From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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2026

Education Design Lab

About Education Design Lab

Education Design Lab (the Lab) is a national nonprofit and intermediary with a mission to co-design an inclusive, skills-based learn+work system that facilitates upward economic mobility and closes opportunity gaps for the New Majority Learner-Earner. Our facilitated design process helps employer and education stakeholder groups co-design and launch scalable, skills-based education-to-work pathways that align talent supply and demand.

About XCredit

Throughout our lives, learning happens continuously; on the job, through caregiving, military service, community leadership, and everyday problem-solving. These experiences build valuable, transferable skills, yet they are often invisible to employers and educational institutions that rely on degrees or formal credentials as signals of capability.

To address this gap, Education Design Lab launched XCredit (Experience Credit), a Walmart-supported initiative that explores how skills developed through life and work can be validated and made visible in the talent marketplace. XCredit uses short, performance-based assessments to help opportunity seekers demonstrate durable skills and earn portable, interoperable credentials.

The initiative was designed to investigate a core question: How might we validate and credential existing skills to make (l)earners more visible in the talent marketplace?

Education Design Lab

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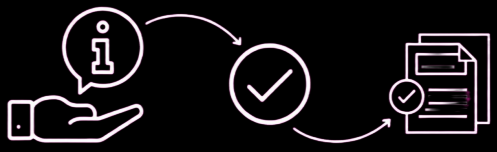
Skills Validation Defined

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



Executive Summary

Across education and workforce systems, skills are often inferred through proxies such as degrees, grades, resumes, job titles, and interviews rather than demonstrated through trusted evidence. While these signals remain important, they do not fully capture the durable skills individuals develop through work, caregiving, education, military service, community leadership, and everyday life.

To explore how skills can be made more visible, Education Design Lab launched six Walmart-supported XCredit pilots across diverse learning and employment contexts. Together, these pilots examined where skills validation creates value, where implementation challenges emerge, and what conditions are necessary for skills validation to become a trusted, scalable component of the learn-and-work ecosystem.

The pilots explored six distinct use cases:

- Validating skills developed through parenting and caregiving with student parents.
- Strengthening algorithm-derived skills profiles in K–12 career navigation.
- Supporting admissions decisions for workforce training programs.
- Validating durable skills developed during workforce training.
- Providing additional evidence to inform hiring decisions.
- Supporting career navigation and learner decision making.

Rather than evaluating whether skills validation "works," this research asks a more practical question: How can skills validation be designed to create meaningful value for learners, employers, educators, and workforce organizations?

Across all six pilots, several themes emerged consistently.

- Validation creates visibility, not skills — people already had the skills; validation gave them language, confidence, and evidence.
- Value comes from connection to action — validation matters most when tied to a hiring decision, career pathway, or credential use, not as a standalone endpoint.
- Context matters as much as competency — skills built through caregiving, community leadership, or life experience are as legitimate as workplace-derived skills.
- Validation works best as part of an evidence stack — layered with interviews, resumes, academic data, and references, not as a replacement.
- Trust depends on transparency — stakeholders need to understand what was measured, how, and what to do with results.

Scale requires more than technology — adoption hinges on trusted partners, workflow integration, staff capacity, and data-sharing agreements, not assessment quality alone. Different models serve different purposes — there is no single validation model; the right question is where and for whom it creates value.

The report concludes with practical guidance for employers, education providers, workforce organizations, technology partners, and policymakers seeking to implement high-quality skills validation. Together, these lessons suggest that the future of skills-based systems will depend not simply on recognizing that skills matter, but on creating trusted, portable evidence that helps individuals communicate what they know and can do wherever those skills were developed.

About this Publication

Every day, people demonstrate skills that matter. They solve problems under pressure. Navigate competing priorities. Communicate across differences. Adapt to change. Lead without authority. Learn new technologies. Support families. Coordinate teams. Make decisions in uncertain situations.

Yet many of these capabilities remain difficult to see, describe, and verify.

A common challenge exists: how do we know whether someone actually possesses a skill, and how can that evidence be trusted and used? Current practices across the life continuum do not provide support for understanding, validating, and documenting what an individual knows and can do. The issue is shared in both education systems, which often rely on transcripts, grades, and credentials as signals of readiness and employment environments, which use resumes, interviews, references, and prior experience.

Validation moves beyond claims and proxies by creating structured opportunities for individuals to demonstrate what they know and can do. When done well, skills validation can help learners better understand their strengths, help employers make more informed decisions, and help education and workforce organizations create pathways based on demonstrated capability rather than credentials alone.

But important questions remain.

Where in the learn-and-work journey does skills validation create the most value?

How should validation be integrated into existing systems and processes?

What makes validation meaningful to learners, employers, educators, and workforce organizations?

And what conditions are necessary for skills validation to scale?

To explore these questions, Education Design Lab launched six pilot projects through XCredit and the Skills Validation initiative, Walmart-supported research focused on making skills developed through life, learning, and work more visible. The pilots tested skills validation across a range of real-world settings: student parenting, K–12 career exploration, workforce program admissions, workforce training, hiring, and career navigation.

Together, these pilots move the conversation beyond whether skills validation is possible. Instead, they offer insight into when it creates value, where it encounters friction, and what it will take to build systems that recognize skills wherever they are developed.

The pages that follow share lessons from these pilots and offer practical guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen skills-based pathways. While each pilot explored a different challenge, together they reveal a common opportunity: creating a future in which skills are not merely inferred through proxies, but made visible through trusted evidence that can travel with learners and workers throughout their lives.

In addition to these six pilots, Education Design Lab continued to learn from its ongoing partnership with Hire Heroes USA, which was documented in an earlier Design Insights publication focused on validating skills developed through military service and lived experience. While not included as a formal pilot in this publication, lessons from that work continued to inform the evolution of XCredit and our understanding of how validated skills can support career mobility for diverse learner populations.

Exploring Skills Validation Across the Learn-and-Work Ecosystem

While skills validation is often discussed as a single concept, it can serve very different purposes depending on where it is introduced. A learner exploring career options may need validation for self-discovery and confidence. An employer may need trusted evidence to support hiring decisions. A training provider may seek ways to recognize skills developed during learning experiences. Educational institutions may be interested in helping learners connect academic experiences to workforce-relevant capabilities.

Recognizing this complexity, XCredit did not focus on a single implementation model. Instead, the initiative partnered with organizations across the learn-and-work ecosystem to test how skills validation functions in different contexts, with different populations, and for different purposes.

Together, the pilots explored six distinct validation models answering specific aligned skills validation questions:

Validation of Skills Developed Through Lived Experience
Student Parents + Generation Hope
Can skills developed through caregiving and parenting be recognized as legitimate evidence of workforce capability?

Validation of Algorithm-Derived Skills Signals
Educational Results Partnership + Rowland Unified School District
Can independently validated skills strengthen skills profiles generated from academic data and improve career navigation for students?

Validation for Program Admissions
ActivateWork – Admissions Pilot
Can durable skills assessments provide meaningful evidence to support admissions decisions for workforce training programs?

Validation of Skills Developed During Learning
ActivateWork – Training Pilot
Can workforce training programs make durable skills more visible by validating competencies developed throughout the learning experience?

Validation for Hiring Decisions
Imaginable Futures
Can validated durable skills provide employers with additional evidence when making hiring decisions in an increasingly complex recruitment landscape?

Validation for Career Navigation
SkillUp Coalition
Can skills validation help opportunity seekers move beyond awareness of their strengths toward meaningful action, learning, and career advancement?

An Additional Source of Learning: Hire Heroes USA

A Framework for Understanding the Pilots

Although each pilot operated in a different environment, they shared a common goal: creating trusted evidence of skills that could be understood and used by learners, educators, employers, and workforce organizations.

The pilots examined skills validation at different moments across the learn-and-work journey:

Experience → Discovery → Validation → Credentialing → Opportunity

Some pilots focused on helping individuals recognize and articulate skills they already possessed. Others explored how validated skills could support admissions, hiring, career navigation, or workforce development. Together, they offer a broader picture of what skills validation can accomplish, where it creates value, and what challenges must be addressed to scale these approaches.

The pages that follow examine each pilot in depth and highlight lessons for practitioners seeking to build more skills-based pathways to education, employment, and economic mobility.

From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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USE CASE 1

Making Parenting Skills Visible

Validating Durable Skills Developed Through Parenting

Education Design Lab

Making Parenting Skills Visible

Validating Durable Skills Developed Through Parenting

36
student parents took at least 1 assessment

22
validated their skills

#1
benefit sought: confidence + self-awareness

146
student parents surveyed

5
student parents interviewed

About the Learners

Student parents are one of the fastest-growing and most underserved segments of higher education.

Simultaneously enrolled in college and raising at least one child — often while working and serving as the primary caregiver and breadwinner — they develop sophisticated organizational, emotional, and durable competencies that are extremely in-demand across industries right now.

The Use Case

The student parent pilot was set up to test a specific question:

Can parenting experience be validated in a way that is credible to employers, legible in hiring systems, and meaningful to the people who lived it?

Our Partners

Participants were recruited through two channels: 18 came through Generation Hope, and 18 came through the Education Design Lab's broader student parent network — reflecting the Lab's ongoing body of work with this population.

Generation Hope is a nonprofit providing direct support and national advocacy and research for student parents in college.Through its Scholar Program, Generation Hope provides holistic support — scholarships, coaching, and wraparound services — to teen parents pursuing college degrees across the Washington, DC region, Greater New Orleans area, and the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

The Challenge

Student parents are not simply “busy learners.” They are operating across multiple high-stakes systems at once: school, work, parenting, finances, transportation, childcare, and family support.

That responsibility and complexity builds durable skills.

The problem is not that student parents lack evidence. The problem is that their strongest evidence often comes from contexts hiring systems do not recognize. A student parent may be making complex decisions daily, but if those decisions happened in a caregiving context, they are often treated as personal responsibility rather than professional capability.

This creates a translation gap.

Student parents may know they are capable. They may even have proof in their daily lives. But when asked to present that proof in an interview, resume, or professional profile, the language available to them often narrows. They are expected to speak in the vocabulary of paid work, even when some of their strongest skill development happened outside paid work.

> “When I’ve been in interviews, they never ask those kinds of questions. They want work-related experiences, so it’s almost impossible to name situations from your personal life.
>
> — XCredit participant

The challenge, then, is not only recognition. It is legitimacy. **Can caregiving be treated as valid evidence of workforce capability, not as something learners must work around?**

The Idea

Test whether performance-based assessments could validate skills developed through caregiving and give participants a portable credential they could use beyond the pilot.

Deeper learning questions:

- Could the assessment help participants see their own experiences differently?
- Could it give them language for skills they had been practicing but not naming?
- Could a badge help them carry caregiving-based skills into professional spaces with more confidence?

What Was Tested

The pilot deployed XCredit to student parents, giving them access to four durable skill assessments. These were prioritized based on a prior survey in which student parents identified the skills they believed they had developed through caregiving and the benefits they most hoped to gain from validation:

- Creative Problem-Solving
- Critical Thinking
- Resilience
- Empathy

What Happened

The strongest outcome was not only that 22 student parents validated their skills. It was that the assessment process changed how some participants interpreted their own experience.

Several participants completed more than the minimum number of assessments, not simply to collect badges, but because the process helped them reflect. For some, the assessment confirmed strengths they already suspected. For others, it disrupted their assumptions. One participant earned a credential in the skill she least expected to demonstrate. Another said the empathy assessment expanded her understanding of the skill itself.

This matters because many student parents are not starting from a blank page. They are starting from years of complex responsibility that has not been formally named. Validation gave them a structure for noticing what was already there.

At the same time, the pilot showed that a credential does not automatically become usable. Participants still needed support translating assessment results into resumes, LinkedIn language, interview examples, and professional narratives.

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 badge is useful only when paired with a translation layer.	The pilot showed that digital credentials can help student parents carry evidence into professional spaces. But it also revealed the limits of credentialing on its own. A badge can say a skill was validated. It cannot, by itself, teach a participant how to introduce that skill in an interview, explain caregiving as evidence, or respond when an employer expects only paid work examples. That is where the next layer of support becomes essential. Participants shared needing practical tools that connect the credential to use: resume bullets, LinkedIn language, interview scripts, coaching prompts, and examples that make caregiving-based evidence feel appropriate in professional settings.	**Transparency + Trust; Data, Security, + Integration** Skills validation should provide clear, understandable results that help individuals know what was validated, how it was validated, and how to act on that evidence. For student parents, this means pairing credentials with transparent feedback, resume language, LinkedIn guidance, interview practice, and secure, portable skills data they can share across career systems.
Caregiving should be treated as a real-world context for performance-based evidence.	The pilot challenged a narrow view of what counts as valid skill evidence. Student parents demonstrated durable skills through responsibilities often categorized as "personal": managing competing needs, making decisions under pressure, coordinating care, advocating for children, and adapting when plans change. These experiences are not simply background stories. They are real-world contexts where durable skills are practiced and tested.	**Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts; Bias Mitigation.** High-quality validation should recognize skills gained outside formal education and paid work where appropriate. Assessment content should avoid privileging only traditional workplace examples and should be designed to capture credible evidence from lived experience without lowering standards.
For student parents, the delivery model determines whether validation is actually reachable.	Student parents were interested in participating, but their availability was shaped by caregiving, work, school, transportation, and household responsibilities. The self-paced digital model made participation possible, while stipends recognized the real cost of time. Platform friction, especially around navigation and retakes, created barriers. For this population, flexibility has to be built into the experience itself, not added as a support after launch.	**Accessibility, Fairness, + Inclusivity; Scalability + Adaptability.** Equitable validation for student parents requires mobile access, asynchronous completion, automatic saving, clear progress indicators, visible retake pathways, and compensation for time. These design choices are not accommodations. They are core conditions for participation and scale.

Replication Guidance

For Organizations Considering Skills Validation for Student Parents

The XCredit student parent pilot offers a practical framework for any organization evaluating whether to add durable-skills validation for caregiving populations.

Before You Launch

+ **Partner through trust.** Recruit via organizations that already hold trust with student parents—scholarship programs, community colleges with robust student parent services, or nonprofits like Generation Hope. Cold outreach usually does not work.
+ **Budget for compensation.** Stipends are not recruitment sweeteners—they signal that participant time has value and that their constraints are understood.
+ **Design for interruption.** The tool must work on mobile, save progress automatically, and resume seamlessly. Any re-entry barrier will cost engagement.
+ **Invest in articulation support.** Pair validation with coaching or peer cohort sessions that help participants name and narrate their skills in professional contexts. A badge without voice addresses only half the problem.
+ **Test navigation before launch.** Run retake flows, progress visibility, and credential redemption with actual student parents. These friction points directly limit impact.

When Validation May Work

- The population is embedded in a trusted community or program that can endorse the tool.
- The tool is mobile-accessible, self-paced, and tolerant of interruption.
- Skill domains map genuinely to competencies exercised in caregiving, grounded in workforce frameworks.
- There is a clear pathway from credential to use—a job application, promotion conversation, or career counseling touchpoint.
- Participants are in a stable enough place that professional development is within reach.

When to Reconsider

- No trusted intermediary exists in the deployment context. Participation will be low regardless of tool quality.
- The platform requires sustained, uninterrupted time or in-person attendance.
- There is no articulation or language support for credential holders.
- The issuing institution has no recognized credibility in the labor markets participants care about.

Voices from the Pilot

> I'm multitasking, delegating, planning, organizing, budgeting, being a health aid, teacher, cook, psychologist, coordinator, and project manager all in the same day.
>
> **— XCredit survey respondent**

> The skill I believed least in myself was the one I ended up getting. Being able to take it again allowed me to see what the intention was.
>
> **— XCredit participant**

> Having these questions really helped me understand myself more. I don't talk about a lot of these things, and it makes me reflect a lot better.
>
> **— XCredit participant**

Learn more about the Lab + our work

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USE CASE 2

From Academic Signals to Validated Skills

Validating Algorithm-Derived Skills Profiles

Education Design Lab

From Academic Signals to Validated Skills

Validating Algorithm-Derived Skills Profiles

1038
Rowland Unified seniors received personalized skills profiles through SkillSight

339
students registered for XCredit

84
students took at least one XCredit assessment

70
students validated at least one skill

26
students earned a digital credential

About the Learners

This pilot focused on high school students in Rowland Unified School District preparing to make decisions about college, training, and work. Many were seniors nearing graduation, a moment when students are expected to make high-stakes choices about their futures with limited work experience and often limited visibility into how their academic performance connects to career pathways.

For these learners, the challenge is not only career awareness. It is skill visibility. Students may be building workforce-relevant skills through coursework, projects, career technical education, and life experience, but those skills are often communicated through grades, transcripts, or course completion rather than clear, employer-facing skill signals.

The Use Case

The ERP + XCredit pilot was set up to test a specific question:

Can independently validated durable-skill evidence strengthen a skills-currency platform that translates academic performance into workforce-relevant skills profiles?

ERP's Skills Currency platform uses academic inputs, such as grades and standardized test scores, to generate skills profiles and job matches. XCredit added a second layer of evidence: performance-based assessment of durable skills.

The pilot explored whether these two forms of evidence could work together: algorithm-derived skill matches and independently validated skill credentials to better prepare students for their next step.

Our Partners

The pilot was conducted in partnership with ERP and Rowland Unified School District.

Educational Results Partnership (ERP) is piloting a Skills Currency platform that translates academic performance into workforce-relevant skills profiles. Through this pilot, ERP made a link to EDL's XCredit assessments available within its Skills Currency platform for participating Rowland Unified students.

Rowland Unified School District in Los Angeles County, California served as the K-12 implementation partner. supporting student access to the platform and helping bring skills-based career navigation into a high school context. ERP delivered personalized skills profiles to all 1,038 Rowland USD seniors through its SkillSight platform.

The Challenge

High school systems run on academic signals: grades, course completion, test scores, college eligibility. These matter, but they don't answer the questions students, counselors, and employers increasingly need answered: What skills does this student actually have? Can those skills be demonstrated beyond a grade? Would an employer trust this evidence?

ERP's platform begins to address this by inferring skills from academic data. But inference has limits. A grade may suggest critical thinking or problem-solving, but it doesn't show how a student applies those skills under realistic conditions. In focus groups, counselors noted that students often leave high school unsure of what their strengths are or where they point. Discussion with ERP indicated that the differences in teachers and experiences in any one learning experience can be quite dispersed and requires some element of teacher external assessment.

> “I personally don't feel like I know what jobs I would be good at."
>
> — Anonymous Student

The core challenge: **generating skill signals that students, educators, and employers can trust not just infer.**

The Idea

Test whether XCredit could serve as an independent validation layer inside ERP’s Skills Currency platform.

ERP’s platform could suggest skill and job matches based on academic data. XCredit could then give students a way to demonstrate selected durable skills through performance-based assessments.

Deeper learning questions:

- Could XCredit help validate skills that ERP’s algorithm inferred from academic records?
- Could independently validated credentials make students’ skills profiles more credible?
- Could scenario-based assessments give high school students another way to show readiness beyond grades?
- Could this combined model help counselors and educators support career navigation in a more skills-based way?

What Was Tested

The pilot embedded access to XCredit assessments within ERP's Skills Currency platform. Students entered through ERP's platform, completed an industry selection quiz, and could then access XCredit's performance-based durable skills assessments. Students who successfully validated their skills could earn a digital credential issued by Education Design Lab.

The pilot was also designed to support ERP's research agenda. By comparing XCredit results with ERP's skills-currency outputs, the partners could begin exploring whether algorithm-derived skill profiles aligned with independently validated skill evidence.

What Happened

The Rowland Unified pilot created two connected learning moments.

First, students received personalized skills profiles through ERP's SkillSight platform. These profiles helped students see the workforce-relevant skills they had developed through their K–12 education and connect those skills to occupations, earnings, and future pathways.

The student response was strong. Among 298 survey respondents, 83% agreed or strongly agreed that SkillSight helped them better understand their skills and strengths. Eighty-two percent said it helped them identify opportunities that matched their skills, and 76% said it increased their confidence in the value they could bring to an employer.

Second, students had access to XCredit as an independent validation opportunity. 84 students took at least one XCredit assessment, and 70 validated at least one sub-competencyl. This suggests that once students reached the assessment experience, many were able to demonstrate durable skills through applied scenarios.

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
Skills validation gives high school students another way to show readiness beyond grades.	ERP's platform used academic data to generate skills profiles, while XCredit gave students a way to demonstrate durable skills through applied scenarios. Together, they point toward a richer student profile that includes academic signals, career interests, job matches, and validated skills.	**Data, Security, + Integration; Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts.** High-quality skills systems should combine multiple forms of evidence while giving learners secure, portable ways to use their validated skills across education and employment pathways.
Algorithmic skills matching needs a validation layer.	ERP's platform translated academic data into workforce-relevant skills profiles and job matches. XCredit added independent, performance-based evidence that could help test whether inferred skills show up in applied scenarios. Analysis is ongoing to determine whether any correlations were inferred.	**Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts; Transparency + Trust.** Skills inferred from grades or test scores should be complemented by applied evidence that students, educators, and employers can understand and trust.
K-12 implementation depends on institutional choreography, not just student interest.	In a K-12 context, participation depends on timing, district approval, IT integration, counselor engagement, principal buy-in, CTE leadership, student communications, and concentrated moments of promotion.	**Accessibility, Fairness, + Inclusivity; Scalability + Adaptability.** Skills validation should be embedded into structured moments of engagement, such as career days, CTE activities, counselor-supported sessions, or platform nudges. Passive access is not enough. Scalable implementation requires clear ownership, low staff burden, and a rollout model that fits the realities of school systems.
Data-sharing and interoperability are part of the learning agenda, not just operations.	The pilot depended on multiple systems working together: ERP's platform, school district data, XCredit assessment results, credential issuance, and research reporting. Because the learners were high school students, privacy and FERPA considerations shaped what data could be shared and how. The ability to evaluate the pilot depends on whether partners can connect student engagement, algorithm-derived skill matches, XCredit validation results, and credential outcomes in a responsible and analyzable way.	**Data, Security, + Integration; Transparency + Trust.** Skills validation systems must be secure, ethical, and interoperable. For pilots testing algorithmic skills matching, data architecture is not back-end administration. It is central to whether the evidence can be trusted, analyzed, and improved over time.

Finding	What Was Observed	Principle for Skills Validation Quality at Scale
Evidence stacking requires a shared translation layer across skills systems.	The pilot showed the promise of combining multiple evidence sources: academic data, skills profiles, career matches, performance-based assessments, and digital credentials. But it also surfaced a deeper ecosystem challenge. Each system defines skills differently. ERP translates grades and assessment data into workforce-relevant skills profiles. XCredit validates durable skills through performance-based scenarios. Employers define skills through job requirements, but those skills show up differently depending on the role, industry, and workplace context. Without a shared translation layer, connecting these systems becomes difficult. The challenge is not only validating skill. It is making sure that a skill means enough of the same thing across education, assessment, credentialing, and employment systems to be trusted and used. |	**Transparency + Trust; Data, Security, + Integration; Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts.** Skills validation systems need clear definitions, interoperable data structures, and context-specific interpretation. Practitioners should not assume that the same skill label carries the same meaning across systems. High-quality validation requires crosswalking skill definitions, documenting what each evidence source measures, and clarifying how a skill manifests in different jobs.
Performance-based validation must be calibrated to the learner's experience base.	Although the pilot was conducted with high school students, XCredit assessments are designed around real-world scenarios that often assume some familiarity with workplace expectations, entry-level professional judgment, or prior work experience. This may help explain why validation and credential attainment looked different from pilots with adult learners or participants who had more work experience. The issue may not be that high school students lack durable skills. Rather, they may not yet have enough exposure to workplace contexts to recognize what the scenario is asking, choose between competing professional judgments, or connect their school-based experiences to the applied context of the assessment. Workplace experiences, per district interviews can help students "put their skills into action" and thus learn how to communicate them better.	**Accessibility, Fairness, + Inclusivity; Performance-Based Evidence + Real-World Contexts; Bias Mitigation.** High-quality validation should use real-world contexts, but those contexts must be developmentally and experientially appropriate for the learners being assessed. For high school students, this may mean adapting scenarios, adding orientation to workplace norms, offering practice examples, or pairing validation with career-connected learning experiences before assessment. Interview participants reiterated the need for both exposure and application.

Replication Guidance

For Organizations Considering Skills Validation for with High School Students
The ERP + XCredit pilot offers a practical framework for organizations exploring how to combine academic data, career navigation, algorithmic skills matching, and independent validation.

Before You Launch

+ **Define the validation question.**
  Be clear about what a validation method is meant to assess. Is it confirming a skill inferred by the algorithm? Filling a gap that academic data cannot capture? Giving students a portable credential? The research question should drive the design.
+ **Align skills frameworks early.**
  Academic standards, durable skills frameworks, employer skill language, O*NET data, and assessment constructs may not map cleanly. Misalignment will weaken both the student experience and the research analysis.
+ **Design the data model before the rollout.**
  Decide what data needs to move across systems, who can access it, what identifiers will be used, and what privacy rules apply. Do not treat this as an afterthought.
+ **Build activation into the school calendar.**
  Passive links will not be enough. Plan for career days, CTE pathway sessions, counselor-supported pushes, advisory periods, or other concentrated moments when students are guided into the experience.
+ **Reduce staff burden.**
  K-12 staff are often supportive but overextended. The implementation model should require minimal lift from counselors, teachers, principals, and district IT teams.
+ **Test the full student journey.**
  Run the complete flow before launch: platform entry, quiz, XCredit link, sign-up, assessment, result, credential issuance, and return to the ERP platform. Any confusing step can reduce participation.

When Validation May Work

- The platform already gives students a skills profile or job match that can be strengthened with independent evidence.
- There is a clear hypothesis about how academic data and performance-based assessment results should relate.
- Students have a structured moment to engage, such as a career event, CTE session, advisory period, or counselor-supported activity.
- The selected assessments map clearly to the skills being inferred or recommended.
- The district, platform partner, and assessment provider have a clear data-sharing agreement.
- Students can access and use their credentials beyond the pilot.

When to Reconsider

- Validation may have limited impact when:
- The assessment is only added as a link with no structured activation plan.
- The skills being assessed do not clearly map to the platform's skills profile or job matches.
- Data-sharing agreements are not in place before launch.
- District staff do not have the capacity to support rollout or troubleshooting.
- The platform cannot connect assessment results back to the learner profile.
- The pilot cannot answer whether independent validation strengthened the algorithmic match.

Voices from the Pilot

> Grades are part of the story. To better understand a student's skills a more holistic approach is necessary.
>
> **— Alex**

> I think that as a whole, education has really gone to college first, college-centered... I think we had it wrong — that we should be career first, career focused, with college as a path, along with all kinds of other ways to get there.
>
> **— Mitch**

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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

Validating Resilience Signals during Program Admissions

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**

From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

Nishita Chheda
Naomi Boyer
2026

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. **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.

From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

Nishita Chheda
Naomi Boyer
2026

USE CASE 5

Validating Skills during Hiring

Using Durable Skills Evidence to Support Final Hiring Decisions

Education Design Lab

Validating Skills during Hiring

Using Durable Skills Evidence to Support Final Hiring Decisions

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**

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Education Design Lab

From Signals to Evidence

Lessons from Six New Skills Validation Pilots

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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

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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**

Design Insights for Skills Validation

Across the six pilots spanning education, workforce development, hiring, career navigation, and lived experience, XCredit explored a central question: How might we create trusted evidence of skills that can be recognized and used across the learn-and-work ecosystem?

While each pilot tested a different implementation model, several common themes emerged. Together, these insights suggest that the future of skills validation depends not only on the quality of assessment, but on how validation is embedded within larger systems of learning, hiring, advising, and career advancement.

Validation Creates Visibility, Not Skills

The pilots repeatedly demonstrated that individuals often possessed the skills being assessed long before entering the validation process. Student parents had developed resilience, communication, empathy, and problem-solving through caregiving. Opportunity seekers using SkillUp often validated skills they already believed they possessed. Workforce learners demonstrated durable skills developed through previous jobs, community leadership, military service, and life experiences.

Validation did not create these skills. It made them visible. The most powerful outcomes often occurred when participants gained new language, confidence, and evidence to describe capabilities they had been practicing for years.

Validation Creates the Most Value When Connected to Action

Validation alone rarely changes outcomes. Across the pilots, the greatest value emerged when skills evidence connected directly to a next step: a hiring decision, a career pathway, a training opportunity, an advising conversation, or a professional credential. Participants consistently needed support translating validated skills into practical action. Resumes, interviews, career exploration, admissions decisions, coaching conversations, and hiring processes served as the bridge between evidence and opportunity.

Skills validation should not be viewed as an endpoint. It is most effective when it functions as part of a larger pathway.

Context Matters as Much as Competency

The pilots revealed that where a skill is demonstrated matters. A student parent may demonstrate complex problem-solving through caregiving. A high school student may demonstrate communication through classroom experiences. A job candidate may demonstrate initiative through volunteer leadership or community engagement.

Traditional systems often privilege evidence gained in formal employment or academic settings. Yet many participants demonstrated meaningful capabilities through life experiences that were equally demanding and consequential. Future validation systems must recognize that skills develop across many contexts and create ways for learners to demonstrate those skills without requiring traditional forms of evidence.

Validation Works Best as Part of an Evidence Stack

The strongest use cases did not rely on a single source of information. In hiring, validated skills complemented interviews, resumes, and references. In career navigation, validation complemented occupational data and career exploration tools. In K–12 settings, validation complemented academic records and skills profiles.

Rather than replacing existing systems, validation added another layer of evidence. The future is unlikely to be built on a single assessment or credential. Instead, it will depend on ecosystems that combine multiple forms of evidence into a richer understanding of learner and worker capabilities.

Trust Depends on Transparency

Participants, educators, workforce organizations, and employers all wanted to understand how skills were being evaluated and what the results meant. Trust increased when validation processes were transparent, understandable, and connected to real-world applications. Trust decreased when assessments felt disconnected from learner experiences, difficult to interpret, or unclear in their purpose. For skills validation to gain widespread adoption, stakeholders must be able to understand what was measured, how it was measured, and how the resulting evidence should be used.

Scale Requires More Than Technology

Several pilots demonstrated that technical functionality alone does not create adoption. Participation depended on trusted partners, clear implementation models, learner support, organizational workflows, integration with existing systems, and sustainable economics.

The challenges surfaced by the pilots were often less about assessment quality and more about activation, integration, staffing, data-sharing, and long-term sustainability. Scaling skills validation will require not only better technology, but stronger partnerships, clearer governance models, and intentional ecosystem design.

Different Validation Models Serve Different Purposes

Perhaps the most important lesson from this work is that there is no single model for skills validation. Validation can support self-discovery. It can strengthen hiring decisions. It can complement academic signals. It can help learners articulate capabilities developed through life experiences. It can guide career exploration. It can provide evidence of skills developed through training.

The question is no longer whether skills validation has value. The question is where it creates value, for whom, and under what conditions.

Conclusion: Going Forward

The six pilots featured in this publication demonstrate that skills validation is not a singular intervention. It is an emerging capability that can support learners, workers, educators, workforce organizations, and employers in different ways across the learn-and-work journey. Taken together, these pilots suggest that the future of skills-based pathways depends on more than identifying skills. It depends on creating trusted mechanisms for recognizing, validating, communicating, and applying those skills in ways that create opportunity.

As education and workforce systems continue to shift toward skills-based approaches, several important questions remain that can further inform the field:

- How might we make skills developed through life, work, caregiving, military service, and community leadership more visible and portable?
- How might validation systems complement rather than compete with existing forms of evidence such as degrees, transcripts, certifications, and work experience?

- What forms of validation are most trusted by employers, educators, and learners?
- How might validated skills be translated into meaningful opportunities for employment, advancement, education, and economic mobility?
- What role should artificial intelligence play in identifying, validating, and communicating skills?
- How might validation systems remain equitable, transparent, and accessible as they scale?
- What partnerships, policies, and infrastructure are needed to support a more connected skills ecosystem?

The XCredit pilots do not provide definitive answers to these questions. They do, however, offer evidence that skills validation can help bridge the gap between what people know and can do and what education and employment systems are currently able to recognize.

The opportunity ahead is not simply to create more credentials. It is to create a future in which learning, wherever it occurs, can be seen, valued, and connected to opportunity.

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AI tools, including ChatGPT, were used for editorial support and copyediting purposes. All AI-assisted content was reviewed by the Education Design Lab team to ensure alignment with the organization's commitment to human-centered design, responsible innovation, accuracy, equity, and ethical use.

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