Origins of SkillsFwd

SkillsFWD was launched in 2023 at a pivotal moment for the future of skills-based learning and hiring in the United States. A collaborative of funders recognized that while momentum around skills-based practices was growing, the infrastructure needed to support those practices—particularly Learning and Employment Records (LERs)—remained largely conceptual and underdeveloped. There was a clear opportunity to make targeted, strategic investments that could help move LERs from theory into practice and shape how skills-based systems would evolve in real labor markets.

At the time, LERs were beginning to gain traction as a promising approach to digitally capture, verify, and share individuals' skills and competencies across education and employment contexts. However, most efforts were limited to pilots or isolated use cases, with few examples demonstrating how LERs could function across an end-to-end user lifecycle or be adopted at scale. The vision for SkillsFWD was to accelerate this transition by supporting projects that could demonstrate how LERs can unlock opportunity for learners and workers while addressing existing and future labor market needs.

To bring this vision to life, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA), with support from a collaborative of funders led by Walmart, launched SkillsFWD as a first-of-its-kind initiative focused on advancing skills-based hiring and economic mobility through the development and application of digital LERs. SkillsFWD was intentionally designed not as a single platform or product, but as a portfolio of place-based, sector-anchored demonstrations that could generate practical evidence and shared learning for the field.

SkillsFWD awarded inaugural grants of $1.4 million each to teams working to advance interoperable LER ecosystems. Grantees were selected based on their ability to demonstrate proof-of-concept for how skills-based hiring and economic mobility can be enabled through the real-world application of LERs. Importantly, teams were expected to enter the initiative with strong partnerships already in place including training providers, employers, workforce organizations, and technology partners so they could focus on implementation rather than early coalition building.

Together, these investments marked an ambitious step toward bringing LERs into the mainstream and laying the groundwork for a more equitable, skills-based future.

SkillsFWD Grantees

ACCELERATEMT

WGU Western Governors University

cael

Colorado Workforce Development Council

ASU

C-BEN Competency-Based Education Network

ASPYR Workforce Innovation

Where We Began

The state of the LER ecosystem in 2023

When SkillsFWD began in 2023, LERs were becoming a known concept within workforce development and education communities, but real-world implementations were limited and uneven. Many stakeholders understood the potential of LERs to support skills-based hiring and lifelong learning, yet few had seen working examples that demonstrated how these systems could operate end-to-end or deliver value at scale.

Across the country, workforce boards, educational institutions, and state agencies were beginning to articulate strategies to move toward skills-based practices. In some cases, these strategies included plans for digital credentials, competency-based education, or data systems that could better capture learning and work experiences. However, most efforts remained aspirational, constrained by fragmented infrastructure, limited coordination and resources, and uncertainty about standards and governance.

At the same time, technology vendors were starting to incorporate LER concepts into their product roadmaps. Many developed wireframes or conceptual designs to illustrate what their LER technology might look like, and a small number launched early pilots. Yet adoption was slow, in part because few implementations demonstrated clear, end-to-end use cases that connected issuing, storage, sharing, and use of records in hiring or advancement decisions.

Standards for digital credentials and interoperability were also emerging, with some specifications established and others still under development. Buy-in across the ecosystem was inconsistent, and technology vendors did not always have clear incentives to align with shared standards. As a result, the LER ecosystem remained fragmented, limiting trust, portability, and scalability.

This was the landscape into which SkillsFWD launched: a field characterized by growing interest and early momentum, but also by gaps between vision and practice. SkillsFWD was intentionally designed to address these gaps by supporting demonstration projects that could move beyond planning and prototypes to real-world implementation, generating evidence, lessons learned, and actionable insights to help mature the LER ecosystem and accelerate the transition to skills-based hiring.

T3 LER Ecosystem Map

Purpose

SkillsFWD was designed to serve as a catalyst for organizations that had already laid foundational groundwork for skills-based systems and LER infrastructure. The initiative focused on accelerating efforts that had foundational partnerships and objectives in place that could be strengthened by expansion of differing aspects needed to establish a full LER ecosystem.

Applicants were expected to build upon existing tools, systems, or strategies to show how LERs can be made more interoperable, how awareness and capacity for adoption can be increased, and how access can be expanded to new user groups, particularly learners and workers who have historically been underserved by traditional credentialing and hiring systems. Projects were expected to be ready to demonstrate end-to-end LER implementation, with an emphasis on interoperability, adoption, and measurable impact.

To support this goal, SkillsFWD set clear expectations for awarded projects. Grantees were required to demonstrate the full LER lifecycle, connecting learners and workers to education and workforce opportunities through verifiable use cases and clearly articulated user journeys. Projects were expected to align with the SkillsFWD Guiding Principles, Rights, Responsibilities, and Commitments, ensuring that implementations centered user agency, trust, privacy, and equity.

In addition, each project was required to address a defined sector-based or regional labor market challenge grounded in relevant data and a clear statement of need. Teams were expected to track and report on metrics of success, incorporate user-centered design and feedback throughout the grant period, engage key stakeholders across the ecosystem, and present a plan for scaling beyond the scope of the pilot.

The initiative's objectives, as articulated in the original RFP, included:

- Launching LER lifecycle infrastructure that connects learners and workers to education and workforce opportunities and lays the foundation for scale;
- Defining and demonstrating clear value propositions for stakeholders involved in developing, issuing, using, and adopting LERs;
- Generating insights, outputs, and outcomes that demonstrate progress toward interoperability and lifecycle adoption;
- Identifying remaining research, technical assistance, and coordination needs to enable broader adoption; and
- Informing state and national policy changes needed to overcome barriers to equitable LER adoption, including issues related to credential quality, data interoperability, privacy, trust, and the responsible use of artificial intelligence.

Through these aims, SkillsFWD sought not only to support individual projects, but also to advance the field as a whole.

How does SkillsFWD Define Learning and Employment Record (LER)?

Digital records of learning and experience that are linked to and controlled by learners and earners. An interoperable, well-governed LER ecosystem has the potential to transform the future of work so that it is more equitable, efficient, and effective for everyone involved: individuals, multiple credentials issuers, employers, and policymakers.