

ACT celebrates Workforce Development Month with a powerful keynote from LaShana Lewis—technologist, advocate, and Chair of Opportunity@Work’s Stars Advisory Council. Recorded live at ACT’s Atlanta summit, LaShana shares her personal journey and the systemic barriers faced by STARS—those Skilled Through Alternative Routes. Her story highlights the urgent need for inclusive, skills-based hiring and the role of ACT’s Work Ready Communities in building skills-driven pathways.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 62



[LaShana Lewis, LM Lewis Consulting Chair, STARS Advisory Council Opportunity at Work](#)

Links and Resources

- Episode 49 of the Podcast (Spotify Feed)
- [Connect with LaShana Lewis](#)
- [More STARS Stories with Opportunity@Work](#)
- [Rural STARS Joint Research Partnership with ACT and Opportunity@Work](#)
- [Webinar from ACT’s Center for Impact in Learning featuring LaShana Lewis](#)
- [Workforce Development Month Resources from NAWDP](#)
- [Ready for Work's Spotify Feed](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)

Transcript of Episode 62

[Opening Jingle and Music]

LaShana Lewis: The partnership between other organizations, specifically, ACT’s workforce-ready communities are essential in making sure that the STARS voices keep getting out there, that we keep talking about what we need to do, that we keep pushing the needle and we keep doing the things that we need to do to show that people are valued, regardless of pedigree.

[Podcast Open] Ready for Work is a podcast from A-C-T! spotlighting excellence and innovation, throughout the workforce ecosystem! Jason Jones hosts this journey, with trends and ideas to help your region’s workforce reach its highest potential.

[Jingle] Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: That's the voice of LaShana Lewis to kick off Episode 62 of Ready for Work. This is Jasen Jones and thanks for listening-in as we celebrate Workforce Development Month here in September of 2025. In just a few moments we'll hear more from LaShana, founder of Lewis Consulting, as we revisit her inspiring keynote presentation from our Atlanta workforce gathering that ACT hosted just 11 months ago.

LaShana Lewis is a technologist, advocate, and Chair of Opportunity@Work's Stars Advisory Council. LaShana shares her personal journey and the roadblocks faced by millions of skilled workers. Her story is as inspiring as it is urgent, and her message is a call to action: to recognize and uplift the talents of STARS—those Skilled Through Alternative Routes.

September marks the 20th anniversary of Workforce Development Month. ACT is proud to celebrate the talented champions across the workforce ecosystem that work their magic to connect credentialed working learners to employers of choice. All of us share this mission of career and education readiness for life changing impact and LaShana's story shows us the workforce ecosystem at its best.

Providing a proper introduction is ACT's CEO, Janet Godwin as we revisit the Summit stage in Atlanta for this powerful keynote from LaShana Lewis.

Janet Godwin: Now, speaking of power to change, I'm very, very excited to be able to introduce our keynote speaker today as the founder and CEO of L.M. Lewis Consulting and Chair of Opportunity at Work's Stars Advisory Council, Lashana Lewis knows a thing or two, I would say, about dismantling barriers and helping people realize their full potential.

A technologist with more than 25 years of experience, Lashana has participated in and led teams around the country to expand diversity and improve the nonprofit landscape as part of the Tech hire initiative, which Opportunity at Work now powers well. Shauna worked with the Obama administration to encourage employers to hire and train people with nontraditional tech backgrounds. She continues this work as chair of the Stars Advisory Council, whose mission is to rewire the U.S. labor market so that all workers who are skilled through alternative routes can work, learn and earn their full potential. So, without further ado, please help me and welcome Lashana Lewis to our stage this afternoon.

LaShana: Hello everyone. Good afternoon.

So let me start a little bit back on my story. Just to, kind of temper the room. I'll just say that I'm closer to 50 than I am. The 30. So, when I give pieces of my story, I want to make sure you don't think that I was like, you know, a five-year-old, working on a computer or something like that.

So, about 20 years ago. So again, that's why I tempered it. I found myself working at a help desk job, and That was after I worked as a van driver and facilitator for an after-school program. So, despite attending university for about, three and a half years, I realized that opportunities in tech were not that great for people like me.

So, like many others, I encountered the frustrating reality of being skilled but overlooked due to the lack of a bachelor's degree. So back to that afterschool program. I was actually supposed to just make sure that the high schoolers didn't get into shenanigans and things like that, but the computer tutor was leaving, and nice woman had a master's degree.

Was helping the kids out, and she said, "you know, Lashana, you look like you know a lot about computers. You went to university; you understand exactly how to do this job. So go ahead and just do it."

They may actually give you this position, which is great because it was like twice what I was making at the time. So, I went on ahead and I kind of put together like a schedule and started teaching the kids.

So, to kind of put you in a mindset of what technology looked like, this was about 1998, 1999. I started teaching them things like how to create web pages. How was the skill that, you know, a lot of people needed at that time? I taught them email addresses and what those meant. And these are all kids who lived in a project who were all low income. And, you know, marginalized and oppressed community kids. So, I was like, you know, one thing that they can't do is they can't take any of this knowledge away from you, out of every single thing that I'm teaching you. So, I did that. Kids loved it. I am still in contact with a lot of those kids today. And they said, you know, thank you, Lashana, for teaching us all of this, because most people wouldn't think that we would be capable.

So, I went went to my bosses and all of that stuff and just said, you know, hey, here's, here's everything, and let's, you know, see if I can actually do this position. And he looked at me and said, "You know, okay, let me talk to all of the executives, etc.," and so forth. He did that and had me sign a piece of paper to do the job and, came back to me and said, Lashana, we need to meet again.

Took that piece of paper, ripped it up in front of my face. He said, "we don't have the funding, and this position isn't for someone like you. You would need more education. And I said, But I've been doing this job. And he said, yes, we need you to keep doing the job until we find somebody else to be able to fill that position.

Yeah. Last time I said that story, a lady, like, got up and she was, like, crying, and she was, like, ready to fight. And I said, it's okay. This is like years ago. I don't even know where this guy is anymore.

Another story. I was working for a law firm. decided to leave that after-school job because I found out I wasn't really going anywhere. Worked in helpdesk and doing all the helpdesk stuff. They were doing an M&A merger and acquisition of a new law firm, and they sent somebody out. It was my turn to go out and check out everything that was happening with this law firm. And I did a huge technical document. I got to know everything. I was helping out with updating systems and all of that stuff.

Came back, gave my presentation. They said great. We need to be able to do like these succession orders for help desk. Will you help us create that? And I said absolutely. So here I am doing all of this stuff, and I get to, the final row and they said, okay, we're going to interview people in for these, you know, succession rights.

And I said, okay, great. Go in. I do the interview. It's down to me and one other person, and I was told, well, because of cultural differences, you are not allowed to have that position. It had nothing

to do with performance. And I said, well, what do you mean by cultural differences? How many people have heard cultural differences as the reason why they didn't get something?

I had no idea what that meant either. So, I went and I talked to a few people and they said, well, one boss believes that a person with a bachelor's degree deserves this position, and I didn't. And that boss went out, so I didn't get the position because I didn't have a bachelor's degree, even though I had done all of this stuff. And then I had to go back and train the person that actually got the position, how to do the job.

Third story. All right. So, I decided to leave that corporation, and I went on to a different one where I was actually hired in as a helpdesk manager. So, the position that I was trying to eventually get to at this previous job, anyway, I had filled in for my boss.

True story. May he rest in peace. But at the time he survived this, he had a horrible accident where he was riding a bike. Ribs got crushed. He needed somebody to kind of go in and do all the hiring and all this other stuff.

So, I stepped in, did all of that. He said, this is fantastic.

I'm going to go ahead and try to put you up for another position. And he wasn't able to do it, and it was literally a money thing that one had actually nothing to do with, with my bachelor's degree or lack of having one.

But I said, you know, if he thinks that I'm worth it, let me try my my hand out in the field.

So, I went, and I applied for jobs. Finally found a job. I was overqualified for the job. And it was at a time where, as some of us do, we were looking for 100% of everything, right? You have to fit every single thing on there. So, I was like 120%. And, I get on the phone with the recruiter, she's really excited.

She was like, okay, you know, I think we got everything together. And she said, I need to check one thing. Do you have a bachelor's degree? And I said, no. And she said, I can't submit your application for this job unless you tell me you have a bachelor's degree. And I said, well, that would be a lie. I'm not going to tell you that.

So, she said, okay, let me see. And she called me back and I said, is there anything you can do? Can you talk to anybody? Can you talk to the hiring managers and ask them, what are the specific qualifications for the job? She said, no, I can't do that. So, I'm sorry. And from that, I just kind of learned that whatever I did, this one barrier was just going to stick with me. No matter what I did, no matter where I went.

It wasn't until I went, and I was auditing some classes at a university to kind of bone up my knowledge and computers that a couple of instructors actually said, Lashonda, you have all the skills that you need to be able to do this job and make way more than what you're making right now as a manager.

And they told me about a nonprofit that was forming back in 2014, a little boot camp to be able to actually put people into apprenticeship programs. And, they said, you know, go and check it out. I

did, and literally it went from month one of going to the boot camp, to me, to them finding out that I already knew how to program to my three them actually putting me into apprenticeship program, my four and five.

I did good in five months, six. I was asked to have that position full time. They didn't care that I didn't have a bachelor's degree. They didn't care about any of those other type of qualifications, other than just the fact that I could do the job. So, from there, I made my way out of this whole that I was kind of put in.

And the stereotype that many of us, people who are known as stars, have to endure because people have these outdated notions of exactly what we are capable of. So, of course, mine is a story that's shared by countless other people. Every single time I give speeches like that, somebody brings me on stage, and they say, The Shining, I've gone through this, or somebody I know has gone through this.

And, through the, the bootcamp that I went through, I ended up meeting Byron Opportunity at work, shortly formed afterwards. He brought me on. I was going on stage talking to people, which is weird because I am a techie. I sit down behind computer screens, and I don't talk to people. So, after after Byron kind of dragging me through and helped me, you know, get my chops together.

He asked me, he said, you know, what does it feel like to be, 1 in 1,000,000? And I said, you know, Byron, I don't feel like I'm one of them in a million. I feel like I am one of millions. And at that time, I had no idea how true that was until researchers put together the numbers.

And we are talking about 70 million people who are just like me, that do not have bachelor's degrees but have a lot of skills to be able to do higher wage jobs. 70 million, that is half of the workforce in the U.S. Half. So, through partnerships with various entities, Opportunity at Work was able to put together some numbers.

Looking at workers who are starting in about like 1989, after about 30 years, they kind of don't ever get anywhere close to being able to reach those salary levels that their degreed counterparts are. This is people who have the same amount of skill set. The only difference is just a bachelor's degree versus not. And when you break down that 70 million again, huge number, you find out that 61% are black stars, 55% are Hispanic workers, 49% are white stars, 66% are rural workers.

Now think about the people we know. I'm from Missouri. So, there are a lot of rural people where I am. 66% of those people fall within that range and 61% of veterans. These are people that I know for a fact have these skills. There are people that I know that came out of the military programming satellites that are struggling to get higher wage jobs.

Some more numbers here. 70% of new jobs between 2009 and 2019 were in occupations where employers typically require a four-year degree. I go back in my mind, and I think about the Apollo program because I am a NASA fan. So, if you want to placate me, buy me off, get some NASA merch and I will be happy.

And I look at it, there were about 400,000 people, I think, in the Apollo program. How many people do you think have bachelor's degrees? Back there in the 60s? Probably. Probably about

10%. I have not done the numbers, but I know it's not 100. I know 100% of people could not have been bachelor's degree people. And some of these people touched the machines that actually sent, people to the moon.

So it just makes me think about if we're pumping these types of requirements out, what kind of things are we missing out on? What kind of technology could we have that we are borrowing ourselves from? By putting this artificial barrier in three times more? Degree holders are likely to have a strong network. The degree holders are three times more likely to have a strong degree network.

That makes sense to me because a lot of people, you know, do college hookups. You went to college with me, and I know you, but where does that leave stars? I had to join organizations as, like board members and things like that to be able to have something similar to that network. But that's still not as strong as what degree holders have.

I like this one because it actually kind of breaks down a lot of things. But look at. How these.

Skills line up. You get someone making 18 an hour, basically having the same skills as someone that makes two and a half times more. What's the difference? Why can't that person get up there? Basically, how the stars universe breaks down forming stars or people who, are like, they have the potential, but they might be limited.

That's how I was for a very long time. Because of those stories I told you. I had a hard time getting out of those Forming stars place. I eventually got a rising star because I found the boot camp. That was the one thing that was the gateway job for me to be able to get to a higher wage, and now I'm where I'm at now.

Stars lost a lot of access to jobs because they don't have that gateway. They're being limited. They're being squeezed. And this is what I'm talking about when I'm saying the gateway jobs. You got the stars coming in doing entry level jobs. The gateway job comes up. You have to be at the right place at the right time. I happen to have professors who believed in me to be able to say, degree be damned.

You deserve to have a better chance. And that led me to my destination job, where I was able to make a higher wage. But look. Percentage of current workers who have a bachelor's degree. 40%. There's not a lot of us that are making it out of that gateway job. And this is what we're talking about. When we break that down, the paths are blocked specifically for racially marginalized and oppressed people.

They're not getting through those gateway jobs. They're not getting to the the destination jobs. We're not even getting more than 9% of stars in these destination jobs.

So, with that said. I just kind of wanted to point out the fact that you needed something like what we have now.

You need something like opportunity at work to exist, to be able to want to do the research and point these things out but also be able to help you understand exactly where that bottleneck is

happening. And basically, we decided we needed kind of name. We needed stars. We needed people who were skilled through alternative routes, and we needed to brand that out.

And that's how we ended up with the higher stars campaign. That's how we ended up with tear the paper ceiling movement. And, basically people ask me, well, you know, why do you keep doing this? You keep saying that you are a techie. You don't like to talk. You don't understand exactly. You know what it is that that needs to be done with every single facet.

And I tell them there needs to be more voices like mine in the room. There needs to be more voices like mine. Because who can talk about stars better than a star themselves? So, the partnership between other organizations specifically asked is workforce ready communities are essential in making sure that the stories voices keep getting out there, that we keep talking about what we need to do, that we keep pushing the needle, and we keep doing the things that we need to do to show that people are valued, regardless of pedigree.

And, as we celebrate the achievements and the further partnerships that we have, I want us to recommit ourselves to the vision of a future where everyone has an equitable chance to thrive and together, we can unlock the full potential of every individual and build a workforce where talent know knows no bounds and I wanted to end by saying, my name is Lashana Lewis and I am a star.

Thank you.

Jasen: What a powerful story from LaShana Lewis. Let's carry this message forward. Whether you're an employer, educator, policymaker, or advocate, you have a role in the workforce ecosystem to expand skills-driven pathways with focus on credentials that matter. If LaShana's story resonated with you, share this episode and help amplify the STARs movement.

Our team at ACT would love to connect with you about Work Ready Communities as a catalyst for building skills-driven regional partnerships. Check our show notes for more on Work Ready Communities and the inspiring stories of STARs through Opportunity at Work's partnership with ACT. This is Jasen Jones, and it's been a pleasure to celebrate Workforce Development Month with you. Join the celebration with links in our show notes as well and thanks for listening. Let's keep pushing the boundaries of what's possible in a skills-driven future.

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