02. The Team

The SkillsFWD initiative was carried out by a nimble team of contractors working in close coordination to support grantees and advance the initiative's objectives. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) serves as the initiative's operational foundation and fiscal sponsor. The contractor team was responsible for the day-to-day execution of the work, serving as the primary interface with grantees and ecosystem stakeholders.

Organized to align with the core functions of the initiative, the SkillsFWD Team operated as an integrated set of partners delivering implementation support, evaluation and reporting, technical and user experience assessment, and communications. The specific roles and responsibilities of each group are detailed in the sections that follow: **Project Implementation, Research and Discovery, Technology** and **IUX Assessment, and Communications.**



Interoperability & IUX Assessment



Nate Otto
Technical Assessment

Nate Otto is a digital credentialing technology leader and founder of Skybridge Skills, where he develops standards-based tools that support open recognition and interoperable credential ecosystems. He brings deep technical expertise from leading development of digital credentialing platforms, like Badgr, and contributing to Open Badges and verifiable credential standards across the credentialing ecosystem.

For SkillsFWD, Nate led the creation of the interoperability assessment process and facilitated formative and summative assessments with grantees, providing follow-up support and targeted technical assistance to advance learner-centered, standards-aligned LER implementations.



Robert Bajor
Technical Assessment

Robert Bajor is a nationally recognized leader in digital credentialing and skills-based workforce systems, with over 15 years of experience designing interoperable, learner-centered credential ecosystems. He brings a practitioner's perspective shaped by founding Micro-credential Multiverse and advising national organizations on equitable, skills-first credential strategies.

For SkillsFWD, Rob helped design the interoperability assessment framework and led the tracking and documentation of grantee progress, ensuring consistent evaluation, evidence capture, and alignment with emerging LER standards.



Chioma Aso-Hernandez
IUX Assessment

Chioma Aso-Hernandez is a UX researcher on the Pathways team at Digital Promise, where she centers inclusive and human-centered design in the development of learner-focused technologies and research initiatives. She brought experience in qualitative research, user experience, and inclusive design to help ensure that digital learning and employment record solutions reflect diverse perspectives and real user needs.

For SkillsFWD, Chioma led the Inclusive User Experience (IUX) assessment, guiding grantees through research-informed evaluation of usability and accessibility, and helping translate insights into design improvements that support equitable, learner-centered experiences.

Goals

- Ensure the ecosystems developed and scaled by grantees are interoperable through identified open standards, so that they can expand through further interoperability based on these standards.
- Document the implementation choices within each ecosystem to generate insights and identify needs for additional research, technical resources, and coordination to further the mass adoption of skills-based hiring systems that use LER tools.
- Provide accurate information to SkillsFWD leadership and funders about the success or failure of funded projects to fulfill all technical rights and responsibilities.
- Ensure LER and Digital Wallet technologies center the lived experiences of learners and workers, especially those in historically and systematically excluded communities.
- Ensure technology alignment with industry standards and best practices for inclusivity and accessibility.

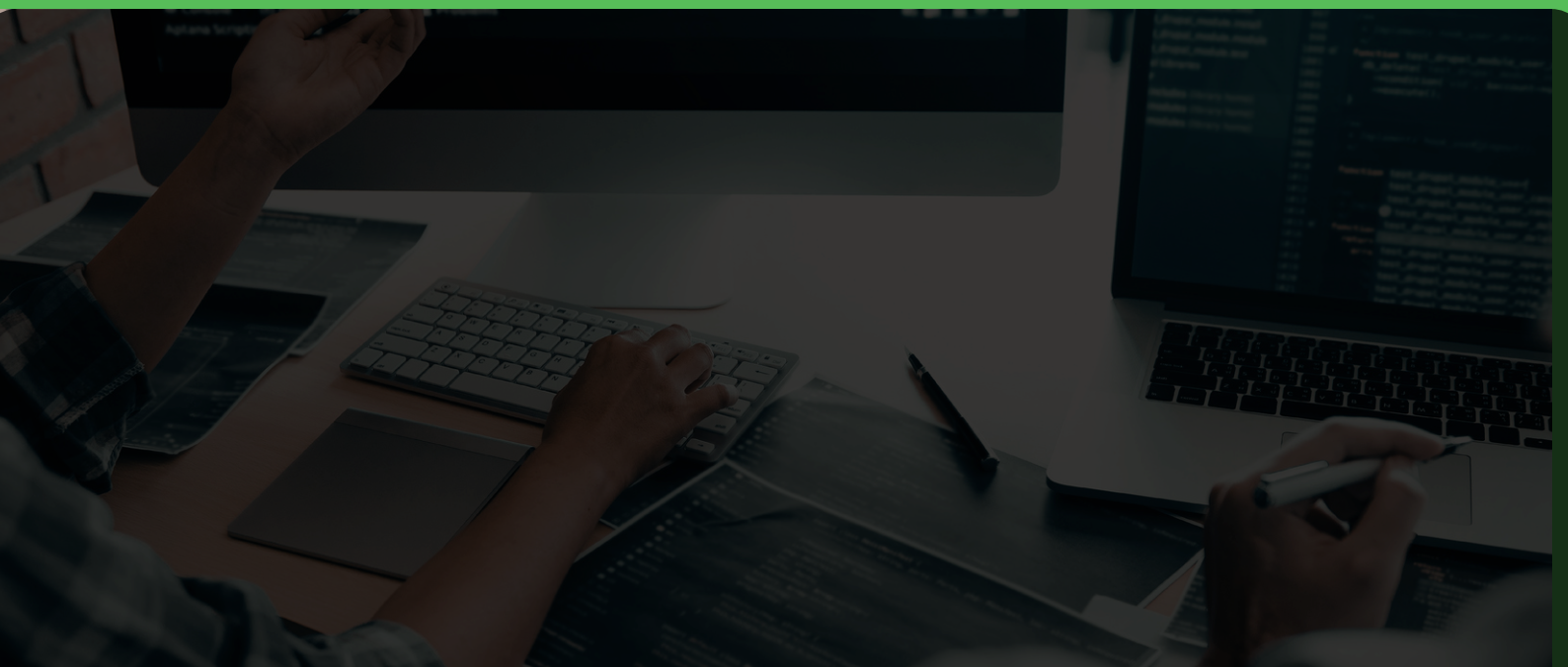
Approach

The Interoperability and IUX Assessment Team worked collaboratively to guide grantees in demonstrating adherence to the Principles, Rights, and Responsibilities (PRRs) outlined in the RFP related to interoperability and inclusive user design (IUX). The team's work was integrated into a single, coordinated process, with all assessments and technical assistance documented in a SkillsFWD Project Dashboard.

Formative Assessment
Approximately eight months into the grant period, the formative assessment phase provided grantees with an opportunity to understand their progress relative to the PRRs and identify areas for improvement. Each grantee team participated in a single, collaborative session covering both IUX and interoperability criteria, guided by the assessment team. Following these sessions, the team updated the SkillsFWD Project Dashboard to reflect which PRRs had been met and to highlight areas where targeted support could help grantees advance toward full alignment.

Targeted Technical Assistance
Following the formative assessments, the Technical Assistance Team provided individualized support tailored to each grantee's needs. For grantees who had not fully met all PRRs, the team helped develop strategies to address gaps. For grantees who had met most or all PRRs, the team focused on maximizing project impact, including support in completing the full IUX Assessment Plan. This ongoing technical assistance ensured that all grantees were prepared for the summative assessment and positioned to maximize the outcomes of their initiatives.

Summative Assessment and Recognition
In the final phase, the assessment team evaluated each grantee's progress against all PRRs, again combining both IUX and interoperability criteria in a coordinated session. The SkillsFWD Project Dashboard was updated to reflect completed PRRs, and the Technical Assistance Team worked with grantees to create plans for any remaining areas needing attention. Upon successful completion of the summative assessment, grantees were able to claim digital badges recognizing their achievements and documenting adherence to PRRs, providing both accountability and formal acknowledgment of their success.



Lessons Learned

- **Trust is built through demonstrated functionality.** SkillsFWD reinforced that trust in LER systems is earned, not assumed. By rigorously assessing platforms for usability, security, and standards-based interoperability, the process surfaced risks early and strengthened confidence among learners, employers, and credential issuers. This emphasis on transparency and continuous improvement helped prevent downstream "failure at use" moments that often remain hidden until deployment.
- **Interoperability requires technical rigor and human-centered design.** There is no single technical pathway to effective LER implementation. SkillsFWD successfully paired machine-readable interoperability with human-understandable design, adapting assessment mechanisms to diverse technical stacks and regional contexts. This flexibility ensured open standards were implemented in practice without forcing projects into rigid or artificial architectures.
- **Visibility and feedback drive action.** The assessment process went beyond evaluation by making progress visible and actionable. Clear dashboards, phased formative and summative assessments, and detailed technical feedback created shared accountability and real-time learning loops. As a result, all teams measurably improved interoperability and standards conformance between assessment rounds.
- **Structured assessment can shift behavior and strengthen ecosystems.** By anchoring grant requirements in concrete interoperability expectations, SkillsFWD empowered teams to apply constructive pressure on technology vendors to adopt current standards. While challenging at times, this approach led to meaningful vendor updates and demonstrated that assessment frameworks can be a powerful lever for ecosystem-wide change—without directly funding all development.
- **Clear expectations enable scale.** One of the most durable outcomes of SkillsFWD was the creation of a shared vocabulary across technologists, educators, employers, and implementers. Publishing assessment tools, checklists, and interoperability profiles can help future teams plan more effectively, support cross-project interoperability, and accelerate scaling through collaboration rather than duplication.

Helpful Resources

- Technical Interoperability Assessment Plan - This was the plan that the assessment team followed to assess the technical interoperability of each project. This process can be modified and used by teams to help set expectations and create accountability with their vendors.
- Technical Interoperability Assessment Template - This was the template that the assessment team used to document the results of the formative and summative technical interoperability assessments. This template can be modified and used by teams to document actual functionality areas in need of improvement in their tech systems.
- Interoperability Workflow Overview - This guide helps teams implement and demonstrate end-to-end LER workflows: issuing, holding, and verifying credentials. It outlines three common models that can be followed to achieve a standards-compliant end-to-end demonstration.
- IUX Assessment Template - This was the template that the assessment team used to document the results of the formative and summative IUX assessments. This template can be modified and used by teams to document actual functionality areas in need of improvement in their tech systems.