

COMMUNICATING COMPETENCIES THROUGH BADGING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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In today's knowledge economy, good jobs and career progression require ever-higher levels of rapidly changing skills (Carnavale, 2013). A single credential or a stable set of well-known job skills are no longer sufficient for career success. Most people can expect numerous career transitions that will require up-skilling, professional development, and lifelong learning. The ever-changing arena of professional competencies is a challenge not only for individuals trying to navigate career progression, but also for employers, who cite the inability to find people with necessary skills as a critical business concern (SHRM, 2016).

Badges support the professional currency of competencies

Navigating the rapidly changing world of work requires understanding one's own competencies. And making effective use of competencies requires understanding why a particular set of competencies is valuable. Competencies don't have value in and of themselves; they accrue value as stakeholders use them to represent currency in exchanges. These exchanges are not possible unless competencies are documented and can be verified in a form that allows for easy transfers of information among stakeholders. This is where badges are important. Open badges use a standard format for digital exchange of information documenting learning achievements. A learner's mastery of competencies, including evidence of how the competency was assessed and in what context, can be documented in badges. Competencies that are documented in badges are portable on the web, for lifelong learners to collect, curate, and use as evidence of their capabilities.

Competencies documented in badges can be circulated among stakeholders in ecosystems that value these

competencies and therefore recognise the professional capabilities of the individuals who have earned the badges. Relationships develop among these stakeholders, including:

- Individual learners who have mastered competencies (they hold the currency of their own competencies);
- Education or training organisations that help individuals master competencies and verify that mastery (they help individuals generate and hold more currency);
- Employers who seek individuals who have mastered competencies (they "consume" the currency);
- Endorsers who vouch for the validity of competencies (they reinforce the currency).

The practical exchanges among these stakeholders include, among other things:

- Getting a job or career advancement;
- Hiring or promoting a valuable employee;
- Paying for education or training for the purpose of acquiring competencies.

When these systems of exchange are not working well, the currency of competencies is broken and the value of competencies is not realised. For example:

- Individuals do not know or cannot express their own competencies, hindering their ability to get good jobs and advance their careers.
- Employers can't find employees with the needed competencies.
- Employers don't know and/or can't apply the valuable skills of their current employees.
- Education and training programs are opaque and do not explain what competencies are being mastered.
- Different stakeholders disagree about what competencies mean and how they are related to each other.

Furthermore, when competencies are

only documented in systems that are closed or proprietary, the value of the competencies cannot circulate among stakeholders unless they all have access to these closed systems. Open, portable badges make competencies easy to understand, circulate, combine, and accrue value among diverse stakeholders.

When competencies are defined and used in ways that are transparent, relevant, valid, and portable via badges, stakeholders benefit from shared, understood value in their exchanges.

- Individuals understand what competencies they need for a specific job or career path.
- Learners and employers can invest in education and training programs that lead to mastery of the specific competencies that are needed.
- Educators can verify the mastery of specific competencies and provide transparency with regard to what's included in their credentials.
- Learners can articulate their own competencies and provide evidence.
- Employers can find employees and verify that they have the necessary competencies.

Curating evidence of competencies

How can lifelong learners get the most value out of their own competencies? The first step is to gain a better understanding of the competencies they already have, and by extension get useful insights about gaps they might want to address.

Learning and development professionals can help learners understand their competencies in the context of occupational categories and job requirements. They can communicate the skills required for an individual to move into higher levels of responsibility in a current position,

advance to another position, or perhaps make a lateral move to a related position.

Professional development organisations can provide training and assessment opportunities for learners to verify the competencies they already have and master new competencies. These organisations can use online systems to issue badges for competencies, granting learners open, verifiable records that they can combine and curate for different purposes. Portable competency badges put the learner in control and are therefore a strong motivator for learners to curate their competencies, collect evidence, and engage in ongoing professional development.

Learners can curate not only their own badges, but also evidence to back up their competencies. Actual evidence, such as work artifacts, with an explanation of how they demonstrate a competency, concretely show an individual's capabilities to an employer. Evidence helps the learner and other stakeholders visualise the ability to apply this competency in a work environment, including demonstrating the individual's value in their current position.

In some cases, the evidence will be credentials, including degrees, certificates, certifications, licensures, and badges issued by educational institutions and professional organisations. These might not explicitly include information about the competencies mastered to earn these credentials. Learners can request a detailed description from the institution that granted the credential to get information about the competencies included, which are sometimes called "learning outcomes." One might also find this information in course descriptions or syllabi from courses taken.

As learners gain awareness of their own competencies, they will understand the value of collecting digital evidence and artifacts continuously. Ongoing curation of evidence not only avoids the problem of trying to gather and retrieve materials in a rush when there's a timely opportunity, but it also

encourages individuals to keep in mind that they are lifelong learners who need to be constantly aware of their own competencies and what they're learning and achieving. Curation of one's own evidence is important for building confidence and keeping an ongoing professional development mindset.

The ability to articulate and describe one's own competencies is evidence also; this reflects the learner's detailed understanding of the field, what it means to be professionally capable, and their clear-eyed analysis of their own strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. The time and effort learners spend documenting and communicating their own competencies is a solid investment that helps them successfully navigate the complexity of career opportunities.

The benefits of communicating competencies

Learning and development professionals understand well the importance of ongoing acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities. A clear understanding of one's own competencies and how to apply them will continuously accrue value - this value is relevant not only for learners, but also for other stakeholders, including the following benefits:

- The learner's ability to clearly communicate readiness for a specific position or career advancement;
- Employers' and employees' visualisation of career pathways;
- Employers' efficiency and accuracy in hiring and promotion processes;
- Educators' and trainers' effective design of education and training programs that are transparently aligned to competencies;
- Professional associations' applicability in the services they provide to members.

Improved communication about professional development competencies builds the currency value of these competencies and strengthens lifelong learners in their career progressions.

References

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