From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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USE CASE 3

Validating Resilience Signals during Program Admissions

When an External Skills Assessment Adds Value + When It Becomes Redundant

Education Design Lab

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When an External Skills Assessment Adds Value + When It Becomes Redundant

40
applicants completed the Resilience capstone as part of admissions

2
IT Support Fundamentals Cohort supported

12
Applicants passed the resilience capstone

5+ hrs
Added staff time per week

5-7
Days estimated admissions timeline extension compared with other programs

About the Learners

ActivateWork applicants were seeking entry into IT Support + Security Fundamentals, a rigorous workforce training program designed to prepare learners for technology careers.

Applicants were navigating a multi-step admissions process that included eligibility screening, application review, baseline assessment, technical aptitude screening, interview, background check, and onboarding.

For these learners, admissions was not only a selection process. It was the first step into a high-stakes training pathway where persistence, adaptability, and professional readiness would matter from day one.

The Use Case

This pilot explored whether skills validation could strengthen admissions for a workforce training program. Durable skills like resilience, grit, and adaptability are important to learner success but difficult to assess consistently through a standard admissions process. The goal was not to replace human judgment or use assessment scores as a hard screen. Instead, the pilot tested whether assessment results could help admissions staff ask more targeted follow-up questions and build a fuller picture of applicant readiness, combining assessment data with interview judgment rather than treating them as substitutes.

Our Partners

ActivateWork is a workforce training organization that prepares learners for technology careers through technical instruction, professional skills development, coaching, and employer connections.

For this pilot, ActivateWork partnered with Education Design Lab to test whether EDL's Resilience capstone assessment could be embedded into the admissions process for IT Support Fundamentals applicants.

A key implementation context shaped the pilot: ActivateWork's admissions process is administered through Per Scholas, which delivers the technical curriculum and manages the formal admissions standards, systems, and tools. This limited ActivateWork's ability to independently integrate XCredit into the core admissions workflow.

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The Challenge

Workforce training programs need to understand whether applicants are ready to persist through a demanding training experience.

Traditional admissions tools can capture important information: applications show background, technical assessments show some aptitude, and interviews surface motivation and fit. But durable skills like resilience can be difficult to assess consistently, especially when interviews are less structured.

This created a signal gap.

Admissions staff needed a better way to see early evidence of resilience, not to replace their judgment, but to make interviews more targeted.

The challenge: **whether a stand-alone assessment could create a useful enough signal at the admissions stage**

The Idea

Embed XCredit's Resilience capstone into the admissions process as an early signal that could inform structured interviews.

The assessment was designed to surface initial evidence across four sub-competencies associated with resilience:

1. learning from experience
2. exhibiting flexibility
3. demonstrating self-awareness
4. focusing on solutions.

The intended model was human-centered evidence stacking: combine assessment data with interview judgment so admissions staff could go deeper with applicants rather than rely on generic behavioral questions alone.

Deeper learning questions:

- Could a performance-based assessment surface initial evidence of resilience before the interview?
- Could assessment results help admissions staff ask more targeted follow-up questions?

- Could combining XCredit data with human interview judgment create a fuller picture of applicant readiness?
- Could resilience scores help predict persistence, completion, or performance in the bootcamp.

What Shifted

The pilot took place inside a changing admissions environment.

ActivateWork's admissions process was largely shaped by Per Scholas, which managed the formal tools, standards, and Salesforce workflow. During the pilot, Per Scholas updated its interview process with a stronger rubric, clearer questions, and more consistent criteria.

That shift mattered.

Skills validation was initially introduced to fill a gap in the interview process. But once the interview became more structured, the assessment was no longer being compared to an informal process. It was being compared to a more complete human evaluation model.

The question changed from: **Can a skills assessment surface what interviews miss?** To: **Does this validation tool add a distinct signal beyond what the improved interview already captures?**

What Was Tested

Applicants to two IT Support Fundamentals cohorts completed EDL's Resilience capstone assessment as part of the standard admissions process.

The assessment was added alongside existing admissions requirements, including application review, baseline assessment, CyberGen technical aptitude screening, structured interview, background check, and onboarding.

At the time of the pilot, applicants were required to complete three separate assessments across different systems. XCredit was introduced by ActivateWork as a pilot layer, but it was not formally integrated into the Per Scholas admissions process.

The intended workflow was for the Recruiting and Admissions Manager to review XCredit results and use them to inform follow-up questions within the structured Per Scholas interview process.

What Happened

The pilot surfaced a broader lesson for skills validation: a tool's value depends on the decision environment around it.

XCredit produced individual-level resilience data, and the recruiter used it in the first cohort to identify where to ask follow-up questions. This showed the promise of a stacked validation model: assessment first, human follow-up second.

But over time, the added value became less clear. The improved interview process began capturing many of the same competencies the assessment was intended to surface. Christina noted that the results were not producing dramatically different insights from the normal interview process.

The issue was not that resilience did not matter. The issue was that the assessment was no longer filling a clearly distinct evidence gap.

The implementation model also made adoption difficult. The assessment sat outside the Per Scholas workflow, required manual tracking, lacked automated completion notifications, and could not be easily stored or interpreted inside Salesforce. This added staff burden and slowed the admissions process.

For learners, the assessment became one more step in an already assessment-heavy admissions journey. Without a clear understanding of how it would be used, some applicants experienced it as another requirement rather than a meaningful part of the admissions conversation.

The pilot was paused after two cohorts. The takeaway was not that skills validation has no role in admissions. It was that admissions-stage validation must add a distinct, usable signal and be integrated into the workflow where decisions are made.

Top Findings

The findings below translate pilot learnings into practical design guidance for work-learn ecosystem practitioners building skills-based programs. Rather than asking whether student parents have durable skills, the pilot surfaced a more actionable question: what does it take for skills developed through caregiving to be validated, trusted, and used across education and employment systems? These findings show that quality validation depends not only on assessment, but also on how evidence is defined, how results are communicated, and how the experience is delivered for learners navigating complex lives.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
A validation signal only becomes useful when it is designed into the contextual process.	The Resilience assessment produced individual-level data, but the results did not meaningfully influence admissions outcomes. Scores were intended to shape follow-up interview questions, but the pilot lacked a structured decision framework for how results should be interpreted or acted on. Without that framework, the assessment became an added step rather than a usable decision tool.	**Transparency + Trust.** Skills validation should make clear what is being evaluated, how results will be used, and what decisions or supports they inform. In admissions contexts, programs need explicit criteria before launch: what score patterns trigger follow-up, additional support, selection, or reconsideration.
Evidence stacking is promising, but disconnected systems make the stack harder to use.	The pilot attempted to combine multiple evidence sources: Per Scholas admissions criteria, CyberGen technical screening, XCredit resilience results, and structured interviews. But these signals lived across separate platforms and were not integrated into one workflow. ActivateWork also did not fully own the admissions process, which limited its ability to embed XCredit into Per Scholas' systems and standards.	**Data, Security, + Integration; Scalability + Adaptability.** Evidence stacking should make decision-making stronger, not workflows heavier. To scale, validation data must integrate with existing admissions systems, trigger completion notifications, and be easy for staff to access, compare, and act on.
Admissions is a high-momentum moment, so added friction has higher consequences.	Applicants were already completing multiple admissions steps and three separate assessments. Because XCredit results were not used as formal admissions criteria and did not materially change decision-making, the added effort felt disproportionate. Staff also absorbed additional manual work, including troubleshooting, completion tracking, and reviewing results across platforms.	**Accessibility, Fairness, + Inclusivity.** Admissions-stage validation must be low-burden and easy to complete. Extra logins, unclear expectations, manual follow-up, and delays can create barriers before learners even enter the program, especially for applicants with less time, less digital fluency, or fewer supports.conditions for participation and scale.

For Future Partners

Before introducing a durable-skills assessment into admissions, ask: "If this tool produces a score, what decision will change — and for which learners?" If the answer is unclear, the placement is premature. Map the decision architecture first, then determine whether validation adds signal or noise.

When Admissions-Stage Validation May Work

Single platform, under 30 minutes; the competency assessed has documented links to program completion; staff capacity is formally allocated; and assessment output is integrated into a structured interview protocol with training for admissions staff.

When to Reconsider

When applicants already face multiple assessments; when no prior evidence links the competency to your program's outcomes; when staff time isn't protected; or when a separate platform and login are required. In these conditions, move validation into the curriculum instead.

Replication Guidance

For Organizations Considering Skills Validation During Program Admissions

The ActivateWork + XCredit pilot offers a practical framework for organizations exploring how durable-skills validation can complement admissions processes for workforce training and education programs.

Before You Launch

+ **Define the decision point.**
  Determine exactly how assessment results will be used. Will they inform interview questions, identify support needs, strengthen admissions decisions, or predict persistence and completion?
+ **Identify the evidence gap.**
  Assessments should provide information that is not already being captured through applications, interviews, or existing screening tools.
+ **Design the workflow before implementation.**
  Map how assessment results will move into admissions systems, who will review them, and what actions will follow.
+ **Integrate wherever possible.**
  Validation should be embedded within existing admissions platforms and processes. Separate systems, manual tracking, and disconnected reporting create adoption challenges.
+ **Train staff on interpretation.**
  Admissions teams need clear guidance on how to use results consistently and how to incorporate findings into follow-up conversations.
+ **Minimize applicant burden.**
  Admissions is often a high-friction stage. Keep assessments concise, easy to access, and clearly connected to program goals.

When Validation May Work

Validation may create value when:

- The competency being assessed has a demonstrated relationship to learner success, persistence, or completion.
- The assessment fills a clear information gap that interviews or applications do not capture consistently.

- Results are used to inform structured follow-up conversations rather than replace human judgment.
- Assessment data is integrated into existing admissions workflows and systems.
- Staff have dedicated time and training to review and apply results.
- Validation is one component of a broader evidence-stacking approach that combines assessment data with interviews, applications, and other admissions criteria.

When to Reconsider

Validation may have limited impact when:

- The assessment duplicates information already captured through interviews or existing admissions tools.
- Results are not tied to a specific decision, support intervention, or admissions process.
- Applicants are already navigating multiple assessments and application requirements.
- The assessment requires separate logins, platforms, or manual tracking processes.
- Staff capacity is insufficient to review, interpret, and act on results.
- Assessment data cannot be integrated into the systems where admissions decisions are made.
- The organization lacks evidence that the assessed competency is connected to desired program outcomes.

Voices from the Pilot

> The lack of integration with Salesforce, the manual scoring process... if this was built into our integration somehow — notifications, Salesforce fields, more standardized data reports — I could potentially see it there.
>
> **— ActivateWork Recruiting + Admissions Manager**