

Illinois workNet System, NOCTI Partner for

REAL-WORLD CREDENTIALS



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BY NATASHA TELGER AND JOHN FOSTER

Credentials, credentialing systems and credentialing agencies have taken on a level of significance that has propelled the visibility of the topic into the mainstream media. This focus on credentials is a result of a larger issue; employers want workers with skills, both technical and soft skills, and workers need to demonstrate they have these skills. But what does it all mean? What credentials are getting people jobs and meeting employer needs? Credentials can include information like courses completed, experiences gained, assessments passed, and sometimes these pieces of information culminate in diplomas or certifications received by passing nationally validated examinations.

For workers, obtaining credentials provides a competitive edge and validates possession of specific technical knowledge and skills. Through the use of an objective assessment tied to a recognized set of national standards, a credential can certify that an individual is ready for specialized employment.

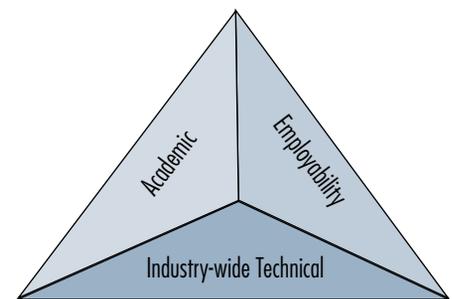
How does one know which assessments to select to provide a credential that is meaningful to the employer? The decision can be difficult since there are many options. Some argue that some credentialing agencies are profit-motivated, with less of a focus on test security, objectivity and national standards. Still, others would argue that the standards can be proprietary or focused on a single company's operations. Keep those views in mind when making a choice, but here are a few other things to consider:

- Is the credentialing agency a leading national provider of high-quality occupational competency assessment products?

- Do they have existing assessments for your audience?
- Do they have experience working with, or endorsements from, employers and educational institutions?
- Are the assessments based on national standards?
- Do industry associations endorse or recognize specific assessments?
- Do they provide services that include test development, written and performance assessments that can be delivered in an online format, scoring services, and specialized reporting?
- What is the assessment review/update schedule?
- Do they offer an assessment format that is accessible to individuals with a disability?
- How many assessments are required to cover the material?
- Is there curriculum to help prepare individuals with the required skills?
- Does the cost of the assessment fit within a budget?

Is there any one assessment that provides a college- and career-ready individual for employers? In Illinois, Illinois workNet early adopters would say no. This is why: National and state standards, employers and various task forces bringing together education, government and employers play a role in identifying acceptable standards for work. A common theme is that a college- and career-ready workforce needs to have a combination of academic skills, industry-wide technical skills, and employability (soft) skills (see Figure 1). To meet the workforce needs, all Local Workforce Investment Areas (LWIAs) in Illinois use a grassroots partnership approach that recognizes the local experts in each primary skill area.

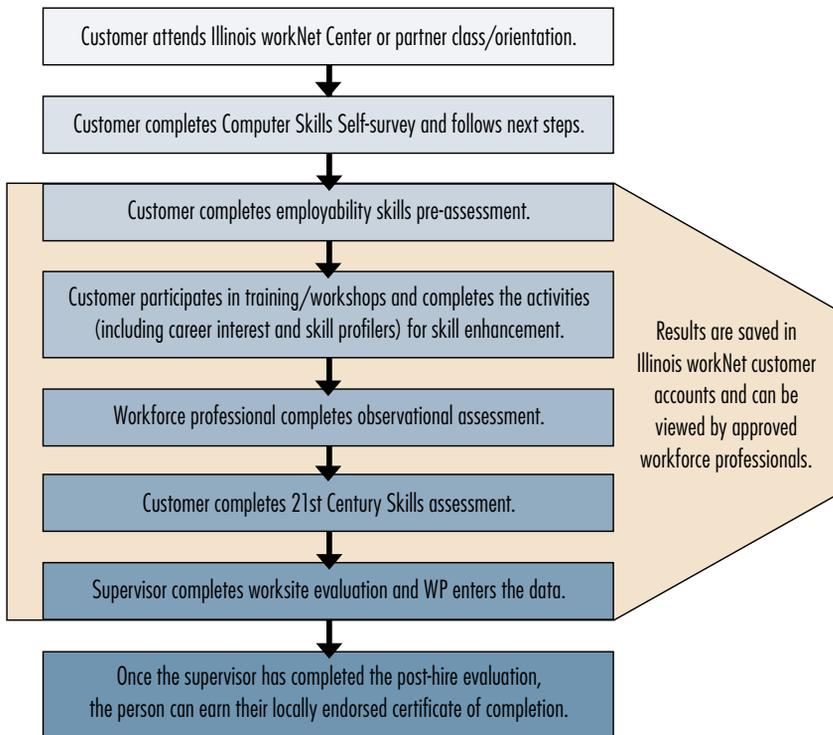
Figure 1: College- and Career-ready Skills



Through efforts of a recently formed Statewide Employability Assessment working group, some are using local endorsement from businesses as one type of credential. What is different about the approach is it uses a set of service, training and assessments that together help guarantee a qualified workforce. Workers may have earned valuable credentials, but the point is that employers endorse the local Illinois workNet program based on overall outcomes, not any one credential.

For example, local experts for each of these skill areas are available statewide. The local experts train and assess individuals in local school districts, community colleges, technical schools, universities and other training institutions. Some of those locations use national assessments in technical areas and programs of study. One example of a provider that offers national technical assessments is NOCTI. They provide technical certification exams for numerous credentialing partners. Some of these credentialing partners include: Manufacturing Skills Standards Council, National Association of Homebuilders, American Culinary Federation, Plumbing Heating and Cooling Coalition, and the North American

Figure 2: Assessments Accessible Through Illinois workNet



Technicians of Excellence. In fact, these partners are currently working together on a project that will assure a consistent pathway for students trying to obtain industry credentials.

Academic/technical skills and credentials may get you in the employer’s door, but soft skills help keep you there. Workforce Investment Areas are great resources for helping people obtain employability (soft) skills. They offer resources for helping people explore careers and training programs to lead them to pursue occupations that match their skills and interests. They offer many resources for workplace skills to help people find job openings, get jobs, keep jobs, and excel to meet their career goals. In Illinois, a variety of assessments have been used to assess work readiness (academic and technical) and soft skills (see Figure 2), and they have been documented in the Illinois Workforce Development System (IWDS) federal reporting system.

What approach is Illinois workNet taking? Illinois workNet, the state’s primary online workforce development Web site and resource for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) services, is addressing the need for credentials not by focusing on any one assessment, but by working with partners to implement a customer service approach that integrates a set of assessments throughout a continuum of services. This set of available assessments includes skill and interest profiles, pre-assessments, work-readiness activities, and work-readiness assessments that include observational notes by instructors and employers. The outcome focus is a promise, to customers and employers, to meet employment needs. The first step in addressing this need was convening a workgroup in partnership with Chicago Workforce Investment Council, Illinois Workforce Professionals programmatic committee members, and other LWIA directors. The focus of the group is to identify outcomes benefitting workers and employers.

Figure 3: Illinois workNet Skills Wheel



A History of Collaboration

In June of 2005 the Governor's Illinois Workforce Investment Board launched Illinois workNet, with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity taking the lead and sponsoring implementation. The Web site (www.illinoisworknet.com) and program that resulted are based upon partnerships and technology to expand seamless and real-time access to workforce development resources for individuals, businesses and workforce professionals.

A Cutting-edge Program

Customer-driven changes and partner collaboration have been the cornerstone of success for Illinois workNet. The site is integral to the WIA continuum of services—connecting workforce professionals, businesses and individuals in Illinois. For individuals, the program is focused

on preparing a college- and career-ready workforce. Within the WIA continuum of services, LWIAs work with local partners to ensure their customers can gain the necessary academic, technical and employability skills to meet local employment needs. The focus of the LWIA staff is connecting customers to work support services, training for in-demand occupations, and providing expertise and resources to teach the employability skills that are essential for a training-ready or career-ready individual.

The Illinois workNet portal is a tool used by LWIA staff and partners to help prepare individuals and, ultimately, connect them to employers. As part of the workforce system, Illinois workNet offers a variety of assessments that help direct individuals toward exploring careers and training that match their skills and interests. In addition, it also offers work-

readiness activities and assessments that have been used in ARRA Summer Youth Employment Programs since 2009.

In 2009-2010, a Case Management Workflow Study identified how these assessments and tools can be used within the WIA continuum of services. As a result, it also identified the need for a common validated work-readiness assessment. Options were reviewed to identify an affordable, validated work-readiness assessment that included soft skills attributable to success in today's workforce, and could be offered through customer accounts. The NOCTI 21st Century Skills for Workplace Success (21SWS) was selected as a non-occupation-specific employability assessment to be made available as a free resource for Illinois workNet partners. This assessment covers the core knowledge and skill areas from the career cluster movement, as well as content that

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The 21SWS assessment includes an evaluation of reading, math and writing skills, speaking and listening skills, computer literacy, reasoning, problem-solving and decision making, understanding the big picture, work ethic, bringing a positive attitude, independence and

initiative, self-presentation, importance of attendance, and the importance of being a team member.

How It Works

- **Step 1:** Workforce professionals use the Illinois workNet activities and resources to identify skills and

interests and prepare participants with work-readiness knowledge. These resources are available on www.illinoisworknet.com. Additional resources and guidance are provided for Illinois workNet partners through the workNet professionals' pathway. This guidance can be used to prepare participants for the NOCTI assessment, as well as the other assessments that are offered through Illinois workNet.

- **Step 2:** Illinois workNet partner sites have the ability to order the NOCTI 21st Century Skills for Workplace Success Assessment from their Illinois workNet workforce professionals' pathway dashboard. Once they agree to NOCTI terms of use, they are provided access to order assessments and proctor materials.
- **Step 3:** In a proctored environment, the assessments are distributed electronically to the participant through his or her Illinois workNet account.

After the results have been marked as official through NOCTI, participants can access their results within their account, and case managers or instructors can view and track assessment results. If the participant scored low in an area, or if he or she wants to learn more, the individual can click on a specific NOCTI skill area for more information. Each NOCTI skill area is cross-referenced back to the Illinois workNet Skills Wheel (Figure 3), which provides 12 skill areas that are needed for participants to be ready for college and careers. The skill areas are cross-walked to a compilation of the national and state standards, and IWIB task force recommendations. The Skills Wheel uses scenarios, activities, definitions, links to additional resources, and next steps for participants to enhance their skills and to prepare for work-readiness assessments.

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participant results and run reports based on their specified customer groups (youth, adult, dislocated worker), site/location, and compare results to statewide and national data. This integrated, seamless system was collaboratively designed to not only assess and report workplace competence, but stored information in Illinois workNet can be synced to update the IWDS state reporting system.

Early Results

The concept of LWIAs working in partnership with academic and occupational training providers to help individuals become college- and career-ready is not new. However, using technology to streamline the process, offering a consistent set of free activities, resources and assessments through Illinois workNet, and gaining local program endorsement on the holistic

approach is new. The early adopters began in September this year, and the program was made available to other partners in October.

Illinois workNet early adopters have taken the approach of incorporating the series of assessments and resources into their process. Most early adopters have decided to start using the assessment with their youth program. For example, they are providing the following items in an individual self-accessed or group setting:

- assessments to identify skills and interests;
- activities to help participants explore careers, find training programs, learn workplace skills, and find/apply for jobs;
- workplace skill feedback based on observations in a group setting (includes soft skills);

- workplace skill online assessment (includes soft skills); and
- worksite evaluation for employer feedback (includes soft skills).

Although this program is in its early stages, there has been much excitement about integrating the NOCTI 21st Century Skills for Workplace Success assessment and resources into the WIA continuum of services' local approach. The streamlining process makes it easy to access, distribute and use. **T**

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