From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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USE CASE 5

Validating Skills during Hiring

Using Durable Skills Evidence to Support Final Hiring Decisions

Education Design Lab

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3
completed hires

3
Coordinator level roles tested

4
durable skills assessed

About the Candidates

The pilot focused on finalist candidates applying for three Coordinator level roles at Imaginable Futures.

These roles required more than functional experience. Strong candidates would be those that could communicate clearly, manage ambiguity, listen actively, draw conclusions from complex information, and lead work forward without always having formal authority.

For these potential candidates, the hiring process needed to surface durable skills that are hard to verify through resumes, polished written submissions, or standard interviews alone.

The Use Case

The pilot was set up to test a specific question:

Can durable skills validation provide a more trustworthy signal during recruitment, especially when traditional hiring artifacts are becoming easier to polish or produce with generative AI?

The goal was not to replace interviews, resumes, or hiring manager judgment.

Instead, the pilot tested whether structured skills validation could add another layer of evidence late in the hiring funnel.

Our Partners

Imaginable Futures is a global education -focused philanthropic organization that supports organizations and their collaborative efforts to build and strengthen equity in education, enabling all learners to thrive.

Its HR team was managing high-volume applicant pools across multiple roles while trying to hire in ways that were efficient, equitable, and less reliant on traditional credential proxies.

Imaginable Futures entered the pilot as a learning partner, willing to test where durable skills validation added value, where it created friction, and what the field could learn from implementation in a real hiring environment.

The Challenge

Hiring teams are under increasing pressure to make decisions that are both efficient and fair. Resumes, interviews, and work samples remain the dominant tools for evaluating candidates, yet each has limitations.

- Resumes compress complex experience into a few bullet points.
- Interviews often reward candidates who are skilled at self-presentation.
- Work samples can provide deeper insight, but are becoming harder to evaluate as generative AI makes it easier to refine or produce application materials.

For Imaginable Futures, these challenges were particularly visible when hiring for coordinator level roles. Despite using interviews and scenario-based exercises, past hiring processes for the respective roles did not always identify the strongest candidates.

The organization needed people who could navigate ambiguity, communicate clearly, solve problems, collaborate effectively, and take initiative without formal authority, skills that are difficult to assess consistently through traditional hiring methods alone.

The rise of generative AI further amplified the challenge. Hiring teams increasingly encountered resumes and application materials that were polished, optimized, or partially generated, making it harder to distinguish between a candidate's presentation of their skills and evidence of those skills in practice.

The goal was not to remove human judgment from hiring. It was to strengthen it.
As Desy Osunsade, Global Head of People and Culture at Imaginable Futures, reflected:

> It's not a definitive science. There are multiple factors at play. And honestly, hiring is always like an art and a science.

The question became: How can employers introduce a more trustworthy and structured signal of durable skills without replacing human judgment or creating new barriers for candidates?

The Idea

XCredit assessments were introduced as an additional source of evidence, to provide a structured signal of candidates' durable skills at the point where hiring decisions are often the most difficult: choosing between finalist candidates who appear similarly qualified on paper.

Imaginable Futures did not want skills validation to function as an early screening tool or automatic cutoff. Instead, it was designed to complement existing hiring practices by helping the team compare finalists against a shared set of durable skill criteria.

In this model, skills validation became one part of a broader evidence stack. It could help confirm strengths already observed, identify areas for deeper discussion, and provide a more consistent framework for making final hiring decisions.

While this pilot focused on late-stage validation, it opened the possibility that skills assessments could play a larger role earlier in the recruitment journey as employers look for stronger signals of candidate readiness.

What Was Tested

The pilot focused on recruitment in a hiring-based context for coordinator level roles at Imaginable Futures.

Three roles were tested:

Operations Coordinator
This role required a proactive and detail-oriented candidate who could anticipate needs, manage logistics, coordinate across internal and external stakeholders, and solve problems without always receiving explicit instructions. Because the Managing Partner's work was global, the role required strong situational awareness and the ability to manage complexity in real time.

Program Coordinator
This role provided administrative and logistical support for program operations. Success required strong organization, clear communication, follow-through, collaboration, and a commitment to advancing social impact work.

Finance and HR Coordinator
This role was identified as a similar level position with a different skill set. After the initial pilot, Imaginable Futures reached back out to explore extending the assessment approach to this additional recruitment, signaling interest in using durable skills validation beyond a one-time experiment. Based on learnings from the initial pilot, the Imaginable Futures team decided to shift the assessments earlier in the pilot process for this role, as a way to make sure that those moving to in person interviews were truly those who had demonstrated proficiency in the relevant competencies.

Education Design Lab provided access to four XCredit sub-competency assessments through the Muzzy Lane platform:
Initiative: Lead Without a Title
Collaboration: Listen Actively
Critical Thinking: Draw Conclusions
Creative Problem Solving: Manage Ambiguity

These sub-competencies were selected because they aligned with the demands of the coordinator work. Candidates needed to move work forward without always having formal authority, listen and communicate across stakeholders, draw conclusions from complex information, and manage ambiguity in real-world contexts.

The assessments were placed near the end of the hiring process. Candidates first moved through earlier stages, including resume and cover letter review, phone screen, work sample, hiring manager interview, and second-round interview. Select finalists then completed the XCredit assessments before the final decision.

The working assumption was that if two candidates were closely matched, XCredit results could serve as a final decision-support signal. The scores would not replace the full hiring process, but they could help the team understand how candidates demonstrated durable skills in structured, scenario-based contexts.

Assessment Design Considerations

- Scenarios were drawn from real workplace contexts, not abstract exercises, which increased candidate engagement and relevance.
- Assessments took approximately 15–20 minutes — short enough to respect candidate time while generating meaningful signal.
- The platform environment reduced (though could not fully eliminate) the risk of AI-assisted responses, since candidates engaged with scenarios interactively rather than submitting standalone written documents.
- Scores were returned at the competency level, allowing hiring managers to see relative strengths and gaps across candidates.

What Happened

The pilot showed that durable skills validation can add value when hiring teams use it as a signal, not a verdict.

Imaginable Futures used the assessments with finalist candidates rather than the full applicant pool. This helped reduce candidate burden and positioned validation as a late-stage decision-support tool.

The assessments gave the hiring team another way to understand candidates' durable skills beyond resumes, interviews, and written work samples. This mattered because the team was increasingly concerned about the reliability of traditional application artifacts. AI-generated resumes and work samples had made it harder to know whether a candidate's submitted materials reflected their own thinking, experience, or judgment.

In one hiring process, the candidate who had performed most strongly throughout the earlier stages also scored highest across the assessed competencies. This gave the hiring team additional confidence, not because the assessment made the decision by itself, but because it aligned with other evidence.

The pilot also showed how validation can support deeper human judgment. A lower score in one competency did not automatically disqualify a candidate. Instead, it could help the hiring team ask better follow-up questions and explore whether that score reflected a real concern, a contextual difference, or simply an area to understand more deeply.

This aligned with how Imaginable Futures already understood hiring: as both art and science. Interviews, references, and human judgment still mattered. But those judgments needed stronger evidence around them. Skills validation offered a way to add structure without removing the human element.

At the same time, the pilot surfaced an important implementation gap. Candidate-level score reports were not enough for employer decision-making. Hiring teams needed side-by-side comparisons across candidates and competencies, especially when making final decisions among strong finalists. Without an employer-facing view, HR staff had to rework the data before it could be useful for hiring managers.

The strongest positive signal came after the initial use of the assessments. Imaginable Futures reached back out about the Finance and Coordinator role and included them in the pilot after it was extended to accommodate. Desy Osunsade also noted that she would eventually need to identify a more permanent provider for these kinds of assessments.

That follow-up suggested that Imaginable Futures saw enough value in durable skills validation to consider it as a repeatable part of recruitment. It also surfaced a scaling question: if employers want to use skills validation regularly, they need sustainable access, clear pricing, employer-friendly reporting, and tools that fit real hiring timelines.

Top Findings

The findings below translate pilot learnings into practical design guidance for employers and work-learn ecosystem practitioners exploring skills-based hiring. This use case surfaced a central question: how can validated skills evidence strengthen hiring decisions without becoming an automated cutoff? The answer depends on treating validation as one signal in a broader evidence stack: structured enough to improve trust, but contextual enough to support human judgment.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
Skills validation can rebuild trust when traditional hiring artifacts become less reliable.	Imaginable Futures was seeing AI-generated resumes, altered job titles, and work samples that could be produced through AI tools. This made it harder to trust what candidates submitted. Scenario-based validation offered a more credible signal because it asked candidates to demonstrate how they think through applied situations, rather than only submit polished materials.	**Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts.** Skills validation should capture what candidates can do in realistic situations, not just what they can claim, write, or generate.
Assessment data needs employer-friendly visualization to drive decisions	When candidate scores were returned, the HR team found that the raw data required re-engineering before it could be meaningfully presented to the hiring manager. Side-by-side candidate comparisons across competencies — not individual score reports — were what hiring teams actually needed.	Transparency + Trust: Solutions should provide stakeholders with clear, actionable analytics and reporting to support instruction and decision-making. **Data, Security, + Integration; Scalability + Adaptability.** Skills validation tools need reporting and data views that match employer workflows. If results require too much manual reformatting, adoption becomes harder to sustain.
Validation works best as a complement to human judgment, not a replacement	One finalist had a notably lower score in one competency but strong scores across the others. Rather than eliminating the candidate, the HR team used that gap to generate targeted follow-up interview questions. The person ultimately was hired based on the totality of the process.	Transparency + Trust: Human oversight of AI evaluation should always be complemented by human judgment to account for accuracy and context. Care should be taken to not use assessment scores as a single criteria for advancement or dismissal. Rather, validation should be used as a data point in a larger profile to understand the unique skills of an individual.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
The strongest hiring use case is decision support, not automated selection.	The assessments were introduced late in the funnel, when the hiring team was deciding among finalist candidates. This placement allowed results to complement interviews, work samples, and references. The data helped confirm strengths, surface questions, and add structure to final decision-making without becoming a pass/fail screen.	**Transparency + Trust; Bias Mitigation.** Validation results should be interpreted with context and human judgment. Scores should help teams ask better questions, not automatically decide who moves forward.

Replication Guidance

For Employers Considering Skills Validation in Recruitment

The Imaginable Futures pilot offers practical guidance for employers who want to introduce durable skills validation into hiring without creating unnecessary burden for candidates or hiring teams.

Before You Launch

+ **Map your hiring funnel.**
  Identify where skills are currently assessed and where the biggest evidence gaps exist. Do not add validation without knowing what problem it is solving.
+ **Define the role of the assessment.**
  Clarify whether validation is meant to reduce reliance on written submissions, support final interviews, compare finalists, or surface follow-up questions.
+ **Place validation where it adds decision value.**
  In this pilot, validation was placed late in the hiring funnel, when the team was deciding between finalists. That reduced the burden on the hiring team and made results more directly relevant to the final decision.
+ **Consider whether earlier validation is needed.**
  If resumes and work samples are increasingly shaped by AI, employers may eventually need trusted skill signals earlier in the process. But earlier placement should be tested carefully to avoid creating new barriers.
+ **Choose role-relevant competencies.**
  Select skills that are central to the role. Assessment scenarios should feel connected to the actual work candidates will do.
+ **Prepare hiring managers.**
  Brief the team on what scores mean, what they do not mean, and how to use results as one data point alongside interviews, references, and experience.

+ **Design follow-up prompts.**
  Turn lower or mixed scores into interview questions rather than automatic concerns.
+ **Build employer-facing data views.**
  Candidate-level reports are not enough. Hiring teams need side-by-side comparisons across competencies and finalists.
+ **Communicate clearly with candidates.**
  Explain what is being assessed, why it matters, how long it will take, and how the results will be used.

When Validation May Work

Recruitment-stage validation may be a strong fit when:

- The role depends on durable skills such as communication, problem-solving, listening, managing ambiguity, or leading without formal authority.
- The hiring process relies heavily on resumes, written submissions, or interviews and needs another source of evidence.
- There are concerns about AI-generated work samples or overly polished application materials.
- The hiring team is committed to using scores as one signal among many. Results are used to inform follow-up questions, not automatic cutoffs.
- The platform can produce clear employer-facing comparisons.
- The employer wants a more structured way to compare candidates without losing the human judgment needed for hiring.

When to Reconsider

Recruitment-stage validation may have limited value when:

- The team wants to use scores as automated pass/fail thresholds.
- The competencies do not clearly connect to the role.
- The candidate pool would experience the assessment as burdensome or inaccessible.
  Hiring managers do not have time to interpret results thoughtfully.
- The platform only provides raw reports that are difficult to compare.
- The scenarios feel disconnected from the work or from candidates' lived experience.
- The role is senior enough that track record, references, portfolio, or strategic interviews may provide stronger evidence.
- The organization has not decided how assessment results will be weighted alongside resumes, work samples, interviews, and references.

Voices from the Pilot

> I think the assessment is most valuable when you come to it with curiosity. Not: this score means yes or no. But: what does this tell me that I want to learn more about?
>
> – **Desy Osunsade, Global Head of People and Culture Imaginable Futures**

Learn more about the Lab + our work

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