

Education credential 'maze' confuses job seekers, hirers

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FULL TEXT

When Nate Tsang gets a resume from a job applicant to his company, WallStreetZen, he often sees credentials he's never heard of.

So these days, as part of the hiring process, he gets straight to the sometimes uncomfortable point: "I'm going to ask them what they learned."

Tsang, whose company provides stock research for investors, is among the many employers weighing the quality of a bewildering proliferation of education credentials on applicants' resumes and transcripts - and whether they're even real.

"There certainly are more and more certification programs every year," he said. "Unless it's an actual degree, I can't accept the certification at face value."

There is, in fact, a "maze" of nearly a million unique education credentials in the United States, the nonprofit Credential Engine reports, including not only degrees but also badges, certificates, licenses, apprenticeships and industry certifications. More have popped up during the pandemic as career-switchers seek education and training.

The result is confusion among employers scrambling for workers - and growing concern that unsavory players may be taking advantage to sell fraudulent credentials.

"What folks are struggling with is whether or not that credential means what it says it means," said Julie Uranis, vice president for online and strategic initiatives at the University Professional and Continuing Education Association.

More well-paying jobs require at least some education or training beyond high school - about 80 percent of them, according to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Eager providers, including universities and for-profit companies that offer training and education, are responding with a dizzying number of credential programs.

"The student market is incredibly tight, and [colleges] are just, 'Let's throw everything we can out there, and call it a badge or call it a certificate,'" said Shawn O'Riley, associate vice president of professional education and special programs at Pace University.

The way new kinds of credentials are being developed and awarded is "a bit like the wild West," a study by the Rutgers University Education and Employment Research Center found. (The study was underwritten by the Lumina Foundation, which is among the funders of The Hechinger Report.)

"There is no single set of standards, no mechanism or system to help workers, employers, policymakers, and educational institutions to define quality or to measure it," the Rutgers researchers concluded.

This doesn't mean that all the education isn't valid, Uranis said. But amid the clutter, it can be hard to tell.

"I could have a credential in cybersecurity, but if I got it from an entity that previously was focused on food handling, you have to worry about whether they're qualified to teach that subject matter," she said.

Learners and employers alike "have to be critical consumers," Uranis said. But given the flood of education and training programs and the scramble for workers, "having an employer verify what that credential is, it takes time, and not every hiring manager is going to have that kind of time."

That's especially true now, said John Dooney, an adviser at the Society for Human Resource Management, an association of human resource officers.

Even before the pandemic and the subsequent labor squeeze, 39 percent of human resources managers said they spent less than a minute reading a résumé, according to a survey by CareerBuilder.

Consumers, too, are probably looking for shortcuts, said Allen Ezell, a retired FBI agent who spent much of his career investigating education fraud and the often multinational scammers that sell credentials from made-up universities.

"The more pressure we put on people to have academic credentials, and the more important they are for opening the door or getting a raise or a promotion, the more the bad guys are going to take care of the demand side of the curve," Ezell said.

Even if they're looking for authentic education programs, prospective students have to navigate the complexities of higher education and its poorly understood accreditation system.

Providers "use the vagaries of accreditation to say, 'Hey, we're accredited by some made-up thing,' and that's enough to fool people," O'Riley said. "It allows bad actors to exploit that lack of understanding into students enrolling" in programs almost certain not to be accepted by employers or by universities for transfer credit. Conventional higher education institutions are increasingly alarmed about the holes that have developed in a system that was previously much simpler.

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers this year produced a 264-page guide to bogus institutions and documents to help its members wage what it calls "the complex battle against this kind of fraud."

"That book probably wasn't necessary 10 years ago," Dooney said.

A quarter of American adults now hold nondegree credentials, meaning something short of an associate or bachelor's degree, according to federal data, and they've become more popular in recent years. Among other things, advocates say, they encourage equity by giving consumers a way to get jobs without spending years in college getting degrees they don't need.

"If there's a way to get a really skilled employee in less time and with less effort, [companies] are really interested in that," O'Riley said. "But they struggle with that same question, which is, 'What's the real currency of an individual credential?'"

The answers, he said, are "all over the map."

But some of the hand-wringing by universities and colleges over the boom in educational credentials may actually mask concerns about new competition, said Amrit Ahluwalia, director of strategic insights at Modern Campus, which builds webpages for universities on which students can find their own previous credentials and be offered more.

"As online education becomes normalized, as a credential from Google or Microsoft can get someone a job, all of a sudden we're in an environment where higher education doesn't have a monopoly on education," Ahluwalia said. Universities themselves have been among the employers taken in by spurious credentials. In August, the managing director of a theater company operated by the University of Utah resigned when it was disclosed that he had claimed to have a master's degree he hadn't earned.

Attempts are being made to bring order to this chaos.

Credential Engine is building a registry of credentials with the formidable goal of eventually listing all of them, along with the format of instruction, whether they're accredited, how long they take and what jobs they may lead to.

"There are credentials that are offered legally that don't help move someone along," said Scott Cheney, chief executive of Credential Engine. "They leave people in debt, they don't lead to jobs, they aren't respected by employers. If you live in any major city, you're going to see ads on the bus advertising those programs. I want to make sure people can get information about whether or not what's in that ad has value or leads to a dead end."

A small industry of credential evaluators has sprung up to assess the quality of credentials for hiring managers

and universities. Other companies, such as Credly, validate digital credentials and what skills they represent in a way that can be checked easily online. The number of organizations using it has nearly doubled in the last year, Credly said.

"It's a sad situation to be in, but we pretty much look at every document with the sense of you're guilty until proven innocent," said Jasmin Saidi-Kuehnert, president and CEO of the Academic Credentials Evaluation Institute and board president of the Association of International Credential Evaluators.

The Credential Engine Registry so far includes full or partial information on about 30,000 educational credentials. That's about 3 percent of the total it eventually hopes to list.

Until then, "we're going to continue to be in this place where we're wondering" whether a credential is legitimate, said Uranis, whose organization just formed an Alternative Credentials Network to help set quality standards for these programs.

"Are we ever going to have a Kelley Blue Book or Consumer Reports for credentials? I don't know that we're ever going to have anything that comprehensive and specific. It might be a cluster of information sources," she said. "But that would be far and away better than what we have now."

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