



## Digital badging: The common currency for professional recognition

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Historically, colleges and universities have held the responsibility of preparing and qualifying individuals to be productive members of the workforce. For the opportunity to earn a diploma, students were willing to go into debt in exchange for what was generally the promise of employment.

However, a diploma today is simply a gatekeeper to be considered for a first interview – it is no longer the guarantee of employment. This is because business leaders have come to realize that while diplomas are useful for initial screening and “weeding” purposes, they do not offer insight into a candidate’s ability to be a successful employee. As such, employers are hungry for additional ways to identify candidates who will likely succeed quickly in the workplace.

Professional credentials are meant to fill this role, but, too often, employers do not have the literacy needed to decipher the “alphabet soup” of letters after someone’s name in order to know whether he or she can meet the nuanced demands of a particular job. The lack of such literacy has further contributed to the frustration inherent in the hiring process.

Additionally, a credential often signals assessed *generalized* industry knowledge and skills. While the credential may be essential for entrance into the career pathway, individuals who seek to differentiate themselves from others have few available mechanisms to be formally recognized for specialized skills, assessed competencies or expertise levels.

While differentiation is important, given the ever-evolving job market and the tendency for people to change positions every few years, it is also vital for individuals to find ways to keep their skills and knowledge current. To do so, many people take advantage of the unprecedented access they have to “supplemental” career development and continuing education opportunities. These experiences allow them to focus on areas of interest and pursue learning activities in order to close knowledge and skill gaps and ultimately, develop competencies needed for career growth. Even though these learning activities can be quite transformative, an employer has no way to validate the authenticity of the experience, nor can they know whether or not the individual’s skills have been assessed. As such, the experience simply becomes an unverified line item on a resume.

With the disparate nature of the professional development opportunities available today, what is clearly needed is a common currency to validate and provide clarity around the nature of credentials, accomplishments and experiences. This currency should also be



portable so that individuals' can easily maintain evidence of their ongoing commitment to their professional development. As noted above, the lack of such a currency has caused a great deal of frustration and confusion among all of the professional development stakeholders within an industry ecosystem (i.e. professionals, education providers, credentialing bodies and employers) and has made it difficult for professionals to clearly articulate the stepping stones taken along their individualized career pathway. Moreover, in today's digital world, where professionals share practically everything online and job recruiters primarily search websites for potential candidates, having a common way to decipher, manage, share and verify accomplishments is paramount. This is why digital badging is quickly becoming the currency of choice for professional recognition.

Digital badges represent and verify a variety of different accomplishments including certifications, continuing education experiences, specialty certificates, professional contributions, and assessed competencies. Because they function as a consistent way to represent all aspects of an individual's professional development pathway, badges have become the needed "common currency" for industry ecosystems to recognize professional achievements.

With this in mind, there are two major ways that digital badges have been used in recent years: Certification and Micro-credentialing.

### *Certification*

Many of the largest and most prominent certification providers in the world have decided to adopt digital badging to represent their certifications.

They do so for a variety of reasons including:

- 1) *Mitigate risk*: Credentialing organizations need to protect the integrity of their credentials and mitigate the risk of someone tampering with a paper certificate. Digital badge technology provides the security needed to verify the authenticity of credentials.
- 2) *Expiration*: Digital badges can be set to expire and this feature insures that only certification holders whose credentials are current and up-to-date can share their badges. The BadgeCert platform also has tools to communicate impending badge expiration to earners.
- 3) *Digital Verification*: Certificants want the added value of being able to digitally share their credentials with others who can instantly verify them with a single click. This capability also allows certification bodies to reduce the burden of manually validating their stakeholders' credentials for third-parties.
- 4) *Meta-data*: Often, third-parties do not understand the nature of an earned credential. Badges are embedded with underlying metadata or information that further describes and qualifies the credential.



- 5) *Marketing*: Organizations need to promote their credentials to other potential candidates and maintain their viability within their respective industries. Because digital badges can be shared across social networks, on email signatures and websites, they have become a powerful marketing tool. Several digital badging platforms also allow the issuer to review digital badge sharing data and analytics that helps them to further understand how their brand is being seen in the world.
- 6) *Reduce costs*: Digital badging eliminates labor and materials costs associated with issuing paper certificates, thus providing a large cost savings for issuing organizations.

### *Micro-credentials*

As stated earlier, professionals are eager to find ways to further differentiate themselves in today's competitive job market. They want to be recognized for their areas of expertise, specializations and competencies, which may not be directly represented by their current certifications. As organizations constantly strive to provide additional value to their stakeholders, while also identifying alternative ways to generate revenue, they have begun to develop specialty certificates, or "micro-credentials."

This nomenclature has caused significant confusion within the credentialing industry. To set the record straight, the term "micro-credential" is often associated with the term "digital badge," but they are not the same thing. Digital badges can be used as a tool or currency to represent a micro-credential, but they are not micro-credentials. The confusion may be related to the fact that the concept of micro-credentialing and digital badging emerged around the same time. As organizations began to develop micro-credentials to grow their program offerings and support the needs of their certificants, they also decided to adopt the most current way to represent these smaller, more competency-based certificates.

Digital badging technology also facilitates the ability to automatically "stack" or "level-up" badges to represent the hierarchy of developing skills and knowledge. This ability enables organizations to be quite creative as they consider how to develop new specialty programs and certification offerings. Along this line, one of the newer applications of "stackable" digital badges involves a professional requesting an "endorsement" from a manager who can attest to applied competencies or skills in the workplace. Much like a letter of recommendation, an "endorsement" badge enables a professional to be recognized in a verified manner for their advanced level of expertise.

Micro-credentialing has also been a concept used by training providers and higher education institutions. Instead of issuing a paper certificate for successful completion of continuing education courses and competency-based activities, these organizations use digital badges to represent and validate the accomplishment. As mentioned earlier, when all stakeholders within an ecosystem (i.e. professionals, certification providers, training



providers, employers) adopt badging as the common currency, the resulting utility for all parties is significant.

Finally, a recent advancement in recruiting technology has contributed to the movement towards adopting digital badging as a currency and essentially propelled it to the proverbial “tipping point” in the career development space. Many job boards are now making it possible for candidates to include their verified credentials on their profiles, and are also enabling recruiters to search for candidates who have validated or authenticated certifications and skills. Now that digital badging is emerging a highly valuable currency for key stakeholders in workforce development, what was once a “nice to have” technology is quickly becoming a “must have” strategic tool.