

The eLearning Coach Podcast #22

ELC 022: All About Digital Badges with Jon Aleckson & Andy Hicken

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Connie: Hello everyone, and welcome to episode 22 of the podcast. In an effort to prepare for what the future holds for leaning professionals, I thought it would be interesting to better understand digital badges, what are they, and when would someone use them. In this episode, I interview Jon Aleckson, PhD, and Andy Hicken, PhD, from Web Courseworks. Jon is a consultant in Association Learning Technologies & eLearning. Andy is a product innovation specialist at Web Courseworks, and he is on the ASTM standards committee for digital badges. There are a lot of potential uses for micro credentials and online learning, so I hope you really enjoy this. And now here is the interview. John and Andy, welcome to the e-learning podcast.

Jon: Delighted to be with you, Connie.

Andy: Great to be here.

Connie: This is the first time I have ever interviewed two people at once, so it should double the fun.

Jon: Andy and I enjoy talking together, we kind of mind meld and develop things together, so this will be exciting.

Connie: That is great. So why don't we set the stage for everyone. We're going to be talking about digital badges, but first can you explain the term micro credentials to start us off?

Andy: Credentials in general are things like your degree from a traditional Higher Ed institution, so that is kind of a macro credential. In professional development, continuing education, there are things like certifications, so you belong to a membership association that maybe provides a certification. In medicine, there are very extensive certifications where you go through a board certification exam. Then there are things like certificate programs, which tend to be smaller. And then the idea of a micro credential is that it is smaller than any of those traditional credentials, a smaller bit of learning or experience that it represents. And it is supposed to represent a more nimble type of credential, a smaller chunk of learning, maybe related to a bit of content that's more recent, that Higher Ed, for example, or even a traditional credential program can't cover because it's just too new.

Jon: In the corporate space you have situations where you have your company geniuses that are your subject-matter experts, and they're working with the eLearning department and creating a course, and typically you'll give the learners a certificate. So that's a micro credential.

Connie: How do digital badges fit into the micro credential category?

Andy: I would say digital badges are one way of representing a micro credential. Traditionally associations, at least in continuing education—which is where Jon and I have the most experience over the last few years—have done certificates, which are literally pieces of paper or PDFs that say, "Such and such a person completed a program of education." The digital badges to some extent are a replacement for that certificate.

Jon: One of the issues with the piece of paper, this PDF that the learner prints out, it is really difficult to validate. The key thing with a digital badge is that an employer will be able to validate that learning. And what all this comes down to, from an adult-learning standpoint, is that as we build our resume—and it is going to be electronic, it is going to be LinkedIn or someplace else—as we build our electronic resume for our employment potentials, is it verifiable? In other words, if you have a badge or certificate, does it mean anything? What is really important with credentials is, is there meaning, is there a demand for that information? Oftentimes Higher Ed and community colleges, for example, when it comes to professional development or just a degree—which is our main resume piece—they're not doing a relevant job. They're usually two years, maybe five years behind the workplace in terms of the knowledge that's out there, particularly in technology. So what badges represent is a variable digital imprint that tells an employer that yes Andy Hicken has taken this chunk of learning and should be able to understand that new technology, for example.

Connie: Is there some of kind of psychology that underlies the whole use of Digital badges?

Andy: Broadly, it is an example of skeuomorphic design, so you're taking a concept from the real world, which is the physical concept of badges, and you're creating a technological version of it. So it appeals to people for that reason. If I do a pieces of learning, I get this technological thing, but it something that I could collect, the same way you would collect badges that represent places you've traveled to, for example.

Jon: Let's not forget that the origin of badges—of course we could go back to boy scouts—generally is game-based, video games. Video gamers, which is a dominant part of the population now, are used to getting badges for their achievements.

Andy: I think that is the direct place that it came from in the world of technology. Gamers are actually driven by their desire to collect all the badges that are available in a game, so people said if there is some kind of psychology, some idea of collection that drives people, so if people could get badges for the learning that they've done, then that would drive them to do more learning. Let's not forget, too, that employers need verification of the professional development that a potential employee that they are interviewing has taken. The value of a higher education degree, the value of a Bachelor's degree has been minimalized tremendously over the past ten years. A lot of the population has advanced degrees, as in a BS or BA, so what is really going to be meaningful are badges that verify specific types of learning that adults have taken.

Connie: That means that they have to be issued by someone that the employer respects?

Andy: Exactly. And that is a really important point. You can't just put a badge out there and expect it to succeed, it has to represent something that is valued in the marketplace, it has to come from an issuer that has a reputation in the marketplace, and that is why professional associations see a real opportunity there, because they tend to have a strong brand in a particular area of content, they represent a reservoir of subject matter expertise in their membership that people know.

Jon: They're also connected to the corporate space. In other words, the major corporate trainers have a connection to their professional associations. A lot of times they are united across competitive corporate boundaries, hence promoting a body of knowledge that is important to the corporation. So they promote the participation within these professional associations. But, getting back to the validity, one thing that's important for you to understand is that there are standards bodies, there is a standards body called ASTM, of which Andy is on the committee, which helps to legitimize what has to go into the learning of that before you're able to give a badge.

Connie: I'm sure that there are a lot of organizations that are using digital badges just within their workplace to show that they've completed a particular course or path of study. Can you think of examples of how people are using digital badges for workplace learning?

Andy: This is something that we know about second-hand, but we have seen examples of people being designated as having become experts on a particular area within a training organization, in a particular content area. And in the corporate environment it often has to do with succession planning, like you have person who is an expert and then you want to make sure that you have some backup experts available, so you give out some sort of designation that they are an expert on this.

Jon: Yeah. But we're not aware of companies that have endorsed this heavily in term of using, for example, the Mozilla badge technology. We've got a situation where we've got the learning event being legitimized by a standards board, we have the technology being standardized in terms of how does this technology work, and there are competing technologies out there right now. I'm not sure of the incentive for a corporation to spend the money right now, get involved in some of those technologies, unless it's done through the learning management system.

Andy: When we work with corporations, it's often an extended enterprise application where the corporation is training people who are outside of their HR training organization, and that's the kind of situation where I think badges are pretty valuable, because you're talking about people who are not represented perhaps in your corporate LMS, but you could award a badge to, say, somebody like a field service technician who works on the products that your corporation produces, but doesn't actually work for you company. You could award them a badge saying that they have the right field service expertise, and then they could save that badge, show it to prospective employers as evidence that they're certified.

Connie: That's a great use case. How likely is it that digital badges are going to be accepted any time soon?

Jon: I don't think we're very far, because I think we're still developing standards. And learning management systems are paying lip-service generally to, "We're going to integrate with Mozilla badges," for example, or Pierson has got an effort. So what we're seeing in the marketplace, and our customers in many cases are national association, we're just not seeing them clamor to institute this. They're still in a "We're going to give you a certificate" phase. They haven't really moved to demand the electronic badge program, which is really legitimate, and I think there are going to be some drivers, like LinkedIn, the national resume holders, and the Monster.com, they're going to drive the validity of badges and the use of badges. And I think it is going to be outside the corporations, so we will have to watch for that. And, ultimately, professional development associations. But we have to have standards, we don't have them yet, right Andy? When are you meeting at that community?

Connie: Get busy, Andy. [laughter]

Andy: It meets twice a year, and it has draft standards. The whole question of standards is there is a little bit of complexity. There is the technical standards that are out there, Mozilla Open Badges is the best-known technical standard, so that is an interoperability standards, it's comparable to something like HTML, which a technical standard, so that where a piece of software that's doing badges should be compliant with the technical standard. And then there is the educational standards, which is more of what ASTM is about. They definitely get into the technical side of things a bit, but they're also adding a layer of what would be a valid example of a badge that we could put the ASTM market approval on.

Connie: I think that is pretty exciting that there is a standards body that will be eventually trying to come up with some kind of way to give the badges value.

Andy: Right, and the background on that is ASTM already has a pretty widely accepted standard for certifications and certificate programs, so for other types of credentials it sets educational standards. So it was natural for them to create a new subcommittee on standard for badges and micro credentials.

Jon: And I think higher education is going to get aggressively adopt it. A lot of schools out there have professional development programs, continuing education programs, and they're going to jump on the bandwagon.

Connie: I did want to talk about the technical aspect, but before we get into that, I wanted to know why you're personally and business-wise excited about badges, because I know you're very into it?

Jon: Let me start personally, this is really exciting because the marketplace needs to recognize the various types of learning that we all consume. And a lot of it is informal. But as long as it follows a standard of quality, I think we should be able to show that off. And those of you that are on LinkedIn know how powerful LinkedIn is, and it is coming that we will display valid badges on that. From a business standpoint, we're excited because we have a learning management system, and we national association customers who will eventually demand this. They will move from the paper certificate to a digital badge. And we want to be ahead of that curve.

Andy: Also because we're in the nitty gritty of learning management system design and implementation, I can tell you that there is a lot of unnecessary pain and burden around those traditional certificates. Let's say you go to a conference, you earn a certificate for attending a certified piece of continuing education there, you then have to take that certificate and somehow get it to a separate board that is managing your certification and that awards your certification. And there are whole categories of software built around that, and it is basically a matter of filling out a form and attaching a PDF file. If you're a lawyer, you might have to do that for a dozen different certificate-granting educational experiences you had during the year. You have keep track of those PDFs or those physical pieces of paper, get them scanned in, fill up the form, get them into your certifying boards, peace of software, it's just kind of a mess, and badges promise to make that a lot faster.

Jon: From a corporate standpoint, this is exciting for human resource departments, because corporations are asked to fund continuing education, they're asked to fund professional development of their employees, and what budgets will do is they will step that up in terms of what a corporation can get out of it, from an HR department, and from an employee incentive program. In other words, if I can send Andy to a workshop and there is a badge that he brings, there is a value to him and his career and his resume. There is also a value to me, because it is a good benefit for my employees to be able to not only provide continuing education, but to also have badges. And then I can create my own badges that are legitimate as a corporation. What's really important for companies to understand out there in workplace learning is that they should get on board for standards so that when they do provide badges, they're legitimate, they're recognized, and they're verifiable.

Connie: Let's get into the technical, I was wondering if you could talk about Mozilla badges and the Open Badge project.

Andy: Mozilla Open Badge is a technical standard. Open Badge itself is not a specific piece of software, it is a standard that pieces of software have to meet in order to be interoperable. So you can have one piece of software that creates a badge, and then that badge can be transferred to another piece of software to track it. So there are concepts in Mozilla Open Badges of issuers, these are entities that need software that allows them to create badges and give them to people. Earners, that is the actual person who can get the badge, that's your learner. And displayers, potentially a separate piece of software where the earners are going to save their badges and then be able to choose who they display their badges to and when.

Connie: And Mozilla came up with this themselves?

Andy: The project itself is guided by the participation of a lot of stakeholders from the educational industry.

Jon: Mozilla is open source, and they build features, it's done by the community, so Mozilla is very organic in terms of the kinds of features they develop. So it's a very healthy, cooperative development, and they were first.

Andy: Just the same way that the Firefox browser—which is Mozilla's best known product—represents the interests of both software companies and groups that represent users. The Open Frontiers Foundation, Open Badges, also represents the interests of people who care about this for lots of good reasons.

Jon: That's what's exciting about this. It's organic, it was developed originally by Mozilla, an open source community, which has the very popular Firefox browser, and that is what has given it some momentum as well.

Connie: To my understanding, the xAPI standard, which people know as Tin Can, can interface with digital badges. Can you explain how that works, or how that could work, I don't know if anyone's doing it yet.

Andy: Experience API is comparable is comparable—and in some senses competing—with the badges standard, in that they're both interoperability standards that allow you to have learning on one technological platform, and then send information about that learning to another technological platform. Experience API I think is more ambitious in sharing all of the details of what happened during the learning experience with the separate platform. Badges are really, "I completed this experience, here is evidence that I did it."

Jon: And we can't speak for Tin Can. They're not really synonymous. Tin Can will eventually, I assume, play with digital badges, in other words at some point they will provide a legitimate digital badge or connect somehow. Tin Can is more synonymous with SCORM, with sending data to a learning management system or a record store, whereas the digital badge is the very specific feature, would you agree Andy?

Andy: In terms of what the established standards are in e-learning, Experience API is comparable to SCORM where you're getting a lot of detailed information about what happened inside of the online learning experience. It adds both more information, and it adds the ability to more easily have information flowing between separate platforms. And then badges are more comparable to certificates where it is something you get from...

Jon: From the platform, from the LMS or the record store. We're assuming someday there will be record stores that provide digital badges.

Connie: My understanding was that the standard now has that kind of interoperability.

Jon: We haven't seen applications, I guess.

Connie: I have not either. So we'll go on.

Jon: If you look at the adaption curve, they're in the same position that learning management systems are in, and that is do they have a module, or do they have a feature built in that can provide digital badges. And that is a question of adoption amongst learning management system companies, and you would really have to ask them. We would say in our system we will have it by June. We probably won't roll it out for every customer, we will roll it out for those that are demanding it. And that is the case with most learning management systems, they're going to be motivated by their customers' demands. I don't think the age of demanding digital badges is here yet.

Connie: That's what I was going to ask you, what is standing in the way of mass adoption, is it that people aren't yet motivated, that they don't understand, or the technology is not there?

Andy: There are a few different possibilities, but I think one simple factor is critical mass, it has to get to the point where learners are saying, "I'm not going to go to your continuing education activity unless you provide me a badge." Currently they wouldn't go if you didn't provide a certificate. It has to get to a point where enough people know about badges that they say, "They're so much easier to administer than the certificate model. I'm just going to look for activities that offer a badge."

Jon: I think the tipping point is going to be out in the marketplace, where your LinkedIn, and your Monster.com, starts pushing it heavily, and then your recruiters start demanding it. That's where the tipping point is going to be. And I don't think we've seen that on LinkedIn, I haven't seen it.

Andy: You would expect principles of Web 2.0 that would be one platform that would become dominant that has the most user-data in it—user data in this case being badges—so it is the one place you go to see what badges somebody is publicly sharing in the marketplace. That’s why Jon keeps talking about LinkedIn, because that has become the one place to go to see somebody’s resume.

Jon: If you look at the adaptation curve of even game-based learning, and attracting gamers to educational events that use gaming principles, that’s growing, but it hasn’t reached a critical mass per se, and I think that is something that will happen. As newer generations come in, they will demand digital badges, because what they’re used to.

Andy: I don’t think the barriers are strongly technological right now. I think you can find badges platforms out there if you really want to. And learning managements are also capable of applying the technology. It is less daunting than Experience API, technologically.

Jon: And I think it is going through an acceptance curve or continuum. Workplace training does this often, where they give a certificate for marginal achievements. So you’re going to have on the one of the continuum people giving badges out for maybe not quite accredited learning experiences, and then you’re going to have people that take it very seriously. So you’re going to have a continuum from one end to the other, and I think we will go through a period of sifting through whether it has meaning or not. And that’s where I think the standards committee comes through because there need to be standards. In colleges, for example, accreditation is key, and that whole accreditation piece needs to be there to legitimize badges.

Connie: You have mentioned LinkedIn a few times, do you know if they’re working on something like that, a way to display badges?

Jon: I’m not an authority, but my assumption is they are doing it now.

Andy: I’ve got to think if it’s not out there already, there is no way that they aren’t aware of it. Because you just see large technological players definitely paying attention to it.

Jon: We are speaking out of turn here, because we’re not experts on LinkedIn or Mozilla. There could be a situation where LinkedIn has not quite adapted the Mozilla badges or whatever, but I think they have, and I just think it is a question of user adaption.

Andy: Blackboard, the biggest higher education LMS, has created a resume-type platform that's targeting the recent college graduate and, if it isn't already, it should be compliant with Open Badge's standard. So if Blackboard does that, then that's a challenge to LinkedIn, so you would think that LinkedIn would respond.

Jon: So there is always the competitive marketplace that chugs along, pushes and pulls the new technologies forward. And you've got to have a reason, like in the workplace what is the rationale for investing in this and pushing your LMS to do badges. Somebody has to be a champion and say we want our employees to be starting to use badges and represent that. So it's a curve, and we're on the starting point of it, and I think it's just going to grow.

Connie: So people might end up using badges before there is a firm standard. In other words, within corporations they might start giving out badges to employees who complete certain activities or course.

Jon: I think that's happening now. There has to be critical mass and a tipping point where it just becomes common. I would say there is a buzz right now, and that's probably why you are interested in it. There is a buzz going on, and I think it is a really solid initiative that will take hold.

Connie: I am really interested in, personally and in this podcast, in talking about trends and things that will be happening so that we can all prepare ourselves to be ready for the future.

Jon: What is interesting though is when you talk about the people competing, so you're going to get a lot of noise. I think that colleges and universities are going to be threatened by it, because it minimizes the value of their degrees, to some degree. So there are going to be people that deal with it in a threatening way, but ultimately I think the idea is going to take hold and be universal.

Andy: Yes, colleges and universities will probably be threatened by it as a new and competing education model, but ultimately it shouldn't be that. Colleges and universities should be providing this macro credential that your degree shows that you have a theoretical foundation, the kind of thing that would never be covered in a few hours of continuing education. Continuing education is focused on recent applications, how to use new technologies, for example.

Jon: You're totally right. I was just thinking of the MOOC.

Connie: That is what it reminded me of too. It would be interesting if some of the MOOCs were standardized and were giving out their digital badges for people who complete them.

Andy: I think that they are. If you look at Coursera, it already has digital certificates that they hand out with their courses. I don't know if they are badged, but you can send your digital certificate to a prospective employer and the employer can follow a link back to Coursera, which is exactly what badges are supposed to, to verify that it came from this legitimate issuer.

Connie: And the individual does need software, something like LinkedIn or some kind of resume software, where they can display their badges.

Andy: There is a variety of platforms to do that. Compliant learning management systems can do that, the standard is called the Displayer, they can be a place where you save and display your badges. And then there are also dedicated platforms that just display and save your badges.

Connie: Can you name some of those?

Andy: Sure. The Mozilla Backpack is the best example. That is Mozilla's application of its standard. And the backpack analogy is you have this place where you save all your badges. Maybe they're pinned to your backpack. But then there are also learning management systems that do the same thing. I already mentioned Blackboard has capability to do that.

Jon: I think what you're going to see in employment is that on a resume you're going to see where you can go to verify my badges when I apply for a job.

Connie: That would be awesome, wouldn't it? Before we wrap up, I just wanted to ask you where do you see digital badges heading in the future, and what do you think their potential is?

Jon: The potential is just overwhelming. I think it is coming, and it is all a matter of hitting that tipping point, and generally it takes a major player to get us over that edge, whether it is going to be Blackboard, or whether it is going to be LinkedIn, or a player like that that's just going to just come out and they're going to have a mobile app for badges, and it's just going to take off. But what we hope is that the standards bodies set the standards before that tipping point hits, so that we don't have to go through this junky period of legitimacy.

Connie: Is there a projected time when the standard is going to be finished, or is it going to be something ongoing?

Jon: Didn't we predict that for this year in our predictions?

Andy: It's the E36.30 subcommittee at ASTM, we have a draft standard already, and it is a matter of doing some work to finish up some parts of it and then getting the subcommittee to vote to make it a real standard.

Connie: This was quite informative, I learned a lot. Thank you so much Jon and Andy for being on the podcast and for giving us your time and knowledge about this.

I definitely learned a lot from Jon and Andy, and I hope you did too. You can find the show notes at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/22. I would like to hear your thoughts and the value and potential uses of micro credentials. You can leave your comments on that same page. In case you didn't know, you can subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Stitcher. That's it for now, talk to you next time. Take care.