

Open badges are unlocking the emerging jobs economy



Introduction

Recent economic studies have identified a paradox: Although high percentages of youth are unemployed, employers report a shortage of qualified candidates who possess critical job skills. Higher education providers are producing more graduates than ever before, yet fewer than half of new graduates or employers believe that they are adequately prepared for entry-level positions.¹ The symptoms described in the reports point to troubling market-signaling problems between job candidates, employers and education/training providers.

Often, new college students are unsure of which professional path they want to pursue and select a general course of study that does not give them the skills demanded by the marketplace. In other cases, learners are unaware of which skills are required to secure the jobs they have targeted, or they struggle to identify education programs that teach these skills, so they delay choosing a major or spend time studying the wrong things. Employers find it difficult to communicate their needs to education providers, who could adapt their curricula to meet emerging needs if only they knew what those needs were. Proposed solutions identify the common need to align postsecondary programs with labor market needs and call for much greater transparency between education/training curricula and career pathways. Helping a learner identify a possible career path early in the process is a critical step that both secondary and postsecondary schools should participate in.

Meanwhile recent graduates have difficulty describing their competencies and telling their story to employers. Universities are publicly criticized because they struggle to demonstrate to employers and the public the value of the knowledge and skills they develop in their graduates. And employers struggle to identify candidates whose qualifications they can trust.

Achievement-based badges address market inefficiencies

An ecosystem built around Open Badges can be an important part of the solution to reduce these market inefficiencies, increase transparency and establish trusted communication between employers, jobseekers and education providers. By collecting skill-based badges, the record of achievement begun in secondary school becomes the foundation upon which workers build their capabilities and tell their stories to employers throughout their careers. Employers will use the verified information gleaned from skill-based badges to identify qualified candidates and to communicate skill gaps to education providers.

Postsecondary institutions will use badge-derived information to track the impact of their learning programs through the job placement of graduates and to adapt their programs to meet market needs.

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¹ Georgetown Public Policy Institute, *Failure to Launch: Structural Shift and the New Lost Generation* (October 2013). Also, McKinsey & Co. *Education to Employment* (December 2012)

The concept of formally recognizing achievements related to knowledge or skill mastery is not new. For many people the word ‘badges’ immediately conjures images of scouting organizations and the achievement-based patches they issue. A related concept comes from video games. The original implementation of a game-based achievement system is credited to Microsoft, which introduced the Xbox 360 Gamerscore system in 2005. More recently mobile apps like Foursquare and online games like Farmville have firmly implanted the idea of ‘badge earning’ in the popular lexicon.

‘Badges’ as symbols of achievement have long existed in education and employment as well. Since their inception, colleges have awarded diplomas that signify the successful completion of degree programs (essentially a collection of ‘badges’). For many decades, government, industry and trade groups have issued certifications and licenses to signify competencies and professional skills. However, most badges that represent achievement in this context are not standardized, rarely digital and difficult to share. Today, badges have evolved into secure, verified, web-enabled credentials that contain metadata detailing the issuer, rigor and requirements met for the recipient to earn the badge.

To realize the full potential of a badge-based ecosystem, it is important that the interactions around badges are open—not proprietary.



Figure 1. Badges are a web-enabled version of the traditional credential.

Introducing Open Badges

To realize the full potential of a badge-based ecosystem, it is important that the interactions around badges are open—not proprietary. In late 2011, Mozilla, HASTAC and the MacArthur Foundation came together at the center of a broad community of collaborators to produce an open technical standard for any organization to create, issue, manage and verify digital badges. In March 2013 they released the first version of their Open Badge specification and the Open Badges Infrastructure (OBI) software that implements the standard.

The Open Badge standard allows any person or organization to define a badge (or a system of badges) to recognize achievements. Each badge begins with an image—a visual representation of the knowledge or skill represented by that particular badge. Open Badges use metadata attached to badge images to provide additional information; every badge tells its own story about what it signifies, how it was earned and the organization that conferred it.



Figure 2. What's in an Open Badge

Open Badge metadata includes:

- The defined outcomes required to earn the badge and the evidence earners provided to demonstrate their competence.
- The qualifications of the learning provider, credential sponsor or issuing organization and their trustworthiness.
- The relationship between the badge and larger programs, professional learning pathways and/or larger skill sets.
- Verification of the badge earner's identity and relevant, secure, trusted communications about his or her qualifications, competencies and skills.

Applications that support Open Badges are able to share, stack, combine and include Open Badges issued by other applications. The Open Badges framework includes specifications for aggregating badges into a profile account or “backpack” for each badge earner. Badge earners can use backpacks to organize their own achievements across issuers and learning experiences and broadcast their qualifications to employers, professional networks and others.

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Who will benefit from badges?

Badges are rapidly becoming the currency that provides verified, specific information from trusted sources about the skills, competencies and knowledge an individual possesses. The economic disruptions of the last two decades have made workers responsible for managing their own career development through learning that starts in secondary school and college but continues throughout their careers. Professional networks now enable social learning and sharing of interests, qualifications and opportunities, but the information in online profiles is often questionable or even fraudulent. In the future the most valuable credentials will be issued and verified by recognized and respected organizations and education providers. In the new worker-centric world, verified and validated badges will grow rapidly as an alternative to paper resumes, curriculum vitae (CVs) and even transcripts that deliver more reliable and more complete information about achievements.

- Sponsors of high-stakes exams will increase the value of the credentials they issue by encouraging trusted sharing by earners and verification for employers, as paper transcripts are replaced and degrees are enhanced by web-enabled, secure digital certifications. Badge systems will increase the transparency of the learning pathways and progressions that culminate in professional certifications; from individual courses to high stakes credential programs, badges earned along these pathways will unlock new professional opportunities.
- Universities and other education providers will endorse badges as a means of enabling learners to articulate the job-ready competencies and soft skills they acquire during coursework. Skills learned through extracurricular activities and experiential learning will also be captured and communicated, providing a more complete picture of each candidate. Badges will become important as signals of “side-track” competencies for students, from foreign language fluency for business majors, to programming skills for liberal arts grads, or communication and teamwork skills for engineering grads.
- Badge earners will control their own credentials across schools, training programs and learning experiences. The badges they collect recognize the full spectrum of learning and skills they develop, both inside and outside the classroom. They will easily share their qualifications, broadcast their potential, and connect to new jobs and new learning opportunities.
- For employers and advanced education providers, the common language of outcomes, competencies and skills articulated through badges will make it easier than ever before to communicate changing needs to learners, education institutions and training providers. As a result, curricula will become more market-responsive and impactful for learners.
- When seeking new job candidates or evaluating prospective applicants for advanced education or training, employers will have ready access to a marketplace of verified, qualified individuals whose pathways may differ, but whose outcomes converge on common skill sets represented by verified and validated achievements in the form of badges.

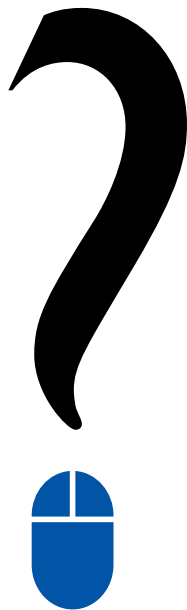
Important considerations remain

- Issuers need to agree on the greater value of an open, centralized, secure and verified approach to badge management and avoid proprietary strategies, which will hinder the growth of the badging ecosystem.
- Educators and training providers must become more comfortable with unbundling diplomas and embracing outcomes-driven learning design.
- College faculty will resist badges initially. For some, the adaptation may be difficult because it requires—perhaps for the first time—examining and defining the marketable job skills that students will develop in their courses.
- Tools and processes for effective badge system design must be created based on best practices for learning design and competency-based outcomes.
- Badge system design tools and processes must be embraced by the issuer community, with complete consideration and planning for impact on existing credentialing programs.
- Employers must value badges as web-enabled representations of educational and job-relevant achievements.

The promise of Open Badges

Open Badges are not the silver-bullet that will cure the ills of our postsecondary education system. However, if they are implemented according to best practices, Open Badges are means to bridge the gap between workforce supply and demand currently impacting global labor markets. Aligning the requirements of employers with the offerings of educational institutions in a way that leads to learners becoming competent entry-level professionals serves the interest of all three groups. Accomplishing this in a way that allows individuals to broadcast their potential as opportunities arise is only valuable if it operates through a trusted ecosystem built around clear communication of valuable skills and knowledge. Once these things are in place, higher education providers can prove their case for the ROI of college tuition and employers will have more efficient access to qualified workers and better transparency around job skill gaps with schools and training providers.

In the future the most valuable credentials will be issued and verified by recognized and respected organizations and education providers.



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