From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

Nishita Chheda
Naomi Boyer
2026

USE CASE 6

Helping Opportunity Seekers Move from Skills Awareness to Skills Action

Incorporating skills validation into a skill-based career navigation platform — a pilot with SkillUp Coalition and XCredit

Education Design Lab

Helping Opportunity Seekers Move from Skills Awareness to Skills Action

Incorporating skills validation into a skill-based career navigation platform — a pilot with SkillUp Coalition and XCredit

333
Learners registered for XCredit

113
Took the first step before taking an assessment

52
Took at least one assessment

47
Validated their skills

25
Earned credentials

About the Learners

SkillUp serves a broad population of opportunity seekers, primarily STARs navigating nondegree pathways into better jobs, training, and career mobility.

Many users come to the platform not simply looking for jobs, but seeking to understand their strengths and identify next steps toward high-opportunity careers.

The Use Case

SkillUp had already begun surfacing durable skills through AI-powered tools and occupational profiles. Users could see broad competencies associated with careers and understand which skills employers value.

However, several challenges remained.

Users could learn that critical thinking or communication mattered for a role, but they had

Our Partners

SkillUp Coalition is a nonprofit that helps individuals secure high-opportunity employment. They focus on non-degree career pathways that provide livable wages and support the job-seeker from start to finish.

SkillUp was looking to explore how durable skills validation could fit within a career navigation ecosystem.

The collaboration provided SkillUp users with access to XCredit assessments and learning experiences while generating insights into user

Data from an internal survey conducted by SkillUp indicated that durable skills already held personal value for users, with 56% reporting that SkillUp had helped them feel more confident about their durable skills. Yet confidence alone did not necessarily translate into evidence or action.	no way to understand whether they possessed those skills or what to do next. And while the platform surfaced durable skills at the competency level, SkillUp was interested in more granular information that could help users understand specific strengths and areas for growth. These questions led to a broader design challenge: **How can a career navigation platform help opportunity seekers move from awareness of durable skills to validation, learning, and action?**	behavior, barriers to engagement, and the value of skills validation for opportunity seekers. The partnership combined quantitative data, surveys, interviews, and ongoing strategy discussions to better understand how validation could complement SkillUp's existing skills infrastructure. Together, the organizations tested whether durable skills validation could serve as a bridge between identifying skills and taking action—helping users understand their strengths, earn credentials, and access targeted learning when gaps emerged.

The Challenge

SkillUp's users often arrive with questions that extend beyond finding a job or training program.

They want to know:

- What skills do I already have?
- Which skills matter for the careers I am considering?
- How do I know whether I actually possess those skills?
- What should I do if I need to strengthen them?

While SkillUp could surface durable skills associated with occupations, there was no mechanism for users to validate those skills or receive guidance on next steps. The platform could tell users that a skill was important, but it could not yet help them understand whether they had demonstrated that skill or what actions they could take to build it further.

The challenge was not simply making durable skills visible. It was making them meaningful and actionable for users.

The Idea

The pilot tested whether performance-based assessments could enhance the value of a skills-based career navigation platform.

Rather than treating durable skills as broad labels, the partnership explored whether validation could become part of a larger journey: helping users identify their strengths, validate existing capabilities, and access targeted learning when gaps emerged.

The broader hypothesis was that skills validation could become part of career navigation itself, not simply a stand-alone assessment.

What Was Tested

SkillUp users were given access to XCredit through a co-branded experience built around three competencies, selected through a skills-mapping exercise that aligned Education Design Lab's durable-skills framework with the durable skills SkillUp already surfaced on its platform:

- Oral Communication
- Collaboration
- Critical Thinking

These three were chosen because they cut across the widest set of SkillUp's most commonly surfaced durable skills, as shown in the mapping below.

SkillUp durable skill	Mapped to EDL durable-skills framework
Verbal Communication	Oral Communication
Active Listening	Oral Communication, Collaboration, Empathy
Coordinating	Collaboration, Initiative
Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking
Decision Making	Critical Thinking, Resilience
Teaching	Oral Communication, Empathy, Collaboration

The pilot used an assess-first model: users selected an industry pathway and then attempted a capstone assessment. Those who did not validate their skills were routed to learning modules, with the opportunity to reassess specific areas later. Midway through the pilot, the team observed a nearly 50% drop-off between industry selection and assessment attempts. To reduce friction, the experience was simplified to a single IT capstone rather than multiple industry pathways — a change that increased assessment attempts by approximately 30%.

What Happened

Of 333 registered users, 52 attempted at least one assessment; of those, 47 successfully validated at least one skill, and 25 went on to earn a credential. Notably, 90% of users who attempted an assessment validated at least one skill on their first try — evidence that the confidence users already reported in SkillUp's survey was, for most, well-founded.

The pilot demonstrated that users were willing to engage with durable skills outside of a formal training or hiring context. Conversations between SkillUp and Education Design Lab increasingly shifted from assessment completion toward a broader question: how can career navigation platforms help users understand their strengths and determine what to do next?

The pilot also surfaced interest in more granular skills information. While SkillUp already surfaced competencies, the partnership highlighted the potential value of sub-competencies as a richer layer for understanding strengths and recommending next steps — reinforcing the targeted-learning behavior described in Insight 1 above.

Top Findings

The SkillUp pilot explored a different dimension of skills validation than many of the other XCredit use cases. Rather than embedding validation within a hiring process, training program, or educational pathway, it tested validation as part of a self-directed career navigation journey.

The results suggest that opportunity seekers are interested in understanding and validating their durable skills, particularly when those skills are connected to future career opportunities. At the same time, the pilot revealed that awareness alone is not enough. Learners need simple pathways to action, clear next steps, and experiences that feel directly relevant to their goals.

The pilot also highlighted an important distinction between proving a concept and scaling a solution. While many participants successfully validated their skills, the experience surfaced practical questions about user motivation, platform design, engagement funnels, and the long-term economics of delivering validation at scale.

Taken together, the findings point to a broader lesson for career navigation platforms: skills validation creates the greatest value when it helps users move beyond understanding their strengths and toward informed action. The challenge is not simply making skills visible, but designing experiences that help people use those skills to navigate learning, employment, and career advancement opportunities.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
Motivation Matters	SkillUp users achieved one of the highest validation rates across all pilots. Unlike learners in a required program or candidates in a hiring process, users had actively chosen a platform centered on career growth and skills exploration.	**Transparency + Trust.** Skills validation solutions should provide stakeholders with a clear understanding of how skills are defined, evaluated, and validated. Transparent results and actionable feedback help individuals understand their strengths and support continued skill development
Friction inside the funnel — not awareness — was the biggest barrier to action.	Registration was not the bottleneck: 333 users signed up through a direct, co-branded link shared across SkillUp's existing user base. The steeper drop came later — only 113 users took a first step beyond registration, and just 52 went on to attempt an assessment, a funnel SkillUp and EDL had not fully anticipated at the outset. Mid-pilot data showed a nearly 50% drop-off specifically between selecting an industry pathway and starting a capstone assessment. The team responded by simplifying the experience to a single IT capstone instead of asking users to choose among multiple industry pathways first. That single design change increased assessment attempts by approximately 30%, demonstrating that small reductions in decision-making friction can meaningfully change whether an opportunity seeker takes action on a skill they already believe they have.	**Accessibility, Fairness, + Inclusivity.** Skills validation solutions should be fair, inclusive, and accessible to all individuals. Ease of navigation and minimizing unnecessary barriers are essential to ensuring equal access to validation opportunities.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
Scale Requires Sustainable Economics	SkillUp represented Education Design Lab's first partnership with a large national user base. Serving these many learners taught us that it must be sustainably built to scale. SkillUp could put a no-cap durable-skills assessment link in front of its entire base of 459,000 profile creators specifically because XCredit offered free access through June.The implication reaches beyond this partnership. If skills validation is meant to become durable infrastructure for opportunity seekers — not just a free pilot experience — then cost-at-scale needs to be treated as a design variable from the outset, tested with the same rigor as the user experience, rather than resolved after a pilot proves the concept.	**Scalability + Adaptability.** Skills validation solutions should be able to grow with demand and adapt to changing workforce and educational needs. Sustainable growth models and scalable technical infrastructure are essential to maintaining quality at scale.

Replication Guidance

Before You Launch

+ Start with skills users already encounter on the platform. Align competencies to existing language and career pathways so validation feels like a continuation of the user journey rather than a separate experience.
+ Design for simplicity. Every additional click or decision point creates opportunities for drop-off.
+ Consider sustainability from the outset. Questions of access, pricing, and long-term ownership become especially important when serving large populations.

When Validation May Work

- Career navigation platforms are uniquely positioned for skills validation because users arrive seeking answers to questions about their strengths, interests, and next steps.
- Validation creates the greatest value when it is connected to action through learning, credentialing, or career recommendations.

When to Reconsider

- Reconsider introducing validation if it exists as an isolated experience without clear next steps. Awareness alone is unlikely to drive engagement.
- Similarly, avoid adding unnecessary complexity to the user journey. Too many choices or pathways can create friction and reduce participation.
- Finally, ensure that the economics support the scale you hope to achieve. Large-scale adoption requires sustainable access models, not just successful pilots.

Voices from the Pilot

> Our users engage differently with XCredit depending on where they are in their career journey. When we amplified XCredit within our platform, we found it helped users explore career possibilities, discover opportunities to build new skills, and gain confidence, while SMS attracted users who were further along and ready to take their next career step.
>
> – **Lauren Dietz, Vice President, Strategy + Operations**
>
> **SkillUp Coalition**