



BUILDING EQUITABLE UPSKILLING PROGRAMS: IT'S NOT DEGREE VS. SHORT CREDENTIALS – IT'S BOTH

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Recent efforts to expand diversity, equity, and inclusion measures have employers questioning nearly everything about their hiring processes. And, suddenly, degree requirements are being reconsidered in a big way – with employers finally reconsidering whether they are necessary for many job roles. They've come to see degree requirements for what they too often are: an unnecessary barrier for black and brown employees, which restrict access to jobs they are qualified to do.

As companies look to address this disconnect, they've started reevaluating whether their own education benefits and upskilling programs should continue to include degrees or should they focus solely on shorter-term, skills-based credentials.

This is a false choice, though.

Not only can these two pathways co-exist together – they must. Workers shouldn't have to choose between an option that sets them up for promotion in six months or one that prepares them for an upwardly-mobile career in six years. They can do both at the same time.

In order to achieve the topline goal of a more diverse and equitable workforce, these options also can't stand on their own: choosing one, or the other, hamstring economic opportunity for workers and ignores the complex historical relationship between education and opportunity in this country.

Requiring degrees is limiting, because it locks employees into pathways that are costly and time-consuming. At the same time, short-term credentials alone are limiting because while many roles don't require a bachelor's degree, some of the most upwardly-mobile – and lucrative – ones do.

Even as companies evolve their understanding of career skills, our broader society still holds formal degrees in high esteem. Earning a college degree can be empowering for people, especially for parents and adults who come from communities where higher education isn't the norm. In a recent national survey by Strada Education Network, 25 percent of adults without degrees said that feeling like a better parent, spouse or partner would be an important result of getting additional education.

That is why the answer isn't "either or," but rather "both, and." Fortunately, the postsecondary field has begun working on just such a solution: stackable credentials. Those credentials create clear pathways that allow worker-learners to build from a short-term credential to a bachelor's degree over an extended period of time.

Take, for example, a worker named Arnold. He's been doing tech support at a call center for a year and is looking to advance in his career. He starts with a short-term IT credential paid

for by his company's education benefits program. This allows him to move into a role in the company as a QA specialist, which doubles his salary to about \$60,000 a year.

That's great for a couple of years, but Arnold begins eyeing a job doing QA scripting and front-end web design. He has opportunities to begin developing those skills on the job, while also pursuing an associate degree program that applies all his credits from his short-term certificate and also allows him to earn credit for the skills he's already learning on the job. He's able to finish the associate degree in a year and is promoted to front-end web designer. Around this time, he gets married and starts a family, and now, continuing his education becomes a distant priority for a number of years.

When his children enter elementary school, however, he's itching for another move in his career. He starts to pursue his bachelor's degree. By having all the credits from his associate degree apply toward his bachelor's, he's able to earn it in two years. He moves into an architect role and makes \$200,000 a year. This is the way that transfer from an associate to a bachelor's degree program is always supposed to work, but in reality, it rarely does. A recent review by the US Government Accountability Office, for example, found that the typical transfer student loses 43 percent of their credits in the process. Stackable pathways change that.

In total, it took 10 years for Arnold to get to that architect role. But because he was earning valuable credentials along the way, he wasn't stuck in a low-paying job the entire time. He also didn't get frustrated and derailed by the long timeline, which leads many learners like him to abandon their pursuit of a degree altogether.

That's the beauty of stackable credentials, in theory. This approach has yet to take off though, in part because higher education has been recalcitrant, but also because employers have yet to embrace stackable credentials. Short-term credentials and stackable pathways more broadly, only have value if they are tightly tied to employers' skill needs and to the logical progression of careers. That's why the stackable credentials have been the most successful thus far, in fields like healthcare, have significant employer involvement.

The moment is ripe to expand this approach, as employers urgently look for ways to improve the career mobility of women, Black, and Latinx workers in low-paying jobs. Designed well, the stackable approach takes advantage of a "captive audience" of sorts, reaching people in their workplace and lowering barriers to entry for students and cost of acquisition for institutions. It provides students with greater clarity around program and credential choice, and it ensures a clear tie-in to career outcomes. Lastly, it allows workers to build their education and their career in lockstep, with one informing the other, rather than sequentially, which too often results in wasted effort and time.

The stackable strategy is the key that could unlock both education and career opportunities for millions of working Americans – one that does not restrict them from two seemingly opposing paths, but rather two intertwining and empowering ones.