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Creating Clear Messages: Early Lessons for LER Leaders

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Terminology is important. The words or names we use to label and describe a program, project, innovation, or movement can make or break the success of those initiatives. With our words, we can inspire, describe, motivate, and engage. In the same vein, we can also unintentionally confuse, alienate, or repel.

In our work to understand the messages, narratives, and themes that leaders are using to describe "blockchain-powered credentialing technology" and "self-sovereign identity solutions," we came across dozens of terms that describe the same general body of work. The following brief describes our findings and makes some early recommendations for language and messaging strategies that may resonate more with employers.

The Terminology Challenge

There is no shortage of jargon at the intersection of education, technology, and human resources and workforce development. There are multiple names used to drive initiatives and to name components of the broader credentialing workstream. And to a large degree, frequently used terms center higher education as a primary audience. Consider:

- **Digital Credentials.** In our review, we encountered this term as describing the shift of data and insights typically housed on an academic transcript in digital format, as well as credentials with content focused on digital and technology skills and occupations.

- **Microcredentials.** The emergence of microcredentials, digital badges, and Blockcerts, which are often conferred digitally, is an area ripe for confusion and conflation.

- **Alternative Credentials.** These nondegree credentials, including industry-recognized certifications, badges, microcredentials, and other credential formats represent short-term, competency-based indications of mastery. These credentials are often conferred in digital formats and, as a result, may be conflated with digital credentials.

- **Digital Wallets.** While "wallets" are a commonly used term in this space, digital wallets are also used in other applications where the connection to education, skills, and job seeking is minimal.

- **Comprehensive Learning Record (CLR).** This term is typically used to describe efforts by education providers to transcript a broader array of student learning and experiences. It is also occasionally used interchangeably with "Learning and Employment Record."

- **Interoperable Learning Records (ILR).** Used early in the movement to verify credentials using technology, this term was jettisoned because it was too difficult to pronounce and reference. It was largely replaced by "Learning and Employment Record," though ILR is still referenced in early writing on the topic, and the focus on interoperability is still frequently discussed.

- **Learning and Employment Records (LER).** A commonly used term, "LER" conveys that there is a record that logs individuals' learning and employment. However, the term does not ultimately describe what purpose LERs are intended to serve.

The Terminology Challenge

Developers also deploy different terminology depending on where they fall in the development of the technology. The focus with LERs has primarily been on using the blockchain, so much of the terminology comes from the blockchain ecosystem. But some frequently used terms include "digital wallets," "verifier solutions," and "self-sovereign identity solutions." The developer focus appears to be on the ability of the user to exert control over their information and who they choose to share it with. LERs are included as part of this self-sovereign ecosystem, but it is not limited to LERs; it also includes government ID cards, for example.

Few publicly available resources exist that target employers directly and are typically written for employer-serving organizations or a small segment of employers by academia or think tanks. Where employers are the customer and intended user, particularly with platforms that would help employers integrate these tools into their hiring and management processes, we see terms like "blockchain-powered credentialing technology" ([Workday](#)) or "blockchain records on demand" ([Greenlight Credentials](#)).

Concepts and approaches that may complement the demand for LERs are prevalent, but may not directly link the concepts with LER systems and platforms. For example, skills-based talent management is a growing approach, with many businesses and public employers moving toward evaluating job descriptions, candidates, and incumbent employees based on competencies rather than degree requirements. While there is a growing body of work, powered by partners like Grads of Life and Opportunity@Work, communications about skills-based talent management often omit information about how LERs can facilitate these shifts.

Upskilling, reskilling, and lifelong learning are also areas that are receiving growing attention, particularly as employers understand the value of education and training as a powerful retention and advancement strategy that benefits the business bottom line. However, despite the clear potential for LERs to facilitate upskilling and reskilling, there is little content that connects these ideas with LERs.

As the Digital Credentials Consortium Report, "[Credentials to Employment: The Last Mile,](#)" describes, the lack of employer-focused content can even be seen in the naming of the standards: *"It is telling that none of the major standards actually mention 'employment' in their naming, and it is hard to find marketing materials aimed at employers and [human resource management system] vendors, or examples of the standards aimed at workforce development."*

The employers we spoke to are interested in LERs to the degree that they enable business priorities, including:

- **Developing candidate pipelines**, enabling recruiters and hiring managers to get access to structured data and gain an understanding of the potential number and qualifications of potential candidates. Employers are also interested in staying connected with potential candidates, including those who engaged through internships, volunteer opportunities, job shadowing sessions, and other engagements.

  "We are always looking for different ways to get our positions out there. One way is not the right way, and the same way doesn't work for everyone." – Vice President, Healthcare Organization

- **Saving money and time**, particularly by reducing the time to hire and the number of unfilled positions, and by potentially reducing or eliminating components of the hiring process, including third-party background checks.

  "It costs a lot of money to hire an employee. When you're an employer and you see high turnover, anything you can do to help makes a difference." – Vice President, Construction Company

- **Enabling easier movement** within a company. Large companies in particular often have barriers to employee transfer, even after employees have completed education and training for new roles.

  "It will facilitate on the job training programs – we'll know exactly what we need to train people on because of verified skills and credentials. This will let us better plan an employee's career path."
  – Vice President, Manufacturing Company

  > Learning and development professionals who attended a March 2023 convening to review the Alabama Talent Triad saw significant opportunity for the platform to support "building a skills-based curriculum" that could target documented skills gaps and be tailored to individuals and departments. "This would make it 100% easier," an L&D leader commented.

- **Interoperability.** Employers expressed reluctance to invest time or money into closed systems. Interoperable platforms that can work across vendors, state lines, and providers are favored.

  "If a system is proprietary, don't offer it. You're not going to convince us to join another vendor. People can't have LERs on different platforms that don't talk to each other."
  – Digital Learning Lead, Retail Company

- **Verifying skills.** The employers we spoke with found value in verified credentials where credentials are required by law, such as in healthcare roles, but found the greatest value in considering platforms that described a candidate's verified skills and competencies.

  "This will be more difficult to adopt without skills data. We can go from CIP codes for credentials, then occupational codes, then crosswalk to understand whether the identified skills are helpful for this occupation. There is value to having credentials verified, but there is much more value in understanding what skills providers are validating rather than just the credential itself."
  – Digital Learning Lead, Retail Company

Employer priorities center on function and value to the business, and much less on the process or record itself. This suggests that advocates and leaders interested in engaging employers in LER efforts should minimize talking points that are not directly relevant to employer priorities.

While there is much to learn about effective communications and engagement of employers in LER efforts, especially as those platforms mature, there are some early lessons.

1. **Answer four questions** for employer partners:

   a. What will the platform do for the company?

   b. What will the platform do for the individual employer partner in their role?

   c. What will the platform do for the candidate or employee?

   d. What does it cost/what will it save?

2. **Pick a term and stick with it.** If marketing and outreach materials reference LERs, CLR, microcredentials, wallets, and blockchain, the employer's attention may already have been lost. Elevate one term and refer to it often, building an understanding of the platform's function and operations without relying on jargon.

3. **Verbs over nouns.** Share insights about what the LER platform will do, over what it is. Employer partners will be more interested in outcomes than inputs.

4. **Gauge readiness for technical talk.** While the technology behind LERs is exciting, understand going in, if possible, what the employer partner is interested in and the degree to which they are engaged with that technology. Deep conversations about those topics may alienate employer representatives who are not directly in technology roles.

5. **Understand business interests.** Employers are often interested in collaborating with other businesses when it comes to building competitive and talented regions or labor markets, but are less likely to collaborate around company-specific needs and workforce strategies. Consider how platform communications emphasize collaboration and ensure that the engagement strategy does not ask an employer to go against their practices.

6. **Messengers matter.** Consider the unique talents of the individuals working on and leading the LER effort. Think about LER platforms as products that require salespeople. Select individuals who have experience working with business leaders and who understand effective sales strategies to represent the platform publicly.

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.

Acknowledgements

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