

# Badging for Professional Development

## Scenario

Mark has a bachelor's degree in business administration and has worked for four years as an HR generalist in a large insurance company. He likes working in HR and would like to move up in the field, and his current company offers regular opportunities for promotion. With a family and a full-time job, however, Mark doesn't have time to pursue a graduate degree that would qualify him for most of those opportunities.

He is a member of an HR association and an insurance association, both of which offer professional development through seminars, online courses, and other avenues. Both organizations have begun offering digital badges to recognize completion of PD activities and mastery of specific skills. Many of the badges are awarded for mastery of emerging issues, such as changes in employment laws or upgrades to the HR software the company uses. Mark begins compiling a set of such badges, representing his learning in areas including employee benefits, various employment policies, and HR management. He also earns several badges from two state agencies, one that regulates the insurance industry and another that oversees employment practices.

Mark regularly reviews job announcements for HR positions that interest him—both within his current company and from other companies—and he is able to target his skills training to closely match those requirements. He actively maintains profiles on three professional networking websites, which display the badges he has earned. For each badge, the sites link to resources that identify the issuer of the badge and clearly state the requirements for earning it. His professional profile grows to include his work and accomplishments at his current job, as well as a long list of demonstrated competencies through the badges he displays. Representatives of two local companies contact Mark through the professional networks about jobs they are trying to fill, and a recruiter also gets in touch with him. As his skill set grows, new professional opportunities become increasingly available to him, including within his current company. The digital badges facilitate Mark's career development in ways that work with his financial situation and his other commitments. In the end, he earns a promotion at his current company to a supervisory position. He will continue his career growth and hopes one day to move into a leadership role.

## 1 What is it?

Digital badges—awarded by institutions, organizations, groups, or individuals—recognize a particular experience or signify accomplishments, such as completion of a project or mastery of a skill. Today's economy necessitates a workforce that educates itself beyond formal degrees. **Badging documents skills gained through various learning and engagement opportunities via professional organizations and communities** in a way that was not possible before. These digital credentials recognize a model of ongoing learning that can include service, leadership, and subject-matter expertise.

## 2 How does it work?

Requirements for receiving a digital badge vary by issuer. **In a professional context, a learner typically fulfills the criteria by conducting presentations, attending institutes to develop a specific competency, or serving on advisory boards or committees.** The issuer verifies that the criteria have been met and awards the badge, maintaining a record with metadata that includes the issuer's name, a badge description, and a link to the criteria. The earner can place the badge in a digital “backpack,” a portfolio-style account where the award is stored alongside badges from other issuers. This repository might be the Mozilla-hosted Badge Backpack or a backpack hosted by another provider. Badge recipients can keep their awards private or share their professional development by displaying badges on websites or through social media.

## 3 Who's doing it?

Beginning at the 2013 EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative Annual Meeting, EDUCAUSE became one of the first membership associations to initiate a [digital badging project](#). With a fully developed badge constellation, the project has awarded more than 2,500 badges to date. **Social media and other websites amplify the effect of sharing professional development activities.** Current badge activity for EDUCAUSE exceeds 172,000 badge impressions. Eighty percent of EDUCAUSE badges shared publicly are shared on LinkedIn using Credly, a digital credential management platform that has a partnership with LinkedIn for sharing

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badges. The relevance of badges to individuals, their peers, and their current and future employers indicates exponential growth and acceptance of such microcredentialing. The American Alliance of Museums' Center for the Future of Museums received a grant in 2012 to implement a [badging initiative](#) to explore the résumé of the future. Using BadgeOS, an open-source platform for assessing and rewarding achievement, the center created a microcredential that would distinguish individuals who earned it from other applicants while providing continuing development for those within the profession who don't have the time or resources to return to school. Additional grant funders for badges include the Mozilla Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Education has provided open data and other resources. In 2013, the American Society for Engineering Education began to use badges to recognize authors of its papers. The initial phases of the society's badge development were built around community contributions, leadership, and content development related to its annual conference.

## 4 Why is it significant?

Until now, an effective mechanism has not existed to recognize and/or certify professional development engagements in a way that is public (signals to an external community) and progressive (builds on itself). **Digital badges enable professional communities to identify new competency areas**—areas that may not yet be supported through formal education programs—and recognize mastery or demonstration of those competencies. A progressive process of badging can include certification with assessment and documented verification. Badges serve as a digital transcript or learning narrative that highlights interest and development in particular subject areas and also communicates an individual's participation and membership in professional communities. The digital environment allows tracking professional activity and documenting it to a peer and professional network. Badges encourage deeper learning in a particular topic. Active professionals can become leaders in particular subjects, instructing others and publishing their work. Through digital badging, an association can recognize the steps taken, identify the community and the participants' learning pathways, and allow them to share those accomplishments, encouraging further participation and networking.

## 5 What are the downsides?

One concern is how to determine the value of a badge. **Badging lacks standards for easy comparison, and there is**

**wide variation in badge requirements.** The value in each badge rests largely on the credibility of the issuer and the badge requirements, as well as the badge earner's articulation of its importance. Other concerns include the risk to an issuer's brand if a badge earner does not perform as expected. Senior campus administrators may be hesitant to endorse a badging program, especially if it presents a political risk, perhaps because it resides outside the academic program or lacks appropriate oversight for the assessment of learning outcomes. Badging is an emergent and rapidly evolving field. Because there is no aggregated solution to view, search, and compare badges—badges may appear in a LinkedIn feed, in a tweet, on Facebook, on a badge profile page, or in a backpack—it's easy to miss a lot of badging activity.

## 6 Where is it going?

A 2013 report, [The Potential and Value of Using Digital Badges for Adult Learners](#), identified the need to train today's workforce in specific abilities and recognize achievement in those areas. The criteria developed for a credible badge must align to educational standards, established business standards, or competency frameworks within specified professions or populations. The future of badges includes a way for HR and hiring directors to identify top candidates based on required and recommended knowledge, skills, and abilities. The résumé of the future can be a two-way process in which job seekers pursue growth and employment while employers search for the most qualified candidates. **Badging can narrowly define specific skills required for particular jobs**, providing clear guidance for those who pursue lifelong learning to advance their careers. Digital badges can directly complement adult post-degree development to maintain competence.

## 7 What are the implications for professional development?

Badging has the potential to transform the way we think about professional development. **Badges can recognize prior learning and provide evidence throughout the lifelong learning cycle.** Learning doesn't stop when we achieve a degree or accept a new position; badges serve as microcredentials of achievement beyond the transcript or career step. Badges signal to colleagues and to current and prospective employers a professional life of active learning, engagement, and ongoing development. As the field of badging evolves, badges will align with competencies and skills directly applicable in the workplace, and training programs will use badges in ways that can clarify career pathways.