

Employer Toolkit: Skills-First Hiring

Introduction:

Massachusetts continues to experience significant workforce pressures, including talent shortages, demographic shifts, rapidly evolving skill demands, and persistent barriers to labor force participation. Skills-first hiring, which centers on competencies rather than degrees, offers a strategic way for employers to expand their talent pools while improving both the hiring process and long-term retention. Drawing on lessons from the MassSkills Coalition's 2025 Skills-First Hiring Learning Community, this employer toolkit outlines practical steps to operationalize skills-first talent strategies across recruitment, hiring, and onboarding.

This toolkit summarizes insights from the MassSkills Learning Community Sessions on Skills-First Hiring, facilitated by [Grads of Life](#), which covered topics such as recruiting, recredentialing, interviewing, onboarding, along with skills mapping, and partnership development. The goal of this toolkit is to provide employers with a guide to implement skills-first practices across recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and retention. In doing so, the MassSkills Coalition hopes to help employers across the Commonwealth expand talent pipelines and strengthen long-term retention, both of which will help to advance the economic competitiveness of Massachusetts.

Why Skills-First Hiring?

Massachusetts is at an inflection point. Talent shortages, skill mismatches, and a rapidly changing economy are impacting traditional hiring strategies. Skills-first hiring prioritizes a candidate's or employee's specific skills and abilities over specific degree requirements. The Skills-First Talent Journey, described in [MassSkills Session One](#), demonstrates how skills-first practices extend across recruiting, hiring, retention, and mobility. The [MassSkills Skills-First Hiring](#) one-pager also highlights why skills-first hiring can be a smarter approach to sourcing talent.

Employers adopting skills-first talent strategies consistently report higher-quality talent pipelines, better alignment between candidate skills and job needs, and reductions in mis-hires and turnover. Specifically, skills-first hiring evaluates competencies such as critical thinking, adaptability, communication, digital literacy, and role-specific technical skills.

Step-by-Step Skills-First Hiring Framework

Step 1: Building Strong Talent Partnerships

Effective talent partnerships are fundamental to scaling skills-first practices. Massachusetts benefits from a robust training ecosystem, including: community colleges, the MassHire system, vocational schools, colleges and universities, community-based organizations, industry associations, and more.

The MassSkills [Employer Guide for Building Strong Skilling Partnerships](#) offers a framework with three key steps:

- **Understand your starting point:** *Workforce gaps, turnover drivers, role-specific skill requirements*
- **Set a change strategy:** *Clarify hiring demand, define partner roles, establish shared KPIs*
- **Begin to execute and refine:** *Align curriculum, provide work-based learning, offer employer feedback loops*

Key criteria for evaluating potential partners include:

- Curriculum alignment with employer technical and professional skill needs
 - Scalability for high-volume hiring pipeline
 - Wraparound supports such as transportation and childcare
 - Job-ready conversion rates and long-term retention outcomes
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Step 2: Recredentialing Roles and Developing Skills Profiles

Recredentialing is one of the most powerful tools employers can use in their journey to adopt skills-first hiring. Recredentialing is not simply the removal of degree requirements. Rather, it is a structured process that involves identifying day-one skills, aligning job descriptions with competencies, and ensuring that both internal stakeholders and hiring tools (e.g., applicant tracking systems) support skills-first practices.

Roles that benefit most from recredentialing:

- High turnover or hiring bottlenecks
- Degree inflation without corresponding job needs
- Limited internal mobility pathways
- Clear on-the-job training potential

The recredentialing process includes:

- Identifying the exact skills required to perform the job effectively
- Prioritizing the top 8–10 skills
- Categorizing skills as required vs. preferred
- Removing degree proxies and outdated credentials
- Using Skills Profiles to guide job description development

Skills profiles summarize the competencies and proficiency levels required for success, supporting recredentialing and fair evaluations. Skills mapping builds on this by identifying employees with adjacent skills who can move into newly recredentialed roles or transition into new pathways.

Skills Profiles serve as the foundation for skills-first practices. A Skills Profile summarizes:

- Core competencies
- Technical skills
- Behavioral skills
- Proficiency levels
- Indicators of job success

The MassSkills Coalition has created more in-depth guides to help employers as they recredential, create skills profiles, and map skills. These materials include the [MassSkills Skills Recredentialing Session PowerPoint](#) and [Best Practices in Utilizing Skills Mapping](#).

Step 3: Writing Skills-First Job Descriptions

Skills-first job descriptions increase transparency and broaden talent pools. Components of a strong skills-first job description include:

- **Role Purpose:** *Clear, one-sentence explanation*
- **Skills Needed:** *Based on a skills profile*
- **Structured List:**
 - *Required skills*
 - *Preferred (but not mandatory) skills*
- **Bias-free language:** *Avoid terms like “digital native,” “aggressive,” “native speaker,” or “reliable transportation,” all of which may deter qualified candidates*
- **Skills-first inclusion statement:** *Communicates openness to STARS, career changers, and diverse talent*

The [MassSkills PowerPoint on Skills-First Interviewing](#) provides additional examples on writing skills-first job descriptions.

Step 4: Skills-Based Interviewing

Skills-based interviewing relies on behavioral questions, structured rubrics, panel-based evaluation, and role-specific tasks or assessments. These methods improve fairness and outcomes by focusing on what candidates can do rather than where they learned their skills. Interviewers must base evaluations on observable behaviors and relevant competencies rather than assumptions tied to degrees or job histories.

Best practices include:

- Behavioral and situational questions tied to priority competencies
- Structured rating rubrics with observable indicators
- Standardized evaluation forms to ensure consistency
- Multi-interviewer panels to reduce individual bias
- Role-specific assessments or work samples

Behavioral questions provide deeper insights into how candidates have demonstrated skills in real contexts. Examples include:

- *“Tell me about a time you learned something quickly to complete a task”*
- *“Describe a situation where you solved a problem without clear direction”*
- *“Give an example of how you collaborated with a team to achieve a goal”*

These best practices can help identify candidates with the requisite critical thinking, adaptability, communication, and problem-solving skills, all traits that distinguish high performers. For a more in-depth tool to help guide employers in this process, review the [MassSkills Interviewing PowerPoint](#).

Step 5: Skills-First Onboarding

Effective onboarding reinforces the skills required for the role and helps new hires build confidence, connection, and capability. A strong skills-first onboarding framework includes clear learning goals, structured 30/60/90-day plans, regular check-ins, peer support, and proficiency benchmarks. Skills mapping supports retention by helping employees visualize future growth paths and giving managers insight into internal mobility opportunities.

Best Practices

- Focus onboarding on the development of targeted skills
- Assign proficiency levels and timelines
- Build relationship-based support (managers, peers, and mentors)
- Hold regular check-ins (30/60/90 days)
- Incorporate feedback loops

Impact - Effective onboarding leads to:

- 89% higher engagement
- 50% increased productivity
- Stronger relationships and retention

See the [MassSkills Onboarding PowerPoint](#) for more information on skills-first onboarding for new employees.

Conclusion

Skills-first hiring is not a wholesale overhaul—it starts with small, meaningful shifts. As the MassSkills materials emphasize: Start with one role. Clarify what someone needs to do, not what they need to have. We hope that this toolkit will help employers across Massachusetts build more equitable, resilient, and future-ready talent pipelines.

Implementation Roadmap for Employers

Phase	Key Actions	Tools to Use
Getting Started (0-30 days)	- Identify 1-2 roles to pilot - Conduct skills analysis	Skills Profiles Recredentialing Templates
Build Skills First Job Descriptions (JDs) (30-45 days)	- Develop job descriptions - Review for Bias	JD Templates Language Checklist
Prepare for Interviews (45-60 days)	- Create interview rubric - Train interviewers	Behavioral Question Bank
Partner with Training Providers (60-90 days)	- Align on curriculum - Plan pipeline	Skilling Partnership Vetting Guide
Launch Skills-First Hiring (90 – 120 days)	- Post job - Source talent - Evaluate skills	Evaluation Rubric
Onboard & Track Outcomes (0-6 months)	Create skills-based onboarding plan	30/60/90 Templates