



KEEPING UP With Digital Badges

Digital badges and credentials have blown up. Now we need to verify them through an industry standard that makes sense to stakeholders.

BY ELIZABETH LOUTFI

In the material world, people have been wearing badges for hundreds of years to signify personal achievements, acquired competencies and accomplishments. During the early 2000s, badges expanded into the digital world. In 2005, Microsoft created the Xbox 360 Gamerscore system. Foursquare, the social networking service, launched in 2009, and used badging as a marketing tactic to drive user engagement.

In 2011, badges were given more recognition following the publication of Peer 2 Peer University and The Mozilla Foundation's white paper, "An Open Badge

System Framework.” According to the report, badges were being formally and successfully used to represent achievements and motivate learning. Foursquare, the Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Scouts of America were highlighted as examples.

In recent years, the number of digital badging programs available in the workplace have grown. Keeping up with them — understanding what they are, what they mean and where they come from — is an emerging challenge for chief learning officers and learning leaders.

Also in 2011, then-U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recognized digital badges as an important new education investment in his remarks at the fourth annual launch of the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Lifelong Learning Competition. In his address, Duncan emphasized how all types of learners can benefit from digital badging programs, including teachers.

“Badges offer an important way to recognize non-traditional ways of learning,” he said in his remarks. “They’re a way to give credence — and ultimately, credit — for the skills learners and teachers acquire in a broader set of learning environments, and a wider range of content. Badges also empower students and teachers to play an even stronger role in their own learning and development — to seek out the right tools among many resources available, and in their fields of interest — and build a record of what they have mastered.”

However, the Mozilla Foundation’s research pointed to context being more important than design. Not long after publication, the foundation developed its own standard for digital badges, called Open Badges, in 2011. The system collects, issues and displays digital badges across many websites and nonprofits, including information such as what the badge represents, how and when it’s earned and where it was issued, according to its website. Now, roughly 3,000 organizations issue Open Badges as part of their learning and development.

But so far, most of the discussion surrounding digital badges and their use in L&D has been on the supply side, not the demand side, said Daniel Szpiro, dean at Marist College.

In hiring, it’s tricky for employers to trust a digital badge if they have never included them as part of their hiring equation before.

For career advancement, the types of credentials managers are interested in are the ones that are associated with job requirements, which tend to be

degree- or license-based — not digital badges.

“Very few employers have historically attached credentials to career advancement, and I can tell you that having spent 25 years in the executive MBA space,” Szpiro said.

As a result, some learning leaders may not know enough about digital badges to begin with, while others are left skeptical of what skills those badges actually represent, he added.

“Whatever format it takes, whether it’s digital or somebody is writing it with a feather on a sheepskin, what does a credential represent?” Szpiro said. “Why would an employer put weight on any credential?

It has to do with the validity process and the issuing organization.”

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RAPID GROWTH

At the end of 2019, there were more than 190,000 digital badges and badging programs — roughly 29 percent of all U.S. credentialing programs, according to a Credential Engine report released in September.

Not all of them follow the same standards, however. Like any credential, a digital badge represents the completion of a course or the acquisition of a skill. But they vary in content, intended quality, duration and rigor, said Scott Cheney, Credential Engine’s executive director.

While some digital badging programs are becoming household names, such as digital badging giant Credly’s Acclaim and IBM’s Digital Badge Program, many others still give employers pause. “How much effort are employers going to put in to vet 27 different kinds of digital badges?” Szpiro said.

He said the ones he trusts personally are those that have been around the longest — from universities, business schools and established organizations. In January 2019, the School of Professional Programs at Marist launched a digital badge program, in which each badge is earned after completing a series of three courses. The program is designed for users to go through it as a standalone or when working toward an undergraduate degree at Marist. The program is also compatible with employee tuition reimbursement benefit policies at many organizations.

Cheney said he and his team found the number of digital badge programs in the U.S. to be surprising. They had not expected the number to be that large prior to conducting the research.

“This is absolutely going to influence employers,” he said. “What we need to have happen, for the marketplace to be really efficient, is for those employers — whether those badges are being used internally for the employees or externally for the market — to make

sure the information about those badges is shared publicly so that the next employer isn't wondering." Sharing this information would advance the flow of marketplace talent, he added.

Historically, with alternative credentials there would be little or nothing to show when a user completed something, with the exception of a paper certificate or PDF. In many cases, individuals were being left to self-report these skills. Prior to launching Credly in 2013, this was a point of inquiry for founder and CEO Jonathan Finkelstein.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, Finkelstein and his colleagues were working with large companies and academic institutions to scale workforce development using technology, which gave them pause: "It was like: Wait a minute, if we're bringing in technology in such an incredible way,

and at-scale for learning, why aren't we doing the same for the outcome?" Finkelstein said.

The digital aspect would make it easier for employers to discover the meaning behind the badge. With Credly, Finkelstein said, the idea was that a learner's achievement doesn't get locked up in one place. Instead, the credential should be portable.

"Once you earn a credential, you should be able to use it anywhere, and that ties into the next piece, which is that it needs to be verified," Finkelstein said.

KEEPING TRACK

Credential Engine's report estimates there are roughly 738,428 unique credentials in the U.S.: 370,020 issued by postsecondary education institutions, 7,132 credentials from MOOC providers, 315,067 credentials from nonacademic institutions (including digital badges) and 46,209 credentials from public and private secondary institutions.

At the end of the day, experts in digital badges and alternative credentialing agree that for these programs to work, there needs to be some way to standardize and ultimately verify them for employers.

A digital infrastructure to easily store, share and display credentials where students and badge owners can store their data would help as they apply for jobs, register for job training programs and upgrade their skills, according to Washington D.C. based public policy think tank, Third Way's report, "Hurdles to Connected Credentials."

Last year, Credential Engine also designed an online credential catalogue; they've had approximately 9,000

credentials registered with it so far. Cheney said he hopes to get as many programs registered as possible. The goal is to be the one place anybody can go to search an individual credential, where companies can pull them into applications they're developing, where a high school junior can discover a new pathway tool or where somebody who's been laid off can decide how to jumpstart their next career path, Cheney said.

Additionally, Cheney said Credential Engine wants to continue to publish an annual report on the number of alternative credentials in the U.S.

Ultimately, what the first report revealed was significant, but Cheney said their evidence is indicative of all the other questions they have to answer about credentialing.

"I think we've accomplished being able to share a richer picture of the basic contours of the marketplace," he said. "What

we still need to do is have much richer information about each of those credentials that we've identified as being out there, and we need to make sure that we can put that information into the hands of everyone who needs it."

TAKING ACTION

By 2030, as many as 375 million workers throughout the world may need to reskill or switch occupations in response to technological disruption, according to a 2018 McKinsey Global Institute Report. And by 2023, the digital badging market, which includes vendors like Credly, Accredible, Badgelist and others, is expected to reach a net worth of \$205.6 million, according to a 2019 market research report, "Digital Badges Market by Offering, End User and Region — Global Forecast to 2023."

We know that digital badges and other forms of credentialing are likely here to stay, and experts believe they can be useful in identifying and hiring talent, as well as helpful tools in workplace training and development.

The trick, however, is keeping up with them, and keeping them verified through an industry standard that makes sense to stakeholders.

Spiro said more coverage that talks about employers and alternative credentials in general — or even digital badges specifically — would make a legitimate impact in how they are recognized and understood. **CLO**

Elizabeth Loutfi is a Chief Learning Officer associate editor.

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