# From Signals to Evidence

## Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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USE CASE 4

# Validating Durable Skills Built During Training, with a Visible Credential

**Education** Design Lab

# Validating Durable Skills Built During Training, with a Visible Credential

**87**
Learners took Oral Communication as part of their training

**8**
Cohorts supported

**2**
Delivery models tested

**80**
Validated at least 1 sub-competency

**16**
Earned a credential

**About the Learners**
ActivateWork serves adult learners and career changers who are unemployed, underemployed, or seeking to transition into higher-wage careers.

Through technology-focused boot camps and career readiness programming, the organization works to expand access to economic mobility for populations historically underrepresented in the tech sector.

Their cohorts include people of color, immigrants, veterans, first-generation college students, parents returning to the workforce, and individuals transitioning from industries disrupted by economic change and automation. Many do not hold a four-year degree, and most come from low- to moderate-income households.

**The Use Case**
Technical training programs often help learners build durable skills alongside technical competencies. Yet those skills frequently remain invisible at the end of training.

ActivateWork partnered with Education Design Lab to explore a simple question:

**Can durable skills developed during training be validated and translated to create more career-ready graduates?**

The goal was not to replace training outcomes or technical certifications. Instead, the pilot tested whether a validated durable skills credential could help learners better understand, articulate, and communicate capabilities that employers consistently identify as critical to workplace success.

As part of the program, participants completed Education Design Lab's Oral Communication assessment and earned a micro-credential if they demonstrated proficiency.

**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 embedded the Oral Communication credential within their training program. Critical Thinking and Creative Problem solving were also offered for all learners, however were not embedded within the curriculum.

## The Challenge

Workforce training programs invest significant time helping learners develop workplace-ready behaviors such as communication, collaboration, adaptability, and professionalism. Yet these skills are often assumed rather than demonstrated.

Technical competencies can be verified through exams, projects, or certifications. Durable skills are harder to validate, making them difficult for learners to communicate and employers to recognize.

For learners entering new industries or changing careers, this challenge can be especially significant. Many possess valuable durable skills developed through previous jobs, family responsibilities, military service, education, or community leadership. However, translating those experiences into language that resonates with employers is often difficult.

The challenge was not simply helping learners build durable skills. It was **creating a trusted way to recognize and communicate them.**

## The Idea

Learners were developing skills throughout the training program. We integrated Education Design Lab's Oral Communication micro-credential into the AW training program.

## What Was Tested

ActivateWork integrated Education Design Lab's durable skills assessments into four IT Support cohorts across two implementation models. The first model followed an assessment-first approach, where learners completed a durable skills assessment early in the program, received targeted instruction and practice, and were then reassessed later in the training experience. The second model followed an instruction-first approach, where durable skills were explicitly taught and reinforced through structured learning activities before learners demonstrated their proficiency through a capstone assessment.

The pilot initially focused on Oral Communication. In early 2025, ActivateWork expanded implementation to include Critical Thinking. Creative Problem Solving was introduced on a more limited basis toward the end of the pilot period.

Across both models, durable skills assessments became embedded within the training experience rather than functioning as a stand-alone credential. Learners engaged with the assessments as part of their broader career readiness journey, creating opportunities to build, practice, and demonstrate workplace-relevant skills alongside technical training.

The pilot generated insights into how durable skills validation can be integrated into workforce training programs, the role of assessments in supporting career readiness, and the conditions under which learners are most likely to engage with skills validation.

## Top Findings

| Finding | What Was Observed | Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale |
|---|---|---|
| **Instruction-first models improved engagement and skill framing** | Shifting assessment later in the learning journey and embedding durable skills into lessons and activities improved classroom engagement, learner motivation, and understanding of professional skills.Pass rates on the Oral Communication capstone reached approximately 50–60%. | **Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts.** Moving assessment downstream — after learners had practiced the skill — produced more credible demonstrations. Ongoing documentation of skill development across the cohort, not just at capstone, would give instructors richer data to act on throughout. |
| **Assessment content and context strongly influenced learner trust** | Learners — particularly those with less formal education and professional experience — found some capstone scenarios confusing or not reflective of the skill being assessed. ActivateWork staff who took the assessment themselves confirmed the issue. | **Bias Mitigation.** Sensitivity reviews and internal testing by people with diverse backgrounds, before the assessment reaches learners, are essential. Confusing scenarios are not a learner problem — they are a content design problem.<br>**Transparency + Trust** and **Industry-Relevant Application**: Assessments should use clear, observable criteria and authentic scenarios that learners perceive as credible and relevant to real-world contexts. |
| **Timing of assessment delivery matters** | One cohort received their Oral Communication capstone during the same window as their CompTIA A+ exam, dampening performance. | **Scalability + Adaptability.** Agile development means treating delivery design — including scheduling — as an iterative variable, not a fixed logistics detail. |

## Replication Guidance

**For Organizations Embedding Durable-Skills Credentialing into Workforce Training**
The ActivateWork + XCredit pilot offers a practical framework for organizations exploring how durable-skills validation can be embedded within workforce training programs as part of instruction, coaching, and credential attainment.

**Before You Launch**

- **Start with one skill.** Pilot a single competency before expanding to multiple skills. Establish the instructional model, assessment process, and learner experience first, then add additional competencies once the approach has stabilized.
- **Choose a skill already embedded in your curriculum.** Select a competency that instructors are already teaching and reinforcing. Validation is easier to implement when it makes existing learning visible rather than requiring entirely new content development.
- **Design instruction before assessment.** Build the learning experience first. Learners should receive explicit instruction, guided practice, and feedback before being asked to demonstrate a skill through a capstone or credentialing activity. Understand the "individuality of each learner". Some may require assessment first, others may not have the exposure and require the learning first. Crafting an instructional process that allows for flexibility to meet the individual needs of learners is critical.
- **Test the assessment internally.** Have instructors, coaches, and staff complete the assessment before launch. Identify confusing scenarios, unclear language, or activities that do not align with how the skill is taught in practice. New ai tools may emerge to help test and validate these types of skill validation tools.
- **Plan assessment timing intentionally.** Map assessments against the broader training calendar. Avoid introducing validation activities during periods already associated with major exams, certifications, or other high-stakes milestones.
- **Allocate staff capacity.** Skills validation requires coordination, coaching, assessment review, and learner support. Build these responsibilities into staffing plans rather than assuming they can be absorbed into existing workloads.

**When Validation May Work**
Validation may create value when:

- Durable skills are already embedded within the curriculum and instructional model.
- The skill being credentialed is genuinely developed during training, not simply assessed at the end.
- Instructors are involved in aligning curriculum to the competency framework before the cohort begins.

- Learners receive explicit instruction and practice before assessment.
- The capstone is positioned as a culminating demonstration of learning rather than a surprise test.
- Assessment activities align closely with how the skill is taught and demonstrated in the program.
- The credential provides meaningful evidence of skills valued by employers.
- Learners understand from the outset what the credential represents and how it can be used in education, employment, or career advancement.
- Validation reinforces coaching, advising, or career readiness activities.
- Staff have time and training to support implementation and learner success.

### When to Reconsider

Validation may have limited impact when:

- Multiple skills are introduced before the initial model has been tested and refined.
- The assessment is disconnected from instruction or introduced before learners have opportunities to practice.
- Significant curriculum redesign is required to support the targeted competency.
- Assessment scenarios do not reflect the workplace contexts learners are preparing to enter. In these cases, pass rates may underrepresent actual skill levels and produce misleading results.
- Employer recognition of the credential has not been established. Learners are more likely to value and use credentials when there is a clear connection to employment opportunities and employer demand.
- Assessments compete with other high-stakes learning activities or certification exams.
- The training schedule is too compressed to support both technical and durable-skills assessment without creating assessment overload.
- Staff capacity is insufficient to support assessment administration, feedback, or credentialing.
- Learners do not clearly understand how validation connects to their training, career goals, or employment opportunities.