

# OPEN BADGES FOR EMPOWERMENT

HOW OPEN BADGES CAN BE USED TO  
RECOGNIZE AND COMMUNICATE  
HIDDEN HUMAN CAPITAL

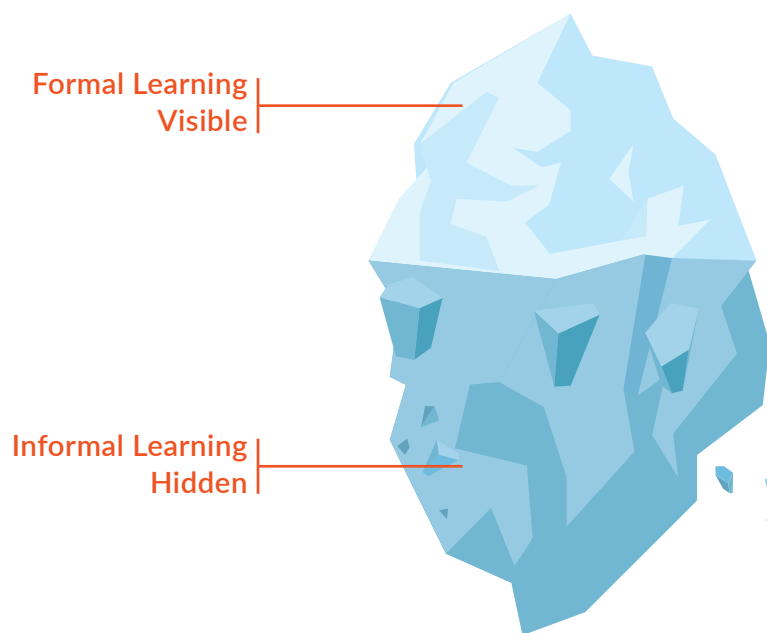


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## KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS GAINED THROUGH INFORMAL LEARNING REPRESENT HIDDEN TALENT

Today, because of open access to information, individuals are empowered with more ways than ever to learn through informal channels. For this reason, the knowledge and skills individuals acquire through informal learning represent a growing and abundant source of talent for the labor market. But, many of the abilities individuals acquire through informal learning aren't recognized, visible or communicated. Thus, a vast source of human capital remains hidden, undervalued and underused.



Dr. Peter Smith says, “Like the tip of an iceberg, only the formal learning you have accomplished as represented on a transcript or certificate is visible and recognized by employers and colleges. Meanwhile the rest of this iceberg of knowledge remains invisible to educators and employers. Thus, the full value of your life experience – and the knowledge it represents – lies concealed below the surface, out of sight, out of mind, and without validation or recognition.”<sup>1</sup>

To compound this problem, individuals are rarely encouraged to reflect on their informal learning. Consequently, they remain unaware of their full inventory of abilities and the full value they can offer.

Moreover, people struggle to have the knowledge and skills they’ve acquired through informal learning recognized and put to full use because it’s difficult for them to prove their abilities to others.<sup>2</sup> In the work context, informal learning is often recognized in non-formal ways through promotions, praise, pay raises, letters of recommendation, endorsements and being sought after for advice. This non-formal recognition has value within the communities where it’s been gained but is difficult to carry into the broader labor market as a visible, accessible and transparent asset.

If we value all lifelong learning and concede there’s more than one path to acquire knowledge and skills, then new ways of recognizing informal learning must be sought “that are more flexible, more inclusive and more transparent than the current forms of official certification.”<sup>3</sup> This is the empowering potential of open badges.

“The difference between school and life? In school, you’re taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you’re given a test that teaches you a lesson.”  
 – TOM BODETT

## BADGES EMPOWER PEOPLE TO RECOGNIZE, VALIDATE AND COMMUNICATE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL CLAIMS

A badge is simply a symbol that can represent many claims such as knowledge, skill, achievement, participation, affiliation, oaths, identity or completion. Open badges also symbolize claims, only they're machine readable and are backed by detailed supporting evidence viewable online, across networks. This means they're portable and transparent so that anyone can evaluate the evidence contained within the badge and determine for themselves whether that evidence substantiates the claims the badge represents.<sup>4</sup>

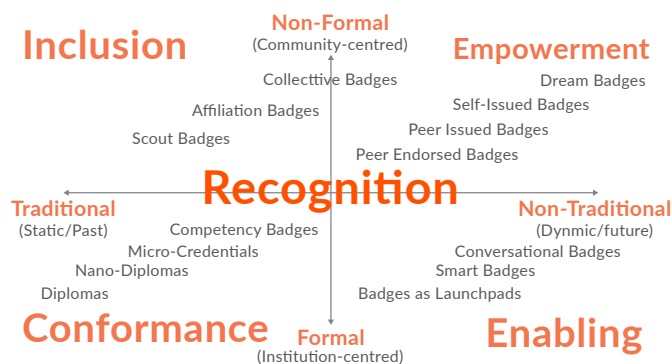
Open Badges Represent Claims Backed by Detailed Supporting Evidence



The Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) defines a credential as verification of an individual's qualification or competence issued by a third party with the relevant authority to issue such credentials.<sup>5</sup>

Some institutions use open badges as alternative digital credentials (ADCs). Others use them as rewards like "stickers" for encouraged behaviors such as participating in an event or activity. However, open badges can be used for much more.

As Michael North suggests, newness is often circumscribed with the limits of the old.<sup>6</sup> As a relatively new technology, it's no wonder early adopters are using open badges in the most familiar ways they know about. But, as the Open Recognition Plane<sup>3</sup> shows, badges can represent traditional, formal forms of recognition but also non-traditional, non-formal forms of recognition that foster empowerment.



Open Recognition Plane—Source: Serge Ravet.

Dr. Bernard Bull says, "Open badges create a means by which the breadth of one's learning and growth can be recognized, displayed, celebrated and shared. In doing so, we empower people to have greater agency, to better represent their identity in the connected age, to build meaningful connections with people and organizations (even employers) on the basis of this recognition."<sup>7</sup> Open badges empower individuals to tell their own lifelong learning story with authentic evidence.

“ Claimed knowledge, skills and abilities must be verifiable for others to recognize and accept. We're leaving a time where it was because 'I say so...' The real issue is who's got the evidence, how can they display the evidence, and does that add up to success in the workplace and/or success in school?<sup>8</sup> ”

- DR. PETER SMITH

## BADGES HELP INDIVIDUALS PROVE AND ARTICULATE THEIR SOFT SKILLS

Open badges can help individuals showcase skills that remain “hidden” because they’re difficult to prove and articulate through traditional, formal methods. This makes them ideal for evidencing and communicating “soft skills,” the essential workplace skills needed to succeed in any career. Although universally understood as critical for career success, soft skills are difficult to teach and substantiate because they require continuous development, practice, reflection and validation beyond the time limits of traditional learning programs. They’re acquired through informal and formal learning that is lifelong and lifewide.



Transcripts represent only formal learning that has reached a “finished” state. The problem with this, particularly for evidencing soft skills, is that one never truly “finishes” developing soft skills. Whereas transcripts are static, open badges are dynamic with the capacity to continuously capture evidence of learning and skill demonstration across the many different contexts of one’s life. Thus, open badges can remain relevant symbols of claimed abilities at any point in a person’s life.

While educational institutions recognize the importance of addressing soft skills, these skills are often treated as general dispositions. This may instill a misunderstanding among students that soft skills are inherent traits rather than skills that can be developed. Moreover, soft skills are often defined in abstract terms such as “grit,” “emotional

intelligence,” “work ethic” or “creativity.” To effectively address soft skills, they must be specific, contextual and socially observable.<sup>9</sup> For example, “professionalism” represents a high degree of abstraction whereas “treats people with respect as observed by instructor/manager” is not only low in abstraction, but also practical, observable and contextual.

Unlike transcripts, open badges can signal specific, granular-level skills and contain multi-media files providing rich context and direct evidence of skill in the form of formal and non-formal recognition. Open badges also provide opportunities for educators to assess and endorse non-formal recognition and establish alternative learning pathways to earn credentials. In short, open badges have many advantages over traditional instruments used to evidence and communicate soft skills, and any other skills, that remain “hidden” to employers.

“With the right strategy, we can help millions of young people secure a place in the twenty-first-century economy. Every student developing soft skills today could potentially change the world for the better in the decades to come. That will be a future from which we will all benefit.”<sup>10</sup>

- KELLI WELLS

## About CareerPrepped

CareerPrepped is creating a talent community connecting the workforce, talent suppliers and employers to enable skills-based hiring.

CareerPrepped empowers individuals to continuously build in-demand soft skills, prove their soft and hard skills with open badges and portfolio evidence, and showcase their full set of abilities to employers through their own career site. CareerPrepped helps individuals get the job they want, while perpetually preparing for career success in an everchanging labor market. The system helps talent suppliers to provide higher quality talent to employers with verifiable skills. Ultimately, CareerPrepped helps employers recruit and retain talent with the essential workplace skills they need, reducing employee recruitment, training and turnover costs.

CareerPrepped is powered by MaxKnowledge, Inc., the leading online provider of talent development solutions for the career education community, serving over 2,500 organizations.

Learn more about CareerPrepped at [www.careerprepped.com](http://www.careerprepped.com).

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