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**HOW CAN TOURISM COMPANIES UTILIZE MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN THEIR
HR MANAGEMENT?**

Bachelor's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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The tourism sector, like many others, is undergoing significant changes driven by the rapid progress of technology and changing customer tastes. This ongoing transformation highlights the need for a workforce that is not only flexible but also skilled in a wide range of abilities. Micro-credentials, similar to traditional paper certificates, act as tangible evidence of skill development. Comparable to badges denoting expertise, these micro-credentials demonstrate the specific competencies acquired by employees.

The purpose of this thesis is to get a thorough grasp of the concept of micro-credentials, their utility as a tool for identifying and validating employees' talents in the tourist industry, to familiarize tourism companies with micro-credentials, and to inspire them to start introducing them into regular HR practices.

The thesis begins by introducing the commissioner company, Oulu University of Applied Sciences (OAMK). The theoretical base serves as the research foundation by explaining the main concepts using material from current literature, existing cases, and reliable online articles. To answer the research questions, qualitative research in the form of phone call interviews with industry professionals was selected as the approach. The conclusion addresses the research questions and makes recommendations for the use of micro-credentials.

Keywords: digital learning, digitalization, human resource management, micro-credentials, open badges, tourism



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1 INTRODUCTION

Micro-credentials, a relatively recent development, are gaining traction across diverse business sectors. In this age of swift technological advancement and digitalization, customers can make informed purchasing decisions without stepping out of their homes. A mere click of the mouse provides all the essential information about a specific product or service. The global pandemic in 2020 has further emphasized the world's shift toward digitalization.

The tourism industry is no exception. It is experiencing dynamic shifts, largely influenced by rapid technological advancements and evolving customer preferences. This quick transformation necessitates a workforce that is not only adaptable but also proficient in a diverse array of skills. Micro-credentials, like commonly used paper certificates, serve as tangible markers of skill acquisition. Much like badges that signify expertise, these micro-credentials showcase specific competencies obtained by employees.

The purpose of the thesis is to gain a solid understanding of the concept of micro-credentials, and their functionality as a tool to identify and validate employees' skills in the tourism industry, familiarize companies with micro-credentials, and inspire them to start implementing them into regular HR practices.

The thesis aims to answer the following research questions: *How do micro-credentials function as a tool for identifying and validating skills?* and *How can tourism companies use micro-credentials to showcase the skills of their employees?*

To give the answers to the questions, qualitative research in the form of phone call interviews was conducted. In total, four HR managers and two hotel staff members, aged 26 to 39, were interviewed during the research.

2 COMMISSIONER COMPANY

Oulu University of Applied Sciences (OAMK) is one of the top internationally recognized universities in Finland, with approximately 9000 students studying there annually. The university offers education in 28 different bachelor's and 17 master's degrees in various fields: Business, Engineering, Information Technology, Culture and Arts, and so on. OAMK consistently creates and launches national and international projects to drive new developments in people's everyday lives.

2.1 Acknowledgements

I would also like to express my gratitude to two essential contributors without whom this thesis would not have come to light. Lotta Pakanen, a project manager at Oulu University of Applied Sciences, brought her wealth of experience in Digital Learning and Open Badges. She not only provided me with the opportunity to apply my knowledge but also thoroughly guided me through the entire idea of micro-credentials when the idea for this thesis was still in the bud.

A special thanks to Pia Puustjärvi, my thesis supervisor and a lecturer at OAMK, whose diligence and attention to detail proved invaluable. Pia played a crucial role in navigating the bureaucratic aspects at the beginning and the final details towards the end. Her efforts ensured that the thesis did not veer off its original focus, adhered to proper formatting, and presented itself effectively to a wider audience.

3 THEORETICAL BASE

3.1 Micro-Credentials

Micro-credentials (or Open/Digital badges in this thesis) are a modern educational innovation that involves the awarding of brief certifications to confirm the development of certain abilities by a person. Micro-credentials, like badges in gaming, serve as a tangible trophy of skill accomplishment. Individuals who achieve mastery in specific skills are given micro-credentials as proof of their expertise.

The use of micro-credentials has become increasingly popular as a more flexible way to acknowledge an individual's knowledge, skills, and expertise. This approach allows learners and employees to acquire and combine smaller units of learning based on their own needs, promoting lifelong and life-wide learning. However, there is no universally accepted definition of micro-credentials or their fundamental characteristics (UNESCO, 2021).

The recognition of an individual's talents is not a recent invention, even though the terms "micro-credentials" and "open badges" have come into use in the 21st century with the rise of technology. For instance, the royalty in ancient Egypt used specific symbols to demonstrate their high status and authority. Another example is the Keys of Heaven, also known as the Keys of Saint Peter, which symbolize the pope's authority in the Vatican City. Many theories suggest where symbolism originated from: some of the most popular are Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, McClelland's Acquired Needs Theory, Adams' Equity Theory, and so on (Deterding & Whitton, 2016). Despite the theories being different at their core, they all seem to agree that the concept of wearing something that makes people stand out arises from the person's innate need for recognition by society.

People who actively support micro-credentials view them as the remedy to all the problems in education, staff training, and the labor market. The constant need for professional development and reskilling of the labor force sparks the interest in designing more training programs and forms of accreditation. That is where micro-credentials come in handy, and that is why many tech-savvy

companies and universities are starting to invest more in their research and development. They are believed to be a helpful solution for individuals who have lost their jobs or whose skills have become outdated and are at risk of automation. Micro-credentials can help close the gap between labor market skills and availability, leading to more efficient employment. Some countries use micro-credentials to help unemployed students increase their chances of landing a well-paid job position after graduation (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

3.2 Human Resource Management

Human resource management (HRM) is the process of hiring, training, evaluating, and rewarding employees, as well as addressing labor issues, health and safety, and fairness concerns. HRM or personnel management has also been around for a while. Until the late 1800s, personnel responsibilities like these were part of every manager's job in most countries. Labor issues began to emerge in many of the post-industrial revolution's new factories at the time. Employers soon established "welfare offices" and "welfare secretaries" to administer operations such as factory washrooms, as well as "safety bureaus" to oversee plant safety. Employers established the first "hiring offices," training programs, and factory schools around 1900 (Gary Dessler, 2013). During World War I, the demand for Human Resource Management increased due to the deaths of many workers on the battlefield, which led to massive labor shortages in factories.

HR management recognizes the value that employees bring to the organization. Investing in people and effectively meeting their needs can increase the happiness of employees, their motivation and, as a result, productivity. Employees who are well-thinking, competent, valued and supported by their subordinates are more likely to have the skills and motivation necessary to achieve the goals of the organization. Human resource management, as mentioned earlier, includes hiring new talent, evaluating employee performance, guaranteeing fair wages and benefits, training staff and promoting education and development, as well as preserving the health and safety of all employees. These are the fundamental elements of HRM. Human Resource Management exists at all stages of an employee's work in the company, from creating a job advertisement to providing opportunities for continuing education (Coursera, 2023).

Effective human resource management (HRM) is especially important in the tourism sector to meet the special difficulties and needs of the industry. Tourism is a labor-intensive, customer-oriented field, which, as a rule, is subject to seasonal changes, which makes personnel management measures more important. HR management processes in travel companies include cross-cultural training programs, seasonal HR management, customer service training, employee retention strategies, and so on (Dennis Nickson, 2006).

3.3 Digital Learning

Digital Learning refers to any kind of learning with the use of modern technology. This can include, for example, taking part in online courses, watching educational online videos, and using virtual tools during face-to-face training sessions. It also allows students to access carefully created lesson and training materials at any time and from anywhere in the world. Because of mobile learning, active learning, and gamification, digital learning platforms tend to often be significantly more interactive and engaging. Digital learning systems proved especially useful during the COVID-19 years when people were spending all day in their own homes.

Surprisingly, despite the word "digital" in the title, the idea of getting knowledge online has been introduced and presented since the last century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, educational psychologists suggested that robots could automate learning and assessment. The initial vision of using technology was to enable teachers to devote more time to students and allow them to learn at their own pace. Despite the emergence of new technologies, digital learning actually has a long history (Education Writers Association, 2021).

Changes in technology have also affected the tourism industry. The experience of working with clients has developed in tandem with the achievements of the industry in the field of technology. As a result, customer expectations are now higher, and companies need qualified employees who can meet the requirements. Employees must be well-versed in digital technologies to fulfill their duties. Training conducted in digital format is better suited for the tourism industry, as it is more accessible and can be conducted around the clock. This flexibility has significant advantages for tourism companies, especially with a large number of operations at multiple sites (Pantour, 2019).

3.4 Certificates or Open Badges

Certificates and open badges, in fact, serve the same purpose. Both of them are proof that a person demonstrates professional skills in a particular field. But the difference lies in the amount of information that each of them contains. The certificates are detailed and contain additional information about the person's name, the course or curriculum they have completed, and the completion date. They may also contain the name of the institution or organization that issued the certificate, with official signatures. Badges, on the other hand, are “faster” in this sense, since they only have the name of the badge, the issuer, and a small emblem. Another difference between them is the amount of time and testing required to get them. Certificates are often issued for successfully completing a course or obtaining a degree, and they often require the recipient to pass an exam or demonstrate their knowledge through a project, research, or thesis. However, badges are often issued for a specific skill or achievement and can be obtained in various ways, such as taking a popular quiz or attending a seminar (Giovanna Pergher, 2023).

Because open badges are pure code, they are simple to share on internet platforms and social media to showcase your abilities or achievements to a potential employer. Open badges provide metadata, which makes it easier to check badges, in most cases. This metadata comprises information on the badge's issuer, the prerequisites for receiving the badge, and the date it was issued. At the stroke of a button, businesses can effortlessly verify the legitimacy and worth of the badge. Certificates are more difficult to obtain in this situation because they frequently need to be sent in physical form to ensure validity. It takes a long time, and time is of the essence. Individual skills or abilities are validated by open badges. Open badges confirm individual-specific skills or achievements, rather than a general field of study, such as a degree in IT engineering. A digital badge, for example, may indicate a person's competence in a software application (LinkedIn skills assessment badge for Microsoft Outlook), successful project launch, or mastery in a narrow field. Certificates, on the other hand, often recognize a broader field of study, such as the completion of a degree program (Imane Mourassilo, 2023).

3.5 Open Badge Passport

Earning a badge, on average, takes less time, and it can be obtained through different educational online platforms, Open Badge Passport being one of them. It allows users to easily earn, save, and share badges with other users on the platform. It is completely free of charge as of November 2023, however, there is a high possibility it may change in the future.

The platform is user-friendly and intuitively understandable. First, a person should register in the system either by creating a new account or logging in with LinkedIn, Apple, Facebook, Google Account, or institution credentials. Then the user lands on the main page of his or her profile, where they have an opportunity to demonstrate the earned badges in a particular area.

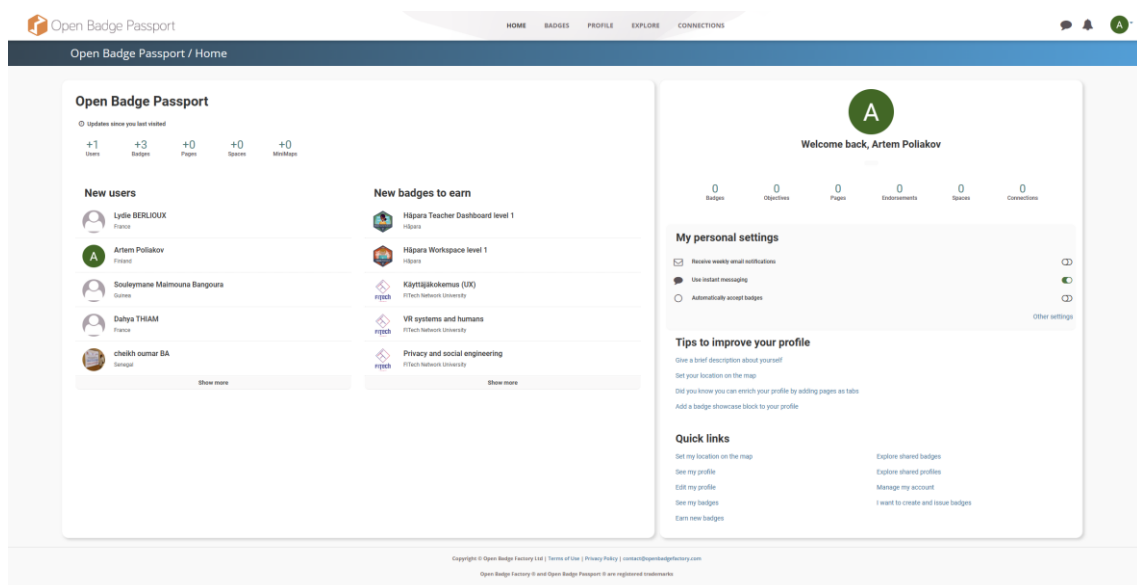


Figure 1. OBP Main Page

Naturally, the profile page is currently blank. The user must now click "Explore" at the top of the screen to access the website and obtain the icon. Badges can be sorted by the user according to criteria like issuer, country, and badge name. The person must again click the "Earn Badges" section to obtain a badge directly. A solid list of open badges now appears.

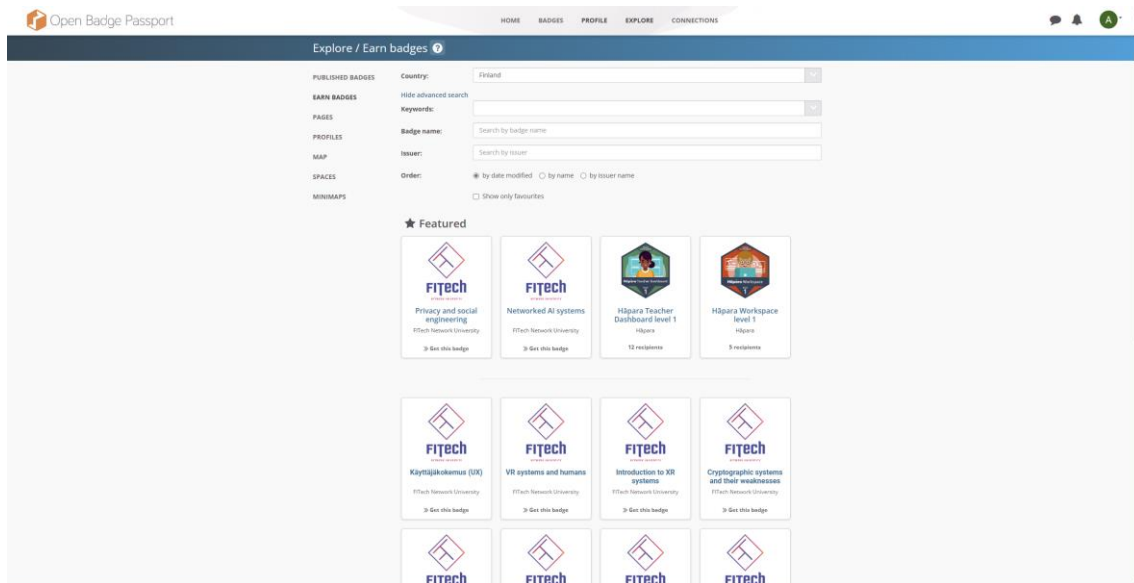


Figure 2. "Earn Badges" Page

Every badge has requirements specific to it. Since most badges need the completion of a certain university course, the user should carefully review the content beforehand. The person can add one or several badges to his or her main profile so that other users on the platform can view his accomplishments in particular areas as they receive them.

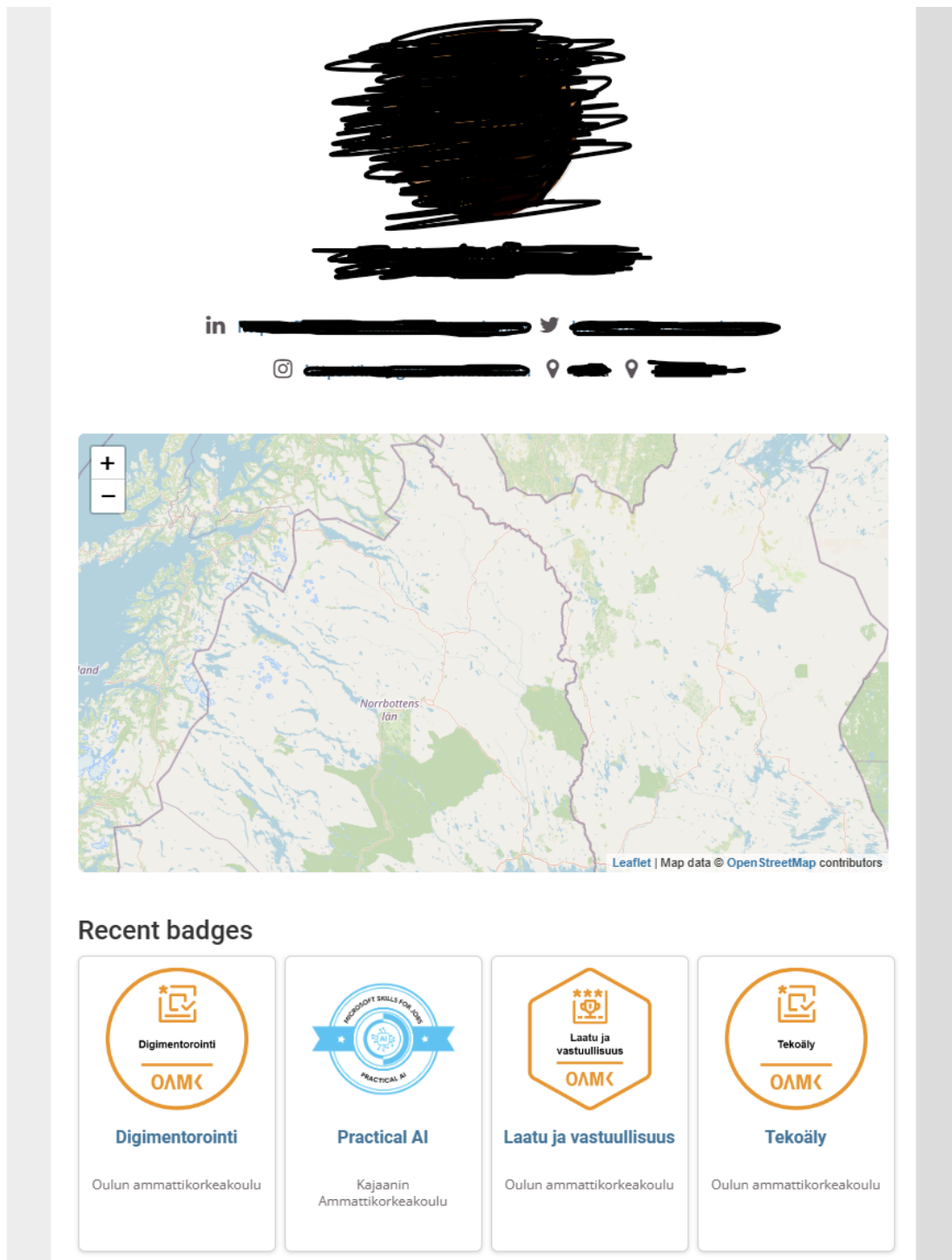


Figure 3. Profile Example

Both recruiters and candidates may find the Open Badge platform to be a helpful resource. Employees may enhance their qualifications with the aid of this platform, and HR managers can carefully choose candidates based on their unique skill set.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Method

A qualitative technique was used for the research method in the thesis, which included interviews with specialists in the Human Resources field and employees within the tourist business. The major goal of these interviews was to gather thoughts and viewpoints from experts directly involved in human resource management in the tourism sector.

Due to the participants' busy schedules, the interviews were mostly conducted via phone calls. This was adopted to allow for flexibility and to meet HR managers' and stakeholders' constraints, ensuring that their contribution could be incorporated into the thesis.

The Apollo.io platform was chosen to find and connect with suitable participants. Although initially designed for salespeople and marketers, this tool proved beneficial in identifying and contacting HR professionals in the tourism industry.

The goal of the thesis is to familiarize companies with micro-credentials and encourage them to start implementing them into regular HR processes. It also aims to provide a thorough understanding of the concept of micro-credentials and their usefulness as a tool to identify and validate employees' skills in the tourism industry. The research questions are: *How do micro-credentials function as a tool for identifying and validating skills?* and *How can tourism companies use micro-credentials to showcase the skills of their employees?*

The interview questions were shaped around the research questions to obtain more accurate research information. The questions were:

- 1) *Are you familiar with the concept of micro-credentials?*

This question serves as a starting point for assessing the interviewee's understanding of micro-credentials. Understanding the concept is critical because it serves as the foundation for more in-depth conversations regarding its potential applications.

- 2) *Are there specific areas or skills within the tourism sector where micro-credentials are particularly relevant?*

This question dives into the practical application of micro-credentials in the tourism industry. It aims to pinpoint specific areas or skills where micro-credentials can be most useful. The response reveals the interviewee's perception of how micro-credentials might solve industry-specific demands.

- 3) *What challenges, in your opinion, tourism companies might face when implementing micro-credentials in HR management?*

Understanding the difficulties connected with implementing micro-credentials is critical for a thorough assessment. The response sheds information on potential roadblocks, such as organizational resistance, and cultural factors.

5 CONTENT ANALYSIS

To preserve complete anonymity, the interviewees' identities have been changed. After this thesis was submitted, all data was permanently erased for privacy reasons. The interviewees, identified as Interviewee A, Interviewee B, Interviewee C, and Interviewee D were chosen at random to help distinguish between various responses or points of view.

5.1 Experts View

5.1.1 Awareness

From the collected responses, all four interviewees seemed to be familiar with open badges to a certain extent. Interviewees A and C had limited knowledge but expressed great interest in exploring more about the concept. Interviewee B had heard of micro-credentials before but never tried to delve deeper into the idea. Interviewee D was an active successful "badge earner" on LinkedIn.

The overarching conclusion is that the concept of open badges is not entirely alien to any of the participants. While some have limited knowledge, there is a general awareness that allows for further, more in-depth discussions on the topic.

5.1.2 Relevant Skills

In this section, the answers were quite subjective and related to the interviewee's own experience as an HR manager in the tourism sector.

First, all four came to the same conclusion: language proficiency is one of the most in-demand skills when they hire candidates. For visitors to have a good stay, hotel staff should be able to interact politely with them, preferably in the guests' native language. Interviewee B said that an open badge that demonstrates fluency in Mandarin, for example, could improve our recruiting process and team's capacity to serve Chinese tourists in central Finland and give them a more engaging and customized experience.

Interviewee D stated that crisis management should also be one of the open badge skills. They were convinced that due to tourism's dynamic nature, it is paramount for a company to hire people who possess certain skills in crisis communication and adaptability.

Interviewee A shared that they would want to have a badge that shows a person's expertise in data analytics. They added that acknowledging abilities in customer behavior insights, market trend analysis, and data interpretation might enable tourism companies to make well-informed decisions, maximize marketing tactics, and adjust to shifting consumer preferences in the travel industry.

Interviewee C thought that showcasing skills in Customer Relationship Management is essential. For example, recognizing skills in various CRM tools or the ability to build long-term relationships with visitors.

The insights from the interviews collectively emphasize the diverse skill sets required in the tourism industry. Micro-credentials, in the form of open badges, are seen as a potential solution to formally recognize and validate these skills. Language proficiency, crisis management, data analytics, and CRM skills are identified as key areas where micro-credentials could play a transformative role in recruitment, team capacity, decision-making, and customer experience. As the tourism landscape continues to evolve, these findings suggest that adapting to these identified skill demands through micro-credentials could enhance both individual professional development and overall industry competitiveness. The tailored recognition of such skills aligns with the dynamic and diverse needs of the tourism sector, contributing to a more skilled and adaptable workforce.

5.1.3 Challenges

All four participants admitted that one of the main challenges if open badges were to be implemented universally would be employers' resistance to this innovation. They said that management is accustomed to traditional HR practices, and introducing micro-credentials could face pushback in the end.

"Convincing everyone of the benefits and ensuring a smooth transition would be a long way home," stated Interviewee D.

Similarly, three admitted that identifying the “right” open badges would be a real challenge. Companies must ensure that the skills recognized contribute directly to their company's goals. It would be essential to plan. However, Interviewee D said that companies make decisions based on the skills they deem necessary for a candidate. That way they can set their criteria.

Interviewee A said that navigating employees' awareness is also a problem. Adoption may be sluggish if staff members are unfamiliar with the idea or do not see how it would advance their professional development. They mentioned that to raise awareness, funding for education and communication is crucial, which is a problem for many companies given the situation in the world and how it's affecting the tourism industry.

The difficulties that the participants pointed out highlight the challenge it may be to apply open badges everywhere in the travel and tourism sector. Crucial issues that require attention include overcoming employer reluctance, choosing open badges carefully, and raising staff awareness through communication and education. The relevance of matching micro-credentials to the unique objectives and requirements of each travel agency is further highlighted by the participants' recognition of the necessity of strategic planning and the establishment of open badge criteria. These difficulties offer important information for developing strategies that will successfully integrate micro-credentials into HR procedures as the sector navigates changes.

5.2 Stakeholders View

Interviews were conducted with hotel staff as well. Unfortunately, only two individuals were interviewed because of the hotel staff's busy schedules. The findings will thus be compressed into a single paragraph.

Both respondents A and B demonstrated a high level of digital badge awareness. Interviewee A acknowledged that having a credential in a particular field helped him stand out from the other applicants and land a prior job. According to both, the use of this method can greatly streamline the hiring process for all parties because everyone will be aware of exactly what is expected of

them. Regretfully, it was challenging for both interviewees to respond to the question of which abilities would be most appropriate for digital badges since they believed it was up to HR management to decide. The respondents also found it difficult to answer the question about possible difficulties in implementing digital badges in the recruiting process.

In conclusion, while the hotel staff demonstrates awareness and positive perceptions of digital badges, there is a need for enhanced communication and collaboration between staff and HR management to define the criteria and address potential challenges. The responses underline the importance of not only introducing digital badges as a recognition tool but also ensuring that there is a shared understanding of their application and benefits among all stakeholders in the hiring process within the tourism sector.

5.3 Recommendations

Since there is not enough data to develop a detailed strategy on how to integrate badges into the HR system, recommendations are given based on the theoretical and practical part of the thesis. To design more detailed and comprehensive strategies, thorough research must be conducted. Unfortunately, it was not possible in this thesis due to limited resources.

When considering the implementation of Open Badges in Human Resource Management (HRM), companies should take several key factors into account.

- *Staff Awareness and Education:*

Prioritizing comprehensive staff awareness and education programs to ensure that employees understand the concept and benefits of Open Badges. Communicate how badges contribute to career development and organizational goals.

- *Focus on In-Demand Skills:*

Companies should align badge criteria with the in-demand skills identified by both HR professionals and staff. Emphasizing skills such as language proficiency, crisis management, data analytics, and customer relationship management that are crucial in the dynamic tourism industry. However, each company decides on its skill criteria.

- *Pilot Programs and Employee Involvement:*

Initiate pilot programs involving small teams to test the effectiveness of Open Badges. Gathering feedback from participants and incorporating their insights into refining the badge system before wider implementation could be useful.

- *Strategic Communication and Funding:*

Companies should try to develop a strategic communication plan to address potential resistance and navigate employee awareness challenges. They would also allocate funding for education and communication initiatives to overcome hurdles related to unfamiliarity and skepticism.

- *Customization and HR Decision-Making:*

Allow flexibility in badge criteria, enabling companies to customize Open Badges based on their unique goals. While considering employee input, empower HR management to make informed decisions on the skills that align with company objectives.

- *Continuous Feedback Mechanism:*

Establish mechanisms for continuous feedback from employees about the Open Badge program. Regularly assess its impact, gather suggestions for improvement, and adapt the program based on evolving needs and industry dynamics.

- *Integration with Traditional HR Practices:*

Integrate Open Badges seamlessly into traditional HR practices. Demonstrate how badges enhance the hiring process, streamline expectations, and contribute to a more efficient and transparent HRM system.

- *Emphasis on Digital Badge Awareness:*

Prioritize digital badge awareness initiatives to bridge knowledge gaps among employees. Showcase examples of successful badge utilization and emphasize their role in standing out during job applications.

- *Making Use of Open Badge Passport*

Companies should look further into the platform since it might bring numerous benefits to the recruiting process.

6 CONCLUSION

The goal of the thesis is to familiarize companies with micro-credentials and encourage them to begin incorporating them into routine HR processes. It also aims to provide a thorough understanding of the concept of micro-credentials and their usefulness as a tool to identify and validate employees' skills in the tourism industry.

The following research questions are the focus of this thesis: *How do micro-credentials function as a tool for identifying and validating skills?* and *How can tourism companies use micro-credentials to showcase the skills of their employees?*

Qualitative research using phone interviews was done to provide the answers to the questions. Four HR managers, ranging in age from 26 to 39, were interviewed for the study.

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that digital badges have long been included in everyday life. They are actively used in the field of education and gaming to show a person's achievements in a particular field. They will undoubtedly continue their development and become an integral part of the recruitment process in the field of tourism and travel.

Information collected from HR managers' and hotel staff's interviews revealed that the respondents were well-informed about digital badges. This made it possible for the discussion to go on. It was evident from the following responses which skills HR managers deem appropriate for digital badges. They were language proficiency, crisis management expertise, CRM proficiency, and data analytics proficiency. The hotel staff found it challenging to respond to these questions. HR managers were questioned about the challenges associated with implementing digital badges. They cited the possibility that general management may reject the proposal as well as the challenge of selecting the precise abilities for which badges will be granted.

7 DISCUSSION

This thesis addresses two main research questions about how open badges can validate employees' skills and how tourism companies can utilize them in their HR practices.

The research found that HR managers were familiar with the concept of micro-credentials. Moreover, they think that it's a good idea to start integrating them into Human Resource Management. However, the challenges that the participants raised draw attention to how difficult it could be to implement open badges everywhere in the travel and tourist industry. Overcoming employer resistance, selecting open badges properly, and increasing staff awareness through education and communication are all important concerns that need to be considered.

Unfortunately, the research was limited, therefore instead of giving step-by-step guidance for companies, as was planned initially, it was decided to provide simple recommendations to refer to. The recommendations included raising staff and employees' awareness, focusing on skills that are in demand, launching pilot programs to see how the process works, considering funding, and making use of the Open Badge Passport platform.

Overall, despite the difficulties encountered while writing this thesis, I have found the process to be extremely beneficial for expanding my knowledge and understanding of a subject that interests me, conducting qualitative research, analyzing and assessing data, and making connections between my research and that of the available literature.

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Interview Questions:

- Are you familiar with the concept of micro-credentials?
- Are there specific areas or skills within the tourism sector where micro-credentials are particularly relevant?
- What challenges, in your opinion, tourism companies might face when implementing micro-credentials in HR management?