When the *New York Times* and *Harvard Business Review* are talking about a learning technology trend, you know it's got merit, says Stephen Walsh.

OPEN BADGES
WILL FUTURE-PROOF YOUR LEARNING

Here's why Open Badges are one of the most disruptive learning technologies in trend right now. For a start, everyone knows how badges work. When you were a Boy Scout or a Girl Guide and proved you could light a fire, or use a camera, you got a badge showing you had learned those skills. You sewed it on your uniform and literally wore your abilities on your sleeve.

Then you went to school... university... work. CVs and degrees took over from badges. But, in truth, they don't really tell you as much as your camera badge did. Your degree doesn't really tell anyone what you actually learned in that class 12 years ago. Your job history doesn't explain what you really did. CVs can be edited, polished, extended. They don't tell the unique story of what a person can actually do.

To put it in L&D terms; there's a weakness in how we show evidence of learning and competence. This impacts recruitment, how we identify and develop talent, and succession planning – so you'd like to have better information.

Enter: 'Open Badges'. They were part of your life when you were at the campfire. Now they can be part of your online profile and prove exactly what your capabilities are. The Mozilla Foundation (the nice people who brought you Firefox) kicked the initiative off in 2011 by founding the Open Badges Project.

SEW IN THREE STEPS

The Open Badges project allows the validation and verification of all learning through the issue of badges. They are then collected and stored in a central location called the Mozilla backpack. There are three steps to the process:

ONE: Issuing badges: Using Mozilla's Open Badge Infrastructure (OBI) any institution, business or community can issue badges for the things they teach people, backed by their own seal of approval. Each badge shows the issuer, when it was issued and under what criteria. Clicking the badge leads to the underlying data. This could be as granular as your test score... and which questions you got wrong... or examples of assignments you completed to earn the award.

So it remains accurate, live and it might have an expiry. Note that a badge doesn't have to be from an educational institution. An employer can also be an issuer. Would you rather a degree in animation from a university, or a badge from Disney-Pixar? Or more to the point – what do you think your next employer would rather see? As *Harvard Business Review* put it when naming badges as one of the key innovations for 2013: 'Badges – not digital diplomas – seem to be the best and likeliest bet on accreditation's future'.

TWO: Earning badges: Badges are earned by proving you can do things. Proof, as always, is in the eye of the beholder (or issuer). Evidence of achievement can be passing a simple quiz or a complex assessment with submission of evidence or live observation, such as in an apprenticeship. Proof is likely to have lots of different elements. A blended programme could contribute to multiple badges as you advance and complete different tasks towards proving competence. Achievements can be used for different elements within a larger programme to help incentivise learners, or

BADGES = *visual representations of a **skill** or **achievement***

Source: Mozilla Foundation
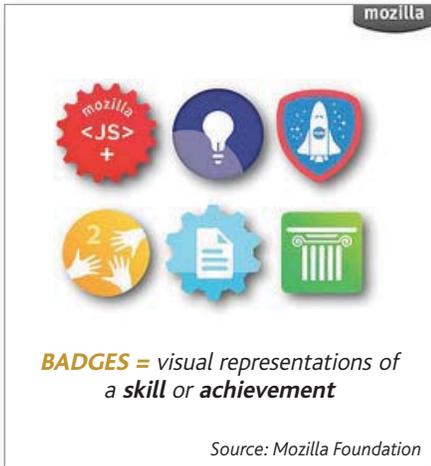
to recognise a specific piece of learning within, say, an employment context.

THREE: Displaying badges: What happens when you earn a badge? It has to go somewhere. Hello, LMS... you've got a new purpose. Totara LMS for example (a custom distribution of Moodle, co-developed by Kineo) was awarded a grant by the Mozilla Foundation to create a component for Open Badges in the LMS. Once a learner has achieved a badge, they are notified and it appears in the My Badges area of their profile on the LMS. The learner can then decide to push the badge to their 'backpack', a Mozilla open system that helps learners to manage all their badges from any source.

And from there you can share it pretty much anywhere (providing there is a displayer API to support it): Facebook, Twitter, an e-Portfolio, LinkedIn – wherever you want to display your abilities, making it easier for employers to see what you can really do. Learners can capture all the evidence of their achievements from different sources such as a college or their employers, and display these as necessary on their CV or social media profile. Each badge when clicked will show all the issuing data and will link directly back to the awarding or issuing organisation – right

down to your assignments. The badge can be validated and verified.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR EMPLOYERS?

Open Badges could be a game-changer for the way we use learning technology to share evidence of our abilities, both inside and outside the organisation. This has the potential to change how accreditation works – and who gets to accredit. The recent *New York Times* article put it like this: 'Digital badges are actually portals that lead to large amounts of information about what their bearers know and can do'.

This challenges the old model of printed diplomas and awards from universities. They are costly and could arguably become 'old money'. As more organisations issue badges, a new currency for what really counts in e-learning design, for example, could emerge. Couple with the explosion in MOOCs from previously closed-door establishments, and you have a new model for learning, assessment, and accreditation. The benefits of going open are immense (*see panel, right*).

WHAT ABOUT PROJECT TIN CAN?

Project Tin Can is a standard for capturing learning experience. So both Tin Can and Badges aim to provide better, less LMS-specific forms of evidence. There's a strong connection in aims. Its early days for making that connection a reality, but here's some thinking to consider:

Tin can will be the language used to tell the Learning Management System or Learning Record Store (LRS) that the learner has earned a badge or completed an activity. This then allows the issuer to create the badge on behalf of the learner.

A joined up version of the future might look like this:

• 'Badge size' pieces of learning can be accessed all over the place in marketplaces, much like e-books. You might earn one for a webinar, a specific online task, or anything that constitutes evidence of ability

• The LMS might then contain only very job-specific/commercially sensitive learning – stuff you might not really want or need to display

• Learners take control of their own learning records through their own backpacks (much like their music library or e-books), thereby controlling their own experience

• Employers are allowed access to learners' records and may hold duplicate records in their systems with powerful analytics and talent management capabilities

Now is the time to act. You need to think about how your L&D systems can support open badges. Do you have the LMS mechanics to issue them? Can you enable people to earn them? It took hundreds of years for the old model of academic degrees and diplomas to gain currency as awards – with all of their flaws and inefficiencies. Badges – online, universal, lower cost, more granular, open source – have the power to catch up very quickly.

The benefits of open badges

There are immense benefits for organisations that implement an Open Badge initiative:

Extend the value of experiences for learners: Badges allow your employees to demonstrate their learning in a valid and verifiable way, and to collect and share the badges as they want.

Incentivise learning: Badges can encourage a learner to go that extra step to achieve a badge. There's always another level. Progression becomes real through the gamification element of badges.

Promote your brand: Badges can be shared across the entire ecosystem, carrying your brand and its values along with them. More people will recognise your investment in learning and the value of your learning. Your organisation's badge could be a challenger to an academic equivalent.

Build your community: Each of your badges links back to you, regardless of where they are shared or used – so you develop a reputation as the issuer, along with the earners.
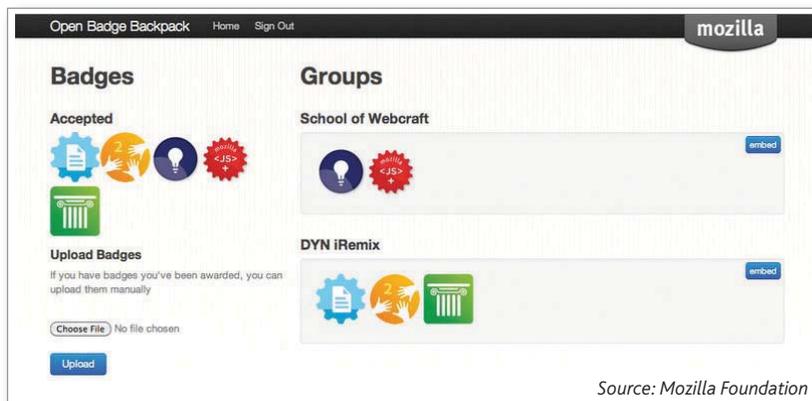
Source: Mozilla Foundation

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