

# Digital Badging for Library Staff

Implementation, Motivation, and Limitations

This session will focus on the practical side of implementing a digital badging program for staff in a public library in the United States. The presenter will outline real-world experiences and findings related to staff training motivation and will discuss the challenges and limitations of the program.

# Jennifer Wright

EdD, MS, MLIS

Administration,  
Spartanburg County Public Libraries

in Spartanburg, South Carolina,  
United States



# SPARTANBURG LIBRARIES



- **Library Location:** Spartanburg, South Carolina, United States
- **Community:** Population of 335,000 in 819 square miles | Mix of dense suburban and rural areas | Increasing development and investment
- **Library:** Founded in 1885 | A main library and 9 satellite libraries around the county, as well as a bookstore
- **Staffing:** About 220 staff, plus volunteers, interns, and Friends of the Library
- **Training:** Training department with three staff and a designated budget to cover LMS, conferences, and other training expenses

- It is important to be transparent about the size and resources of my library system because different libraries have very different structures and resources.
- SCPL is located in a large county with an increasing population and a successful manufacturing industry.
- The library system is fairly old for our area, having started in 1885.
- We have 11 facilities and about 215 staff.
- We are one of the few libraries in South Carolina fortunate enough to have an actual training department with dedicated funds.
- I know many libraries in the area that do not have these funds. Still, badging can be an option.

# BADGING: BENEFITS



Organizational  
training  
requirements  
more likely to  
be met



Employee  
community  
built through  
gamification/  
competition



Opportunities  
for individual's  
professional  
growth

- This presentation will by no means include a comprehensive summary of badging as a topic. There are many other researchers and writers who have done the literature reviews.
- However, from the literature, I have noticed that badging and microcredentialing were long discussed in terms of being “exciting,” “new,” and “innovative,” even though the concepts have been around for a while now. I am always interested when the novelty wears off something and we get down to actual, practical research on the topic.
- I feel like we are starting to move in that direction. Research has started to find quantitative benefits from the use of badges, in some situations, for some students, some of the time. As with any sociological phenomenon, badging as a training or teaching aid is complex to measure and assess. However, we can now start to identify more confidently some possible benefits...
- I’m going to focus on possible benefits through the lens of libraries, and more specifically my own public library employer. First, as I will discuss further when I break down my own research, badges seem to increase the motivation of staff to complete required training, beyond some sort of punitive action for not completing training. In the context of my library system, required training includes topics such as safety and security, customer service, library services, EDI (equity/diversity/inclusion), and personnel policies.
- Badging seems to motivate more staff to complete their required training in a timely manner. Having a structure for gamification and competition through badging can also help build at-work community and conversation. Perhaps obviously, badging can also encourage individuals to pursue professional growth. This can be through assigning badges to the completion of soft skills training—even training related to stress relief, mental health, and wellness—or, more formally, but using badges to create pathways to special projects and promotions.

# BADGING: CHALLENGES



Data and research on the effectiveness of badging remains sparse and conflicting.



Employers and educators have mixed reactions to badges and microcredentials.



Many libraries face technology, budget, and staffing barriers to badging.

- I want to acknowledge some potential issues associated with badging, although I'll talk more specifically about problems we have encountered at SCPL later in the presentation. First, as I touched on earlier, the data about the effectiveness of badging—whether in training completion or in long-term learning—remains fairly sparse and conflicting. We may see conflicting research on this indefinitely—human psychology is vastly complex and everyone's motivating factors are different.
- Two other, more practical problems are that a large number of employers and educators don't seem to have much interest in badging or place much value in micro-credentials. These can be engrained attitudes that only change slowly over time if they see evidence that badges do support learning or even that microcredentials can be successfully used to grow careers. In addition, so many libraries specifically have limitations in budget, staffing, and technology that limit their ability to roll out badging programs.

# DIGITAL BADGING PROGRAM AT SCPL

- **LMS:** Learning Management System – Docebo, \$13,000 per year for access for +/- 220 employees
- **Courses:** Key courses selected focused on training for safety/security, customer service, or specific work-related skills
- **Badges:** Title, icon, and link to selected course, as well as the option to assign a point value



- As I get into talking about the digital badging program we set up, I want to be very transparent about the resources that went into my article. The badges I am discussing were made in a specific piece of Learning Management System software called Docebo.
- The Docebo price is about \$13,000 per year and that is based on number of employees. Unless you're familiar with digital subscriptions, there may be some surprise in that number but quite frankly many learning management systems are even more expensive, and the more functionality you want the higher the price. Obviously the LMS was the first component of our system, followed by the courses.
- During the pandemic, we were doing only digital learning, although we have since returned to in-person trainings as well. We set up hundreds of courses in the LMS—some internally created, some purchased, and some embedded from external sources. Setting up an LMS from scratch is a huge endeavor and if that's something you are interested in, expect a significant investment of staff time. The final component was setting up the badges themselves, which involved creating a title, description, and point value along with identifying and uploading an appropriate graphic or icon.



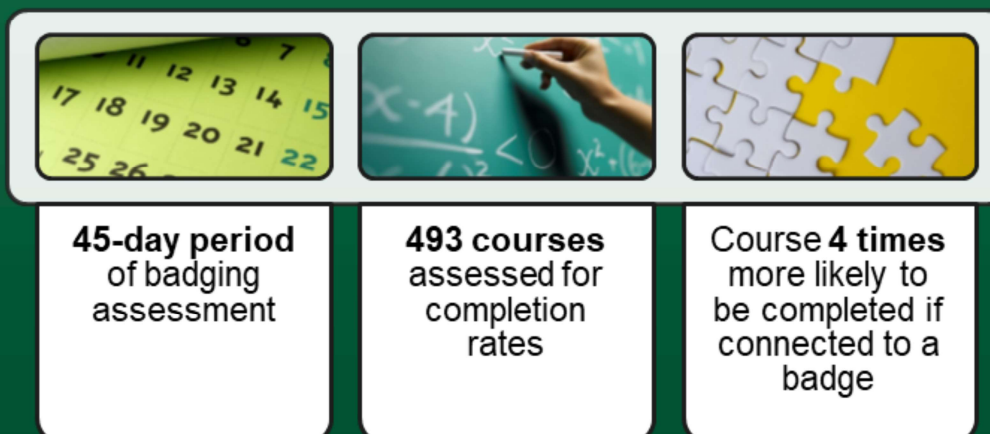
- As I described in the related article, each badge linked to a training course and had its own graphic icon and a title—like the “Animal Wrangler Badge,” for completing a training on how to handle situations when animals are brought into the library. As staff collected these virtual badges, they could see their badges displayed on their homepage in the LMS.

The badges were not connected to any other type of reward outside the virtual environment of the LMS. The badging initiative launched at the beginning of June 2020, just when our library was reopening some services (with limited services and safety procedures in place), and when staff were still going through a tremendous amount of stress.

- At the same time, our staff also had more time built into their schedules for professional development, due to abbreviated library schedules and the cancellation of in-person programs. I think this combination of factors made the program more popular initially than it would have been otherwise, although we have always had staff who are very invested in training.



# PROGRAM RESULTS



- To assess the results, I selected a 45-day period from the launch of the new badging component. Out of +/-650 available courses during that time, I focused on the 493 courses with activity. My goal in looking at courses with activity was to determine whether the badge might be motivation for a staff member to complete a particular course.
- For the analysis I did for the article, I focused on courses which were optional, as opposed to courses which were required, in order to ensure that the staff members had voluntarily selected to sign up for and complete the course. Of the 493 optional courses with activity, 51 were optional courses associated with badges.
- After reviewing the data, I found that courses without badges had significantly fewer completions—in fact, 90 of them had no completions at all. In contrast, all but one of the badged courses had completions during the same time period.
- An average of 8 staff completed each badged course during this time, while an average of only 2 staff members completed each of the non-badged courses during the same timeframe.
- Overall, a course that offered a badge was 4 times more likely to be completed than a course without a badge.
- Of the badged courses, 98% had at least one completion, while less than 80% of the non-badged courses had a completion—a difference of almost 20%.
- In total, the 51 available badges were awarded to 201 staff members a total of 923 times, with an average of 4 badges awarded per person.
- After analyzing the numbers, the answer to my question was clear: digital badging was motivating staff to complete the badged courses at a higher rate than courses which were not associated with badges. Badges appeared to be a powerful tool not only in encouraging training in general, but also in directing staff to key topics on which we wanted them to focus their training.



- At the time, I was pretty excited about the results of the program and the assessment. However, since we are being practical here, I want to go on to discuss some of the long-term badging challenges that have since emerged.

# BADGING PROGRAM CHALLENGES

## INITIAL ISSUES:

- Speed of course completion
- Fairness/unfairness perceptions
- Completing courses just to move up the leaderboard
- Measuring learning retention and application

## LONG-TERM CONSIDERATIONS:

- New employees
- New badges to maintain interest
- Rotating old badges out
- More extensive microcredentialing



- I have divided our challenges into two sections, initial issues and long-term issues.
- One of the first issues we encountered was people moving through a lot of courses at a speed which made us suspect they may not be fully completing the courses. While the LMS has certain rules in place to prevent just clicking through a course in some cases, it is still possible. This was difficult to assess because, again, at the time, many people were doing all the work they could from home and we were letting people spend extra time on training.
- This leads to another issue we encountered. Especially as the library reopened during the pandemic, a gap developed between people who still had a lot of time for training and people whose jobs dictated that they spend less time on training. This basically came down to public-facing staff versus internal staff who did not spend significant time on a public service desk. People who were very invested in the badges and the leaderboard felt this was unfair, and I actually agree.
- As director of training, I was also concerned that staff were completing courses just to move up the leaderboard, without a true good-faith effort to learn and apply the content. This ties into the ongoing challenge of measuring how staff retain and apply training within the workplace.
- From a long-term perspective, new employees coming on board now have a long way to go if they want to collect all the badges and move up the leaderboard. We currently have a high number of badges available in the system as new badges were added to maintain interest, and I feel we probably have too many badges available.
- I now wish I had set up the program so that badges are put out on a yearly basis. I think a better approach going forward might be to delete all badges and reset the leaderboard at the beginning of every year; so that staff are inspired to collect the badges for each year during that year and new employees have a chance to participate in the competition. However, the issue with resetting the badges every

year is that it might interfere with future programs.

- We have been considering the idea of setting up a more comprehensive microcredentialing system that would allow staff to build up to internal certification that would allow them to apply to certain jobs without a formal degree—that would have to be set up separately from the other badges, creating another level of complexity.
- I think the lesson in all these challenges is that a badging program needs a lot of forethought, and you have to be willing to change it completely as time goes on in order for the badges to stay relevant and motivating for staff.

## CONCLUSION

*Digital badges seem to motivate some public library staff learners to complete training.*

*Change and variety are key.*



- In conclusion, my experience has shown that badges do motivate some library staff to complete training, whether the badges are digital or something tangible they can wear in the real world.
- We always have to acknowledge that motivation is complex and changing; so badges will not work for everyone, and when they do work change and variety are key.
- At this time, many American libraries are looking to make our job requirements for hiring and promotion more equitable. I believe badges and microcredentials will become even more important for libraries in the future; so I hope this continues to be a topic of discussion in the profession.

# THANK YOU



International  
Federation of  
Library  
Associations and Institutions