

FEATURE

Creating Inclusive Infrastructure for Untapped Talent

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When Alisia Weaver went to work at Frontier Co-op, a wholesaler of sustainably sourced herbs, spices, and aromatherapy products in Norway, Iowa, her supervisor knew nothing about her arrest record and prison sentence or her struggles to find employment after serving time. But none of that mattered to him.

“I look for people who are very eager and willing to learn,” Mark Lengel, production manager at Frontier, said [in a company video - \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVjbgh6142M\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVjbgh6142M). “To me, the past is the past. Just show me what you can do now, and we’ll grow from that. [Alisia] is a very good example of that.”

For Weaver, the opportunity to work has been instrumental in her ability to rebuild independence. “Frontier’s second-chance hiring program has allowed me to grow and to be successful,” she said. “It’s allowed me to look forward to my future and not be stuck in the past. It’s changed my life.”

As workforce needs evolve, retirements surge, and traditional talent pipelines dry up, the greatest sources of resilience, innovation, and loyalty may lie in talent pools that employers have historically overlooked: formerly incarcerated people, veterans, military spouses, older workers, and others whose experience doesn’t follow a linear path.

Attracting skilled employees is a challenge for 41% of CHROs surveyed for SHRM’s 2025 [CHRO Priorities and Perspectives - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/shrm-chro-priorities-perspectives-research-report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/topics-tools/research/shrm-chro-priorities-perspectives-research-report.pdf) report. Last year, 62% of HR leaders planned to boost recruitment by focusing on more diverse and underutilized talent pools, such as people with disabilities and formerly incarcerated people, according to the [2023-24 SHRM State of the Workplace Report - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/2023-2024-State-of-the-Workplace-Report.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/2023-2024-State-of-the-Workplace-Report.pdf).

But interest alone isn’t enough. Most organizations are not structurally ready to hire and retain nontraditional talent at scale. With automated hiring filters that screen out resumes and inflexible onboarding processes, legacy systems continue to undermine inclusion

efforts. However, some forward-thinking organizations are re-engineering hiring systems, reimagining readiness, and treating these talent pools as integral to workforce strategy rather than corporate social responsibility side projects.

For example, Weaver was hired as a result of Frontier's Breaking Down Barriers to Employment initiative, which aims to address systemic barriers to employee success and economic mobility. Through this inclusive hiring effort, more than 20% of the company's production employees were formerly incarcerated or homeless, according to Megan Schulte, Frontier's vice president of human resources.

Such programs are unfortunately uncommon. While 77% of organizations reported difficulty recruiting for full-time regular positions in the past 12 months, 61% of organizations have no formal initiatives designed to recruit or hire untapped populations such as veterans, military spouses, older workers, young people who are not currently working or in school, people with a disability or chronic condition, or previously incarcerated individuals, according to SHRM's [2024 Talent Trends report - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/2024-talent-trends-research-overall-findings.pdf\)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/2024-talent-trends-research-overall-findings.pdf).

These kinds of programs should not provide preferential treatment or special benefits to members of any group. Instead, inclusive infrastructure exists to provide a level playing field upon which organizations can fairly evaluate all applicants and job seekers can be assessed on their own merits so that the job goes to the best candidate.

To build a future-ready workforce, employers must go beyond expanding candidate pools and redesign their hiring processes from the ground up. With [job openings still outpacing available talent - \(https://www.shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/june-2025-labor-market-review-labor-market-proves-resilient\)](https://www.shrm.org/enterprise-solutions/insights/june-2025-labor-market-review-labor-market-proves-resilient), employers can't afford to overlook qualified candidates simply because they come from nontraditional backgrounds.

The Readiness Gap

Traditional hiring systems often screen out high-potential, nontraditional candidates.

"A lot of hiring systems are built to reduce risk to the company, not necessarily to identify talent," Schulte said. "The first filter is often very rigid: Does the candidate have a certain degree? Have they been involved with the justice system? These kinds of yes-or-no checkpoints can knock people out of the process before their actual skills or experiences are even considered. It's a system that can favor expedience over context and ends up missing a lot of strong candidates."

For example, [military spouses are often highly - \(https://shrm.formstack.com/forms/formstack_for_military_spouse_research\)](https://shrm.formstack.com/forms/formstack_for_military_spouse_research) educated and have in-demand skills, but they are frequently rejected automatically from new positions because of employment gaps on their resumes, said Meg O'Grady, senior vice president of military and government programs at National University in San Diego.

Veterans, another potential pool of untapped talent, may be screened out because their experience is described in terms that don't match the language that hiring systems are trained to recognize.

"Veterans, in particular, have amazing training and a sense of service, but they often have challenges translating that experience into a language that industry and employers can recognize and value," said Doug Heckman, former Air Force officer and current vice president at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). "They come out of the military with a very detailed resume but it's in military talk, not company talk, and the individual may not even be able to articulate those skills."

Rethinking Hiring Signals

Employers can leverage the talents of traditionally untapped groups of candidates by tweaking some of their processes and systems. For example, when updating job requirements, consider whether each position actually needs the specific education and experience you've sought in the past.

"Automatic knockout questions — like checking a box about background or education — can disqualify someone from consideration immediately, even if they're otherwise a great fit," Schulte said. "We should be routinely taking a step back and considering whether these questions are actually relevant to the job we're hiring for. There's also an opportunity to reduce bias by anonymizing parts of the process so candidates are evaluated on what they can bring to the table today."

If your organization uses automated hiring tools, initiate a third-party review of those tools to check for biases based on gender, race, age, and disability. Since July 2023, New York City has required employers to conduct annual third-party [bias audits - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/technology/ai-bias-audits-are-coming\)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/technology/ai-bias-audits-are-coming) of automated employment decision tools. Such audits are not universally required, but they are a good idea for employers that want to foster more inclusive hiring practices.

Also, consider retooling job postings to [prioritize skills - \(https://www.shrm.org/executive-network/insights/people-strategy/beyond-degress \)](https://www.shrm.org/executive-network/insights/people-strategy/beyond-degress), rather than credentials. CAEL and other organizations are working to develop a common skills taxonomy to translate skills learned through the military, certificate programs, and other nontraditional pathways into language that employers understand, Heckman said.

“The future is going to be a learning and employment record, which will be a digital resume, more detailed in terms of skills and competencies, in a language that’s accepted and understood by employers,” he said.

Heckman recommended working with software to analyze job postings, identify the skills needed, and help optimize job descriptions. With that insight, employers can tailor their postings for best results.

“From an HR perspective, when we focus our efforts on building unique, creative support systems with nontraditional employees in mind, we often end up creating solutions that benefit everyone,” Schulte said. “These employees also tend to feel a strong sense of loyalty to organizations that are willing to give them a chance, which can make a positive impact on engagement and retention.”

What Happens When Organizations Don’t Evolve?

If organizations fail to develop systems that will provide fair chances to broader groups of candidates, they are likely to miss out on valuable employees, experience retention failures, and struggle to compete effectively.

“Employers are rapidly trying to adjust to a changing world,” Heckman said. “Individuals from nontraditional backgrounds have had so much varied experience that they know how to pivot, and they bring many skills that are valuable in the workplace.”

As demographics shift and government policies change, hiring challenges are expected to continue. “Employers need a varied, inclusive team to compete,” Heckman said.

Candidates from nontraditional backgrounds can provide unique points of view and needed skills that can build stronger teams.

“Employees from nontraditional backgrounds bring a wide range of perspectives and experiences that can add value to any company,” Schulte said. “These employees often approach challenges differently and can bring a high level of empathy that contributes to a more inclusive culture overall. Ignoring that talent means missing out on real value for your people and for your business.”

Building Inclusive Infrastructure

Organizations can take several concrete steps to start working toward broadening their talent pipelines to include individuals who are often overlooked. Below are four important steps to begin evolving hiring systems to be more inclusive.

1. Redesign roles to increase flexibility. Inclusive infrastructure may start with job architecture. Many positions can be adapted to provide more flexibility or remote options, which may make them more feasible for military spouses who often relocate every few years, older workers such as women dealing with menopause symptoms, or caregivers tending to a family member.

2. Train managers to recognize nontraditional talent. In addition to redefining job architecture, it’s important to train managers to think openly about candidates from nontraditional backgrounds and untapped talent pools. For example, managers sometimes assume that military spouses won’t make good hires because they will leave soon, O’Grady said. However, a military spouse’s stay at a duty station usually ranges from two to four years, which is longer than the median employment tenure for all similarly aged women in the U.S., according to [SHRM data - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/talent-acquisition/what-employers-should-know-about-hiring-military-spouses \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/talent-acquisition/what-employers-should-know-about-hiring-military-spouses).

A number of organizations offer training for employers and managers aiming to hire individuals in specific groups, such as veterans, military spouses, and previously incarcerated individuals.

3. Leverage internal networks and external partnerships. Build partnerships with internal and external groups that can help your organization develop more inclusive talent pipelines. For example, when O’Grady worked in veteran engagement at Fiserv, a global provider of financial services technology and payments, her team leveraged employee resource groups to identify people in the organization who had a military affiliation or background.

“We talked to them about their interview experience, cultural things they didn’t understand, and other experiences with the company,” she said. “We took that information to the CEO to help develop new processes and systems. It’s very important to talk to internal people so they can help inform efforts to recruit others.”

Externally, employers can work with a variety of partners to build intentional frameworks for developing new talent pipelines. Frontier Co-op works with organizations such as Willis Dady Homeless Services and the Iowa Department of Corrections to support candidates who were previously incarcerated and others facing barriers to employment.

“These partners have unique experience, knowledge, expertise, and a network of resources that we wouldn’t have been able to access or navigate on our own,” Schulte said. “As a result, our partnerships help us address more complex and systemic challenges like transportation, housing support, and connections to social services.”

4. Build ecosystems for scalable solutions. CAEL is leading a six-year, five-city program funded by the Truist Foundation to connect financial institutions with more inclusive talent pipelines, Heckman said. The program brings together employers in the financial industry, workforce boards, community-based organizations, and educational institutions to collaborate, understand needs, and provide employers with access to broader talent pools.

And through the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, more than 600 employers have hired more than 600,000 military spouses, O’Grady said.

“This network allows employers to share best practices and share talent among the network,” she said. “It’s pretty incredible to see competing corporations sharing their talent with each other when a military spouse is relocating to another region.”

The Workforce Advantage You Can’t Afford to Miss

The future of workforce strategy lies in systems designed to recognize potential — not just credentials or conventional experience. Organizations that reimagine their hiring practices by removing outdated barriers and investing in inclusive infrastructure will gain a competitive edge. These companies won’t just fill roles, they’ll build teams that reflect the complexity and demands of a changing world.

The question isn’t whether these candidates are ready to do the work. It’s whether your systems are ready to see them.

Nancy Mann Jackson is a freelance journalist and content writer who writes regularly about finance, insurance, HR, health care, and education. Her work has appeared in Entrepreneur, Forbes, Fortune, CNBC, and many other outlets.

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