

Credentials and the Verified Resume

This note is a response to “*A Plan for Creating Coherence in the Credentialing Marketplace*”
Exploratory Committee Background Paper, 6/20/2014

Labor market credentials are attestations to the completion of specific training or education programs by students or to the passing of career-related knowledge and skill tests by candidates. They include but are not limited to educational degrees, assessment-based certificates, industry certifications and occupational licenses. Employers rely on them to provide independent validation – by a reputable credentialing organization or third party assessor -- of a job applicant’s possession of certain knowledge, skills, and abilities. The public relies on them for assurance that certain workers – from welders and electricians to pilots and medical professionals -- are qualified to practice a particular occupation.

Coherence in the Credentialing Marketplace

The background paper cited above lays out a preliminary plan for a national credentialing system, something sorely needed by American labor markets. This note comments on the issues of soft skills, pre-credentials, and the evolving job market after describing a prototype Verified Resume system that has been tested in multiple venues.

Employers often advertise for workers with specific credentials attesting to technical skills and experience. They often hire, however, on the basis of recommendations from people they know who can endorse a job-seeker’s “soft” skills such as responsibility, teamwork, and communication. **The hypothesis: The VR system would usefully complement the proposed credentialing system.**

There are other considerations beyond attesting to soft-skills:

- A fair-sized prototype can be up and running and showing results within a year.
- Youngsters can get involved as early as high school and even in middle school.
- Generic soft skills can transfer to other options as students and workers change their minds about career pathways.
- As technology and jobs change, VRs can be used while certificates are being developed and certified.

Description of the Verified Resume

A Verified Resume (VR) is a record of life-long learning acquired in college, on the job, or in other activities. The VR is midway between Linked-In and a credential. It is more specific and accountable than an endorsement on Linked-In and more flexible and less “official” than a certified credential.

The VR shown in the attached exhibit, for example, was given to a high school student during a summer job in Baltimore. The left-hand column lists seven skills the student demonstrated. The center columns list the students’ proficiency in each as demonstrated by the observation listed in the right-most column. The VR is signed by me as his supervisor. Thus, it is “verified” and not self-reported or reported by a friend or relative.

While the seven skills are generic, the observed context or “anchor” for each skill varies by sector and job. That is, soft skills – while common across industries – are differentiated and anchored in industry specifics. Consider a college offering programs in health and auto mechanics and the soft skill of Listening. Curricula will have to acknowledge that listening (a) to a patient describe his medical history is similar to, but substantially different from, (b) a mechanic listening to a customer describing her problem with an automobile. (This skill is already part of many nursing curricula but less frequent in automobile mechanics.) Fully implemented, the VR system will include a resource bank of Wikipedia-like resource base of skill definitions and specific anchors, on-line course material, and reliable assessment tools,

The VR system encourages students’ life-long learning and managers’ investment in employee development. Individuals will be able to choose schools and employers where they will acquire the soft skills needed on their chosen career path and add them to their VR. The analogue is the “Badges” system, which also records learning across time and place. The pay-off will increase as more organizations implement and communicate and more data on the VRs are collected, analyzed, and shared.

The VRs can be used in many venues — and by many groups from prison populations to those seeking professional degrees. Since 1992, when SCANS’ work on defining the soft skills was completed, a series of experiments were run at Johns Hopkins. These experiences demonstrate that the VR can be launched quickly, and cost-effectively by employers, schools, training and community-based organizations, colleges, and universities. It will be especially valuable to the disadvantaged who have no one to ask when they need recommendations that employers will believe.

The experiments include:

- Students in high schools working on technology-driven projects such as developing a business plan and making a technical presentation. In addition to soft skills they also learned math, English, and science, were much more likely to graduate and take higher level courses. Community colleges students also worked on projects -- locating a factory, applying statistical quality control, developing an information system, building a team, and budgeting for R&D.

- Workers in retail shops, restaurants, and other businesses. These workers, mostly women receiving welfare, increased their earnings because of higher wages and significantly more scheduled hours in their part-time jobs. Employers saw turnover drop substantially.
- High school students participating in community-based organizations where they learned how to make and use media. Once trained, instructors could teach staff in other CBOs.

Organizations with broad social interests, such as Lumina, seek a system “that better prepares workers to be successful on the job and teaches skills that will remain valuable in the future.” Such a system requires, as Lumina says, continuous “communication between the employers and higher education about teaching workplace-relevant skills.”

The VR system encourages managers to provide structured feedback to educators. They will continuously communicate with the faculty and department chairs that develop curricula and teach the students. In the experiments with CBOs, we asked mentors to call work supervisors and ask if they agreed with the scores on the VRs; they differed by less than 0.5 on a five-point proficiency scale.

Widespread implementation will occur if stakeholders perceive the new system as addressing their concerns. Employers want reliable, loyal, and productive employees; college administrators want courses that can attract enough students to fill classrooms; and job seekers want promising career pathways

The VR will make hiring practices more skills based, rather than relying on academic credentials. It will improve the recruiting success of managers that hire solely on the basis of interviews – a deeply flawed selection process. Employers’ will see a return on their investment in a more capable and loyal workforce. Reduced turnover, for those employers that know its cost, will be the most straight-forward measure of return. A more sophisticated approach will also correlate performance with the skills on the VR and act accordingly. For example, knowing that high scores on listening correlates to more sales per square foot will signal retailers to seek this skill.

Colleges are entering a new era where their survival is at stake. Funders – governments, philanthropy, and payers of tuition – are increasingly looking at the economic payoff of the college experience. MOOCs and other on-line courses are increasingly competitive. Colleges that do not provide skills desired by the market will increasingly be at risk.

Finally. Students and their families are the most important stakeholders. Workers throughout the world are competing among themselves and between themselves and evermore versatile and intelligent workers elsewhere.

Relevance to the *Plan for Creating Coherence in the Credentialing Marketplace*

Soft Skills and Credentials: Soft skills and behaviors – such as responsibility, sociability, customer service/negotiation, teamwork/collaboration, oral/written communication, and planning (budgeting/scheduling/time management) are frequently mentioned by employers as crucial to hiring successful employees. Many credentialing bodies have not addressed this category of skills and behaviors in a comprehensive manner.

Arriving at strict uniformity among credentials with regard to these skills and behaviors will be a time consuming and arduous process, even when credentials are in the same sector. Take health care, for example. States now differ about all sorts of things – for example, whether a nurse can stitch a wound. Getting 50 states to agree on a single credential is a challenge.

Fortunately, while a credential carries much weight, especially where the public's health and well-being is at risk, the soft skills are more flexible. Credentialing the hard skills of a surgical technician is pretty exact. The desired soft skills will depend on patient characteristics; the ability to communicate with Hispanic or Russian patients will be highly desirable in some communities, but not in others. The same requirement for dealing with a diverse population obviously exists in many service industries.

Soft Skills Acquisition Before and After Credentials: Life begins before graduation. Individuals acquire skills well before they acquire a credential. The early acquisition should be certified as it occurs. Students still exploring career paths, may acquire soft skills as they learn about, embrace and discard possibilities. For example, learning that you can't stand the sight of blood may deter dreams of being a surgeon; but learning how to plan may encourage thoughts of becoming a hospital administrator.

Moreover, career paths change; while certified technical skills may no longer be relevant on a new path the same soft skills may well apply. Consider, for example, a certified plumber who decides to embark on a career as an installer of smart systems in buildings.

Evolution in the Job Market: As the background paper states:

“There has also been considerable growth in the numbers and types of industry and professional certifications offered in such major industries as healthcare, energy, information technology, and manufacturing. ANSI estimates that the number has climbed from 3,000 a few years ago to more than 4,000 now, with fewer than 10 percent of them accredited.”

Change will continue. The time from the original recognition that a new credential is needed until the accreditation is complete is going to be measured in years. Yet, the job seeker and employers' time frame may be days or weeks. Consider the introduction of a new piece of equipment in any of the four industries mentioned in the paragraph above. Employers will want to hire operators well before an accredited credential is available. Knowing that an applicant can quickly learn a new procedure (a soft skill) will be helpful to a recruiter.

Verified Résumé of Professional Skills for XXX

Work Experience

Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, June –July, 2011

Xxx served as Intern Assistant in Weight Loss Research. He sought to contact five participants and engage in helping them with exercise and shopping for healthy foods. He also participated in four lectures to other students about nutrition.

Evaluated and certified in the following job performance skills

SKILL OR BEHAVIOR	RATING*	OBSERVATIONS FROM TASK OR CRITICAL INCIDENT
Responsibility	4.5	Managed to make contact with 4 patients regarding weight loss program. Came to work on time, finished work on time, writing indicates understanding of the concept.
Team Player	5.0	Worked with other 3 IAs to develop skills and carry out tasks such as making the presentations.
Time Management	4.5	Developed schedules for contacting participants. Writing indicates understanding of the concept.
Information Handling	4.5	Collected data from participants, Developed Excel spread sheet to collect data
Listening	5.0	Listened attentively to lectures and instruction in class. Listened to answers from participants.
Written Communication	3.5	Wrote two short (200 – 300 word) essays on what he learned. Developed Power Points for presentations described below. Needs to read over what he writes more carefully.
Oral Communication	3.5	Helped make four presentations to student groups about nutrition and exercise. Spoke to participants on the phone. Practiced speaking to participants and engaged in class discussion. Voice needs more clarity and projection.

Additional Observations: Xxx has talent and needs to further develop his communication skills.

Certified by:

Arnold Packer

Intern

Arnold Packer, PhD
Supervisor

*** For Responsibility, Teamwork, and Listening:**

5= always, 4=most of the time, 3=sometimes, 2=occasionally, 1=rarely

For Time Management, Information Handling and Oral Written Communication

5=could teach others, 4=can do himself, 3=needs some supervision, 2=needs much supervision, 1=cannot do.