

Talent Economy

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Should There Be a Universal Skills Measurement System?

Establishing a standard skills measurement system could make it easier for companies to source talent, but there are challenges and limitations to the practice.

The Colorado Community College System uses digital badges to display mastery of various skills needed in the manufacturing industry. These images, however, aren't simply stitched onto a vest like a traditional badge; they intend to help people get jobs.

The organization is developing these badges to show evidence of a competency "rather than the traditional measure of learning associated with seat time," as stated in its white paper, "Colorado Community College System Digital Badge Initiative: A New Paradigm for Credentials." This sort of system allows those with a competency to display that badge to a potential employer, which can then see what the badge represents and who earned it, along with when it expires.

Given the large number of unfilled positions in manufacturing, this sort of initiative to measure and display skills is likely to be useful in filling jobs and bridging the skills gap. According to Deloitte's "The skills gap in U.S. manufacturing: 2015 and beyond," there will be 3.5 million manufacturing roles to fill by 2025. However, the difference in skills that employers require and skills that talent possess could result in 2 million of those roles unfilled.

Whether it's in manufacturing or another industry, adding data to a credential — showing that a person has certain skills — helps both employers and employees, according to Jonathan Finkelstein, founder and CEO of Credly Inc., a digital credential service provider based in New York.

And as talent becomes more of a focal point for businesses looking to acquire competitive advantage, should there be a more universal system for defining and tracking workers' skills, instead of focusing on jobs?

Credly, for its part, uses badges to display skills earned. Formal assessments are one way that talent can gain badges, or a manager can follow a defined rubric when issuing various badges internally. Finkelstein said a universal system like this means the employer would rely less on self-reporting of skills proficiency from candidates. Employers would also be able to focus on the skills needed for a job, rather

than college degrees acquired, which don't necessarily indicate one's ability to perform in the business world. Job descriptions could also be more focused on skills and be more searchable than they currently are. A combination of these factors would make it easier to source talent both externally and internally, Finkelstein said.

Workers' skills and abilities are also more visible in a unified skills credentialed system, Finkelstein said, as data is attached to a certificate or badge. Then, as required skills and regulations change over time, talent could more easily see which of their skills require retraining.

"I think the vast part of our labor market is comprised of talented people whose talent has been assessed on the job, in the workplace, but might not have a proxy describing their skills that's well known to everybody," Finkelstein said. "But the skills that they actually have are much needed by everybody. So how do we connect them?"

Socializing Skills

A common language owned and maintained by a single group could be the solution to connecting employers and employees around skills, argued Rick Devine, CEO of TalentSky Inc., a career experience network platform based in San Francisco. "We also [need] a way for the supply side of labor, people, to finally get fair and accurate indications of quality of their skills, and that's changing all the time," he said.

His proposed solution combines a social network with credentialing. Users of the TalentSky platform can post about professional accomplishments and invite their colleagues to rate their skills used in that experience on a scale of basic to expert. This sort of a peer review system uses algorithms to help determine the strength of that rating based on the colleague's field. "We want to democratize the employment system with a common language demand side — employers — and supply side, using a modern concept of social media plus cloud computing trends, combine these two things to create a living network that is a much more connected living network for those that work and those that employ," Devine said.



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Some employers might feel insecure about profiles of their employees being open to the public, Devine said, fearing that their employees could be poached after others see their skills and improvements over time. However, Devine sees that as being useful. "It's too late to wall off your employees from the world. Those days are gone," Devine said. The question then is how do employers retain and engage their talent? Training employees then becomes a way to continue making the talent and organization stronger, while encouraging loyalty of workers the company invests in, he said.

Learning for Development

Gaining outside perspectives helps determine the ability of a job candidate to perform in a role, and that ability should include learning, said Ray Bixler, president and CEO of SkillSurvey Inc., an online reference checking technology firm based in Berwyn, Pennsylvania. His product uses an online, confidential forum to ask references to share insights on how individuals worked at previous positions. Bixler said references answer 26 questions around behavior and soft skills to provide objective candidate information.

As technology advances, adapting in a role and learning quickly are increasingly important. Hard skills can be taught, while soft skills aren't as easy to change. "Learning is something that must be part of the person's DNA," Bixler said. "Do they want to learn or not? And then, do they have the ability to learn or not?"

Ultimately, it's up to the employees to train themselves, but employers should provide resources such as formal and informal training and coaching, said Carmel Galvin, chief human resources officer at Glassdoor Inc. When hiring, Glassdoor looks for people who recognize what they should know to then train for it. It's then the ability to learn that sets people apart. "Being able to show the capability that you're able to learn is as important as already having learned a skill," Galvin said.

Business leaders should also allow their workers chances to use the skills they've gained. "We can sit people in a classroom, but if we're not providing them a place to actually utilize that stuff, it goes away pretty quickly," Galvin said. "The return on investment wanes if you're not able to immediately put it to good use."

Reviewing the Roadblocks

Galvin doesn't advocate for a universal skills measurement system, although she said it could be a helpful part of the hiring process. But with too much emphasis, leaders could miss out on other critical factors of candidates, which might not be classified

as skills. "The danger in that is that you could end up hiring a lot of people who look exactly the same, just by virtue of looking at their skillsets and not looking at some of the broader things and strengths that they bring to bear," Galvin said. Instead, she said it's more important to hire for potential.

Geography is also a limitation in a skills measurement system, said Credly's Finkelstein. Challenges that arise are around language, cultural sensitivity and differing regulations for various professions. However, Finkelstein said data can help to show where assessments do and don't align across borders.

Also, Finkelstein noted that one potential area of contention is around where to stop measuring skills. "Once you start having verified credentials on your profile, you want everything to be verified," Finkelstein said. As this movement takes shape, there will be a period where there are some things that can be verified and others that can't be measured, Finkelstein said. This could cause some frustration.

Finally, if creating a universal system by which to measure skills, how should leaders determine who should set the standards?

"The responsibility to establish that, it's no one's and everyone's at the same time," said Kieran Luke, general manager of credentials at General Assembly, a global education company specializing in in-demand skills based in New York. Luke said this will take commitment from many people, including business leaders and professionals from many sectors. In the end, measurable skills are likely to help both companies and those seeking work.

"The skills gap exists not just because people didn't necessarily have the options of learning the skills," Luke said. "The skills gap exists because people don't know what skills are important and how to prove that they have them if they have them. I think the more that leaders of companies and the general public can understand that the lack of a standard to define and validate skills is a huge root cause of the skills gap."