Mark Leuba: [00:00:00] In the case of Open Badges, for example, we do know that there have been 75 million badges that have been issued in the U.S. alone by 15,000 organizations. So that's a tribute to the strength of the movement. It's very, very significant.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:20] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:22] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:30] Welcome to episode 342, which features a conversation with Kelly Hoyland and Mark Leuba of 1EdTech. 1EdTech was formerly known as IMS Global, a name listeners might be more familiar with. The organization renamed itself in 2022. 1EdTech is a member-based community dedicated to powering learner potential. Its members include institutions and tech providers that work together to make learning technology better, safer, and more interoperable. Mark is vice president of product management, and Kelly is director for higher education programs at 1EdTech. While 1EdTech supports many efforts, Mark, Kelly, and Jeff focus their conversation on digital credentials. They look at the current landscape of digital credentials, the growing buzz, and potential challenges. They also discuss Open Badges and the Comprehensive Learner Record, two key standards developed by 1EdTech that are aimed at addressing some of the challenges that exist in the evolving market for digital credentials. Jeff, Kelly, and Mark spoke in January 2023.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:46] You cover a lot of ground with your various—I think you call them workstreams—and the standards that you create. I think we could probably talk all day and maybe for multiple days to really try to do justice to everything that you work on, that you're involved in. But, of course, we've got limited time for this particular conversation. So I want to focus in on the work you're doing related to digital credentials. And I'd love to hear, first of all, how you would describe the current landscape for digital credentials. Obviously, it's been evolving quite a bit over the last several years. It's been a little bit of a buzz area, I guess, but it's starting to become an accepted part of the lifelong learning landscape out there. What are you

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seeing as some of the positive developments that have come along? And what are some that, maybe, cause you some concern?

Kelly Hoyland: [00:02:36] I think it is a very exciting time. I've never seen so many people moving beyond buzz and really looking, especially in higher education and adult learning in that space, looking at how are we really helping learners and then working across boundaries. So the variety of role types that are involved in this work is really exciting. I think the other part of it is, as there's this new lens of, where does education go in the future? What do our adult learners need? How do we make sure that we're giving them value on the experiences, making sure that the outcomes are very obvious and clear, and that work aligns perfectly with all this credentialing work? Because you need to know what they're achieving through the competencies or skills and training that you're providing. So the digital credentials work is really helping to allow not only institutions and learning providers share their value of those outcomes, but also learners are able to self-advocate. I remember my undergrad, I would be like, "Yeah, I took classes, but I don't know what I actually learned." These digital credentials allow that to be put front and center. I think some of the concerns that I'm seeing are there's so much buzz. It's where do you start? And making sure that those messages are not competing with each other. There are a number of different organizations working in the space and making sure we're all working together and not against each other. And that, I think, is going to be so crucial as we start to look at that transition to how employers understand them. Because, if we're using a different language, they're going to get even more confused. Mark, do you want to add?

Mark Leuba: [00:04:06] I agree. The digital credentials movement is very strong. It's strong in traditional education, in training organizations, and even in corporate employers, as in the spirit of upskilling. And there are a lot of factors for that. But, from my point of view, it boils down to this: that learners and workers want to be recognized for their achievements and their capabilities. And traditional means of doing so just don't work. They're really insufficient, whether it's a transcript, a PDF, or a piece of paper. It really doesn't communicate what you actually know and can do, and digital credentials do that, and they're verifiable on the Web. So it's really a new kind of currency for personal and professional achievement.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:51] I think that is such an important aspect of it that both of you've touched on and really focusing in on specifically what you've learned, what you'd know, what your skills are because you can have a college degree, for example, which has typically been the credential that's carried the most weight, economically, out there. But a college degree doesn't tell you all that much about the very specific things that you have learned and what you're actually

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capable of doing. And I know that employers are increasingly concerned about that when they're hiring. It does seem like—and I don't know if you have numbers on this; I don't know them off the top of my head—that we have seen a real proliferation in credentials out there over the past several years. Does that jibe with what you're seeing? Do you have any idea what the growth rate has been like? And you don't have to have specific numbers, but if you happen to, that's great.

Mark Leuba: [00:05:40] Well, I want to distinguish between credentials generally and digital credentials. And you're right, there are numbers that go up to 700,000, 800,000 unique credentials that are possible to be earned in the U.S.—certifications, degrees, certificates, badges in some cases. In the case of Open Badges, for example, we do know that there have been 75 million badges that have been issued in the U.S. alone by 15,000 organizations. So that's a tribute to the strength of the movement. It's very, very significant.

Kelly Hoyland: [00:06:15] Another great example is the SUNY system in New York. They have over 500 different microcredentials they offer. So that's not how many they've offered. That's the type of microcredentials they have, and those are in 60 different areas. So we're seeing a lot of growth. If one system is producing that many microcredentials, when you add up all of the education providers, there's a huge growth area.

Mark Leuba: [00:06:35] And this does track to the uptake of competency-based education in traditional academics. For the last few years, it has been increasing in importance, as you mentioned, being able to correlate a course with the learning outcomes and align those to skills that are relevant in industry. And I can tell you that across the academic spectrum, institutions are focusing like a laser beam on their industry partners, and they're starting new strategic programs to understand what the needs are. They're embracing a much more active role for employers and industry in the development of their curriculum and associated assessment so that, when a credential is being produced for a learner, it really has much more value and can be trusted.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:28] As someone who listens to the Leading Learning Podcast, you should know about the Leading Learning newsletter, which you can subscribe to at leadinglearning.com/inbox. The newsletter is inbox intelligence for learning businesses and helps you understand the latest technology, marketing, and learning trends and grow your learning business. Best of all, it's a free resource. As a subscriber, you'll get Leading Links, our monthly curated collection of resources to help you grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business; the podcast digest, a monthly summary of podcast episodes released

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Jeff Cobb: [00:08:28] You are the group for standards in so much of the online learning and credentialing world. You've developed two key standards that are aimed at addressing some of these challenges that we're seeing in the evolving market for digital credentials: Open Badges and the Comprehensive Learner Record, or CLR. Can I get you to tell us a bit about each of those standards and what each one is designed to address?

Kelly Hoyland: [00:08:53] So the Open Badges standard has been around for a number of years and has a rich community and culture around it. But where we're seeing these Open Badges fit in this current market is really looking at identifying those single achievements that can stack to bigger things, but really looking at what is the outcome? What is the achievement? What is the skill that an individual has earned? And being able to capture those in a digital wallet or some other format to be able to take those with you as a learner, whether you've earned them at an institution, at a boot camp, at an employer training, wherever it is, you get to keep that achievement with you. And that Open Badge standard allows that not only to be the pretty picture you can post to your social media, but there's a rich set of data behind it that provides the details of what does it mean to earn that badge? What are the criteria? Is there an expiration date? Who issued it? Is there trust behind who has issued that badge? And then our second standard is really in that Comprehensive Learner Record, which allows you to create that whole picture of your learning so you can capture multiple achievements, you can link them together and have context, and think about that stackability and lifelong learning. It can be badges; it can be courses; it can be experiences. All of that stuff rolled together provides that holistic background for an individual, whether it's education, whether it's work, all of that together.

Mark Leuba: [00:10:16] It's all machine-readable, so it has very high value when it comes to presentation in the context of AI—the machines that are now processing resumes, et cetera.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:29] And, practically speaking, how do organizations go about using these, implementing them? If they've got a credential that they want to be able to issue digitally, how do they then know how to get it into the Open Badges standard, how to make use of the CLR?

Kelly Hoyland: [00:10:46] I think there are two options, and the most common one is they look for a vendor partner who has embraced these standards. So we have a product directory that

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lists everyone who has been certified. Not only have they embraced the standard, but they've actually gone through some kind of conformance testing to ensure that they are ready and able to share amongst the market. A lot of institutions have gone that route to say, "Okay, what are some solutions that are available off the shelf for us to be able to do that?" There's a lot of work on the background, on the program planning and the definitions and the governance that institutions have to do, and the technology piece is sometimes the easier part because they pick a solution and partner to work with. There are a few institutions who've gone their own route to build their own solution, and we have resources available for those types of organizations who want to build and create their own process to issue credentials. But most of our organizations are using a technology partner.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:38] That is interesting. You said the technology, in many ways, can be the easier part of this. You've got this design, planning, governance. Do you have resources that organizations can take advantage of for those parts of it?

Kelly Hoyland: [00:11:51] We have a number of resources that our community has coalesced together, and I would say other professional or higher ed professional organizations and beyond are starting to really work together and say, "Okay, here's some from the registrar's perspective—what their guidance is; from continuing education—here's their guidance from IT." And bringing that all together from the different audiences to say, "Here's your playbook. Here's what you need to think about. Here are the key questions you need to answer at your institution."

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:17] Obviously, one part of the credentialing equation is the learner, the person who wants to earn the credential. But, I think, in most cases, people don't earn credentials purely for personal satisfaction. Not that that's not an element—they want to know that they've earned it, that they've gotten their badge or their certificate or whatever it is. But, in most cases, they're going to expect for that credential to have some value in the employment market. And value has already come up a number of times in our conversation. So employers, obviously, are another very important part of the equation. How are you working to build that bridge between credentials and the credential issuer and employment? What standards apply in that area?

Mark Leuba: [00:13:02] First of all, your observation is 100-percent right, that no matter how many digital badges may be held by individuals, if they're not in demand in this whole educational-work ecosystem, their value is almost zero. So we've recognized, and we've been focusing on employer engagement for the last few years with a couple of observations. We knew there was a lot we didn't know about what the employers' needs were when it came to

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this engagement through digital credentials and skills. And we also knew that the corporate industry and employment communities didn't know that these digital badges were now emerging and digital credentials were emerging. And so we started an initiative we call Wellspring, and Wellspring was intended on helping us learn about employer readiness. How do they react to this concept of digital credentials? Are there barriers—regulatory, cultural, or legal barriers—that we may not be aware of we needed to explore? But we also wanted to turn it around and build demonstrations so that we could show what was possible through the use of these innovative technologies. So we built an applicant tracking system that can actually search what we call the Virtual Talent Network. And the Virtual Talent Network is a collection of digital wallets and achievement portals that are hosted by simulated organizations. And, granted, these are demonstration software. It's not in a production status at this point, but we're able to show the value of using open standards to improve hiring and make hiring low bias. You can do it in an anonymized fashion, and you can focus exclusively on knowledge, skills, and abilities to get that right candidate through your applicant tracking filter. It's been a very exciting initiative, and we're trying to share it with as many people as possible. We do periodic demonstrations, and we'd be happy to engage with your listeners, Jeff, to schedule something specifically for the trade associations and professional learning groups.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:26] And I definitely want to talk about that group here in a minute. As far as embracing and adopting on the employer side, have you seen good uptake in this? Are employers receptive to it as soon as they find out that this exists?

Mark Leuba: [00:15:40] Employers are using digital credentials for their own purposes. For example, you'll have Grow with Google, or Amazon is also producing digital badge certificates. So you have them acting as educators in that respect. But employers right now are using digital credentials to issue to their associates as signals of learning and achievement that they can share in their learning experience platforms and use to advance their careers and along pathways that are well defined. So that's really encouraging. There are some, I'll say, a half dozen, maybe ten employers that are doing that right now. Our goal is to break into their hiring practices through the recruiting and HR tech, and that's the current emphasis of our research that we're doing right now. As a matter of fact, we'll be publishing the report in the next few weeks—what we've learned about the HR technology environment and how we can crack into that and strategies to do so.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:49] Right. You mentioned Google and Amazon, and I think particularly Google tends to get a fair number of headlines around its efforts and offering certification pathways and that sort of thing. Have you found, so far, that it tends to be the more tech-

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oriented companies—the Googles, the Amazons, the Microsofts—that are the leading edge of this? Are you seeing less tech-heavy companies embracing this?

Mark Leuba: [00:17:13] I'd say you're right, first of all, about your observation there. Also, healthcare is investing in this area, but there's no reason to have that distinction. As a matter of fact, on the education side, liberal arts institutions are looking at ways that they can issue digital credentials to represent liberal arts degrees and the competencies that are earned through those programs. So it's absolutely not at all associated with whether you're in the tech industry or you're in the trades. No relation whatsoever. I did want to point out something, and Kelly is reminding me that we're doing a very important project as part of Wellspring with the HR Open Standards organization to help them develop a resume standard that will incorporate our digital credentials inside of it. So there will be the ability to present your resume, which will be standards-based and also include, of course, verifiable digital credentials.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:19] That seems very powerful. It seems once this becomes a standard part of the whole resume and hiring process, it's just bound to tip very quickly to something everybody does as part of their engagement with the whole employment market.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:44] I know a lot of the work you're doing around credentialing is, I think, traditionally interfaced with higher education, with academic institutions who obviously are big issuers of credentials. But there are other key players in the credentialing world, and we've referenced them some. These include private companies, might be a Google or a training company, and then organizations like trade and professional associations. To what extent are you engaged with these types of groups, and to what extent have you seen examples of them embracing and implementing the standards at this point?

Mark Leuba: [00:19:18] Well, first, we were established in the formal education sector. 1EdTech and its predecessor, IMS Global, were born in formal education. But we have developed very solid relationships with organizations that serve the adult learning market, also professional and continuing ed. But we don't yet have, I would say, a beachhead in the professional association and trades area. That's actually an opportunity for growth and outreach, and we look forward to being able to establish those relationships. So we appreciate the opportunity to share this with you and hope that we'll be able to take it further and assist other organizations that are like-thinking and want to serve their learners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:05] And I know one opportunity for those organizations to dive into this more, to really immerse themselves and learn about it, would be an event that, at the time of

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this recording, is coming up. It's one of your major annual events, so I assume it will come back around again if you happen to be listening right now and it's past that time. But, right now, the Digital Credentials Summit is on the horizon. Could you tell us a little bit about that event and why listeners may want to consider attending it, whether that's this year or at some point in the future?

Kelly Hoyland: [00:20:35] I would say it's a pretty unique event in the area because its full focus is in digital credentials. Usually, it's a track, a piece, or a part of other conferences that I've attended. So the neat thing about this is it really brings together the whole spectrum in digital credentials. So we'll have K-12; we'll have higher ed; we'll have organizations; we'll have employers that are all there and really focused on what is happening? How can I support it? And you have the range of attendees. So, if you're new to this, you'll see people who are there in that same portion, but you'll also see some of the leaders and the experts in the space, whether they're presenters or attending and learning and getting other examples. The niche is a mix between strategy sessions as well as implementation best practices. So it's a little bit of everything, and there's a lot of opportunity to connect with others who are doing this work. You walk away with a "Hey, I knew you on social media; now I've met face-to-face. Let's continue a conversation and figure out how I can help roll this out at my organization as well." So it's really the premiere event. Typically, we have about 400 attendees, so it's a nice-sized conference, big enough to have a good breadth but also small enough to make those connections.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:44] And I would assume that too some of the topics we've been discussing here—your standards, these issues around value, consistency, connecting the employment market in credentials—all of that is content that's going to be covered there in one way or another.

Mark Leuba: [00:21:59] Absolutely. It's a combination of workshops and sessions, general and breakout. I think there are 60 or so sessions or something like that. For example, the founder of IBM's Digital Badge program is hosting a workshop called the "Digital Badge Academy," where he is going to be teaching how to start up your own digital badge program in your organization. It's a who's who of parties that are leading in this space. And we also are organizing an employer workshop. We're bringing together companies like AT&T, IBM, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Google, and others, to talk about microcredential value and trust and to help the education community and the employment community come that much closer together on these important topics. So we definitely are focused on, as you said in the opening comments, building the bridges between learning and work. And that's our very intense focus.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:23:02] That definitely sounds like a valuable experience and something I know I'll be considering, hoping to get there, and listeners should definitely take a look at. We will link to that in the show notes so that folks know how to find that. And I know that there are actually recordings from last year that are on the Web as well, some resources that have come out of past events that they should take advantage of. Now, before we wrap up our conversation, I want to switch gears a little bit because this is a podcast about lifelong learning, supporting lifelong learning primarily but also how we all are engaged in lifelong learning. And I like to ask guests about their own practices. And I think the two of you are particularly interesting, where you're coming from, the organization you work for, and the work that organization does. It would be interesting to hear about your own approaches to lifelong learning and, to the extent that it applies, to credentialing. What kinds of learning experiences do you engage in? What are your daily, weekly, yearly practices? And, then, to what extent do you continue to find different forms of credentialing valuable to you personally?

Kelly Hoyland: [00:24:08] It's interesting to me as you pose that question. I was like, "What credentials have I earned?" And I realized I do a lot of training and professional development that I get no outcome other than, "Hey, you completed it." It's interesting to me because I'm now in that niche where I don't live within a higher-ed institution. How do I collect all of my achievements, and it becomes my priority? But, when I look at it, I have a really unique background. I started in education as a classroom teacher, and now I'm here. How did that happen? I looked back, and it's been a mix of continued traditional classes, certifications through professional organizations, LinkedIn Learning courses, YouTube, whatever workshops I can find that apply. And so really looking at that mix, and, as I move forward, I look at what are the outcomes that I'm going to get. It's not as much to take a course as an education major. Initially, I had to take courses to maintain my licensure, and now it's really about where's this niche? What's this new thing that I want to learn? Or what's a new skill that I want to improve on? And I will be looking for ones that issue digital credentials in the future, just so I can start to collect those a little more intentionally than I have in the past.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:14] That's interesting. I think credentials are increasingly going to be part of the value proposition for learning experiences. Can I get something concrete that I can use out there in the marketplace? People will be looking for that. Mark, how about you?

Mark Leuba: [00:25:28] Well, I'm a parent, so, by definition, I'm a lifelong learner. I'll say that I'm an avid reader of current events, so I read *The Wall Street Journal* every day. I'm a history reader as well. I'm not pursuing a particular credential at this time. But I can say my

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contribution to the movement is that, as a hiring official, we have actually changed our hiring requirements to be more intentional on exactly what is necessary to do this job and not necessarily falling back on a degree requirement as a baseline. But, personally, we're focusing more on certifications as credentials because we find that to be a very effective way to target exactly the right skills and the right potential that we're looking for. So we're supporting them on the consumer side if you will.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:24] I think many listeners will be heartened to know that you're placing that level of value on certifications because I think we have many people who are either issuing or, at least, supporting certifications with their education who are listening.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:42] Mark Leuba is vice president of product management at 1EdTech, formerly known as IMS Global. Kelly Hoyland is director for higher education programs at 1EdTech. You can find a link to the 1EdTech site in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode342. On the 1EdTech site, you'll also be able to learn more about Mark and Kelly and contact 1EdTech if you're interested in learning more about its work and initiatives.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:11] And the work that 1EdTech has done and continues to do is hugely important for online learning, so we do encourage you to take some time to visit the site.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:20] We'd be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable. Jeff and I would personally appreciate it, and ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:39] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode342, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:57] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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