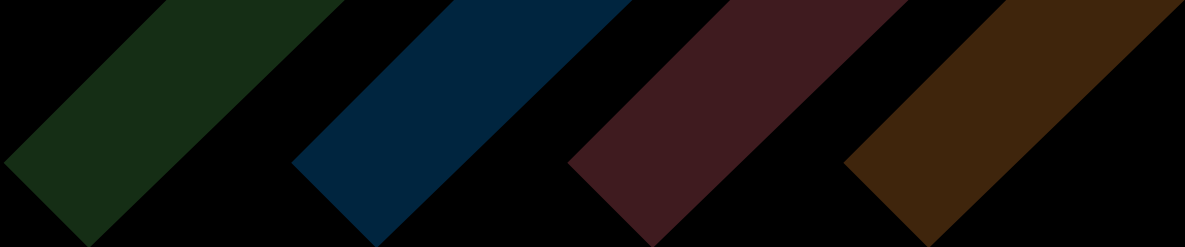




FWD THINKING

From the Field



Introduction

Launched in 2023, SkillsFWD is dedicated to advancing a skills-based future through the development of interoperable Learning and Employment Record (LER) ecosystems. Through SkillsFWD, a cohort of seven grantees received \$700,000–1.4 million each to implement innovative projects to enhance digital credentialing, supporting lifelong learning and workforce mobility.

SkillsFWD grantees work closely with evaluators from Eastern Washington University and the Manhattan Strategy Group. They document progress and reflect on lessons learned through monthly meetings, team meetings, action plans, and quarterly reports. These ongoing analyses inform best practices, highlight emerging trends, and contribute to broader efforts in digital credentialing and workforce development.

FWD THINKING synthesizes key findings from our first year of research and discovery reporting (April 2024 through March 2025), highlighting areas of promising progress, challenges encountered, and actionable insights for the field. Each section summarizes findings from each quarter, demonstrating how projects have progressed and evolved over time.



Q2 2024: Initial Innovations and Adaptations

As grantees' projects commenced, they experienced early wins and encountered unexpected hurdles, uncovering valuable lessons that informed their evolving implementation strategies.

CHALLENGES

Navigating Technical Complexity

Several grantees encountered unforeseen challenges in working with vendors to fulfill complex technical requirements. While this in some cases led to project delays, it also sparked innovative problem-solving and strengthened teams' resilience and adaptability.

PROGRESS

Established Research & Discovery

Metrics Grantees collaborated with the Research and Discovery team to clearly define Dimensions of Progress. These dimensions emphasize measurable outcomes, tracking the development of strategic relationships, robust infrastructure and long-term sustainability.

INSIGHTS

Strong Partnerships Will Enable Early Wins

Grantees entering projects with established partnerships were notably better positioned for early success. Effective communication, mutual understanding and established trust among partners facilitated smoother project launches.

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“Through weekly meetings between [partners], a rapport of trust has been established such that we all feel comfortable expanding our interactions and relationships with everyone feeling comfortable spending additional manpower on custom development as necessary.” – SkillsFWD grantee



Q3 2024: Strengthening Stakeholder Engagement

As projects matured, grantees refined their strategies to better meet user needs and actively expanded their partnerships, positioning their teams for long-term impact and sustained success.

CHALLENGES

Adapting to Emerging User Needs

Grantees adjusted their initial approaches to enhance the user experience, anticipating broader adoption. However, these adaptations occasionally led to project timeline disruptions, highlighting the importance of agility and responsiveness.



“We dedicated ample time to understanding the root causes for disinterest or disengagement when it occurred, coming together as a team to understand how we might address those causes and what incentives might help overcome them, such as payments, memberships or support.” – SkillsFWD grantee

PROGRESS

Driving Collaborative Momentum

With established, formalized partnerships, project teams coordinated their efforts, driving strategic progress. Clear governance structures and open communication channels enhanced collaboration and reduced operational friction.



INSIGHTS

Targeted Value Propositions Drive User Engagement

Intentional engagement with stakeholders revealed the critical importance of crafting targeted messages and clear value propositions tailored to specific user groups. By understanding user perspectives, grantees could articulate benefits that resonate, enhancing overall engagement and commitment. Proactive engagement with end users ensured projects remained aligned with evolving expectations and needs, maximizing long-term relevance and impact.

Q4 2024: Measuring Outcomes and Sustainability

As grantees progressed through their projects, measurable outcomes began to emerge and teams began laying foundations to sustain long-term impact and widespread LER adoption.

CHALLENGES

Moving Toward Widespread Adoption

Grantees recognized the essential role of innovative outreach and engagement strategies to build momentum and encourage broad adoption among employers and learners. They learned that technical solutions alone are insufficient without compelling marketing and genuine user excitement.



“There is a hurdle of marketability and excitement that needs to be crossed to gain any meaningful traction. Importantly, it is not the case that if we ‘build it, they will come’; rather, there needs to be a cache of excitement attached to it.” – SkillsFWD grantee

PROGRESS

Establishing Sustainable Frameworks

As pilots moved from initial phases toward broader implementation, grantees systematically gathered and analyzed data on user experience, system interoperability and employer adoption. These insights informed sustainability plans to ensure enduring project impact.

INSIGHTS

Institutional Support is Key to Build Momentum

Grantees with strong institutional backing encountered fewer bureaucratic obstacles, accelerating their momentum and clarifying pathways for project sustainability. Institutional alignment provided essential strategic resources and a cohesive vision, significantly enhancing long-term prospects. Demonstrating practical value and aligning initiatives with stakeholders' core goals increased enthusiasm and participation.



Q1 2025: Solidifying Trust and Alignment

Engagement from learners and employers increased when the value of participation was clear and supported by career navigators. Partnerships across sectors accelerate adoption, though alignment and sustained collaboration remain critical for continued progress.

CHALLENGES

Change Management Can Be Costly

Some stakeholders are resistant to adopting LERs because of the cost and effort required to change their existing practices. Grantees are overcoming this by improving their systems and by communicating the long-term ROI.

PROGRESS

Value Propositions Facilitate Traction

Grantees identified value propositions that drive adoption by learners and employers, leading to steady growth in engagement and robust partnerships that serve as a strong foundation for the ecosystem.



As the [platform] has been established as a statewide solution, the methodology for approaching I/earners is to train and support the champions across the state that work directly with learners and earners such as the career coaches, case managers, and regional workforce councils. – SkillsFWD grantee

INSIGHTS

Trusted Intermediaries Drive Adoption

Career navigators and community-based organizations play a critical role in increasing LER adoption by providing customized support and leveraging existing relationships with learners and partners.



Q2 2025: Collective Action and Interoperability

Achieving broad-scale LER implementation requires a concerted effort across the ecosystem. This involves continued collaboration among stakeholders, securing additional funding resources, and ensuring the interoperability of LERs across different platforms and systems.

CHALLENGES

Lack of Institutional Support.

Because skills-based hiring is not a common priority, decisionmakers do not have incentives or capacity to invest in LERs and microcredentialing. Without clear alignment with institutional priorities, the cost of adoption can outweigh the perceived benefits.

PROGRESS

Streamlined Outreach and Integration.

Grantees have established targeted outreach strategies and have smoother platform integration for learners. As a result, learners have reported positive user experiences. This finding can help make a case for LERs as an effective tool in reaching workforce development and economic mobility goals.



There is a need to create data sharing frameworks. Even though many organizations collect data, ownership and access often exists in a silo. Consistency and a shared [skills ontology] framework would help organizations promoting LERs do so in a common language.” -SkillsFWD grantee

INSIGHTS

Data Sharing Frameworks Enable Collaborative Success.

When infrastructure and policies are in place to facilitate seamless data sharing, LERs can deliver enhanced value for users and robust insights for stakeholders to promote more widespread adoption of skills-based practices.



Conclusion and Future Recommendations

SkillsFWD grantees have made significant strides to shape an interoperable LER ecosystem. In doing so, they have uncovered valuable lessons about the role of stakeholder engagement, technological stability and policy alignment in LER implementation. SkillsFWD grantees and those wanting to learn from their experience can...



Enhance Employer and Learner Engagement through targeted outreach and streamlined platform adoption.



Refine Technology Infrastructure to improve reliability and scalability.



Strengthen Government Partnerships to facilitate policy support and funding sustainability.



Standardize Metrics to measure impact and interoperability across different grantee implementations.

In focusing on these key areas, SkillsFWD grantees can demonstrate how to ensure long-term sustainability and broader adoption of LER ecosystems, fostering a more dynamic and skills-driven labor market.



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