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Employer as Validator

Challenges in Verifying Skills and Experience

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Introduction

The promise of shifting towards a skills-first system in which learning gained **anywhere** can be validated, recorded, and leveraged is tantalizing. In fact, this may be the most exciting opportunity in a generation to fundamentally change how learning is recognized and leveraged for further education and employment opportunities. We finally have the means to really make **all learning count**, a phrase my colleagues and I have been using for many years to describe a system in which *where* one gains learning and experience means much less than *whether* one has gained learning and experience – ultimately, a system that leverages all the skills, knowledge, and experiences that people possess toward movement up the career ladder.

A big factor in the success of this approach is employers taking on a role in validating and verifying learning and experiences – essentially acting in ways similar to education providers – by confirming that employees have acquired the skills and competencies intended through training. That role – employer as verifier – is both a linchpin in enabling all learning to count and a potential barrier.

Every employer is different. Barriers and blockades to employers acting in this role will exist, and differ, between large and small employers, across different industries, across geographies, and among employers with different skills needs. Without minimizing those very real challenges that will exist in different ways for different employers, here we offer some broad insights from conversations with employers. This short piece describes four general barriers – legal, alignment, financial, and competitive – and offers some early ideas for the developers and designers of learning and employment record (LER) systems.

Legal Challenges

Employers could potentially validate a variety of factors, ranging from internal credentials and competency demonstration to basic data like employment dates.

For the latter, there does not seem to be a great appetite for change – services like The Work Number already provide verified employment information at a marginal cost, and at a scale that many companies have come to rely on.

This third-party system is also attractive for employers who are concerned with liability. “There are a lot of things to be said for a third-party vendor,” one employer commented. “It’s a good idea having an outside organization do it for the liability coverage alone. Through the service, we spend a minimal amount to do the verification piece. And if you have to do a credit analysis, have a pre-employment screening. This takes it off your plate and you have justifiable and auditable data.”

Another chief human resources officer echoed this: “There are likely employment law teams who would hesitate in our validating anything because it puts us in legal jeopardy.”

For organizations considering advancing approaches that would encourage employer validation of employment dates, a smoother path may be to work directly with existing servicers, exploring whether they can serve in this capacity.

Alignment Challenges

A much more challenging hurdle is the skills themselves.

Employers are concerned about understanding what skills mean in other employers' context. While businesses indicate they operate under a "trust but verify" model generally, there is some anxiety about how skills acquired at and validated by one company would transfer. "One concern I have is the alignment or calibration on what particular credential or validated skill means to another organization versus ours," one employer commented. "If I have validated project management skills from one company, and I bring that over here in the form of a credential or validated skill set, what project management might mean here at my company may be different."

Another employer with deep experience working in military learning commented, "If industry wanted to do this, private enterprise will have to step up. Those entities need to come up with a core DNA and common credentialing, something that tells everyone if you've done this job for this time and this level, these are the skills you have."

Based on this feedback, the approach taken by the [Alabama Talent Triad](#) appears promising – the platform has, essentially, leapt over this problem with its [competency ontology](#). The ontology, which describes foundational, industry-related, and occupational competencies that are relevant across industries, employers, and roles, is the "DNA" of all jobs, credential programs, and career pathways in the state. This shared understanding of the skills and competencies across sectors and organizations, as well as the enhanced transparency the Talent Triad is bringing to both training programs and employment opportunities, is breaking down alignment challenges.

"The Alabama Talent Triad is moving the needle on how everyone is thinking about trust," said Greg DiDonato, vice president for EBSCOed and Stacks, the technology and innovation partner behind the Talent Triad. "Having a consistent ontology and skills vocabulary that is shared by employers, students, jobseekers, and education and training providers supports that trust factor because everyone is speaking the same language."

Financial Challenges

Much has been made of the potential financial impact of shifts to skills-first talent management, from shorter hiring times to better fit and improved retention, all of which can create significant savings for companies. When it comes to verification of employees' employment, learning, and experiences, however, employers see dollar signs.

Employers question where the time and staff capacity to do this work would come from. Absent an operating demonstration, employers struggle to envision how they would engage with a system that could verify individual skills and competencies. Whether new LER systems could be fully automated to verify competencies at particular milestones, or whether more employers would adopt credentialing programs that neatly package learning and assessments, remains to be seen. And whether existing HR and talent acquisition systems could integrate these emerging platforms, or replicate what they intend to do, is an ongoing question. Both have financial implications for employers.

Even for employers interested in taking a more active role in verifying employees' learning, cost is a challenge. "We would do something like this – we've looked at badging models consistently in the past. But there is a cost associated," commented an HR leader. "Governments don't typically have state models for free, and it costs a lot to create that infrastructure. And all the companies that do badging charge for it. For a workforce in a field where that credentialing matters, it would cost us millions."

Employers are also constantly seeking a return on investment. While there are some promising opportunities, there are not clear signs that this specific activity – employer verification of skills, employment, and experiences – will drive returns. One employer serving in a corporate learning and workforce strategy role commented, "Unless you can prove the ROI in this process for the talent acquisition side, it'll be a hard sell."

Clearly, this is a chicken-and-egg problem. Until we have solid ROI evidence, we cannot expect scaled uptake by companies, and until we see significant activity, we cannot measure ROI. This should be an area of focus for organizations leading the development of LER systems and the national organizations that support them. Opportunities to pilot employer skills, employment, and experience verification will benefit the field immensely, done under the right conditions:

- Reduce the risk for employers by providing compensation or clear nonfinancial benefits in conducting the pilot.
- Include employers in the pilot that represent multiple industries and especially different firm sizes. Small- and mid-sized employers that do not have large internal HR and learning teams should be a priority.
- Continue to require adoption of interoperability principles among LER project demonstrations, alongside efforts to support talent management systems to adapt to skills-first practices.

Competitive Challenges

Perhaps the most difficult barrier to remove in shifting employers toward acting as verifiers of skills, employment, and experiences is a barrier of mindset and culture.

"Why would I want to have a system in place to validate skills for another employer?" commented one vice president I spoke with.

Another said, "There is a hesitation to promote what people can do, because they might leave. It might make it easier for people to get poached."

While some companies take more open views about supporting their workers in preparing for careers elsewhere, many employers are much more concerned about keeping their talent close. This mindset seems especially prevalent among smaller employers and in organizations with more specialized skills requirements.

An opportunity exists, though, among businesses with large frontline populations and smaller corporate employment. These so-called "sombbrero-shaped" organizations may be best positioned to test and model "employer as verifier" approaches. A learning leader from a

large company shared: “It’s a bit of a leap of faith. Is our company going to be an academy of talent? We understand that people will join our company for periods of time and then move on. And if we’re not able to offer internal opportunities, we should be offering opportunities outside. Why put barriers in their way to prevent them from leaving?”

Conclusion

We are just at the beginning of this journey to make all learning count, including learning gained on the job and through employer-provided training. Employers spend billions each year supporting upskilling and learning for employees and are contributing to the country’s talent supply in inestimable ways. Our aim is to harness that learning for the benefit of individuals, enabling them to effectively advocate for themselves and complete for great jobs empowered with both a solid understanding of what they know and are able to do and a verified record of that learning. For employers, this movement promises to open up new talent pools and create meaningful opportunities to engage incumbent talent.

This shift, though, will require new attitudes and practices. Transparency and openness in sharing the learning gained by employees through formal and on-the-job training will be vital for employers. For the organizations advancing skills-first and LER initiatives, recognizing that employers will need support to shift cultures and practices will be essential to fully engaging employers and leveraging the learning and experiences they are creating. Working together, it is possible for these new systems to make all learning count.

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.



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