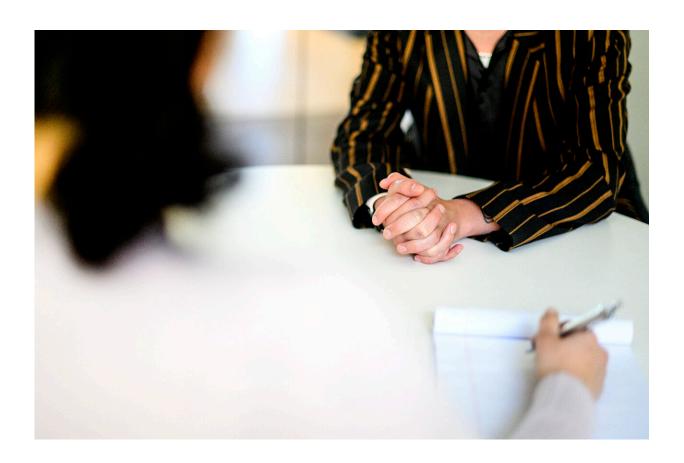# Digital non-degree credentials may go into a black hole when applying for jobs, research says

May 1 2023, by Beth Treffeisen

Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

Many human resource and talent acquisition systems do not recognize digital non-degree credentials that are often included on resumes and in

job applications, according to a Northeastern survey.

Instead, most hiring systems remain geared toward traditional educational information—such as bachelor's and master's degrees—and unstructured data such as PDF attachments.

Northeastern's Center for the Future of Higher Education and Talent Strategy surveyed 750 human resources leaders in partnership with the 1EdTEch Foundation to understand better how employers use digital non-degree credentials in the [hiring process](link).

The 2021 survey confirmed that hiring managers are interested in the growing adoption of digital credentials and skills-based hiring practices but found that technical integration between HR systems is a significant barrier.

Half the respondents reported that data-rich learning and achievement records would challenge their current systems and processes. In contrast, the other half said their systems were ready to incorporate digital credentials.

Educational institutions and professional associations are issuing millions of digital non-degree credentials. But there is a seemingly large disconnect between what applicants submit and what the employers see and use to make a hiring decision.

"You have this huge trend, but you don't have other systems keeping pace," says Emilee Trieckel, a research associate at Northeastern. "We talk a lot about the potential of digital credentials, but for that to be realized, these other systems must work in concert."

The rise of intermediaries like LinkedIn, Indeed and others often adds a third party between the job seeker and the employer. As an applicant's

credentials pass through these websites, they're often reduced to the lowest common denominator—bachelor's degrees and master's degrees, for example.

So many job seekers are adding information or data to their applications that will never make it to employers to review.

Online credentials started to pop up in the early 2010s. The massively open online course platforms such as Coursera and edX partnered with some colleges to provide low-cost online certificates.

In parallel, some degree-granting institutions—mostly community colleges—ramped up their own non-credit certificate offerings such as quick boot camp programs.

The report's main takeaway is that hiring systems are not equipped to accept most of them.

"There are millions upon millions of data points," says Sean Gallagher, the founder and executive director of Northeastern's Center for the Future of Higher Education and Talent Strategy and Executive Professor of Educational Policy.

The purpose of the analysis conducted across 2022 and early 2023 is to explore how existing human resources technologies treat non-traditional educational credentials. The research used representative sample software providers, interviews and demos.

The number of education and professional credentials available in the United States has grown significantly since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

According to the report, there are more than 1 million unique

credentials, including about 660,000 credentials from non-academic providers.

"How does that get mapped into some consistent structure on the employer side?" Gallagher asked.

More information: The report is available online: [cps.northeastern.edu/wp-conten … Acquisition_Tech.pdf](cps.northeastern.edu/wp-conten)

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