About Education Design Lab

The Education Design Lab (the Lab) is a national nonprofit that co-designs, prototypes, and tests education-to-workforce models through a human-centered design process focused on understanding learners’ experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education, and connecting learners to economic mobility.

About Design Insights Publication Series

Design Insights is a publication series designed to share insights from initiatives led and supported by the Lab as part of the Learner Revolution, which is about changing the future of learning and work in response to the needs of learners, workers, and the evolving labor market. The future of education, training, and work lies with new majority learner-earners, who include parent learners, students of color, first-generation students, low-income students, and communities long underinvested in, around whom the Lab is orienting our work through our Learner Engagement Framework. This series offers a glimpse into the Lab’s human-centered design approach to make learning visible, portable, affordable, flexible, and relevant.

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How might we validate and credential existing skills to make (l)earners more visible in the talent marketplace?

Our current systems of learning and work are largely broken and inequitable.

The conventional belief that a successful career hinges on obtaining a college degree after high school graduation falls short for the majority of individuals. For many, pursuing a degree is neither feasible nor desirable due to high costs, inflexibility, time constraints, and a lack of job guarantees. Consequently, even those who attempt this route often fail to complete their degrees, leaving them burdened with debt and without tangible proof of their skills for potential employers.

Compounding the issue is the failure to acknowledge the value of learning that occurs through real-world experiences and on-the-job training. Those who follow alternative pathways often develop vital skills comparable to academic programs, yet educational institutions and employers largely overlook them. The existing models for assessing prior learning often exacerbate the issue, as they are labor-intensive, subjectively reviewed, lacking transferability, and challenging to integrate into hiring systems.

Recent shifts in the labor market have highlighted the importance of skills as the foundation for more effective and equitable systems of learning and work. However, the evolving skills-based economy lacks an efficient and robust system to validate skills gained through life and work experiences, and signal those skills to employers.

To address this gap, the Lab has launched XCredit — or “Experience Credit” — an initiative supported by Walmart which aims to validate the skills individuals have acquired through their life and work experiences.

This issue disproportionately affects a significant segment of the U.S. workforce which Opportunity@Work has termed STARs: individuals who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes. These STARs, defined as at least 25 years old, currently active in the workforce, with a high school diploma but no bachelor’s degree, represent a staggering 50% of the U.S. workforce as of 2021.
To date, XCredit has been dedicated to prototyping and piloting:
+ An initial set of skills validation tools and methods, most notably a suite of cutting-edge 21st century skills assessments.
+ An interoperable ecosystem of partners seamlessly sharing skills and credential data across systems, making skills visible to employers.
+ A growing coalition of practitioners prototyping and testing new approaches through the Skills Validation Network.

In this brief, you’ll find:
+ A glimpse of our work on the ground, including an overview of the implemented pilots
+ Insights from opportunity seekers, employers, and workforce intermediaries;
+ Where this work is headed next

Piloting a skill validation system has been boundary-pushing and challenging in many ways. We hope readers will find inspiration in witnessing the collective dedication of our stakeholders in co-designing and implementing XCredit along with the potential positive impact of this work on STARs.

**Skill Validation**
The process by which an assertion (“I assert that I have a skill!”) is substantiated.
+ Typically conducted by a qualified third party
+ Creates trust that an individual possesses a skill
+ Based on a shared understanding of the meaning of a skill
+ Indicates the level and context of a skill
+ Can be conducted through various methods

**XCredit Skills Validation Network**
The XCredit Skills Validation Network is an action-oriented, future-focused community bringing together innovators from more than 10 organizations across the skills-based ecosystem.

The mission of the Network is to expand the methods, tools, and opportunities available to validate skills gained through work and life experience for individuals skilled through alternate routes (STARs), leveraging Education Design Lab’s 21st-century skills competency framework, the XCredit ecosystem, and the Network’s collective resources and expertise.

[Link to the SVN Page]
Design Insights: Overview

The Vision

The Lab envisions a transformative shift from an inefficient and inequitable system, where degrees act as proxies for skills, to a more equitable skills-based ecosystem driven by a universally valued currency: skills.

Validation of skills is critical. Without validation woven throughout each facet of the ecosystem, unsubstantiated skill assertions pose a risk to the adoption and sustainability of all skills-based efforts. We can’t achieve our desired state — an equitable skills-based ecosystem — without scalable, connected validation tools and methods in place, those which reflect the diversity of workers’ lived experience and the ever-changing array of in-demand skills.

Validation opportunities also need to be made widely accessible. Embedding skills validation throughout the skills-based talent ecosystem is a long-term, large-scale effort that will require a coordinated effort.

We believe XCredit is the vehicle through which this future state can be achieved.

“Translating real-world experiences into credentials can open up so many new doors for people. XCredit has the potential to unlock new career paths for job seekers and expand talent pools for employers, and we’re proud to support this good work.”

— Sean Murphy, Director, Corporate Philanthropy, Walmart
The Lab’s XCredit team, in collaboration with distinguished partners across the skills ecosystem, is prototyping a scalable, interoperable set of validation tools and methods aimed at providing open, low-cost ways for individuals to get “credit” for skills gained from their prior work and life experience. By supporting individuals in leveraging their validated skills, our aim is to create enhanced employment opportunities and foster improved economic mobility.

XCredit paves the way for an open and interoperable skills ecosystem by showcasing to educational institutions and employers the power of leveraging next-generation technology, open data standards, and a forward-thinking mindset.

In doing so, XCredit demonstrates how we can effectively bridge the gap between untapped skills and opportunities, fostering a more equitable and dynamic skills-based economy.

**Key accomplishments**

- Skills assessment
- Validation concepts
- Skills translation
- Interoperable ecosystem

**Phase 1**

**Phase 2**

- Expansion of assessment catalog
- Skills Validation Network
- Assessment + ecosystem pilots
- External research
- Expanded ecosystem
**April 2021 to June 2022**

Phase 1 of XCredit was strategically framed as a “design and prototype” phase, aimed at establishing an MVP skill validation system to validate and signal 21st century skills for opportunity seekers and hiring managers. Key accomplishments included:

- **Skills assessment**: Developed 23 automated assessments using two technologies, Muzzy Lane and Talespin, measuring Critical Thinking, Oral Communication, and Creative Problem-Solving.

- **Validation concepts**: Defined and co-developed, with employers, a set of validation concepts that have the potential to act as market signals of 21st century skills related to high-demand jobs.

- **Skills translation**: Prototyped the translation of military experience into its associated 21st century skills by mapping three Navy MOS codes against the Lab’s competency framework.

- **Interoperable ecosystem**: Prototyped an interoperable ecosystem, enabling an individual to move seamlessly through various technologies needed to validate skills, earn credentials, and take ownership of their records.

**July 2022 to June 2023**

Building upon the achievements of the first year, Phase 2 aimed to broaden the scope and impact of XCredit. Key accomplishments included:

- **Expansion of assessment catalog**: Expanded the available 21st century skills credentials from three to nine, and expanded assessments from 23 to 118 across two technologies.

- **Skill Validation Network**: Launched the Skill Validation Network, bringing together a group of innovators from 10+ organizations across the skills-based ecosystem to prototype methods, tools, and resources available for validation of skills gained through work and life experience, to expand opportunities for STARs (those Skilled Through Alternative Routes).

- **Assessment + ecosystem pilots**: Designed and launched two pilots: the Military Jobseeker Pilot and the Career Advancement (“Internal Mobility”) Pilot, to extend access to XCredit and study the effectiveness of the ecosystem. Furthermore, conducted thorough civilian testing to ensure wider access for all opportunity seekers.

- **External research**: Collaborated with Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center and Texas A&M Commerce to conduct research examining the validity and reliability of the assessments and the value proposition of XCredit more broadly.

- **Expanded ecosystem**: Expanded the XCredit ecosystem by integrating additional entry points and establishing connections with stakeholder organizations to facilitate seamless integration.
The true backbone of XCredit’s success stems from the invaluable contributions and collective collaboration of our partners. Though technological interoperability has undoubtedly played a vital role, at its core, XCredit has thrived on human interoperability. This has required effective collaboration, communication, and mutual trust, purpose, and understanding among individuals at more than a dozen distinct organizations, which further underscores the significance of meaningful partnerships and a shared commitment to revolutionize the skills ecosystem.

**XCredit Phase 2 Partners**

**ASSESSMENT TECHNOLOGY PARTNERS**
- MUZZY LANE
- TALESPIN

**DIGITAL WALLETS PARTNERS**
- SmartResume
- RANDA

**EXTERNAL RESEARCH PARTNERS**
- RUTGERS School of Management and Labor Relations
- Michael Ponton

**LEARNING MANAGEMENT/HUB PARTNER**
- Cypher Learning

**CREDENTIALING PARTNER**
- Credly

**IDENTITY PROVISIONING PARTNER**
- miniOrange

**PILOT PARTNERS**
- JobPaths
- SOLID
- Hire Heroes USA
- North Dakota Job Service
- NYC Small Business Services
During Phase 2, we partnered with over 10 organizations to conduct two pilots and extensive civilian testing:

- A **Military Jobseeker Pilot**, catering to transitioning military members and veterans seeking opportunities in the civilian workforce.

- An **Internal Mobility Pilot**, designed to support employed individuals in showcasing their skills for internal mobility within their organizations.

- **Civilian Testing**, aimed at expanding access to all opportunity seekers, while ensuring access and effectiveness at scale.

By participating in these pilots, individuals were provided with the opportunity to:

- Receive industry-recognized credentials by validating existing 21st century skills gained through their work and life experience.

- Take ownership of their credentials and use them to enhance their professional profiles and share them with prospective employers.

Through the successful implementation of these pilots, we examined the impact of assessing and credentialing an individual’s 21st century skills.

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**XCredit Pilot Overview**

**JUNIOR ENLISTED USER JOURNEY**

- Finds out about XCredit through Hire Heroes
- Creates an account
- Passes all Critical Thinking assessments
- Earns a Critical Thinking badge
- Activates his Smart Resume, containing the badge
- Shares resume with potential employer

**PILOT BY THE NUMBERS**

**Goal: 1,000 Participants Engaged | Actual: 1,840**

**Goal: 800 Skills Validated | Actual: 1,727**

**Goal: 400 Credentials Awarded | Actual: 447**

**Goal: 2 Employers Engaged | Actual: 1**
The Military Jobseeker Pilot

Despite possessing valuable skills such as critical thinking, resilience, and collaboration, the transition from military service to civilian life can be daunting for veterans, as they often encounter difficulties in translating and articulating skills gained through their military expertise to civilian job requirements.

Focus Community
Military-aligned individuals who are actively exploring and pursuing career opportunities in the civilian workforce. These individuals are seeking new job prospects and are seeking to make a transition within the next three to four months.

Pilot Overview
By validating and credentialing their existing 21st century skills, the Military Jobseeker Pilot aimed to empower military-connected individuals with visibility, facilitating a successful transition into the civilian workforce.
Persona
Who are our learner-earners/users? How are they experiencing their journey?

learner-earner’s name Andrea Rico

learner-earner description

This is Andrea Rico, age 24. She is serving in the Navy and will transition to the civilian workforce in 3 months. She joined the military at age 18, right after high school. She has developed many skills over the past 6 years, notably leadership, problem solving, and technology skills.

Andrea would like to move straight into a decent paying civilian job when she leaves the military, without going back to school to get a degree. She sees herself working in IT and eventually managing a small team. She’d like to start a family but wants to be financially stable first.

Andrea loves facing new challenges and inspiring others to help her tackle those challenges. She also gets excited at the prospect of new technologies as tools to help solve complex problems, something she was very good at during her time in the military.

Andrea is motivated to excel, to show others she is highly capable. She will choose her next opportunity based on alignment with her skillset, company culture, and salary. She is open to relocating if necessary.

As part of the design process, the Lab uses fictional personas to represent the goals and characteristics of the learner-earners we aim to serve.
One of the distinguishing aspects of this pilot was that in addition to validating skills through 21st century skills assessments, we also piloted a skills translation approach to validating skills. Previously, in collaboration with SOLID Milgears, the Lab team had mapped all work tasks associated with three Navy MOS codes to the Lab’s competency framework. This mapping was then implemented in the pilot. As a result, individuals from these three military occupations were granted automatic automatic recognition for the 21st century skills they already possessed. This approach acknowledges the valuable skills acquired during military service and provides participants with credentials that showcase their abilities.

This streamlined process not only saves time and effort but also ensures that deserving individuals receive the recognition they deserve as they pursue new opportunities in the civilian job market.

**Since its launch in October 2022, the pilot has attracted over 200 participants and continues to thrive.**

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### Military Pilot Partners

#### Hire Heroes USA

Hire Heroes USA is a nonprofit organization, dedicated to addressing the most sought-after service among transitioning military members: employment assistance. Through free personalized service and support, they empower service members, veterans, and their spouses to get hired and help companies hire and retain them.

#### SOLID Milgears

SOLID Milgears is a tailored, career-building tool designed to assist military-aligned individuals from service to transition and beyond. It helps users plan and achieve their goals by showcasing career possibilities and providing actionable steps for reaching them.

#### JobPaths

JobPaths is a tech company that centers its mission on solving the challenges associated with recruitment and retention for DE&I candidates, including military veterans. They provide intelligently designed tools that empower users in their job searching efforts while equipping HR professionals with advanced technology to help them meet their DE&I hiring goals.
The Internal Mobility* Pilot

The Internal Mobility Pilot was designed to provide crucial support to employed individuals seeking internal career growth opportunities.

Focus Community
Employed individuals pursuing career advancement and enhanced opportunities in their professional journeys.

Pilot Overview
Skill validation plays a crucial role in the journey of employed individuals, recognizing their ongoing on-the-job skill development. By validating their skills, employees can showcase their capabilities, paving the way for increased career progression within their organization. The Internal Mobility Pilot extends XCredit access to Hire Heroes Alumni, empowering employed individuals seeking advancement within their current organizations.

Internal Mobility Pilot Partners
The Hire Heroes USA Alumni Program continues to empower Hire Heroes USA clients who have found employment by offering career development and professional growth opportunities. To support provided remains available at no cost to the members and never expires, supporting them through each relocation, career transition, and promotion.

*Internal mobility refers to the movement and progression of employees within an organization, allowing them to transition to different roles, or departments, without leaving the company. Internal mobility provides existing employees with opportunities for career growth, skill development, and upward advancement within the organization.
Persona
Who are our learner-earners/users? How are they experiencing their journey?

learner-earner description

Who is this individual?
- Age?
- Primary Supports?
- Financial Background?
- Academic Background?
- Career/Job Background?

Sandeep (32) is a delivery dispatcher by day, earning $21 per hour and rideshare driver working mostly in the evenings. He has a high school diploma with some postsecondary coursework and years of varied experience across retail, banking, and building maintenance. He considers customer service to be one of his top skills.

What are their primary goals or dreams?

After 10 years of working at hourly rates, during odd hours, in many frontline industries, Sandeep is interested in making a career change to an “office job,” preferably in IT or customer service. He wants to start a family and have more flexibility on evenings and weekends, with a stable income and retirement options. Sandeep heard that there are many jobs in manufacturing, and is considering that as an alternate career pathway as well.

What do they value in their academic, personal, and professional lives?

Sandeep values having an employer who recognizes his varied skills, obtained through working in diverse industries. He is a lifelong learner, and is looking to gain in-demand skills, leading to upward mobility. He strives to have work-life balance and values flexibility and opportunities where he can grown and learn.

What influences their decision making process?

- Motivators?
- Detractors?
- Challenges?
- Opportunities?

Sandeep is motivated to make a career shift, he knows his strength lies in customer service, but is struggling to take the next step. He struggles with how to organize his online resume. He does not think employers in an office setting, such as customer service in an IT firm, will see his experience in retail or banking as valuable or transferable. Since most of his work has been hands-on or over the phone, he worries about his lack of digital skills.

As part of the design process, the Lab uses fictional personas to represent the goals and characteristics of the learner-earners we aim to serve.
Civilian Testing

The Civilian Testing program addresses the diverse skill sets and talents found in individuals within the highly competitive and rapidly evolving job market. By offering a platform for skill validation, we empower individuals to gain well-deserved recognition for their capabilities.

Focus Community
Any opportunity seeker interested in validating and showcasing their skills.

Pilot Overview
Through our Civilian Testing initiative, we expanded access to XCredit through a Skills Challenge, specifically targeting the validation of Critical Thinking skills. Over 2,000 opportunity seekers registered, with more than 1,000 actively participating and validating their Critical Thinking abilities, and some going on to earn a credential.

Our objective was to make XCredit more accessible and inclusive, removing barriers for a broader audience. Critical Thinking was at the heart of our efforts, as it is an in-demand skill in today’s fast-paced world, enabling individuals to analyze information, make informed decisions, and solve complex problems.

Forbes lists critical thinking, empathy, and teamwork (collaboration) among the top five skills that every employee needs in the 21st century.
At its core, human-centered design is built on empathy and requires us to understand and engage those most proximate to the problem as experts. This section offers a wide range of insights gathered during Phases 1 and 2 of XCredit, organized by key stakeholders who participated in the process, including opportunity seekers, employers, and partner organizations serving as intermediaries between these two stakeholders.

These insights were gathered through multiple methods:
+ Surveys and interviews the XCredit team conducted with pilot participants.
+ Weekly implementation meetings and conversations with partner organizations.
+ Quantitative data from the XCredit pilots, which complemented the qualitative findings, ensuring a comprehensive perspective.

### Early Insights from Key Stakeholders

#### Opportunity Seekers
Military-aligned individuals and civilians seeking to validate their 21st century skills, enabling them to achieve specific professional growth and development goals. In the context of our work, opportunities are framed as:

+ Opportunity to get a job
+ Opportunity to advance in their career
+ Opportunity to validate a skill

We are focusing on STARs (individuals Skilled Through Alternative Routes) to help break down systemic labor market inequities and increase access, opportunity, and income for traditionally underserved populations.

#### Employers
In our context, employers are organizations that are using or are interested in using skill validation methods to hire and upskill their workers. We focused on employers that hire veterans or STARs as opposed to those who hire solely for more traditional credentials like degrees.

#### Partners
XCredit partners from mission-driven, nonprofit organizations and state workforce boards that play a pivotal role in supporting opportunity seekers throughout their career journeys. These organizations provide career coaching services, job search marketplaces, and skill development resources to opportunity seekers to start and advance in their careers. Our partners and their organizations were instrumental in spearheading the implementation of XCredit and facilitating its seamless adoption by our pilot participants.
Design Insight #1

When validating skills through assessments, it’s important to provide learners with transparent scoring and comprehensive feedback.

Our research with pilot participants revealed a strong desire for transparency in the assessment scoring process and comprehensive feedback when engaging in skill validation opportunities. Transparency in skill validation means providing clear and understandable information about the validation process, scoring criteria, and feedback on performance. It ensures individuals have a clear understanding of how their skills are assessed, their strengths and areas for growth, and the value they can signal to potential employers. Furthermore, users want a granular approach that would provide them with deeper insights into their performance, enabling them to identify specific areas for growth and build upon their strengths.

NEXT STEPS
We value this input and will be implementing some measures to address their needs in the next phase. We intend to refine the language on the feedback screen at the end of each assessment, placing a strong emphasis on improvement and the iterative nature of skill development.

By acting on this insight, we seek to foster transparency and continuous learning and growth, in line with the aspirations of our opportunity seekers. Overall, transparency in skill validation fosters trust, empowerment, and accountability, enabling individuals to engage in the skill-based ecosystem and make informed decisions.
Design Insight #2

Reducing complexity strengthens engagement for **opportunity seekers**.

**OPPORTUNITY SEEKER VOICES**

“Navigating my way around the site was challenging.”
— XCredit pilot participant

“I found the screen to be cluttered with information that I found myself not wanting to click around to re-read the details.”
— XCredit pilot participant

Our exploration revealed that administrative and cognitive complexity posed significant barriers to pilot engagement. To maximize user involvement, it is crucial to streamline skill validation processes and requirements.

Administrative burdens, such as participation processes and complex workflows, deter individuals from fully engaging in skill validation. This results in reduced participation and limited benefits for users and service providers alike. Additionally, cognitive complexities, such as unfamiliar tools and terminology, and hinder users’ comprehension and engagement with the ecosystem.

**NEXT STEPS**

1. **Strengthening and simplifying UI/UX**: We are enhancing the user interface and experience on our skill validation platform to make it more intuitive and user-friendly.

2. **Enhancing communication**: Streamlining language and incorporating visuals for clearer communication is an ongoing effort. Our aim is to present information in a clear and concise manner, enabling users to better understand XCredit and our offerings.

3. **Streamlining SSO registration**: With our partners, we are simplifying the Single Sign-On (SSO) registration process. This improvement will streamline onboarding, making it easier for users to access and participate in skill validation opportunities.

4. **Personalized assessment recommendations**: In the future, we intend to develop a system to recommend assessments based on individuals’ unique skills profiles and career interests. This tailored approach will reduce cognitive complexities and ensure users engage with assessments aligned with their goals.
Employers value 21st century skills validation.

Employers recognize the importance of 21st century skills in the hiring process. These skills are perceived as vital for adapting to the rapidly evolving technological and societal landscape, fostering collaboration in diverse teams, and confronting the challenges posed by the digital age. Many employers find 21st century skills more challenging to teach than technical skills, underscoring their unique value in today’s workforce.

During our discussions with employers, they acknowledged the value and potential impact of leveraging a skill validation system like XCredit to make more informed hiring decisions and find candidates who possess the necessary competencies for the job.

Employers involved in our Employer Design Studios emphasized the significance of prior work/life experiences, signaling their desire for a complete candidate portrait that offers a glimpse into the “whole person.” Additionally, they highlighted the necessity for skills to be contextualized, validated, and demonstrated. Employers are seeking tools that not only demonstrate skills but also foster equity of opportunity and provide structured, verified data to support their hiring decisions. In addition, they recognize the importance of different implementation models for validated skills. Employers identified the opportunity to leverage these validated skills as a means to identify upskilling opportunities and enable internal mobility within organizations. This versatility showcases the adaptability of skill validation initiatives to varying organizational needs and workflows.

NEXT STEPS

Employers’ recognition and interest in 21st century skills validation has positive implications for broader skill validation efforts. It signals the demand for effective solutions and suggests the potential for market growth and industry adoption of skill validation initiatives that focus on validating the skills needed in today’s changing workforce.

EMPLOYER VOICES

“[I’d like to have a] better understanding of who they are outside of the work we’re looking for them to do.”
— Employer

“You guys are sitting on gold! There is nothing like this in the market.”
— Employer

“I appreciate the reframe of the resume to a profile but I wonder if there’s further to go in that reframe to reflect the multidimensionality of people.”
— Employer
While engaging with a skill validation system, employers require streamlined processes and enhanced technical support to overcome organizational and technical barriers.

Our discussions with employers revealed significant challenges hindering the adoption of skill validation systems like XCredit within organizations. The nature of internal decision-making processes created an obstacle as the simplicity of the ask — interviewing XCredit candidates who have validated their skills — got lost in complex organizational dynamics.

In addition to organizational hurdles, employers face technical barriers when integrating skill validation into their workflows and systems. Our conversations unveiled critical questions that need to be addressed. Employers sought clarity on educating their organizations about the value of the tools, involving other business units to successfully execute the technology, determining the optimal timing for implementation, ensuring a substantial pool of job-seeking individuals, and identifying compelling use cases that showcase the system’s potential impact.

Moreover, the absence of initial employer partnerships for piloting and showcasing the system’s effectiveness creates a dilemma, as employers hesitate to commit without tangible evidence of its value and influence on hiring outcomes.

NEXT STEPS
+ First, we need to better understand employers’ challenges and develop solutions that align with their needs, ultimately fostering the integration of skill validation systems like XCredit into their organizations.
+ Second, we must identify and engage innovative partners who are willing to collaborate, embrace new approaches, and share their experience as an early adopters. These partners can serve as catalysts for demonstrating the benefits of a skill validation system, generating impact data, and providing testimonials that establish credibility and encourage other employers to join the initiative.

“Most employers are anxious to get started into this...[The] Problem is a bureaucratic problem — simplicity of the ask is lost on the organization.”
— Partner
Design Insight #5

Opportunity seekers and partner organizations leveraging XCredit prioritize both skill validation and skill development.

PILOT VOICES

“XCredit can expand the platform’s database of resources and reference materials to provide users with a comprehensive knowledge base.
— XCredit pilot participant

PARTNER VOICES

“This [failing assessments] can be a barrier to a job opportunity instead of an opportunity.”
— Partner

Pilot engagement data suggests a drop-off rate of 59.5% when participants fail to demonstrate mastery within an assessment. Surfacing a skill gap without remediation or support to move ahead in a user’s journey can lead to a withdrawal from the process. Hence, it is important to empower individuals who have not yet achieved mastery in their desired competencies with tailored learning pathways and resources.

Our partners emphasized the potential negative psychological impact of failure and demoralization for pilot participants unable to advance due to unvalidated skills. They stressed the need for resources and tailored learning options to support those facing challenges in skill validation.

Our partners at Job Service North Dakota prompted us to launch an opportunity that connects their users who don’t demonstrate mastery on their XCredit assessments with vsbl, Education Design Lab’s courses to support development of the 21st century skills. This targeted pathway enables job seekers to acquire knowledge and competence to address skill gaps, and eventually validate their skills and earn credentials.

This approach aligns with the Lab’s Learner Engagement Framework, which places importance on growth, belonging, and agency as fundamental drivers of individual engagement and success. By providing valuable learning opportunities to those who need it, we can actively foster a culture of continuous growth. Moreover, the strategic alignment of skill validation efforts with training and development initiatives empowers individuals, enhancing their sense of agency to take charge of their own growth journey, making informed decisions along the way.

NEXT STEPS
We’ve learned skill validation efforts should be viewed holistically, integrated within a larger skills ecosystem that values both validation and development. This approach acknowledges individuals’ existing competencies while also providing avenues for ongoing growth and improvement.
Engaging stakeholders through personalized support and co-design increases buy-in to emergent ideas and practices.

Skills validation is still in its emergent stages, leading to inherent ambiguity regarding its value for opportunity seekers, workforce intermediaries, and employers. To increase buy-in and participation from stakeholders, we found it important to first support them in recognizing the benefits of engaging with skill validation.

In this context, adopting a co-design approach was essential, involving stakeholders in the design process to gain insights into their unique needs, roles, and positions within the larger skills ecosystem. This not only facilitated the alignment of interests but also enabled us to provide targeted support to each stakeholder group, effectively conveying the value and relevance of skill validation in their specific contexts.

Co-design also played a vital role in supporting stakeholders in navigating the complexities of this emergent system, developing tailored implementation plans, and ensuring the successful integration of XCredit into various contexts.

NEXT STEPS
As we transition into the next phase of our work, our focus will shift toward maximizing impact. Throughout this journey, we will continue to embrace the co-design approach, recognizing its value in fostering stakeholder engagement and empowerment.
Connecting siloed skills efforts and fostering interoperability is essential to strengthening the impact of skill validation.

Currently, various components of the skills ecosystem — skill development, validation, credentialing, job placement, and career advancement — operate largely in isolation, with limited integration and interoperability. This fragmented landscape results in broken links and gaps, and hinders all stakeholders from effectively engaging with the system.

The absence of interoperability restricts the portability of skills across different initiatives or platforms. Individuals face difficulties securely consolidating and sharing their validated skills, hindering their ability to showcase qualifications consistently and effectively. This limitation reduces the widespread utility of their validated skills and the overall employability of the individual, as their skills may not easily transfer between various ecosystems or contexts.

To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to establish robust connections and enhance interoperability among the various tools and ecosystems involved. By facilitating seamless data and information exchange, we can eliminate barriers and create a more cohesive and efficient experience for individuals and stakeholders.

We have made progress in establishing interoperability within the XCredit ecosystem over the past 12 months – successfully connecting our platform with five partner organizations, a badge-issuing platform, and a digital wallet. These advancements have laid a strong foundation, marking a significant step towards a more interconnected skills ecosystem. However, we are aware of the significant work that lies ahead. Bridging the gaps and creating a fully interconnected ecosystem requires continuous collaboration and innovation.

**NEXT STEPS**
Our next steps involve further expanding and optimizing the connections between our XCredit and partner platforms, building a seamless experience that empowers individuals, drives workforce development, and enables employers to find the right talent with ease.
As the nation continues to embrace skills-based programming and hiring, it is essential to keep validation at the core of our efforts and prioritize the needs of both STARs and employers. In the coming years, the Lab will continue to lead a national skills validation movement. Our focus will be on driving and measuring impact through the continued implementation of our pilots and expanding our collective practice through the work of the Center for Skills Validation. With the knowledge gained from these initiatives, we anticipate concrete proof of the value that skill validation brings to STARs, employers, and other ecosystem stakeholders. We will continue to share proof points, tools, and processes that will impact more STARs and strengthen skill validation efforts across the country.

This is just the beginning.

The Design Insights

1. When validating skills through assessments, it’s important to provide individuals with transparent scoring and comprehensive feedback.

2. Reducing complexity strengthens engagement for opportunity seekers.

3. Employers value 21st century skills validation.

4. While engaging with a skill validation system, employers require streamlined processes and enhanced technical support to overcome organizational and technical barriers.

5. Opportunity seekers and partner organizations leveraging XCredit prioritize both skill validation and skill development.

6. Engaging stakeholders through personalized support and co-design increases buy-in to emergent ideas and practices.

7. Connecting siloed skills efforts and fostering interoperability is essential to strengthening the impact of skill validation.
The research included in this Design Insights Brief is made possible through the generous support of Walmart.

The findings, conclusions, and recommendations presented in this report are those of Education Design Lab alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Walmart.

ABOUT PHILANTHROPY AT WALMART

Walmart.org represents the philanthropic efforts of Walmart and the Walmart Foundation. By focusing where the business has unique strengths, Walmart.org works to tackle key social and environmental issues and collaborate with others to spark long-lasting systemic change. Walmart has stores in 20 countries, employs more than 2 million associates and does business with thousands of suppliers who, in turn, employ millions of people. Walmart.org is helping people live better by supporting programs to accelerate upward job mobility for frontline workers, advance equity, address hunger, build inclusive economic opportunity for people in supply chains, protect and restore nature, reduce waste and emissions and build strong communities where Walmart operates. To learn more, visit www.walmart.org or connect on Twitter @Walmartorg.

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