

LER TOOLKIT CASE STUDY COLLECTION

Bridging the Gap from Incarceration to Employment

Prepared By:

Mary Hayes, Stephanie Taylor-Thompson, John Pallasch, Alice Hayes (Workbay), Krystal Rawls (CSUDH-WIN), Julie Keane (Participate), and Kelly Page (LWYL Studio).

September 2025

Workbay, in collaboration with California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) Workforce Integration Network (WIN) and Participate, engaged with incarcerated individuals to co-create a solution that identifies and translates skills acquired within incarcerated settings into structured digital credential assets. These assets are verifiable credentials that can be used to offer career exploration, targeted career pathways, and invitations to interview upon release.

Case Study Details

Scope: National

Sector: Judicial System

Industry: Workforce Development

Focus: Recognizing lived experience and supporting transitions from incarceration to employment.

Citation: Hayes, M., Taylor-Thompson, S., Pallasch, J., Hayes, A., Rawls, K., Keane, J., and Page, K (2025). *Bridging the Gap from Incarceration to Employment*, LER Toolkit Case Study Collection, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF), September 2025.

Introduction

Each year, over 600,000 individuals are released from incarceration in the United States. Yet, the vast majority reenter society with a record of their past transgressions, and very few leave with documented evidence of their skills, experiences, or learning. This gap between incarceration and employment is both systemic and solvable. Workbay, in partnership with Participate and Workforce Integration Network (WIN) at the California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), launched a pilot project through the ExperienceYou mentorship program to address this gap. By converting informal skills and learning experiences acquired inside correctional facilities into verifiable credentials, the project offers a path to employment, empowerment, and long-term reintegration.

Bridging the Gap for Incarcerated Workers

This collaborative pilot aims to recognize, validate, and digitize the lived experience and employment-relevant skills gained by incarcerated individuals through structured Learning and Employment Records (LERs). These LERs are issued using the Verifiable Credentials and 1EdTech Open Badges 3.0 standards, ensuring interoperability and long-term usability. The solution integrates with Workbay's career development platform, used across multiple community and judicial systems, allowing individuals to retrieve, share, and continue building upon their credentials post-release.

The pilot was designed to reflect the lived experiences of people impacted by incarceration and was informed by real-world personas such as Stephanie Taylor-Thompson, whose powerful journey from incarceration to legal education underscores the potential of this work.

Participant Engagement

The solution was co-designed with incarcerated individuals through an iterative and responsive process that respected correctional facility constraints and worker needs. Participants through the Workbay network of partnerships were invited to participate in the pilot and share their stories.

Many participants in the pilot faced literacy challenges or could not input free-form text, so the system utilized a guided, automated interview process with voice-to-text capabilities. This created a human-centered experience that allowed incarcerated individuals to articulate their skills, interests, goals, and work history on their own

terms. Participants could approve their transcripts before they were transformed into credential-worthy narratives.

Using Workbay AI-driven natural language processing to analyze narrative text, including inmate personal statements, and translate them into structured competency formats aligned to ONET. This includes the use of TF-IDF and other semantic tools to extract, prioritize, and map skill-relevant phrases to nationally recognized job classifications.

Technical Implementation

The automated interview tool functioned as the primary data intake mechanism. Designed with the unique environment of correctional facilities in mind, it accommodated voice inputs and translated speech into structured text using natural language processing. Approved transcripts were mapped against O*Net and Credential Engine frameworks to identify relevant, in-demand skills and competencies. These were then converted into Open Badges 3.0-compliant Verifiable Credentials. These credentials were stored securely in Workbay's database and made accessible via the national Workbay platform upon an individual's release.

As a future-facing extension of this work, the pilot explores the possibility of correctional institutions acting as credential issuers, formally recognizing incarcerated labor and skill-building experiences within the correctional setting. The product stack and credential model are outlined below.

Product Stack

Product Name	Role(s)
Workbay	Issuer
Workbay	Holder credential management
DCC VerifierPlus	Verifier

Credential Model

Category	Implementation
Verifiable Credential Data Model Version	VCDM 1.1
Credential Specification	Open Badges 3.0

Interoperability is critical for digital wallets and LER credential solutions to ensure that the credentials and data can be understood, trusted, and accepted across systems. We invited the project team to share a detailed interoperability profile of the technical specifications and protocol choices they made. A complete interoperability profile is available in the appendix.

Key Findings

Since completing the first pilot, the project has informed statewide adoptions for Texas and Florida, engaging over 200,000 incarcerated people (with an approx. 30% annual release rate) and several thousand employers. The LERs are created and accessible to individuals during incarceration and for 2 years post-release. This is an exceptional outcome and testament to the project's long-term success.

Several key findings emerged from the pilot. These included:

- ❖ **Human-centered design is essential.** The tailored approach ensured meaningful participation with incarcerated individuals, many of whom struggle with digital or written literacy.
- ❖ **Incarcerated individuals hold valuable, unrecognized skills.** These competencies are often overlooked, from cooking and carpentry to leadership and logistics.
- ❖ **LERs can improve post-release employment outcomes** when employers are engaged in the process. When skills are made visible and verifiable, they become actionable for employers and job seekers.
- ❖ **Community support is vital.** This work cannot be left solely to Corrections; community-led solutions and partners, including local, state, and private stakeholders, must drive it.

Challenges and Opportunities

Some challenges and opportunities identified from the experience include:

Challenges	Opportunities
❖ Technological limitations within correctional environments ❖ Lack of digital literacy among some incarcerated individuals necessitated further education for Workbay's User Experience Designer, who had to overcome initial presumptions through coaching by the incarcerated participants. ❖ Educating employers' perceptions to emphasize Learning and Employment Records, and overcoming the stigma of transgression records.	❖ Expansion of LER issuance to other correctional systems, State, Federal, and County ❖ Broader use of resources like O*Net, Credential Engine, and other skills inventories for more detailed skills-mapping ❖ Continued development of voice-to-text and interview tools tailored for vulnerable populations.

Recommendations

Recommendations for next steps from the pilot include:

- ❖ **Engage incarcerated individuals in design.** Co-creating solutions increases usability and impact.
- ❖ **Invest in credentialing infrastructure inside correctional institutions.** Recognizing labor inside prison settings legitimizes experience.
- ❖ **Build employer and community partnerships early.** Educate employers and partners about LERs to counterbalance stigma around hiring people with criminal records.
- ❖ **Ensure post-release access.** Make LERs easy to retrieve, share, and build upon through mobile and web platforms.

Conclusion

The “Bridging the Gap from Incarceration to Employment” pilot proves how human-centered technology can create pathways to equity, reintegration, and empowerment. By validating the lived experience and hidden skills of incarcerated individuals, the collaboration between Workbay, Participate, and CSUDH-WIN is

creating a future where everyone can be recognized for what they know and can do, not just what they've done.

Sources

1. USCCF (2023) [Experience You Phase 1 Demonstration](#). Report. October.
2. Workbay: <https://www.workbay.net>
3. Participate: <https://www.participate.com>
4. CSUDH Workforce Integration Network: <https://win.csudh.edu/>
5. Credential Engine: <https://credentialengine.org>
6. O*Net Online: <https://www.onetonline.org>

Attribution

We extend our gratitude and acknowledgement to the following people, organizations, and funders who contributed to the project.

People	Organizations	Funders
❖ Mary Hayes ❖ Stephanie Taylor-Thompson ❖ John Pallasch ❖ Krystal Rawls ❖ Julie Keanes	❖ Workbay ❖ California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) Workforce Integration Network (WIN) ❖ Participate	❖ Workbay

Appendix: Interoperability Profile

Project teams shared information about the open standards and protocols they used to support interoperability and integration of the end-to-end experience.

Category	Item	Implementation
Product Stack	Issuer Product(s)	Workbay
	Holder Credential Management Product(s)	Workbay
	Verifier Product(s)	DCC VerifierPlus
Identifiers	Issuer Identifier Type	did:key, did:web
	Holder Identifier Type	did:key, did:web
	Verifier Identifier Type	None
Credential Model	VC Data Model Version	VCDM 1.1
	Credential Specification	Open Badges 3.0
	Skill Alignment	OB Alignment to URL
	Metadata Extensions (e.g., CTDL)	Alignment to CTDL URLs
	Skills Library or Framework Used	O*Net Online, Credential Engine
Security	VC Proof Type / Cryptosuite	Data Integrity proof
	Credential Status Method	Bitstring Status List 1.0
	Credential Expiration	None
	Credential Refresh Method	None
	Issuer Authority Confirmation	None

Category	Item	Implementation
Authentication	Holder Authentication Method	DID Auth via CHAPI
Delivery	Delivery Protocol to Holder	CHAPI
	VC Export Options	Download JSON
	Presentation Protocol Supported	CHAPI (Presentation Request for OB)
Registries & Discovery	Issuer Registry	None
	Verifier Registry	None

Source: This Interoperability Profile Template was developed by LWYL Studio from interoperability frameworks developed by Project Unicorn, 2023; CBEN, 2022; SkillsFWD, 2024; EDL, 2024; and LWYL Studio, 2025.