

Micro-Credentials: Is Small the Next Big Thing?

October 2014 Town Hall Proceedings



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The town hall hosts were ...

- **Knapp & Associates International, Inc.**, a management consulting firm that has served more than 170 credentialing bodies over the last two decades. The firm's work is focused on helping organizations to maximize the business success of their credentialing programs through innovative marketing and business strategy.
- **Knapp Certification Re-Think Tank™**, an elite group of industry influencers convened to re-think, re-define and completely re-shape the business of certification. These innovative minds are working together to challenge and question every aspect of how our industry does business. Through their collective knowledge, experience and ingenuity, this group of leaders is crafting a blueprint for transforming certification organizations.

Knapp Certification Re-Think Tank™ 2014-2015 Panelists

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NetApp

Kory Ward-Cook, PhD, CAE
National Certification Commission for
Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine

Amy Schabacker Dufrane, EdD, SPHR, CAE
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Why host this town hall conversation?

- During its analysis of disruptive forces in the certification space, the Knapp Certification Re-Think Tank™ identified micro-credentials as an emerging disruptor which could have far reaching implications for the certification space and the larger credentialing landscape.
- The Re-Think Tank noted that conversation about micro-credentials within the certification community has been extremely limited. Although there have been some presentations on digital badges at industry conferences, digital badges are not synonymous with micro-credentials (although the terms are often used interchangeably) and presentations are not mechanisms for facilitating an open dialogue within the community.
- It also was noted that: (1) considerable work was being done outside the certification community on the concept of micro-credentials, (2) to date, the certification community had not had a voice in this work, and (3) much of this work was unknown to the certification community.
- In October 2014, Knapp & Associates International and the Knapp Certification Re-Think Tank™ hosted a virtual town hall meeting to: (1) provide a forum for a community conversation on micro-credentials and their potential impact on the certification space and (2) create an opportunity for the community to contribute to the shaping of the micro-credential concept. A total of 63 certification professionals, representing a wide range of industry verticals and occupations/professions, participated in the town hall event.

What was the focus of the conversation?

The conversation centered on the following questions:

- What is the definition of a micro-credential?
- What are the opportunities associated with micro-credentials?
- What are the challenges associated with micro-credentials?
- What role should the certification community play regarding micro-credentials?

So what is a micro-credential?

To get the conversation started, we proposed that ...

- The purpose of micro-credentials *could* be:
 - ✓ to recognize completion of formal or informal learning **and/or**
 - ✓ to represent completion of an assessment
- And examples of possible uses for micro-credentials might be:
 - ✓ An organization which sponsors a certification in tropical medicine and travelers' health offers a micro-credential in Ebola diagnosis to individuals who complete its knowledge assessment
 - ✓ An employee participating in her company's management program receives a micro-credential in basic supervision skills after her mentor attests to her skill acquisition
 - ✓ A residential construction trade association offers a micro-credential to individuals who complete its 1-day course in solar panel installation

Microcredentials ≠ Digital Badges

We also clarified that although digital badges *could* be used to represent micro-credentials, the two concepts are not interchangeable. Digital badges are a means of representing accomplishments and these accomplishments could include certifications, micro-credentials, academic degrees or achievements not formally recognized as “credentials.” And micro-credentials could be represented by a paper certificate, digital badge, or both.

Possible distinguishing features of micro-credentials (vs. certification):

- **Purpose:** A micro-credential endorses/attests to achievement of specific knowledge/skills/competencies; whereas, certification confirms that individuals have demonstrated a comprehensive, interrelated set of knowledge and skills required to competently perform a job role
- **Breadth:** Less than what is associated with a full job role
- **Psychometric rigor of assessments:** Micro-credentials may not require the same rigor as certification (e.g., depending on the circumstances, only face validity may be required)
- **Separation of education and assessments:** Unlike certification, education can be an element of the credential and can be provided by the credential sponsor
- **Letters awarded:** No letters after one's name are used to denote the attainment of the micro-credential
- **Credential maintenance:** Micro-credentials are NOT required to be time limited (i.e., continued professional development is not required to maintain them)

What participants said ...

- The majority of participants thought micro-credentials could be a means of identifying/acknowledging/verifying specific skills or specialized learning

“A narrowly focused credential, but a deep dive into a specific knowledge and/or skill area.”

- Other definitions that had traction with the group:

- A step towards a larger certification/credential

“A subset of a certification that recognizes achievement toward the larger credential.”

- A means of recognizing an achievement other than certification

“Recognizes achievements toward a bigger goal.”

Micro-credentials: Opportunities or Threats?

NOTE: All ideas in this section were contributed by participants

What are the potential opportunities associated with micro-credentials?

For Individuals:

- Offers “chunkable” learning opportunities
- Affords a convenient and cost-effective way to keep skills updated that fits with individuals’ busy schedules
- Offers the flexibility of combining learning with testing
- Describes a more focused and meaningful set of achievements
- Expands the potential value of the main credential by providing “mini” opportunities to achieve the certification
- Provides a way to bring entry-level candidates and those not yet eligible into the certification pipeline
- Minimizes up front costs for candidates

“Another name for it could be certification ‘gamification’ . . . smaller achievable goals . . . a way of driving participation.”

What are the potential opportunities associated with micro-credentials? (cont'd)

For Employers:

- Offers a vehicle for assessing continuing competency
- Ensures alignment with what employers need and want in order to improve the skills of their workforce
- Keeps employees current with the changing demands of the workplace, thus improving the bottom line

For Certifiers:

- Provides new incentives and motivation to get candidates involved in the certification program
- Allows for continuing candidate engagement throughout the credentialing life cycle
- Creates a potential revenue stream
- Expands the shelf of value-added products and services for customers
- Expands the role of certifiers by giving them the opportunity to work with educators and other partners

What are the potential challenges associated with micro-credentials?

- Creates confusion among critical stakeholder groups
 - ✓ Candidates: “What credential should I pursue?”
 - ✓ Employers: “How can I differentiate among job applicants? Is a group of micro-credentials a demonstration of expertise?”
- Devalues/dilutes/cannibalizes the current certifications offered
- Undermines the significance and value of the concept of certification for the whole certification industry
- Lessens the integrity, rigor and legal defensibility of the whole concept of credentialing
- A big expense for certifiers and financial burden for individuals for something that may not have long-term value
- On a positive note: *“The only threat is if we in certification look at this as a threat and put up ‘walls’ trying to fight the new trend. Why not expand our definition of ‘credentials’?”*

Should your organization be
thinking about a
micro-credential strategy?

What participants said ...

- 80% of attendees indicated their organization should be thinking about a micro-credential strategy
- 17% did not believe their organization should be thinking along these lines
- 3% were unsure

What should certifiers' role be in
defining micro-credentials and
their uses?

What participants said ...

- Take the lead and gather input (including determining the need for micro-credentials) from others inside and outside the certification community
- Speak with the same voice to stave off confusion among stakeholders
- Establish common definition/standards for micro-credentials by creating a taxonomy of credentials
- Develop a model and examples for creating quality micro-credentials rather than focusing on developing micro-credential standards and accreditation
- Most importantly, be open-minded about the potential of micro-credentials for our stakeholder groups and don't be restricted by current standards

“I think what is emerging and clear to me is that credentialing professionals need to be weighing in the conversation and helping to shape the future of micro-credentialing.”

Summing up

In general, the sentiment of the participants was that:

- there is a possible role for micro-credentials in the certification community and such credentials could benefit individuals, employers and certifiers in a variety of ways
- however, the entry of micro-credentials could result in even greater confusion about credentialing, leading to misunderstanding about what each type of credential represents, especially if the community does not speak with one voice on this topic
- the biggest threat to the certification community would be to ignore or stonewall the concept – the community should be proactive, make this an agenda item and participate in, if not lead, the conversation

Continue the discussion ...

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