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Can Skills-First Hiring Fix Our Broken Talent Pipeline? by Martha Ekdaahl

The landscape of hiring has shifted under our feet. Organizations are feeling the pressure as traditional recruiting methods struggle to keep up with rapidly changing skill demands. Too often, talented individuals are passed over because their backgrounds do not fit outdated standards, leaving both open positions and untapped potential. This gap, commonly called occupational mismatch, can lead to frustration, lower productivity, and missed opportunity for both job seekers and employers.

The concerns are real. “For employers, mismatch between skills and business needs is expensive,” explained Michelle D. Sims, chief executive officer of YUPRO Placement, an employment agency based in Boston. “It drives turnover, stalls projects, and requires organizations to pay out higher salaries to midcareer employees with the required skills, or outright hire consultants to cover the work that could be performed by an early-career professional with the right skills.”

The disconnect between the skills employers need and the candidates available is more than a numbers game; it’s a call for a new approach that recognizes and values what people can truly do, not just where they have been. Skills-first hiring offers practical steps toward opening doors and creating opportunities for a wider group of candidates, all while helping organizations build the teams they need to move forward.

Shifting to skills-first hiring is not a cure-all, but it does address critical pain points in today’s hiring landscape. Firms willing to look past conventional markers and focus on real capabilities are finding themselves better equipped to build adaptable, high-performing teams. Skills-first hiring is one step in rebuilding a talent pipeline where more people are positioned to succeed, and organizations gain the confidence to meet evolving workforce needs.

The Growing Cracks In the Hiring Process - Many organizations find their talent pipelines are not just leaking, they are broken. The flow of qualified candidates is insufficient, and conventional methods are not closing the gap. In response, many companies add more filters to their recruiting process, which can make the problem worse.

The Prevalence of Occupational

Mismatch: Candidates in the talent pool do not have the skills to fill open roles. This “occupational mismatch” impacts more than a third of open roles, according to SHRM’s Help Wanted: Understanding the Labor Shortage study. “In our research, we see organizations are struggling to fill roles with unemployed candidates whose most recent employment falls into the same occupation group. This puts pressure on hiring managers, especially in high-demand industries, including health care,” explained Justin Ladner, senior labor economist at SHRM.

Reliance on Extraneous Filters: In the current talent market, open roles can receive hundreds of applications. In response, Sims sees organizations add qualifiers for resumes to make it through the system. “You’re defaulting back to filters just to get through the hiring process. But by adding more filters, you are overlooking skilled talent and then perpetuating the fact that you’re not hiring for skills. You’re hiring for filters,” Sims explained.

The High Cost of Open Roles: As roles remain open, work piles up and so do costs. The median cost-to-hire has increased in the last three years, according to the 2025 SHRM Benchmarking Survey. To manage the load, organizations often hire expensive consultants or temporary contractors. This is a costly fix that does not solve the underlying issue of finding the right long-term team member.

The Double-Edged Sword of Technology:

Technology has introduced new complexities. While AI-powered tools can screen thousands of resumes in minutes, they can also perpetuate biases if not configured correctly. On the other side, candidates are using AI to craft perfectly tailored resumes and cover letters, making it harder for recruiters to assess genuine fit and experience. In the short term, technology can sometimes feel like it is adding more noise than clarity.

A More Effective Path Forward: Focusing on Skills

- The challenges are significant, but they are not insurmountable. By shifting the focus from traditional credentials to demonstrated skills, organizations can fundamentally improve how they attract, assess, and hire talent. Sims suggested practical considerations for shifting the hiring process to focus on skills first.

Shift your Mindset - Sims encouraged HR leaders to move away from looking for talent in the usual places and turn to build a skills-first framework for open roles. To break the work down, start with the most in-demand open roles, rewriting the job descriptions to focus on specific skills and the desired outcomes.

Check ATS Filters - Applicant tracking systems (ATS) and accompanying filters are the first stage of recruitment, helping clear out unqualified candidates. However, they can also hold back talent fit for open roles. Sims emphasized an easy filter to change is the higher education filter. Removing the filter for four-year degrees “immediately opens your pool of talent.”

Refine the Interview Process - Once a candidate reaches the interview stage, it’s important to bring them into a structured environment. Sims encouraged HR leaders to utilize a structured interview process where all parties rely on the same rubric and scoring system. Additionally, interview questions should fall into the STAR format — Situation, Task, Action, Result. This ensures questions are not just getting at what a candidate accomplished in previous roles, but how they achieved their results. “The ‘how’ is where the magic happens and skills candidates possess come alive,” Sims said.

Challenges to Moving to Skills-First Hiring - Focusing on skills in the hiring process can instantly broaden the talent pool, breaking down a key barrier to finding the right person for an open role. However, challenges remain.

Learning and development (L&D) budgets are not always sufficient. Alongside CHROs, L&D executives recognize the importance of developing skills in their organization. However, funding can be difficult to secure, with 21% of L&D executives citing limited budget or resources as a top challenge, according to SHRM’s L&D Executives: Priorities and Perspectives report.

HR leaders also face entrenched mindsets around HR and L&D. C-suite leaders may still view HR as a capital expense, rather than a revenue generator. This challenges HR leaders to speak the language of leadership. “HR has to always align with business imperatives,” Sims said. This means addressing the pain points where open positions and turnover create costs for the business. Measuring time to fill, turnover costs, and productivity loss from open roles can help HR leaders make the case for a skills-first hiring approach, as well as investing in upskilling and reskilling employees to cover gaps.

Building a Stronger Workforce, One Skill at a Time - The traditional hiring process can’t confront all the

challenges of the modern labor market. The prevalence of occupational mismatch and the struggle to find qualified candidates highlight the need for a new approach. While skills-first hiring cannot solve every challenge overnight, it offers a supportive framework for change.

By prioritizing abilities over credentials where it makes sense, HR leaders can confront a weakened talent pipeline to support organizational stability and growth.

Why Offer CPR Classes?

Offering CPR classes is a smart move for employers it’s not just for safety, but for business, culture, and even legal reasons. Here’s why it matters:

Life-saving readiness - Cardiac emergencies can happen anywhere, including the workplace. Training employees in **CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation)** means someone can act immediately before emergency responders arrive, dramatically increasing survival chances.

Safer work environment - Providing CPR training shows a proactive approach to workplace safety. It complements other safety measures and helps employees feel more secure on the job.

Reduced liability & compliance - In some industries (construction, manufacturing, childcare, fitness, etc.), CPR certification may be required or strongly recommended. Even when it’s not mandatory, training can help demonstrate due diligence in protecting employees.

Boosts employee confidence - People feel more empowered knowing they can handle emergencies. This confidence can carry over into better teamwork and leadership in high-pressure situations.

Improves company culture - Offering useful, real-world skills like CPR signals that the company genuinely cares about employee well-being, not just productivity. That can improve morale and retention.

Potential insurance benefits - Some insurers may offer lower premiums or incentives for businesses that invest in safety training, including CPR and first aid.

Community impact - Employees don’t just use CPR at work, they can save lives anywhere (home, public places, etc.), which reflects positively on the company as well.

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