

Digital Badges Create Common Currency for Students Seeking to Fill Skills Gap

The new digital badge program allows students to hone critical skills needed for workplace success—while also demonstrating their competency for employers



Housseem Ismail, Oral Communication Badge recipient, and the Lab's Don Fraser

Sixty-eight percent of human resources professionals say they have trouble finding qualified candidates for full-time positions in their organizations, according to a [recent survey](#). That's up from 50 percent in 2013. But a micro-credentialing system aimed at colleges and universities could help solve this hiring challenge, while also assisting more graduates in landing their dream jobs.

The 21st Century Skills Badge Toolkit, designed by Education Design Lab, seeks to fill the so-called “power skills” gap by enabling college students of all backgrounds to earn digital badges for learning and demonstrating important skills such as creative problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and oral communication.

These skills are just as critical for workplace success as the technical skills that a job requires—and hiring professionals are struggling to find candidates who possess them. In the same survey, which comes from the Society for Human Resource Management, 30 percent of respondents named this as a reason they have trouble filling positions.

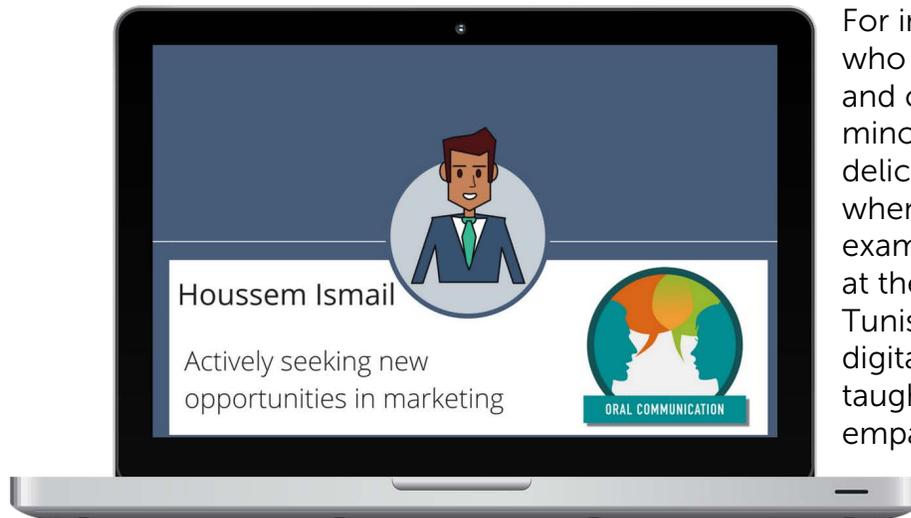
Developed and tested in partnership with more than 20 institutions and employers in the past three years, the 21st Century Skills Badges allows students to intentionally develop these key skills, while—just as importantly—giving them an easy way to prove their competency to employers.

Education Design Lab provides a free toolkit to help colleges and universities implement the curriculum as they see fit. The learning, practice and reflection associated with earning a badge typically happens over the course of a single semester, and participating institutions issue the badges to students when they successfully complete the program.

The Lab worked with widely respected colleges and universities and subject matter experts to design the 21st Century Skills Badges. The badges were piloted with U.S. schools including Georgetown University, George Mason University and University of Arizona, and schools in Africa including Tunis

Business School and Makerere University.

Housseem Ismail is a student at Tunis Business School in his home country of Tunisia. Tunis Business School was one of the institutions that helped design the Oral Communication digital badge. Housseem recently had the opportunity to earn this badge, and he says it definitely helped him become a more confident, and effective, communicator. "It's panning out great," he says. "The thing I (most) appreciate is how versatile the badge is. It has given me a very good grasp on how to engage in conversations with different kinds of people from different backgrounds, no matter what the setting is."



For instance, Housseem—who is a marketing major and computer science minor—had to be very delicate with customers when he worked for the examination department at the British Council in Tunisia. He says the digital badge program taught him how to be empathetic to customers'

needs, while also managing their expectations and working through challenges.

At the same time, the badge curriculum covered more informal communication skills as well. Students who attempt to earn the badge learn how to communicate "with customers, with co-workers, (even) with someone you meet at the elevator," he notes.

The Oral Communication badge focuses on students' ability to speak with clarity and precision; adjust their tone and word choice for both formal and informal settings; listen actively, which includes recognizing and responding to nonverbal cues; and tell stories in order to express their ideas and connect with audiences.

As with all of the digital badges, students have an opportunity to practice these skills in authentic ways and receive critical feedback from the instructor, mentor or peer.

Housseem describes himself as a natural introvert, but he says the Oral Communication badge has made him a more comfortable speaker. He was able to use this skill in interviews that helped him become one of 66 students chosen out of thousands for a foreign exchange program that brought him to the United States, as well as land a marketing internship with Mentor Duluth, a nonprofit organization that matches students with adult mentors.

"There's so much in this badge that you can actually put to use," he says.

In pilot testing, the badges have been found to help employers better screen job applicants and deliver candidates with the requisite skills needed for workplace success. Separate research suggests that certifications on LinkedIn profiles receive six times the views.

Houssem likes having a credential to show he has the oral communication skills that employers desire. "It makes your qualifications have more merit and makes them tangible," he says.

Besides oral communication, there are digital badge programs for initiative, empathy, resilience, intercultural fluency, collaboration, critical thinking, and creative problem solving.

The Lab offers colleges and universities free content and instructions to implement the digital badge. In return, institutions agree to share use cases and data on success rates, such as the percentage of students who earned interviews or were hired after completing the programs.

To learn more or to participate, go to <https://eddesignlab.org/badge-access-form>.