

The background of the entire page is a photograph of construction workers silhouetted against a bright sunset. They are working on a tall, lattice-structured tower. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow that silhouettes the workers and the tower's structure. The sky transitions from a deep blue on the left to a bright yellow and orange on the right.

**UpSkillAmerica**  
aspen institute

# From Should to Will

## Getting Concrete About the Benefits of Learning and Employment Records

By Haley Glover, UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute

November 2023

## Introduction

Learning and Employment Records (LERs), an individual's records of verified credentials, skills, and employment, have the potential to transform the nation's education and employment systems. Yet, when it comes to convincing employers of their value, the focus on "potential" is a problem.

While aspirational language can be an opening hook in any sales pitch, any user will expect concrete details about a product or service before signing on. Much of the existing messaging supporting employer adoption of LERs for upskilling (for current employees) or skills-based hiring (for new employees) focuses on benefits for employers that are vague and unlikely to inspire continued interest at scale. Language used in LER literature is frequently hopeful and ambitious, rather than speaking to outcomes.

"LERs are not products that sell themselves." This comment, shared with me by a vice president of a construction company, has been echoed multiple times over by other employers representing the private and public sectors. LER leaders in states, as well as within the national organizations shepherding this movement, can become immunized to just how much change LERs and the practices they facilitate may require from businesses that are already being stressed within their current operating environments.

While every company is different and has slightly different priorities, there are four questions that LER leaders should be prepared to address when they engage employers. This brief delves into those four questions and arrays evidence to help LER leaders shift away from "should" and "may" in their employer engagement efforts.

## What will the LER platform do for the company?

While each LER platform is developing independently based on different priorities, technology parameters, and governance structures, LER models purport to create value for employers. This value is generated through verification of credentials and learning, skills and competencies, employment experiences, and the creation of new actionable data for talent acquisition and talent management. Five positive business outcomes have been elevated across LER providers and by employers as high-potential benefits.

### **Widen the talent pipeline, enabling job postings to reach different audiences**

Currently, just [five states](#) in the US have enough available workers to meet employer demands. [Eleven states](#) have fewer than 50 workers available for every 100 open jobs. Under stressors like this, employers are increasingly getting creative in advertising and recruiting efforts, working to reach new audiences.

By identifying potential candidates with the right skills and credentials for roles, LERs are poised to help employers reach potential employees they may have previously overlooked, and to reach new applicants with a variety of experiences. These widened pipelines include applicants coming out of traditional academic and career/technical programs, as well as those

who have “alternative credentials,” some college but no degree, military experiences, and other forms of learning gained outside of higher education.

“[Hidden workers](#),” the subject of a 2021 Harvard Business School and Accenture paper, are those who are “widely excluded from consideration for employment by many employers,” and include those who are working in multiple part-time roles, the long-term unemployed, and those who are unemployed and able to work, but are not looking for work. The paper estimates that there are 27 million of these workers in the US labor force, and they are consistently overlooked by employers. The team’s research indicates that employers that intentionally hire these hidden workers are “36% less likely to face talent and skills shortages compared to companies that do not hire hidden workers. And they indicate former hidden workers outperform their peers materially on six key evaluative criteria—attitude and work ethic, productivity, quality of work, engagement, attendance, and innovation.”

Opening up roles to wider, more diverse, and previously overlooked audiences, facilitated by LERs, can create real business value, both at the point of hire and over time. Additional evidence includes:

- [EMSI Burning Glass, 2022](#): “Skills-based hiring can provide a mechanism for companies to close important skill gaps and compete in a tight labor market by expanding the pool of candidates they consider. In 2015, 63% of employers said it was difficult to find suitable candidates for their middle-skill job openings. Yet job posting data shows employers were simultaneously ratcheting up degree requirements for those very same middle-skill positions. That artificially constrained the talent pool on which they were drawing, making it harder to fill vacant positions, fast. Research has demonstrated that degree holders in middle-skilled positions have higher rates of voluntary turnover and lower levels of engagement while commanding a material wage premium even though their performance more often is not equal to or worse than the performance of their experienced, non-degree holding colleagues in the same job. When viewed in its totality, that is a poor tradeoff. Widening the aperture of the recruiting process to include more non-degree holders can generate real economic returns for employers by reducing the mean time to fill positions and turnover with no major associated reduction in productivity.”
- [Harvard Business Review, 2022](#): “In evaluating job applicants, employers are suspending the use of degree completion as a proxy and instead now favor hiring on the basis of demonstrated skills and competencies. This shift to skills-based hiring will open opportunities to a large population of potential employees who in recent years have often been excluded from consideration because of degree inflation. (This population includes potential employees that have been described as ‘[hidden workers](#)’ and ‘[STARs](#).)’”

### Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The business case supporting intentional efforts for diversity, equity, and inclusion is strong:

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

Skills-based hiring and talent management efforts championed by organizations like OneTen, and facilitated by LERs, can connect diverse, qualified talent to roles. A recent [OneTen survey](#), conducted in partnership with Bully Pulpit Interactive, reported that 63% of responding hiring managers experienced a more diverse and inclusive workforce as a benefit of shifting to skills-based hiring.

The [Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\)](#), in a 2021 study, drew connections between “alternative credentials,” or credentials other than degrees that verify one’s skills or abilities in a field, and efforts to improve DEI. The report noted: “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 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%). The majority of executives and supervisors, and approaching half of HR professionals, agree that recognizing alternative credentials would increase their organization’s ability to promote more diverse candidates, ultimately opening opportunities for more diversity at higher leadership levels.”

### **Accelerate filling open jobs**

Any company with open positions is losing money, especially in vital, hard-to-fill roles that may be vital to business operations. SHRM research indicates that replacement costs can be significant, and [hiring costs](#) reach an average of nearly \$5,000 per role. Sustained vacancies also contribute to increased workload for current staff, reduced productivity, and decreased morale. While the true costs of vacancies and high turnover vary by industry and occupation, quick and efficient hiring of good fit employees is a high priority for any employer.

In 2017, [CareerBuilder](#) conducted a survey that found that 60% of employers had job openings that remained vacant for more than three months, costing them an average of \$800,000 per year. While the workforce and economic situation is different in 2023 than in 2017, long-term vacancies remain a problem. Recent research from [Josh Bersin](#) indicates that the average time to hire has increased to 44 days, compounded by low unemployment and slow hiring processes.

[Research from LinkedIn](#) is showing the promise of skills-based hiring strategies: “Hirers finding talent using skills are 60% more likely to find a successful hire than those who are not relying on skills.”

LERs, implemented at scale and supporting skills-based hiring, will help employers fill open roles more quickly, replacing or complementing current credential and skills verification practices and widening talent pipelines.

### **Verify credentials and competencies of candidates**

While LERs will likely never fully replace required credential verification in highly regulated industries like healthcare, verified credentials can save time spent confirming licenses in other

industries and can save money for employers that pay third-party vendors to conduct those reviews.

For LERs that include skill and competency verification alongside credential verification, there may be even more significant benefits, enabling employers to avoid additional assessments and improve placement into roles. In 2021, [EMSI/Burning Glass](#) noted, “Employers get more precise insight into the relevant skills and abilities of job applicants and current employees alike. In turn, they are able to better match applicants and recent graduates with the right openings and needs within their business and are able to more effectively pair current employees with additional training opportunities from a range of education providers.”

## Improve upskilling and talent strategy

Each year, employers [spend nearly \\$140 billion](#) in direct expenditures on employee education and training, with [reskilling needs](#) expected to skyrocket in coming years due to the onset of artificial intelligence (AI).

Learning and development leaders rarely have the kind of data they need to make targeted and tailored decisions about reskilling and upskilling, and about their companies’ talent strategies. LERs will change that, enabling employers to have a real-time, individualized, and aggregated view of their employees’ verified competencies. With this information, employers will be able to create more viable and reliable internal career pathways, filling vital roles, saving money, and improving employee retention.

Additional resources pointing to the effectiveness and efficiency of upskilling supported by LERs include:

- [TPM Academy, 2020](#): “Upskilling an incumbent workforce costs money, but it is often less expensive than the aggressive recruitment strategies required for occupations with skills that are in high demand. And unfilled jobs cost both productivity and money.”
- [US Department of Commerce, 2020](#): “Employers will benefit from clear and transparent signals of job-readiness and trusted and verified granular information about the skills profile of their workforce and of job seekers, and the ability to move into a new paradigm of human potential management by driving upskilling and reskilling investments for their employees that are responsive to the changing nature of work and careers.”
- [FSG, 2021](#): “By developing re- and upskilling programs that reach all employees, employers can hedge against future shifts in their workforce needs, save money on recruiting and onboarding, and ensure that their employees of color gain the skills they will need post-automation.”

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

All employers are different – there is no single role inside a business that will be the best target for engagement for LERs. However, HR, administration, fiscal, and supervisory professionals will all likely have opinions and concerns. Tailoring messages and outreach to address the pain

points that individual stakeholders within businesses are facing can build support and, over time, transition skeptics into champions.

### **Reduce costs and time in verifying credentials**

For roles that require credentials and licensure, employers spend significant time and energy verifying that candidates have the appropriate credentials and that ongoing learning and licensure is kept up to date. LERs, which include credentials and licenses that are verified by the provider and/or licensing board, may eliminate the need to do extensive additional verification processes.

A [2019 piece from WorkDay](#) illustrates how this could work: “As we look to the future, we envision a more frictionless credentialing process that looks a little like this: Using a trusted professional profile containing verified credentials, that same nurse could digitally apply for a new job, with their credentials being verified at the point of application. And, with education and licensing credentials being automatically updated over time, any additional proof regarding renewal or certification is already confirmed, eliminating the need for the employer to manually check a database or call the board for validation. The nurse’s credentials would act as the single source of truth: trusted, up-to-date, and instantly authentic.”

### **Complement or replace assessments, increasing confidence in worker qualifications**

There is inherent risk in hiring, regardless of role. Often, employers will use assessments to ensure that candidates possess the skills and competencies they need to do the job, and to mitigate some of the risk in bringing on new talent. However, tests are never perfect, and may actively discriminate against marginalized workers. LERs that incorporate verified competencies and skills, demonstrated by job candidates and validated by education providers, other employers, and the military, may reduce the reliance on assessments, speeding time to hire and ultimately increasing the trust in the qualifications of job candidates.

A [2023 Forbes piece](#) noted: “Knowing their assessments are verified and validated helps employers more effectively staff their companies by expediting the screening process. Hiring teams can vet candidates faster and make employment offers before they acquire a position elsewhere. In addition, it could also lead to reduced turnover. Employers can accurately measure applicants’ abilities and focus their recruiting efforts on the most well-rounded individuals.”

A [2020 Brookings Institution paper](#) said: “LERs can help individuals show their qualifications for jobs by articulating their skills and competencies to an employer. The adoption of LERs will increase economic mobility for individuals who have been disproportionately impacted by degree-based hiring. Hiring and promotion practices that focus on skills will enhance the power of LERs and the efficiency of the labor market.”

### **Enable tailored, targeted upskilling and training**

The [World Economic Forum](#) estimates that 60% of workers will require training, upskilling, or reskilling by 2030 to keep up with skills demands. And, as noted above, employers are already spending billions to support that training. A [2023 Wiley study](#) indicates that HR professionals are most concerned about keeping workers’ skills updated for both new and incumbent talent.

While many employers are rightfully concerned about widening the talent pipeline, attracting new and diverse talent to the business, there is significant focus on improving career pathways within organizations, supporting economic and career mobility for workers. The [US Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Talent Pipeline Management](#) efforts have found that "Backfilling a less senior, entry-level role vacated by an upskilled and promoted internal candidate is often easier than filling roles that require specialized skills and experience with an external candidate. Companies that look internally to fill their pipeline for critical positions are likely to have workers in those roles reach full productivity faster and more efficiently."

The individual and aggregated verified skills and competencies enabled by some LER platforms represents a significant opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the true strengths and weaknesses of a workforce's skills, to target upskilling and development programs at specific populations in need of those opportunities, and to build robust and replicable career pathways within organizations, with the aim of increasing retention and filling roles internally. Indeed, the availability of learning, development, and growth opportunities is [consistently ranked](#) at the top of employee priorities in taking or staying in jobs.

### **Reduce resume and identity fraud**

A [recent study by ResumeLab](#) indicates that 70% of survey respondents admitted that they had lied on their resume, and that 37% of respondents indicated they lied frequently. They reported lying about job responsibilities (52%), job titles (52%), employment dates (37%), management experience (45%), and skills (15%), all vital factors that employers are looking to confirm, and which, through LERs, could be verified by trusted education providers and employers.

In the aggregate, [Business.com](#) estimates that resume fraud costs employers \$600 billion annually, reducing productivity and job performance, increasing churn and turnover, and affecting morale of incumbent employees.

### **Decrease turnover, reducing cost of filling roles**

Many businesses are struggling not only with filling open roles with new talent, but with holding on to the talent they already have. While the "Great Resignation" appears to be over, with [quit rates](#) back to pre-pandemic levels, employers have learned that keeping talent is a winning strategy. Turnover creates massive costs for businesses. The [National Skills Coalition](#) estimated that the full cost of turnover ranges "from \$25,000 for workers who quit during 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."

According to a [2023 Wiley study](#), 40% of HR leaders name long-term retention as their top concern. Respondents also indicate that 44% of employers confirmed that at least 10% of their job openings went unfilled.

LERs, by opening pipelines, supporting skills-based hiring and talent management, and driving improved career mobility for workers, promise to support employer retention goals, reducing costs over the long term.

## What will the platform do for the candidate or employee?

Employers are concerned about their employees' and candidates' experiences, recognizing that negative experiences, even on a platform that is not owned or operated by the employer, may impact business outcomes. LER leaders should be able to speak to the value proposition for job seekers and incumbent employees, connecting the benefits they will gain to the employer's interests.

### **Retain autonomy in ability to share specific credentials and skills with employer**

LERs, like paper resumes and online job applications, enable job seekers and candidates to control the contents of their profiles or "wallets," sharing only what they deem as relevant to the employer. Autonomy has been a priority for LER developers since the outset, with the US Department of Commerce focusing on this through its [Data Transparency Working Group](#) in 2019.

### **Enable potentially more comprehensive sharing of verified skills and experiences**

Once a job seeker or candidate determines what they want to share with a potential employer, LERs facilitate a much richer dataset than a static resume. In part, LER data is structured and able to be pulled into system and analyzed, while resume data is unstructured. This structure will [enable employers to understand much more](#) about job seekers' experiences and their learning, recognizing qualifications where traditional resumes may exclude the experiences of some job seekers.

Depending on the structure of the LER and wallet, job seekers may benefit from understanding more about their own competencies. LERs that verify both credentials and competencies may enable job seekers to have "proof" of their own skill sets.

### **Enable job seekers to see a more comprehensive list of roles for which they may be qualified**

Among the most exciting opportunities envisioned through the scaled use of LERs is the development of true "talent marketplaces" that enable job seekers to proactively receive recommendations for jobs for which they are qualified, based on their verified credentials and competencies. This can happen [within a particular employer](#), or for job seekers who may be qualified for multiple roles inside a company. It can, in cases where the LER platform allows, enable recommendations for roles across industries, showing job seekers opportunities they may not have been aware of or would never have encountered doing their own job searches.



## Enable improved career planning and upskilling for advancement

The job market is complex, with explicit and hidden barriers for all job seekers, especially those who are “[skilled through alternative routes](#).” As studied in the 2022 McKinsey & Company report “[Race in the Workplace: The Frontline Worker Experience](#),” vanishingly few front-line workers get promoted and are able to advance – just 25%. And only 4% of front-line workers are promoted into entry-level corporate roles.

LERs have great potential to even the playing field by facilitating skills-based hiring and talent management practices by employers, wherein employers rely less on credential attainment as an exclusionary factor and rely more on skills for inclusion. The [US Department of Commerce](#) noted: “LERs can help individuals show their qualifications for jobs by articulating their skills and competencies to an employer. The adoption of LERs will increase economic mobility for individuals who have been disproportionately impacted by degree-based hiring. Hiring and promotion practices that focus on skills will enhance the power of LERs and the efficiency of the labor market.”

## What does it cost/what will it save?

LER leaders need to be transparent and realistic with potential employer partners about what it will take to implement the LER in their environment, including the amount of time it will take for stakeholders to learn how to use a platform, the input and maintenance the platform will require, and whether the platform will ultimately connect with existing human resources information systems or talent acquisition systems.

While many of the LER platforms in development, especially those supported by government and institutions of higher education, are offered free of charge, they will take time, effort, and resources to implement and maintain in a business setting. Those expenses may be offset by cost savings from other areas. We do not yet have a case study for business savings, though early research suggests that there may be solid cost savings generated through improved talent pipelines, better fit and hiring accuracy, and incumbent employee retention and advancement.

Resources supporting potential cost and time savings for employers include:

- [U.S. Chamber Foundation \(T3 Network\), 2022](#): “Reduce the time and cost of the identification of potential candidates/opportunities to actual hiring and advancement as well as the time and cost of candidates in pursuing work opportunities.”
- [MIT, Digital Credentials Consortium Report, 2022](#): “Respondents in our study highlight that despite some recognition of the advantages digital credentialing can bring to employers, there is little direct evidence of their effect on employer priorities. Studies/pilots which can prove that, e.g., hiring accuracy has improved thanks to data-rich credentials, hiring costs are decreased thanks to accepting such credentials or fraud and compliance costs are reduced are not available to back up arguments promoting digital credentialing.”
- [SHRM, 2023](#): “Identifying internal talent with transferrable skills and upskilling them to fill in-demand roles eliminates time and reduces employment costs. Upskilling has also been proven to improve retention, boost morale, increase customer satisfaction and attract new talent.”

## Conclusion

Over the next year, UpSkill America, 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.

But it will take intentional effort on the part of LER leaders and stakeholders to effectively engage employers, working for and with them to understand how LERs can address corporate pain points and create the lasting business value required to sustain the LER movement.

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

## Acknowledgements

This brief was prepared by UpSkill America Director Haley Glover and Communications Consultant Alison Yost. The research included in this report was made possible through funding by Walmart. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of UpSkill America alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Walmart. We are grateful to Walmart for their support of this work.

### Licensing

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program is proud to release this publication under a Creative Commons license ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)) so that other organizations can use and share it to inform and support their work. Note that the use and redistribution of this publication must include an attribution, and this license does not permit use for commercial purposes or modification of the source material. If your use of this publication is not covered by this license, please email us at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org) for written permission. We encourage you to [contact us](#) to share your feedback and let us know how you've used this publication in your work.

### Suggested Citation

Glover, Haley. "From Should to Will: Getting Concrete About the Benefits of Learning and Employment Records." UpSkill America, Economic Opportunities Program, The Aspen Institute. November 2023. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/from-should-to-will-getting-concrete-about-the-benefits-of-learning-and-employment-records/>

## About

### UpSkill America

UpSkill America, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America's front-line workers. We seek to create a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, and policymakers working collaboratively to implement education, training, and development strategies that result in better jobs and opportunities for front-line workers, more competitive businesses, and stronger communities. Follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and learn more at [upskillamerica.org](https://upskillamerica.org).



### The Economic Opportunities Program

The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program (EOP) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. We recognize that race, gender, and place intersect with and intensify the challenge of economic inequality and we address these dynamics by advancing an inclusive vision of economic justice. For over 25 years, EOP has focused on expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Learn more at [aspeninstitute.org/eop](https://aspeninstitute.org/eop).



### The Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners. For more information, visit [www.aspeninstitute.org](https://www.aspeninstitute.org).





2300 N Street NW #700  
Washington DC 20037

[upskillamerica.org](http://upskillamerica.org)

[upskillamerica@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:upskillamerica@aspeninstitute.org)