greater diversity, including diversity around credentials:

“Diversity is what you don’t have. What we don’t have are these micro credentials... I am thinking of all the talent I could be bringing in a different way. Because if you are credentialed differently, you think differently.”

– ECSC Participant

Throughout their projects and in exit interviews, employers with existing initiatives surrounding non-traditional hiring and advancement reported the fewest roadblocks in adopting skilled credentials. One employer reported already having implemented an Accelerated Mobility program several years ago that allowed employees to upskill and transition to new roles in the company to avoid layoffs. By leveraging data to demonstrate the success of this program, they were better able to make the case for scaling. Another employer had a pre-existing “fellows” program that recruited individuals with high school degrees from the community for a six-month IT apprenticeship at the company. For their action learning project, they were able to leverage this program’s success into creating skills-based career pathways for program graduates in the company’s IT department.

The size of the company impacted project success. Smaller companies had more challenges around capacity but were able to move quickly. Larger companies faced more challenges around change management.

Larger employers faced more change management-related challenges than smaller employers, while smaller employers faced more capacity-related challenges than larger employers. In the exit interviews, one employer from a larger company reported the following:

“We’re shifting organizational priorities. While this is a hot ticket issue from my perspective, the organizations that we’re working with for this project have a lot of other things on their plate and from their perspective, this is a lower priority.”

– ECSC participant

In the exit interviews, one smaller employer reported that while capacity was a challenge, they were able to make changes fast:

“[Change management] is very different for large employers and small employers. We were able to make changes quickly. Removing bachelor's degrees from our job descriptions was instantaneous.”
– ECSC participant

Generally, speaking this dynamic meant that ECSC participation was particularly valuable for smaller employers, because the project support provided by coaches gave them extra capacity. While ECSC provided a community of practice session on change management as well as individualized coaching, there was less that the program could do to resolve this challenge for larger employers.

Champions were a key part of the project success.

Employers with champions who had both capacity and enthusiasm for skilled credentials work, as well as influence and connections to key stakeholders, were more likely to fulfill their action learning project goals. In the exit interview one employer reported:

“Being able to secure and find that local champion and advocate in a senior manager role to get on board...that was obviously the first point of success that [you need to] get anywhere in this project.”
– ECSC participant

While many employers did not have a single champion that had both capacity and influence, some were able to assemble a core team that collectively embodied these characteristics. Core teams that had both an executive sponsor to champion the action learning project and a project manager to follow through on day-to-day execution were particularly successful.

Facilitators and Barriers

Employers focused on a range of project goals that represented different employee life cycle stages.

Employers implemented projects targeting a variety of phases across the employee lifecycle (see Table 5).

Table 5. Sample Project Descriptions and Employee Lifecycle Stage

| Sample Project Descriptions | Employee Lifecycle Stages |
|--|---------------------------|
| Identifying competencies and skilled credentials aligned with the organization's coaching role to bolster recruiting and professional development, particularly among immigrant and refugee candidates. | Prepare/Retain and Grow |
| Creating 1-2 career pathways for key direct service positions to utilize skilled credentials in retaining talent, cultivating leadership buy-in along the way. | Retain and Grow |
| Updating an IT job description to be more inclusive of candidates with skilled credentials, cultivating buy-in for adopting a skills-first talent approach from HR leadership and IT leadership along the way. | Prepare |
| Developing and implementing a utility operator apprenticeship program. | Prepare/Retain and Grow |
| Completing an ATS integration. | Screen |

Facilitators for project success included focusing on a talent management pain point and changing the hearts and minds of staff at all levels.

To meet their action learning project goals, employers used a variety of tactics. In the exit interview, employers reported that focusing on one department with a **talent management pain point** that could be addressed by skilled credential adoption proved to be the most effective approach for those that were new to skills-based talent management. That pain point was sometimes high turnover or time-to-fill for key positions, and in other cases it was a rapidly aging workforce. ECSC participants often looked at company data and solicited feedback from key stakeholders to determine which talent management pain points were most salient. One participant reported that this project was one of the few times they were able to step back from their day-to-day responsibilities and reflect on their company's talent management needs:

“[Our greatest success was] being able to look at our job descriptions, especially for entry-level talent for IT. We realized what we're putting out there is not truly what we're looking for. ...a lot of times with the need for speed, the job descriptions would become a cut and paste from the last time we filled the job versus really reflecting on

what do we need. Oftentimes for my recruiters it is a great source of frustration because they go and source a bunch of candidates and they're like the hiring managers don't even know what they want.”

– ECSC participant

Another key facilitator was the ability of the project team to be able to change **hearts and minds** of staff at all levels. To do this, ECSC participants again leveraged data to create a business case for skilled credential adoption. Some created communications plans where they mapped out specific messaging tailored to each stakeholder group they needed to engage. For example, employers emphasized time-to-fill data when advocating for job description changes to their HR team, but focused on skill alignment and performance data when communicating with the management of operational units.

While some stakeholders resisted, many employers also experienced a lot of interest in the topic of skilled credentials across their organizations. One employer reported that this was one of the first times they were able to pull together a team that was comprised of the right people:

“We were able to rally a multi-disciplinary team very quickly. We always seem to bring the wrong people to the table... But this is the first time I was thought this is like a strike force. ... Everyone who is supposed to be at the table is.”

– ECSC participant

IT departments were the most common focus area selected by employers and experienced some of the greatest successes in the pilot.

Reasons cited include a high demand for tech talent and the proliferation of certifications from reputable companies such as Microsoft, Google, and CompTIA, making skill validation easier. Additionally, most IT hiring managers already had some degree of familiarity with skilled credentials, resulting in fewer change management barriers. In fact, one ECSC participant first tried to advocate for skilled credential adoption in the company’s procurement department, only to find that department did not have a felt need, familiarity with skilled credentials, or a champion who could support HR’s efforts. It was only when this participant began focusing their efforts on their company’s IT department that they were able to find a champion, as well as the pre-existing knowledge and hunger for skilled credentials that drove their efforts forward.

“[Our biggest success] was being able to speak to the IT leaders and have them be totally excited and wanting to be part of this and to grow it.”

– ECSC participant

All three initiatives that focused on upskilling internal talent faced fewer barriers than projects that were focused on talent acquisition.

Company stakeholders were less resistant to implementing skills-based approaches to **employee advancement** than skills-based approaches to talent acquisition. This may be because companies saw it as more risky to experiment with bringing new types of talent into the organization, whereas investing in existing employees tended to be less controversial. In the exit interviews, employers discussed how working on projects that were internal garnered greater success and were easier to implement:

“[Our action learning project] aligned with a problem that naturally surfaced....that made everything move faster than it would normally...[Upper management] asked us about it, so it's definitely created a buzz and that's more than anything I could have ever expected for us.”

– ECSC participant

Employers who collected company data were able to create a business case, demonstrate progress, and secure buy-in from key stakeholders.

Not all employers were able to access company data. However, those employers who were able to access data garnered greater buy-in for their action learning projects. Several employers leveraged their company data to make the case for adopting skilled credentials in a particular business unit or phase of the HR lifecycle. For these employers, data often validated a pre-existing felt need for stakeholders, providing them with the numbers to demonstrate the turnover or time-to-fill challenges of which they were already anecdotally aware.

One participant who already adopted skills-based advancement practices in one business unit several years ago centered their whole action learning project around data. This employer wanted to analyze data from their existing initiative to generate recommendations and buy-in for scaling to other units. The data demonstrated that opening up new positions to employees without degrees made the business unit more diverse, helping the company achieve their DEI goals by providing more opportunities to women and people of color. Additionally, the data demonstrated that employees without degrees outperformed employees with a bachelors alone, making the company's business case for skills-based hiring and advancement that much more compelling. The company's HR department has since gained traction on implementing skills-based hiring within a new business unit thanks to the data analyzed through their action learning project.

“My company runs on data...They understand the importance of experience or skills versus a degree. But by putting a ball around it with some numbers and some facts is going to be an eye opener...In our company, my main job is to get diverse talent my work and then pulling this together to say listen, if we do this, you are getting more women. You're getting more person of color to apply and get the job. That's what we want.”

– ECSC participant

Employers reported barriers around cultural norms in their organization.

When asked what barriers they experienced in improving their company’s adoption of skilled credentials, most of the responses in interviews and focus groups related to changing company culture, in addition to their team members seeing skilled credentials as an unknown:

“[A barrier is] people not being able to adopt a new lens and feeling confident in decision-making.”
– ECSC participant

Similarly in the focus group, many employers reported that while upper-level management and company policy do not always require degrees, hiring leaders tend to **gravitate toward people who have degrees** and that degrees are “always buried in the reqs.” Employers also noted that while credentials are more available now, candidates with credentials do not always come with experience:

“Our community college is really pushing these IT credentials. But what we're finding is we're getting a lot of applicants, because of COVID who lost their jobs, who were then eligible to take all this training. They've taken a lot of training but have no related experience...but it's difficult for us to hire people straight up with zero experience and that kind of credential.”
– ECSC participant

While these barriers sometimes slowed progress on action learning projects, all employers were still able to make a meaningful impact on their company’s adoption of skilled credentials with the help of ECSC supports.

Outcomes

Through the ECSC, all employers made progress on their individual goals related to skilled credentials.

All participating employers put in significant effort to change their companies’ hiring and advancement paradigms, but their projects resulted in a range of outcomes. With the help of ECSC coaches, employers were able to pivot their project plans as roadblocks arose such that all employers moved the needle on skilled credential adoption, even if their progress looked different than they initially envisioned.

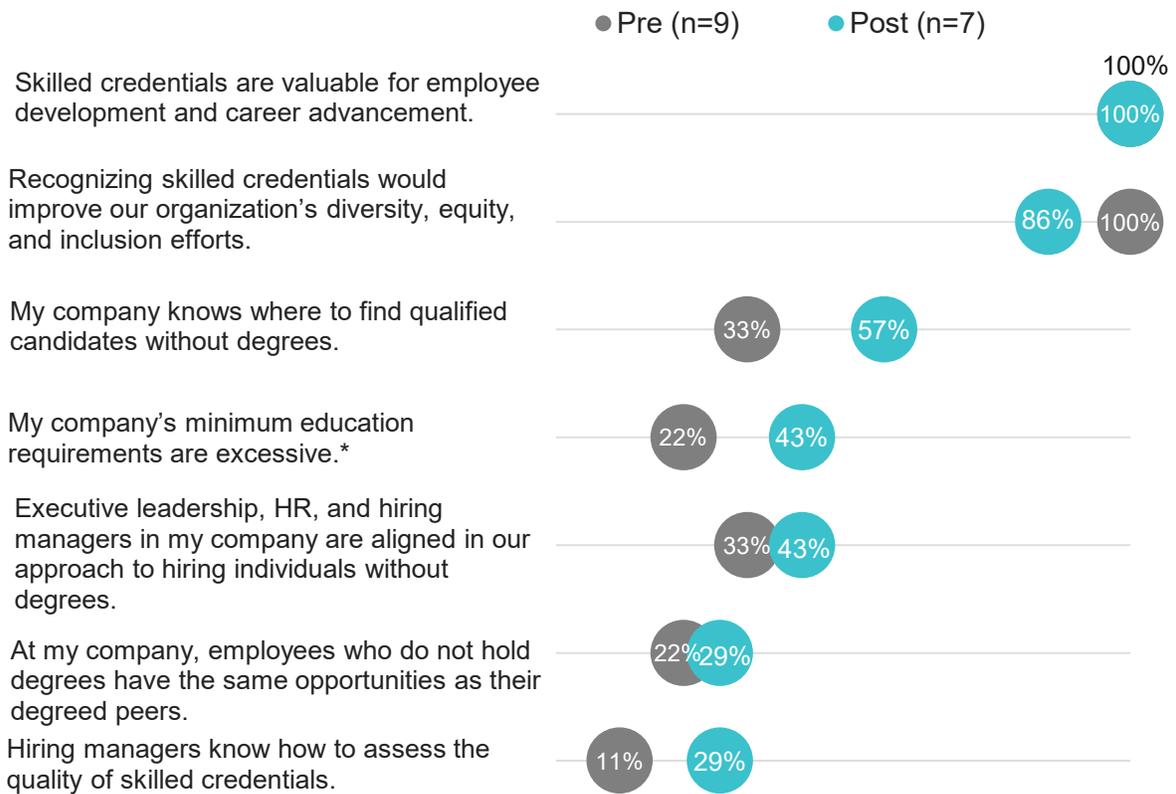
Through the ECSC, employers collectively achieved the following outcomes:

| Outcome | Example of how those outcomes were realized |
|--|---|
| 101 of jobs were made more accessible to people without degrees | One small IT company created a skills-based career pathway that allows entry-level IT apprentices to advance within the department without a degree |
| 11 new career paths were created. | One social service nonprofit created skills-based career pathways to help entry-level clinical paraprofessionals advance |
| 11 job postings were revised. | One small startup company created a skills-based job description aimed at attracting more immigrant and refugee applicants |
| 139 staff members in 52 departments were engaged. | One large government agency needed to assemble a team of 40 people to revise job descriptions |
| 142 applicants were impacted. | One industry association posted both a traditional and skills-based job description for the same role to compare the difference in applicant pool |
| 423 current employees were impacted. | One large aerospace company developed a framework for allowing hourly engineering aides with two year degrees to become salaried engineers |

Employers were asked about their company’s perceptions and behaviors surrounding skilled credentials in the pre- and post-survey. While the numbers are small and do not represent a matched sample, survey results suggest that employers were able to make progress across important areas (see Figure 3).

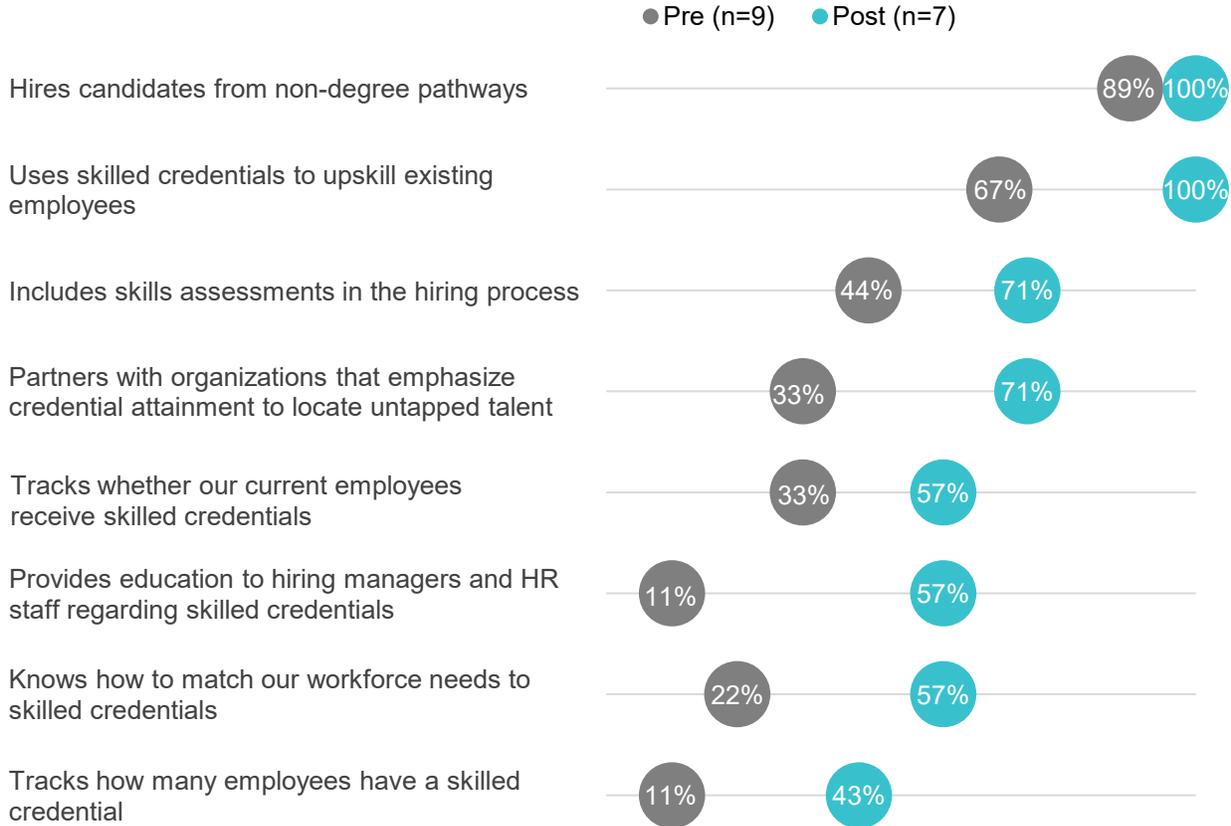
Figure 3. In the post-survey, a higher proportion of employers agreed or strongly agreed on 6 out of the 7 items related to company perceptions of skilled credentials.

*Reverse coded



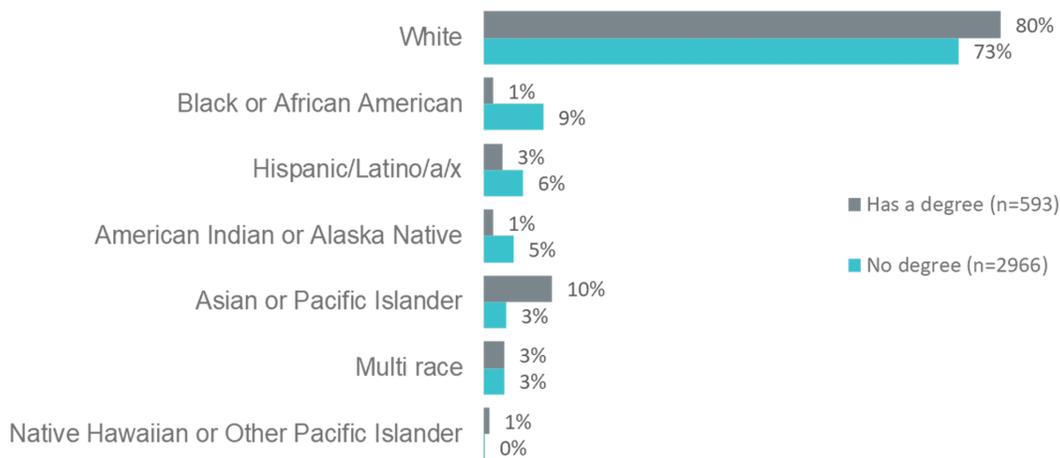
Additionally, 83% of employers in the post-survey reported that their company sees value in hiring individuals without a degree. Similarly, only 43% reported that college degrees are a proxy for both hard and soft skills. Additionally, employers reported engaging in more behaviors related to skilled credentials at the post-survey (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. In the post-survey, a higher proportion of employers reported “Yes” to items related to organizational behaviors surrounding skilled credentials.



Additionally, among employers who were able to report both educational and demographic data, the ECSC project team was able to validate previous SHRM research suggesting that HR professionals, managers, and executives view skills-based hiring as a potential tool to reach DEI goals. Findings suggest that hiring individuals without a degree can help bring greater racial diversity to a company’s workforce (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Those without a degree represented a more diverse group relative to those with a degree in the ECSC employer data.



ECSC Program Findings

Both in the post-survey and exit interviews, employers reported that the program was a positive experience that helped them make progress in adopting skilled credentials within their organizations:

“The folks at SHRM/JFF are amazing. They are encouraging, intelligent and their feathers never get ruffled. Brilliant group of caring individuals. I have learned so much.”

– ECSC participant

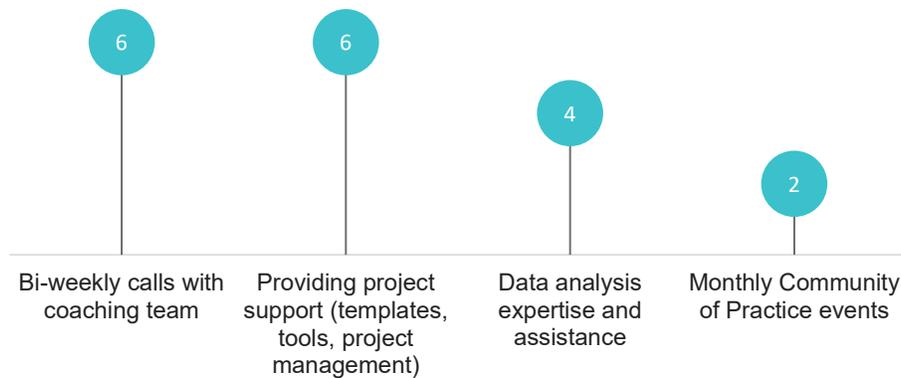
“This was an amazing opportunity that will have a lasting impact on our organization.”

– ECSC participant

Employers reported that the most helpful aspects of the project were the biweekly coaching calls that kept them accountable throughout the project, as well as project support provided by coaches.

When asked in the post-survey about the most useful components of the ECSC, employers reported the bi-weekly calls and project support the highest (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. 6 out of the 7 employers who completed the post survey reported that bi-weekly coaching calls and project support were “very useful”.



In the exit interviews, most employers reported that they felt like the pilot was the right amount of time and that the biweekly coaching calls happened at the right pace.

“[The bi-weekly calls] forced me to commit. I wouldn't have committed otherwise to this pursuit. With the biweekly meetings, it's still a regular cadence and we always know we have a secure time on the calendar. We would not have done that otherwise. It helped us to take a deeper look.”

– ECSC participant

The community of practice meetings were seen as less useful in the survey, and a few employers reported not being able to attend. However, in the exit interviews several employers reported that the content was very useful to them and they enjoyed being around other HR professionals.

“It was helpful during the COP meetings to see the other side of the fence and see that the grass is not greener, but they also had some spots... Just to be around other HR folk...it filled my bucket as a human.”

– ECSC participant

Employers also reported that they were impressed with the “talent that was brought to the [Community of Practice meetings]” and that they would like a summary of meeting content before and after the fact for preparation and reflection.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Iterations

Employers provided recommendations for improving the ECSC in the exit interviews. Most recommendations involved creating more opportunities for peer support and providing more clarity around what support the ECSC provides.

Recommendations for improving the program included adding more opportunities for peer support.

Employers recommended adding opportunities for peer support and collaboration. Suggestions included:

- Pairing each organization with a “buddy” that comes from a similar organization or is conducting a similar type of project.
- Pairing organizations that are new to skilled credentials with “mentor” organizations that may be able to provide guidance.
- Creating a joint “work board” for employers to collaboratively share ideas related to common challenges they are facing.
- Organizing a peer consultancy where one employer presents a challenge they are facing and seeks feedback from others.
- Organizing optional office hours for employers to discuss pre-determined topics with each other and a coach.

One employer reported wanting opportunities to “just hear what others are doing, even if it is not about skilled credentials.” Future collaboratives could provide even greater value to their employers by creating processes for peer learning.

Employers also recommended providing more clarity around the expectations and supports that the ECSC provides.

When asked for recommendations for improving the ECSC, employers also reported that they could use more clarity at the beginning of the project in terms of expectations and supports available. Participants admitted to feeling initially nervous about the time commitment and demands of the action learning project. They found that the supports they received made the program goals feel achievable, so they recommended the team provide more reassurance surrounding supports from the beginning. Additionally, employers would have liked to see a list of project options to help them make informed choices about where to focus:

“Calm the people down when you're starting the project. [Tell them] we are there to help, we are not going to be giving you more work, but we'll help you do the work.”
– ECSC participant

Recommendations for Employers

In addition to developing recommendations for future collaboratives, the ECSC project team combined their observations with employer feedback to generate recommendations for employers who are just beginning their skilled credential journey. These recommendations include:



Establish a champion or team of champions and evaluate their readiness for leading a major change initiative. Readiness is a combination of capacity, influence, and resilience.



Evaluate company readiness through outreach to HR leadership, inventorying existing initiatives that could be leveraged, and researching talent management challenges that could provide insight into where in the HR lifecycle to begin.



Start small by identifying a single department with a felt talent management need that could be addressed through skilled credential adoption. Choosing a department with more familiarity surrounding skilled credentials is also an advantage (e.g. there is often more existing knowledge and acceptance of skilled credentials among IT leaders).



Use turnover, performance, promotion, and DE&I data to make case for skilled credentials and change hearts and minds of key stakeholders. Continue to collect this data throughout skilled credential adoption to demonstrate impact and make the case for future scaling



Adapt project plans to evolving organizational dynamics and priorities, centering change management considerations at every juncture.



Reference the SHRM Skilled Credentials Action Planner for additional strategies and tools for successful skilled credential adoption. The Action Planner will be released in Summer 2023.

Next Steps

Thanks to the support of Charles Koch Foundation, the ECSC generated significant impact by providing employers with support and structure for skilled credential adoption. This diverse cohort of respected companies can now lead, advise, and partner with others in their sectors and regions to scale learnings and encourage others to take action.

Future SHRMF and JFF work will also focus on leveraging learnings from ECSC to scale skilled credential adoption. The goal of the SHRM Skilled Credentials Action Planner is to provide companies with individualized, technology-enabled support that can replace the role of ECSC coaches. SHRMF and JFF are also interested in taking additional steps to build on ECSC work, potentially including but not limited to:

- Assessing long term impact of action learning projects through ongoing data analysis
- Producing case studies, publishing articles, and speaking at conferences about ECSC employers' progress and lessons learned
- Bringing the ECSC model to *more* employers through a place-based model or sector-specific strategies
- Further developing tools, templates, and dashboards to support employers in skilled credential adoption

By building on ECSC findings in future work, SHRMF and JFF plan to support a growing number of companies in harnessing the power of skilled credentials to address their organization's most pressing talent management challenges.