

What Employers Are Really Looking For: Insights to Drive Skill-Based Hiring



Research Findings

Employers are under pressure to build strong, resilient teams in a fast-changing hiring landscape. Many are open to new approaches like skill-based hiring, but face uncertainty, internal resistance, and a lack of clear tools and guidance to change course. This resource shares national research on what hiring managers really value, what holds them back, and how to make the case for skill-based hiring that delivers results.

Use these findings to strengthen your partnerships with employers, shape compelling communications, and build confidence in skill-based approaches that can meet real business needs.

Research Methodology:

These insights come from extensive national research with employers, including:

- Narrative and attitudinal research in the field
- A nationally representative message-testing survey with 1,500 American adults and oversamples including 400 white collar workers who make hiring decisions at their job
- In-depth interviews and roundtable discussions with hiring managers across industries, segmented by urban, suburban, and rural backgrounds
- Pulse surveys to test key concepts, language, and ideas

Audience Insights

Seeking Stability, Collaboration, and Growth

After years of workforce disruption, employers are drawn to candidates who bring more than technical ability: they want teammates who are adaptable, communicative, and committed for the long haul.

How It Shows Up

Hiring managers largely agree that soft skills like communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are critical in an ideal employee.

In Their Own Words

*The credentials, the education, the years of experience, that's an easy find. **But the soft skills**, the ability to express empathy, to be an advocate for your team, to have great communication skills and to be driven by wanting to be successful within yourself, as well as your team, **make the best candidate.***

*As long as a person is teachable, there are a lot of skills you can teach someone. **We need a personality that works with the team**, looking at emotional intelligence and leadership type.*

*The ability to **communicate** the most complex issues in the simplest terms is important.*

*Someone who **works well with others** and is willing to learn and share.*

*People who are able to have an **open mind, be patient, and work well under pressure.***

*A good team member is someone who **works hard and has integrity.***

More than a majority of hiring managers say finding employees with long-term growth potential is very important.

How important is each of the following reasons to adopt skill-based hiring?



More than 75% of hiring managers think skill-based hiring is good for finding candidates with technical skills and soft skills alike.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes skill-based hiring.



The Weight of Unspoken Bias

Although employers believe skill-based hiring can lead to more experienced candidates and stronger teams, uncertainty about others' perceptions and lack of clear leadership support lead many to default to the norm. Demonstrating it has strategic value and has worked for others helps make the case for change.

How It Shows Up

Hiring managers believe skills and experience are more important than having a degree.

In Their Own Words

*There are areas where skill-based training would be really helpful. Because there are challenges with finding skilled people; **they can have the degree, but they don't have the skills** or the capacity to learn the skills sometimes.*

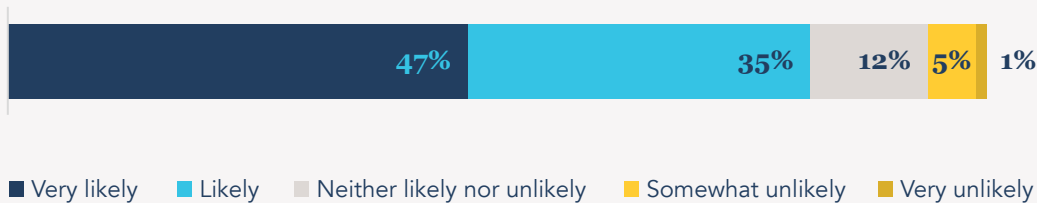
*I think **it's useful to get a different perspective** sometimes than somebody internally [because they] may see it completely different than what I'm thinking about or my team may be thinking about.*

*Why not [hire them]? **If they have the skill I need and they can prove it.** I myself have a degree in a completely different area from my acquired professional skill.*

*Because **skills are more valuable** to us than degrees.*

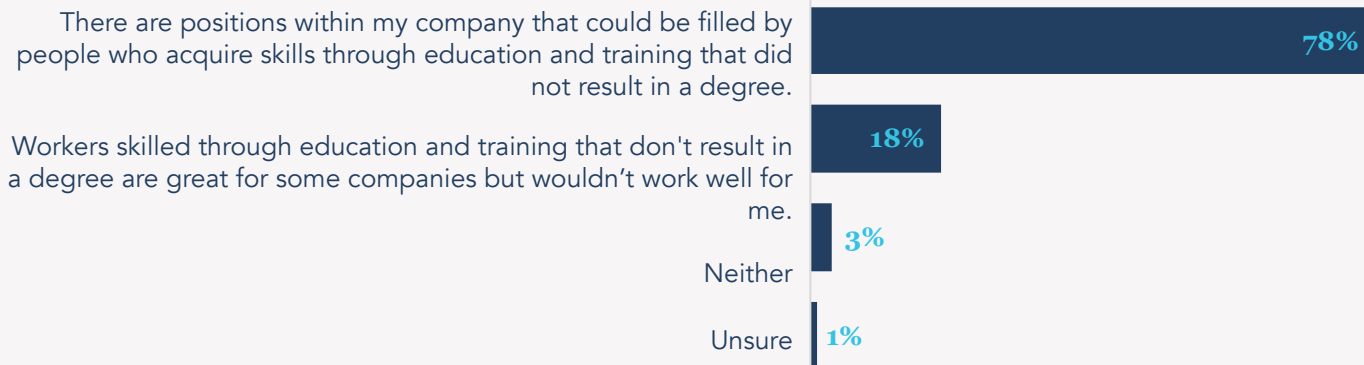
4 in 5 hiring managers are likely to hire candidates without a degree if they demonstrate proven skills.

How likely or unlikely are you to hire a candidate without a college degree based on their proven skills?



4 in 5 hiring managers agree that skill-based hiring could be good for their company.

Which of the following statements is more closely in line with your personal view?



Yet hiring managers are hesitant to use skill-based hiring because they aren't sure what leadership, clients, and colleagues will think.

In Their Own Words

***I have to be concerned with how my clients will look at it.** My clients are paying big bucks and looking for at least two degrees. And if [we hire] someone who has a high school degree, I don't think it will go over well. I know you don't need a college degree to do some of the jobs, but I'm afraid of what the client will think and selling this person to a client.*

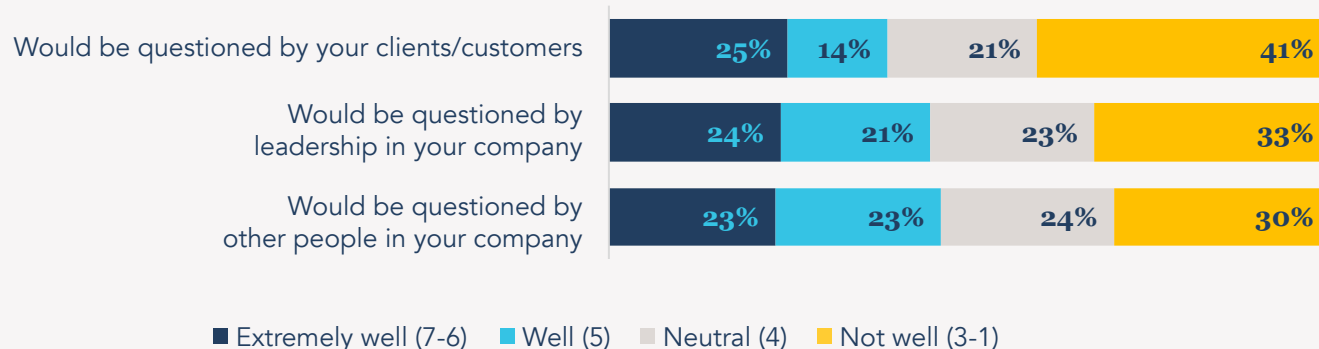
I think most of my clients would want a teacher with at least a Bachelor's degree.** I don't go around talking about it, but I think that's what people assume. For me, the biggest hurdle would be **client perception.

***I get a lot of pushback from other leaders in my industry,** because I'm in the university system, they're so big on [college] credentials and where individuals went to school.*

*Being in an elitist type institution where that type of mindset [about skill-based hiring], in theory may be valued, but **they don't want to bring in individuals who don't have the necessary [college] credentials in comparison to others.***

Around 2 in 5 hiring managers worry that skill-based hiring will be questioned by clients, leadership, or other people in the company—another quarter are uncertain.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes skill-based hiring.



Understanding how other businesses have already benefitted by implementing skill-based hiring can help hiring managers feel more confident in the approach.

In Their Own Words

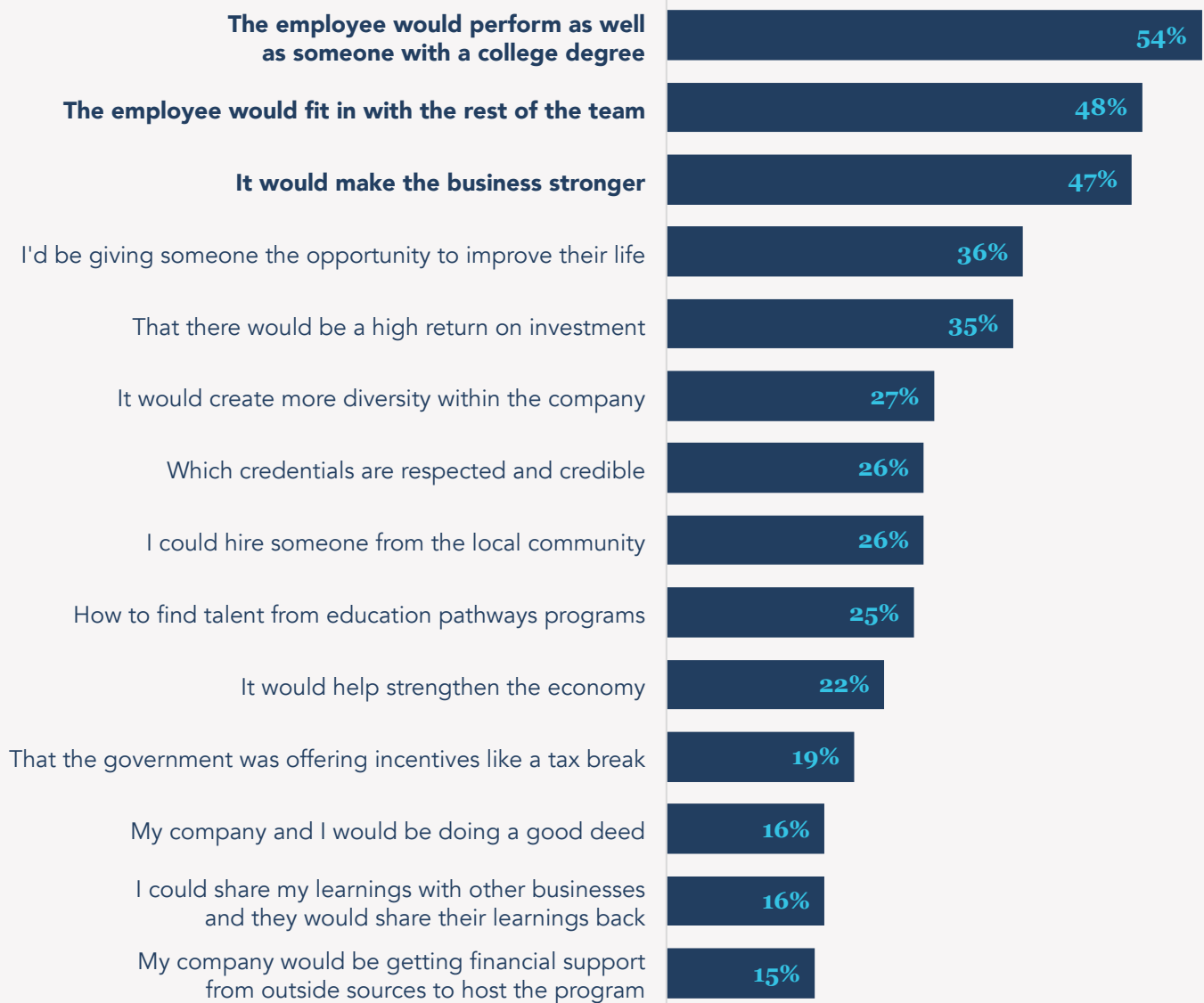
[This is a] business case. Increasing employee retention rates or longevity of employees or company revenues, I mean, all of those things are business cases for me. Those would be impressive.

I really resonate with outcome stories. It would need to be a part of the overall sales package [for skill-based hiring].

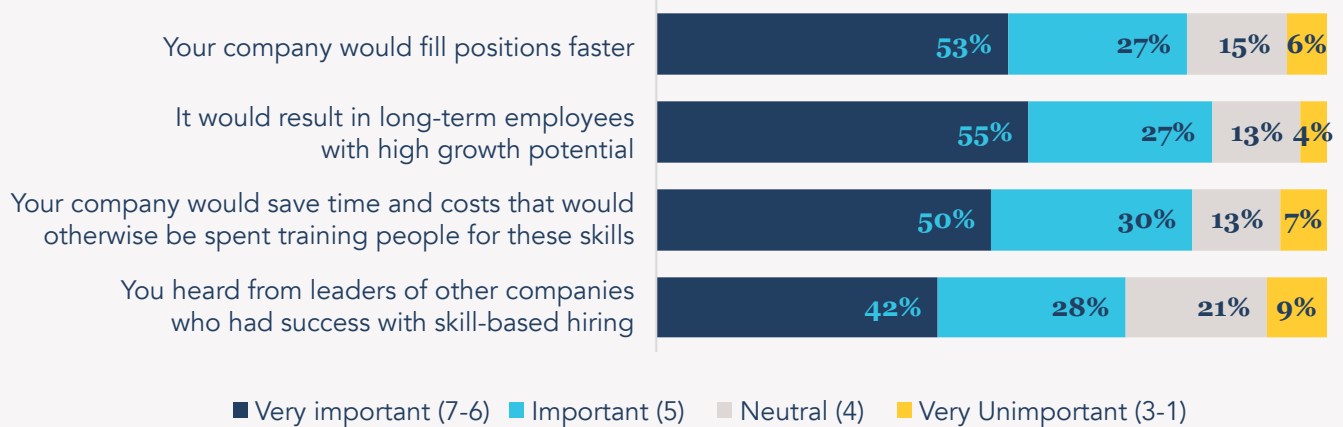
[I need to know] have businesses benefited from this strategy [of skill-based hiring].

In order to hire a candidate without a degree, hiring managers want to know for certain that the employee will perform well, they will fit in with the culture, and they will make the business stronger.

Please select each of the following that is true for you, personally. I would be more likely to hire people whose highest qualification is a demonstrated skill or credential if I knew... Select all that apply.

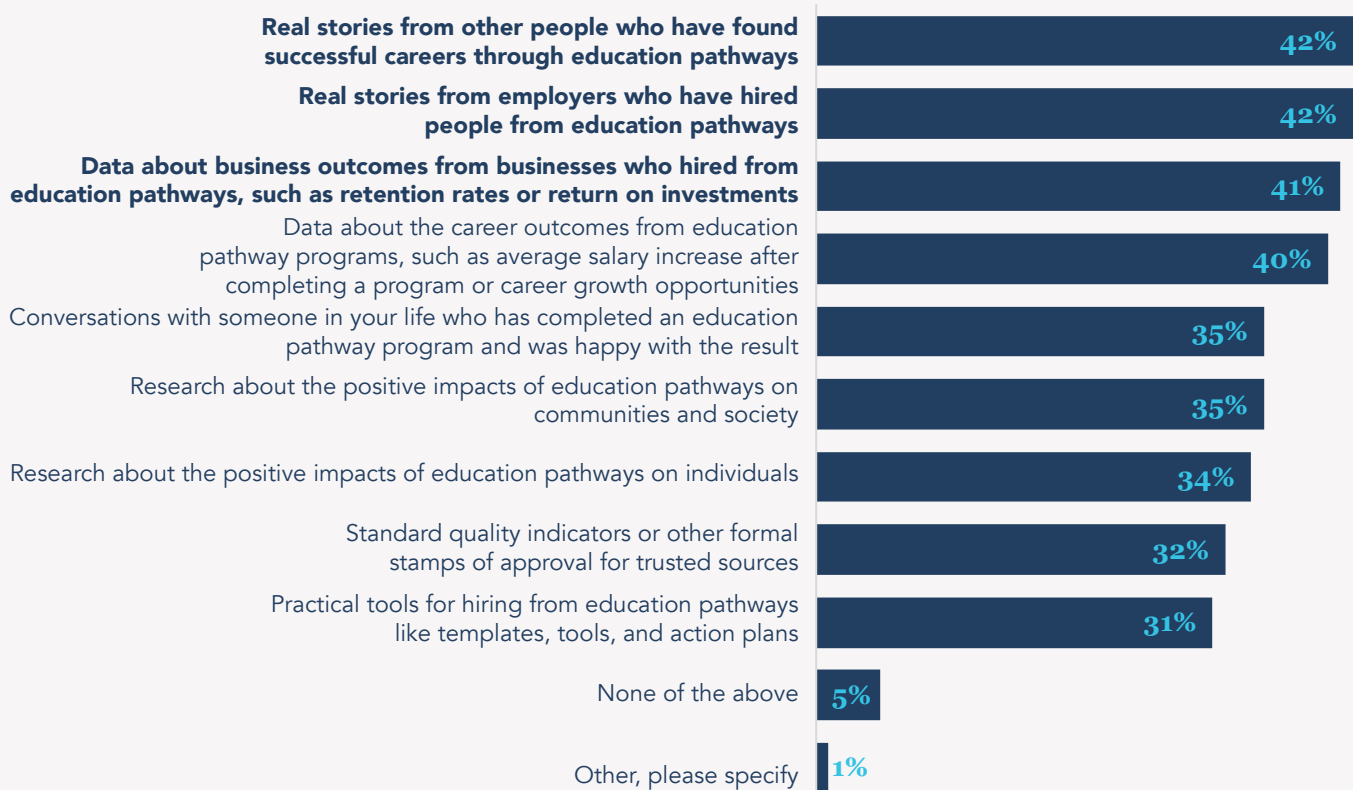


How important is each of the following reasons to adopt skill-based hiring? Use a scale from 1 to 7, where "7" means "Very important"; "1" means "Very unimportant", and "4" means you feel completely neutral.



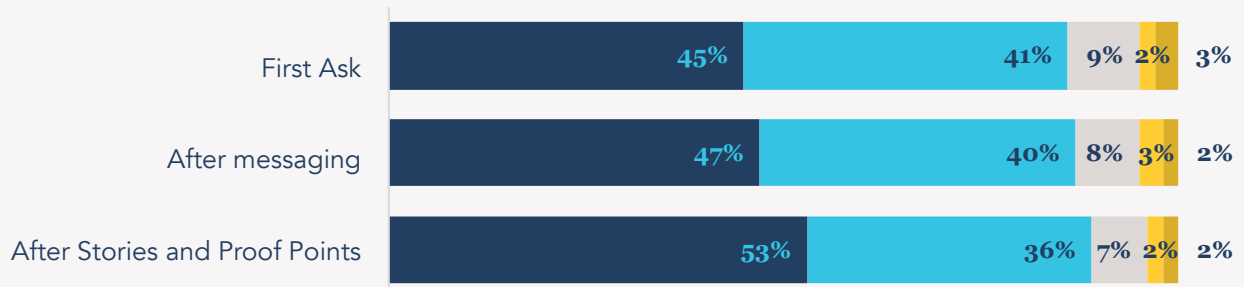
Real-world examples, from stories to outcome data from other businesses, make employers feel more confident that a non-degree pathway can bring benefits to their business.

What would you need to see or hear to feel confident that education pathways could provide real benefits to people, businesses, and society? Select all that apply.



Employers move 6 percentage points to “very interested” category after they see stories and proof points about the skill-based hiring.

How interested or uninterested are you in working with others in your company to shift hiring practices to prioritize hiring people with proven skills, even if they don't have a college degree?



■ Very interested ■ Somewhat interested ■ Neither interested nor uninterested ■ Somewhat uninterested ■ Very uninterested

Readiness to Act Tempered by Concerns of Risk

Employers say they're willing to do the work to move beyond degrees—but fear the personal risk of getting it wrong. Without clear tools to assess skills, championing this change can feel risky.

How It Shows Up

Hiring managers say they are ready and willing to advocate internally to adopt skill-based hiring.

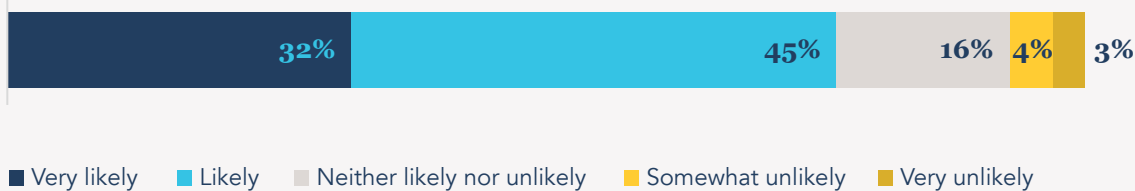
In Their Own Words

I'll advocate for adopting skill based hiring because it will increase our productivity and reduce how much we spend on training employees for required skills

I would advocate because the cost of getting a higher education outweighs the benefits in today's economy. I still owe student loan debt.

More than 75% of hiring managers are willing to advocate internally to adopt skill-based hiring.

How likely or unlikely are you to advocate within your company for adopting skill based hiring?



But without a good understanding of how to assess candidates, some hiring managers are concerned about the personal risk involved in doing things differently.

In Their Own Words

*How would we be able to know that this will get us qualified candidates and successful employees down the road? **Because if it doesn't, the risk is on me as the organization**, the risk is not necessarily as much on the provider of a skill-based approach.*

*I think the biggest justification not to move in that direction unfortunately, and it doesn't stick, is **that's just the way we've always done things**.*

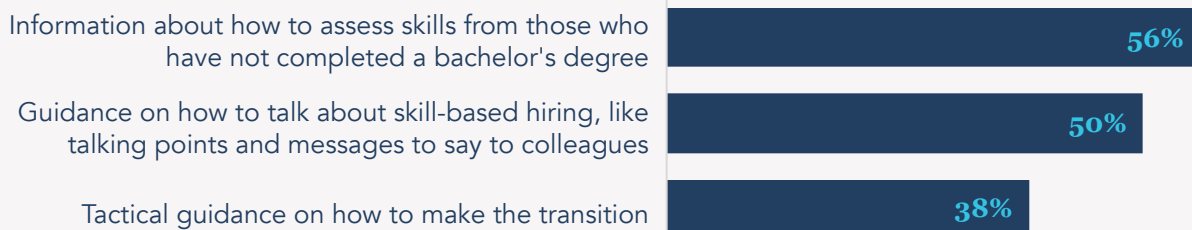
*You know, there's an old saying, **nobody ever got fired for buying IBM**.*

***Would we have the ability to rank which of these are more important or what carries higher weights?**
How do you discern skills?
Because the whole challenge in discerning skills usually takes time and effort, right?*

***It's harder to know what exactly they learned.**
With a degree you can better gauge what they learned.*

Hiring managers want guidance on how to assess skills, talk to colleagues about skill-based hiring, and make the transition.

What information or resources would you need to advocate within your company for adopting skill-based hiring?
Select all that apply.



In order to take the next step, they need to have clear tools to assess candidates.

How important is each of the following reasons to adopt skill-based hiring? Use a scale from 1 to 7, where "7" means "Very important"; "1" means "Very unimportant", and "4" means you feel completely neutral.

Your company would be given tools and guidance for assessing candidates better



■ Very important (7-6) ■ Important (5) ■ Neutral (4) ■ Very Unimportant (3-1)

Complement to Current Hiring Practices

Employers often see skill-based hiring in extremes—only for low-skill roles or impossible for high-credential jobs. Reframing it as a flexible and additive approach for many types of jobs easily helps them see strong teams are built by expanding, not narrowing, the pool or promising candidates.

How It Shows Up

Some hiring managers see skill-based hiring as only for low-level or administrative jobs—or they jump to dismissing it because it can't be used for very technical jobs like doctors.

In Their Own Words

*Because we are hiring people to do certain sorts of trade skills. Like we have **custodians, painters, carpenters, electricians**. I mean, they don't need an undergraduate degree.*

*If it's someone that's going to be working [on] more **clerical [jobs]**, I do not require a college degree or anything like that*

Suppose you wake up in the morning feeling terrible and you rush to the hospital, would you want to have a diagnosis by someone who didn't go to medical school?

*They're not the same. **It's going to depend on which job**. If it's an accountant, they need the proper certifications, education, and on-the-job experience. If it's someone more clerical, I do not require a college degree.*

Framing skill-based hiring as a complement to how they're already hiring—and having conversations about what kinds of positions skill-based hiring is good for—helps hiring managers understand how they could implement it into their hiring process.

In Their Own Words

*When we initially started talking, I was thinking specifically of positions like the police department, facilities management [like] water treatment plant, and those types of positions that already require certifications and apprenticeships. But the more we started talking about it, **I could see how we could expand it to some other areas** on my campus. I wouldn't see that we could expand it broadly, but there are pockets on campus that I think that we could do it.*

*I think I've heard of them already. We've **already started doing them.***

*I love the strategy. **It's not an either/or.** I'm looking at skill-based hiring as a default part of the hiring process, but people typically have a degree to signal they have value in the higher education pathway programs.*

*In addition to the traditional college degree, finding non-traditional candidates who have developed these skills in other capacities, apprenticeships, internships, on the job learning, et cetera, needs to be our next step. **"Both/and" is doable.***

While some think skill-based hiring is only good for administrative or support jobs, a much higher proportion think it's good for finding a wide pool of candidates in a variety of jobs.

For each, please indicate how well you think it describes skill-based hiring.

