

# Employer Engagement in Learning and Employment Records

By Haley Glover, UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute

# Overview

The last mile of any race can be the most difficult. As exceptional work from the [Digital Credentials Consortium](#) at MIT discusses, there are significant obstacles between current Learning and Employment Record (LER) design strategies and broad adoption by employers. Similar barriers exist in work to communicate with, for, and about the employer's stake in this work.

Based on significant work in the field to drive broader awareness of LERs, digital credentials, and other tools, the potential employer use cases are becoming clearer. As employers continue to face hurdles in identifying and hiring qualified talent, the potential for skill- and competency-based digital credentials is likely to grow.

This report, based on a deep review and analysis of existing literature on the topics of digital credentials and LERs, complemented by interviews with experts and program leaders, provides a current state assessment of how employers are learning about and being engaged in these efforts. It also describes some emerging messages, themes, and tactics that show promise in building employer awareness, understanding, and ultimately adoption of LERs, digital credentials, and verified skills.

We outline the current state of content about LERs directed to employers and look at how both the benefits and challenges of LERs are discussed for employers, as well as opportunities to frame the work around LERs differently to motivate employer engagement and begin moving the needle on employer engagement around LERs.

This paper is the first in a series of publications focusing on issues of effective employer communication and engagement.

## Terminology

A primary challenge in effectively communicating with employers, and engaging them, is terminology. There is no common vocabulary for describing or even naming the process and outcomes of platforms that validate credentials, competencies, and skills.

For this paper, we use the term Learning and Employment Record (LER) for clarity, unless a specific product name exists.

# Key Findings

- Employer communications and engagement efforts are stymied by confusing terminology and inconsistent descriptions.
- Leaders of LER and digital credential efforts indicate they feel anxiety about engaging employers at the wrong moment, noting the unique stresses of the current economic situation and a sense that they have “one bite at the apple.”
- LER leaders consistently overindex on communications about technical details, processes, project progress, and governance structures, rather than clear descriptions of how employers will benefit from LER platforms.
- Given the emerging nature of LER implementation, there are limited case studies and real-world examples of the concrete value LERs may generate. In some respects, LER leaders are designing products for which there is unclear demand.
- In some cases, employers have not been engaged at all in the design and development of an LER platform or have been only marginally consulted. These initiatives, while well intentioned, may have difficult experiences in bringing employers to the table as end users.
- While employers may understand and be open to the aims of LER initiatives, details matter. Limited details about how and when employers will engage with a platform, and what that engagement will require, limit the effectiveness of engagement efforts. Given LER project maturity, initiative leads may not be clear on these details.

# Current State

As a movement that predominantly grew out of efforts led by government, institutions of higher education, and technology collaboratives, employers have not been the primary audience of LER content. Current publications focus primarily on communicating to individual learners, higher education stakeholders, and developers. As a 2022 paper from [MIT](#) points out, “It is telling that none of the major [CLR] standards actually mention ‘employment’ in their naming, and it is hard to find marketing materials aimed at employers and [human resources management system (HRMS)] vendors, or examples of the standards aimed at workforce development.” (pg. 26)

The primary messengers on LERs are either highly conceptual (including working groups, academia, and think tanks) or highly technical (those developing the technology). Both have limitations in communicating about LERs, prioritizing an idealized future state or delving too deeply into technology and processes for lay audiences to understand.

In many respects, this is a chicken-and-egg problem, where leaders are conflicted with communicating to employers about a work in progress, compounded by several issues elevated by those in the field:

- **Demands on Employers** – Frequently, LER leaders from states, institutions, and other entities vocalized their sense that employers are currently under unique stresses. They feared that engaging employers in the wrong moment or without fully baked solutions would disable bigger opportunities later or turn employers off from the work entirely.
- **Iteration** – Several leaders indicated that the speed of iteration and movement had stressed their capacity to do deep employer engagement and that the program shifts had created somewhat of a “moving target,” making deep engagement difficult.
- **Skepticism about Demand** – Multiple LER program leaders and influencers noted deep skepticism about employer demand, questioning whether LERs and similar programs were being developed in response to any stated need.
- **Process over Purpose** – Multiple leaders and influencers were frustrated by their own or other stakeholders’ prioritization of process over purpose in communication and engagement efforts, noting particularly that significant time devoted to discussing technology details or governance structures, rather than project goals and outcomes, was ineffective in mobilizing employers.

As a result, messaging directly to employers on the topic of LERs has been scarce, even while the number of articles and papers about the potential outcomes enabled by LERs has grown significantly. Skills-based hiring and talent management, upskilling, reskilling, and other related topics have received much attention, and these articles often contain references to information, data, and processes that would be facilitated by LERs, or value propositions that would be achieved and maximized using LERs.

Generally, messaging around upskilling (for current employees) or skills-based hiring (for new employees) indicates benefits for employers that are vague, poorly defined, and without concrete examples. Messaging from talent management systems to employers is generally vague and aspirational, extolling employers to move beyond “posting and praying,” for example.



# Current State

Much of the written work around LERs is still focused on the technology required in the building of LERs and has not yet moved to use cases. These are two distinct issues that require different messages and different messengers. Currently, many messengers don't have broad access to employers (particularly those without internal technical resources), the credibility to challenge employer skepticism, or the ability to push employers into cooperation. Creating a distinct group of messengers that employers trust and use regularly for hiring needs, such as relevant trade organizations, talent management systems, and HR/recruiting-focused organizations, would help create a broader foundation for adoption and confidence in LERs.

LERs appear to be a complex technical challenge from the employer side (or, at least, one without a standard solution for implementation). The ability to integrate with existing systems has not yet been translated for an employer audience. Where the LER concept is being discussed by talent management systems used by HR and recruiting teams, it still requires significant technical understanding to parse. And, in cases where those systems are describing LERs in marketing materials, they are not using that term. Also, if an employer does not pay for a talent management system, they appear to be missing what is currently a key point of entry into the LER conversation.

In terms of communication directed to users (including job seekers, employees, and learners), there is some messaging around LERs that paints employers/companies as the bad actors in data management (suggesting, for example, that employers are untrustworthy data stewards, using information against prospective hires/employees, or making personal data vulnerable). LERs are intended to give power to the individual user, and they do a strong job of managing privacy needs, but this may come at the expense of portraying the employer as a bad actor. While the value for the individual holds true, this approach may be a turnoff for some employers.

# Emerging Themes

In the employer messaging and engagement efforts we reviewed, multiple themes emerged across publications and strategies. While all the themes require build-out, case studies, and adaptation by individual LER efforts, they show promise in building a comprehensive employer engagement and communications movement.

These themes are organized by employer benefits – areas for opportunity in building employer understanding and uptake – and challenges – places where language, tactics, or even LER design may deter employer understanding and uptake.

## Benefits

For an annotated bibliography of publications reviewed in the development of these themes, please see Appendix A.

### Data-Informed Skills-Based Talent Management

Skills-based talent management – which includes both skills-based hiring of new talent and upskilling of incumbent talent – is a dominant message in both trade press and mass media. The promise of skills-based talent management spans better-fit hires, increased retention, more robust talent pipelines, and increased career mobility.

LERs, and data including within the records, will ultimately enable employers to make better, data-informed decisions. LERs will allow employers to better understand candidates qualifications, reducing the cost of talent acquisition, improving the quality of “matches” of candidates with roles, and reducing bias in hiring in advancement decisions. These benefits also accrue to job seekers themselves.

As noted, LER efforts have not yet effectively linked themselves to the skills-based talent management movement, capitalizing on the growing number of employers who are considering these practices and are looking for effective, scalable ways of understanding and identifying individual worker competencies.

LER leaders should consider how their platforms meet the tenets of skills-based talent management and work to fully articulate how the platforms can help employers implement these practices. [This brief](#) from the Business Roundtable Multiple Pathways Initiative provides a helpful overview of the business impacts of skills-based talent management practices.

### Diversity and Inclusion

Skills-based talent management, at its core, seeks to widen the aperture for talent, enabling people who have been systematically marginalized to qualify for roles and removing bias in hiring and advancement decisions.

Further, the business case for diversity has never been stronger.

- A 2018 [Boston Consulting Group](#) study showed that innovation revenue was 19 percentage points higher in companies with diverse leadership teams.

# Emerging Themes

- A 2018 [Harvard Business Review](#) study that measured the impact of diversity on venture capital investment performance showed that on all measures, the more homogeneous the investment partnerships, the worse they performed.
- Ongoing [McKinsey](#) research shows that the impact of diverse workforces on company financial performance has increased over time.

LERs that incorporate verified skills and competencies from both academic and nonacademic experiences, including military and work-based learning, are poised to underpin this movement, enabling many more people, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to qualify for, enter into, and advance in careers.

In considering their platform design and marketing strategies, LER leaders should understand the business benefits of diversity and inclusion and ensure that platforms are positioned to reach and serve diverse populations.

## Reducing Fraud

[Indeed](#) estimates that 40% of people have lied on their resume, while a [ResumeBuilder](#) survey showed that 72% of respondents admitted to lying on their resumes. Whatever the figure, fraud is prevalent and costly. Some employers have implemented skills tests to prove candidates can perform in roles, and many utilize professional background check organizations, both of which can be costly.

LERs, which include verified information about job seekers' experiences, credentials, and skills, are well positioned to help employers avoid these costs and streamline processes. LER leaders should consider identifying a corporate partner who has experienced resume fraud or inflation and working closely with that company to understand how the LER can save time and resources.

## Expansion of Verifiable Skills

There are many skills that are not necessarily evident through the traditional hiring process and reading through a resume. Durable (soft) skills in particular can be difficult to quantify and compare between applicants, yet these skills are in greatest demand by employers. The World Economic Forum's [Future of Jobs 2023](#) report indicates that these skills, particularly analytical and creative thinking, lifelong learning, and agility, are growing in importance.

LERs can serve as a tool to verify and demonstrate these skills that are often hidden, which benefits both employers and applicants. Further, LERs are positioned to expand employers' understanding of the venues and experiences in which these durable skills are gained and demonstrated, increasing the aperture for talent and opportunities for advancement.

LER platforms that can verify durable skills may be particularly well positioned to attract and engage employers.

# Emerging Themes

## Challenges

For an annotated bibliography of publications reviewed in the development of these themes, please see Appendix B.

### Interoperability and Data Capacity

A significant roadblock to engaging with employers is a broad understanding that LER platforms, as well as the microcredentials, badges, and other forms of digital credentials, are not yet integrated at scale with existing HRMSs and that systems are not interoperable.

According to a 2021 survey by [Sapient Insights Group](#), the average business uses 16.24 HR applications, leading to “app overload” and frustration, especially for applications used frequently. One employer engaged during an Alabama Talent Triad convening voiced concern that the platform would not be “just another government program.”

LER leaders will be well served by focusing on [interoperability](#) and on designing platforms and applications that can ultimately be linked to existing HRMS and talent acquisition tools.

Further, the launch of individualized LERs that include validated credentials, employment experiences, and skills will significantly increase the data available and the capacity required to analyze that data. Currently, stakeholders and systems are not aligned to either collect or utilize the vast amounts of data that LERs will generate.

For small and mid-sized businesses that do not utilize HR technology and may compete with larger businesses for talent, LERs may be a very powerful tool. However, for these businesses, the case has not been made as to why LERs are worth the investment, either in more expensive talent management software that would help on the tech side, or in the staffing and time required to make changes to existing hiring processes.

In engagement efforts, small and mid-sized businesses deserve special attention and marketing.

### Employer Workload and Impact

Current resources that target employer audiences indicate that LER integration and adoption will require significant training, adaptation, and increased workload. Because the return on investment for LERs is yet to be determined, there is little incentive for an employer to engage or adopt an unproven system. Further, for organizations without large talent acquisition, talent management, and HR teams, any potential added burden without clear benefit may be a nonstarter.

LER leads should explore and understand exactly how their platforms will ultimately be used by employers and involve employers in user experience testing and design decisions. These testing experiences are also engagement opportunities and represent means of building deeper relationships and deeper trust with employer partners.



# Emerging Themes

## **Communications Gap Between Higher Education and Employers**

LER efforts, particularly those focused on credentials gained at higher education institutions, are challenged by the long-standing communications gap that exists between education and employers. This becomes particularly important in the development of skills and competency frameworks – absent employer engagement and input, higher education runs the risk of further disconnection from employer needs and job seeker utility.

For employers that have existing distrust of higher education institutions and systems in their state, there may be added barriers to engagement.

Early efforts from the Alabama Talent Triad point to some promising practices, where the LER platform's competency foundations were determined through deep analysis of job descriptions, with input and guidance from higher education. This grounding in employer needs may work to bring education programs and outcomes closer to employer demands.

## **Credential Quality**

While there are legitimate questions about the quality and learning outcomes gained and developed in traditional degree programs, degrees still enjoy, to a large degree, broad trust by employers. For job seekers with nondegree credentials, questions of quality and relevancy remain.

For LER platforms that verify only credentials, not the skills and competencies conveyed by those credentials, there may be challenges in overcoming distrust or misunderstanding by employers about the value and learning of nondegree credentials.

LER platforms that incorporate verified skills and competencies, conversely, may be well positioned to elevate the relevance and value of these credentials.

## **Unclear Demand**

It is not fully clear that employers are demanding verified credentials at a scale that will support LER initiatives. While there are clear benefits to reducing fraud, as noted above, it is not clear that these benefits outweigh the costs or increased workload of adopting credential verification systems.

Further, we do not yet fully understand how employers value the different design features and functions of LER platforms. We have early insights that LER platforms that verify both credentials and individual competencies will be more valuable to employers, but this has not been proven in any scaled research to date.

While a primary function of LER platforms is to codify and collect credentials and learning that comes from sources outside of higher education, there is not a groundswell of employers issuing the kinds of competency-based credentials that they might ultimately find useful in skills-based talent management systems. Employers may also be reticent to issue verified credentials in an open marketplace, citing proprietary interests and to avoid talent poaching by other companies.

# Conclusion

Over the next year, UpSkill America, working in partnership with LER project leads, national organizations, and employers, will work to uncover effective communication and engagement strategies to support broader understanding and adoption of LERs by employer audiences. LERs offer the promise of connected systems, where education providers understand employer demands; where employers send clear signals about the skills and competencies they need; and where job seekers can effectively compete in a transparent and fair talent marketplace.

The groundwork has been laid for this transformation, but the last mile is unpaved. It will take intentional effort on the part of LER leaders and stakeholders to build message discipline and, in many cases, to explore other perspectives.

We encourage readers and interested parties to reach out and explore opportunities to collaborate and learn together.

## Appendix A – Employer Benefits, Annotated Bibliography

### Data-Informed Skills-Based Talent Management

[[Accenture, 2018](#)] *“Employers would gain from a deeper talent pool, reputational benefits and improved scale of learning and training opportunities.”*

[[Accenture, 2018](#)] *“Employers would hire workers based on their skills profile rather than academic degrees. Employers would see a clear value case for skilling, and companies would develop innovative models that afford workers the necessary resources to access training.”*

[[National Skills Coalition, 2023](#)] *“[T]urnover has heavy costs for businesses – with estimates ranging from \$25,000 for workers who quit within the first year to over \$78,000 for workers who quit after five years, averting or delaying turnover by ensuring that workers have upskilling opportunities can be economically significant.”*

[[National Skills Coalition, 2020](#)] *“Given that small businesses employ tens of millions of Americans and represent an important engine for new job creation, these skill gaps are especially concerning. Notably, SMEs are more likely to depend on strong public policies to help them upskill their current workforce. Where very large employers may be able to launch an in-house upskilling initiative entirely on their own, SMEs often look to industry associations and chambers of commerce, industry sector partnerships, or other qualified intermediary organizations to assist them in developing their talent pipeline.”*

[[US Chamber Foundation T3 Network, 2022](#)] *“Skills-Based Hiring and Advancement (SBHA) is the process by which employers and their HR service providers identify, recruit, hire, and advance candidates based on the match between a work opportunity’s skill requirements and a candidate’s skills. SBHA processes produce well-crafted and debiased job requirements and trustworthy candidate information backed by evidence. This candidate information is communicated through new types of resumes and learning and employment records (LERs) that embed proof of their accuracy to accelerate verification. SBHA reduces reliance on indirect indicators of skills (e.g., four-year college degrees, years of experience) that traditionally do not provide evidence of specific skills and can create a barrier for candidates qualified through alternative means (e.g., microcredentials, life experiences, and endorsements). Candidates also benefit by using skills-powered guidance services and technologies which recommend opportunities, support decision making, and provide fairer hiring and advancement experiences.”*

[[World Economic Forum, 2022](#)] *“Employers need to embrace upskilling for their workers to future-proof their business and reduce societal polarisation.”*

### Diversity and Inclusion

[[Benefit News, 2022](#)] *“[W]hen employers recruit using a ‘skills-based’ hiring process instead of basing their decisions off of resumes, the number of women hired into senior roles increases by almost 70%, according to new research conducted by recruiting platform Applied.”*

[[SHRM, 2022](#)] *“The data show the majority of executives, supervisors and HR professionals believe that including alternative credentials in their hiring decisions can improve workplace diversity. When employers recognize alternative credentials, it becomes easier for diverse candidates to obtain employment, according to 81% of executives, 71% of supervisors and 59% of HR professionals. When*

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*asked if recognizing alternative credentials would increase their organization's ability to hire more diverse candidates, about three-quarters of executives (79%) and supervisors (74%) agree, as well as more than half of HR professionals (55%)."*

[[JFF, 2021](#)] *"Deployed at scale, LERs could help businesses save time and money by making it easier to verify workers' skills, employment records, and credentials. And, most important, they can open up opportunities for previously overlooked workers by giving them a way to show employers what they know and what they can do."*

[[FSG](#)] *"Employers who internally find ways to advance the careers and enhance the experiences of their frontline employees of color realize major business benefits, including a management talent pipeline that mirrors their evolving customer base; a more productive, loyal workforce that boosts their bottom line; greater access to and retention of top talent; and enhanced brand equity with customers and communities."*

## Reducing Fraud

[[Getting Smart, 2023](#)] *"Institutions that award digital credentials will benefit from having to store all learner records to a decentralized user-controlled system that is easy, secure and affordable. Identity fraud will be reduced and the level of granularity to describe the skills of a learner will improve."*

## Expansion of Verifiable Skills

[[Issues, 2021](#)] *"LERs may be particularly revolutionary in STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and math—because they could capture the myriad experiential learning and practices that employers require but are hard to verify, allowing graduates to more easily change jobs, enter new industries outside of academia, and work in roles that may not yet exist."*

[[Harvard Business Review, 2022](#)] *"Perhaps because they believe that college graduates possess more-refined social, or 'soft,' skills – the ability to work in groups, say, or to communicate efficiently in real-time, or to prioritize tasks. These skills are far harder to assess, and our analysis strongly suggests that as a result many employers are using college degrees as a proxy for them. Employers who eliminated degree requirements, we found, frequently added more-detailed soft-skills requirements in their postings."*

## Appendix B – Employer Challenges, Annotated Bibliography

### Interoperability and Data Capacity

[[Digital Promise, 2020](#)] *"[N]early all of the key stakeholder groups, from direct service providers to government agencies and employers, viewed data sharing as a key component of their ability to improve service provision and employment opportunities for frontline workers. But competing priorities, siloed thinking, unclear incentives, privacy concerns, and inequitable access to resources often prevented stakeholders from taking real action toward data interoperability. Moreover, the majority of workers felt unprepared to participate in a data-driven workforce and disconnected from the initiatives designed to advance their careers."*

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[[Blockchain Credentialing & Learning and Employment Records, 2023](#)] *"We don't need to immediately solve the technology problems. We need to find the fit between what credential issuers and credential receivers need."*

[[MIT, 2022](#)] *"In their dominance of HR technology, vendors of HRMS software effectively act as gatekeepers for any technology which many employers use to analyze and track skill data. Their willingness to integrate or ignore digital credentials as part of their product to a large extent determines acceptance."*

[[SHRM, 2022](#)] *"Another potential barrier to employers' wider recognition of alternative credentials is the limitations of automated applicant tracking systems (ATS), which may not pick up on them. Often, there is no standard approach to collecting this information in the same manner as traditional education and work experience. Such inconsistency offers a clear direction for both HR and the providers of applicant screening tools to improve the ways alternative credentials are captured in the application process."*

[[US Chamber Foundation T3 Network, 2022](#)] *"In addition to skill and competency frameworks and job descriptions, the more that is structured in the workforce space, the better the analyses can be. Employers do not store job and related skill requirements as structured data that can be easily transferred and analyzed across systems, including skills data. Even internal data sharing is inhibited, preventing use for learning and development needs, resourcing, capacity, etc."*

## Employer Workload and Impact

[[Dept. of Commerce, 2020](#)] *"Organizations must take the time to develop a sound understanding of LERs and the positive organizational impact they can drive. For organizations new to LERs, this can be accomplished by undertaking feasibility studies, needs analyses, and pilot projects."*

[[MIT, 2022](#)] *"Larger companies may have relatively sophisticated talent management systems in-house which may break each activity the company performs into discrete sets of skills, and which group employees by the activities they know how to perform and/or the skill sets they have. Within professions that require licensing, such information is typically standardized using skill frameworks, occupational profiles, model learning journeys, skill taxonomies and other similar tools. However, outside these systems, large employers tend to create their own in-house data structures and spend little effort on making the information relevant or interoperable outside the company. SMEs are less likely to build such skill and occupational profiles, because the cost would often be prohibitive given the small number of employees performing discrete tasks."*

[[MIT, 2022](#)] *"Employers should pilot new types of credentials that can document the acquisition of new skills during employment. Such pilots should focus on adapting existing talent review processes to incorporate formal skills assessments and resolving any institutional barriers. The pilots also need to examine how to integrate such new processes with existing talent management systems."*

## Communications Gap Between Higher Education and Employers

[[American Council on Education, 2020](#)] *"At the core [...] is a communications gap rooted in a disconnect between how higher education and the labor market talk about, measure, and signal individuals' skills."*



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[[Harvard Business School, 2022](#)] *"Businesses recognize that their engagement is critical for creating a workforce of the future but expect educators to initiate efforts to bridge the gaps, despite the obvious imbalance in convening power between them."*

[[Harvard Business School, 2022](#)] *"Community college leaders and business leaders value the partnership to produce a pipeline of workforce-ready students quite differently: 98% of educators surveyed believed a partnership between the two was 'very important,' compared to 59% of employers."*

## **Credential Quality**

[[Accenture, 2018](#)] *"Employers in some geographies and sectors are reluctant to recognize skills from ongoing learning because there is often no accepted standard for credentialing, particularly across different industries."*

[[SHRM, 2022](#)] *"Executives and supervisors most often cited inconsistent quality among alternative credentials—a general observation about the credentials marketplace—while HR focused more on their impact on employee performance directly, such as the actual skills learned and how they as HR professionals could evaluate credentials and compare them to other job qualifications."*

## **Unclear Demand**

[[MIT, 2022](#)] *"Employers do not consider improved verifiability a strong enough incentive to move from traditional credentials to digital versions of these credentials. Verification alone, which prevents fraud and misrepresentation, is not considered to generate sufficient business value to justify the cost of updating technology systems and workflows."*

[[MIT, 2022](#)] *"[S]omewhat ironically, employers are not currently issuing the type of data-rich credentials to their employees that they would ideally like to see job applicants present. While most of our panel acknowledges that certain employers may consider such data proprietary, most indicate this is not a major factor preventing the issue of more and better credentials in workplaces. The problem is rather rooted in business processes that are not necessarily designed to track personal development except as a factor of overall output."*

[[EdTech Foundation](#)] *"Across various survey responses, HR leaders suggested an interest in the potential of newer, more digital approaches to improve hiring, skill assessment, training, and credentialing. When indicating the top barriers within their organization that might pose a challenge to adoption, the top results were technical integration with other HR systems, lack of budget or time, and the challenges associated with including all talent channels or coordinating with colleges and universities."*

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# About

## UpSkill America

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