SkillsFWD Request for Proposals
Frequently Asked Questions

SkillsFWD Informational Webinars

Interested parties are invited to view the recordings of our informational webinars.
- View a recording of the SkillsFWD Request for Proposals Informational Webinar here.
- View a recording of the SkillsFWD Letter of Interest webinar here.

If you still have questions, please email info@skillsfwd.org for more information.

About the SkillsFWD Initiative

What are the objectives of the SkillsFWD initiative?

The digitization of education and employment is already well underway. Right now, we have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to make sure it is done right, with equity at its heart. **SkillsFWD** will award funds to demonstration teams working to solve challenges to Learning and Employment Records (LERs) adoption and engage key stakeholder groups in developing systems that enable more learners and workers to access quality education and career opportunities. Grantees will be expected to align their proposed intervention(s) and desired outcomes with the five objectives of the **SkillsFWD** initiative:

1. Launch LER lifecycle infrastructure that successfully connects learners and workers to education and workforce opportunities, and lay the groundwork to scale lifecycle LER infrastructure across the learning and working ecosystem;
2. Define and demonstrate a clear value proposition for one or more stakeholders to develop, issue, use and adopt LERs;
3. Generate insights, outputs and outcomes to demonstrate the success of proposed LER ecosystem interventions, such as progress towards interoperability and progress through the lifecycle, from developing and issuing digital records to adoption and use;
4. Identify outstanding needs for additional research, technical assistance and coordination to enable mass adoption of skills-based hiring systems that utilize LER tools; and
5. Inform state and national policy changes needed to overcome barriers to equitable LER infrastructure adoption, such as recommendations related to quality assurance of digital credentials in career pathways, data interoperability, increasing trust through policies about data privacy and reducing bias in the use of artificial intelligence.

What does "scale" mean in the context of the SkillsFWD initiative? How should applicants prepare to communicate the scalability of their LER solutions?

In the context of this initiative, "scale" will differ from deployment to deployment and may not be easily defined by only qualitative or quantitative metrics. For example, a successful deployment in a rural community or smaller sector may still be able to demonstrate profound impact and achieve the objectives of the SkillsFWD initiative despite having fewer traditional metrics (users engaged, hiring matches, etc.) than a large-scale applicant in an urban or multi-state deployment. All

applicants should be prepared to define how they define the scalability of their deployment, including:
- Define what baseline metrics will be used to measure the success of your LER solution as a growth engine;
- What outputs or metrics will be achieved as a result of your proposed intervention(s) including, where possible, quantitative metrics such as the number of learners and workers engaged, successful record transfers, hiring matches, increased efficiency, retention, diversity of hiring pool, earnings, etc.; and
- Identify what credential processes are scalable to achieve the purposes of large and diverse ecosystems outside of the current deployment, such as scaling to a future population, sector, geography, etc.

Eligibility

What types of organizations are eligible to apply for SkillsFWD funding?

This opportunity is open to all U.S.-based entities that are leading cross-stakeholder partnerships to fill specific gaps in education and/or talent pipelines and which are prepared to act as a designated intermediary on behalf of their project team. Entities that may be especially well suited to play a leadership role include:

- Community-based organizations that work with populations who face systemic barriers to employment
- Employers and their vendor partners that are creating open and interoperable backend functionality in support of skills-based hiring or internal advancement
- Industry associations or sector partnerships
- K-12 entities and school districts
- Occupational licensing bodies
- State workforce agencies or local workforce development boards
- State postsecondary education coordinating agencies, community college systems or institutions of higher education
- Tribal entities
- Workforce development training providers

Are partnerships required to submit an application?

Yes. Collaboration is a key component to creating intentional pathways between education systems and employment and partnership is a priority requirement for all demonstration grants. Notably, the **SkillsFWD** initiative is intended to serve as a catalyst for organizations that have already implemented foundational strategies and infrastructure around LER systems. Applicants are expected to build upon existing tools or systems to demonstrate how to make LERs more interoperable, increase awareness and capacity to scale adoption and use, or to work to expand access to a new user group.

What if a partnership is missing one of the representatives required on the core design team? Can additional partners be added later on in the grant period?

At the time of application, each **SkillsFWD** core design team is required to include at least one representative from each of the following key stakeholder groups, each of which has been determined an essential part of scaling LER solutions:

- Employers and their HR system vendors
- Governance representatives such as those in state or local government (e.g. state chief data officers, workforce and postsecondary education leaders, and/or policymakers)
- Issuers of digital records and credentials such as employers, education and training providers, or licensing boards
- Learners and earners (such as through a designated representative or user advocate)
- LER solution providers

Applicants should be prepared to identify the proposed role of each stakeholder group in the project to fulfill the demonstration outputs and characteristics, including experience and participation in previous partnerships. If an applicant does not have a partner that has committed to participating in the core design team, the applicant should be prepared to justify why this partner is not included and what steps are being taken to engage this stakeholder as a co-designer during the first three months of the grant period.

What is a lead applicant? Are lead applicants required to subgrant to other project partners?

Submissions must be led by a U.S.-based lead applicant responsible for serving as the intermediary across all the partners in the partnership. They are likely also accountable for the overall success of the program, and can be any one of the eligible entities listed in the RFP. Lead applicants may choose to partner with another organization to serve as the fiscal lead who will have the legal responsibility, authority for, and control of the use of any grant funds. This organization within the partnership will also be responsible for any reporting associated with the grant funds, and be able to exercise in fact and law direction, control, and supervision of the proposed project and the grant funds.

The funding model for all project teams will vary based on demonstration scope and objectives and subgranting is not required. However, each project team is required to have representatives from various organizations and cross-stakeholder groups ([see the RFP for more information](#)) and therefore subgranting is encouraged to promote capacity and equitable participation by project partners.

Can one organization submit more than one and/or be a part of multiple applications?

Only one application will be accepted by lead applicants. Organizations are welcome to participate in multiple project teams, however the capacity of team members to carry out activities associated with the grant will weigh heavily throughout grant review. Organizations should be prepared to justify participation across multiple projects and how they will maintain capacity to implement according to project milestones.

Can one organization meet the requirements for serving as more than one stakeholder group?

This will depend entirely on the scope of the initiative, although all applicants should be prepared to clearly articulate and justify the role that each group plays and how they will represent more than one stakeholder group. The applicant review team will consider factors including ample representation and agency as part of the core design and decision making team.

SkillsFWD Awards Process

When does the grant period begin and end?

The grant period will begin in January 2024 and conclude in July 2025.

Was it required to submit a Letter of Interest (LOI) to receive a SkillsFWD grant?

No, the letter of interest was not required. Prospective grantees were strongly encouraged to submit a Letter of Interest as a first step in the process of being selected for a **SkillsFWD** grant. These submissions were used as an opportunity to provide feedback to prospective applicants as well as inform future technical assistance activities for **SkillsFWD** grant recipients.

The deadline for submitting a Letter of Interest was September 20, 2023.

How will grantees be selected?

Many individuals will be involved in the review and selection process of **SkillsFWD** grantees. Final recommendations will be made by a Selection Committee composed of distinguished experts from across the ecosystem in areas such as technology, employer needs, economic development, workforce development, higher education and grantmaking. The Selection Committee will consider regional and industry representation, populations served, grant request amount and cost effectiveness in the selection of a final portfolio of grantees.

What are the minimum and maximum SkillsFWD grant amounts?

SkillsFWD will award grantees up to $1.5M to carry out activities outlined in their proposals. While there is no award minimum, grant amounts will be based on allocations to grant activities and prospective applicants will be reviewed based on their efficiency and efficacy of grant funds to carry out associated activities.

How can SkillsFWD funding be used?

Project teams should be prepared to highlight how they will allocate grant funds to spending categories including tech development, personnel, meetings and travel, user engagement, contracts and legal, among others. All budgeted costs must be allowable, allocable, reasonable and thoroughly justified in the application documents.

Grant recipients commit to participating in a demonstration evaluation developed and administered by a third-party evaluator selected by, and at the expense of, the SkillsFWD initiative — 2.5% of the total grant amount (up to a maximum of $37,500 USD) will be retained by SkillsFWD to support grantees' participation in external monitoring and evaluation. This amount will not be disbursed to the grantee until the evaluation agreement has been signed.

Grant recipients may allocate up to 10% of their award to indirect costs. Indirect costs are costs for activities or services that support the organization as a whole rather than any particular program or project, including administrative and fundraising costs. These are not costs associated with the delivery of program services; nonetheless, they are essential costs of maintaining and managing the organization through which program services are delivered. Examples of such costs include finance and accounting support, human resources, bank fees, board meetings, and fundraising. In submitting a project budget, grantees will not be required to quantify these indirect costs. SkillsFWD's indirect cost rate of no more than 10% percent is applied to Project Costs to make up the total grant amount or 30% of Personnel costs.

What are the reporting requirements of a SkillsFWD grant?

Grant funds must be obligated within 18 months of receipt of funds. Grant recipients will be required to submit reports at six-month intervals throughout the grant period describing progress toward milestones, including budget reconciliations. Recipients will receive grant funds in two tranches, linked to project milestones. A milestone is a significant and observable activity, such as the holding of a digital wallet by a real user or the validation of a specific change management process or product.

The first tranche of grant funds will be disbursed once the grant agreement has been signed. Release of the second tranche will be contingent upon factors including:
- The successful completion of project milestones
- The successful monitoring of the above milestone by an **SkillsFWD**-designated advisor
- The submission of a brief report accounting for progress toward milestones listed
- Expenditure of at least 70% of the previous tranche

For more information about reporting requirements of grant recipients, please review the *Demonstration Commitments* section of *SkillsFWD Guiding Principles, Rights, Responsibilities and Commitments*.

Will each partner be required to submit a report according to the guidelines above or only 1 per demonstration team?

Only 1 report will be required per demonstration team per reporting period.

Is the SkillsFWD grant considered a Planning grant or an Implementation grant?

SkillsFWD funding should be considered an Implementation grant. Funds are designed to act as a catalyst for organizations that have already implemented foundational strategies and infrastructure around the LER system and are building upon existing work to take their work to the next phase.

SkillsFWD Functional Requirements

How is the success of SkillsFWD applicants being defined and measured?

Each **SkillsFWD** grantee will be required to demonstrate a full LER lifecycle proof-of-concept implementation of an end-to-end model for how skills-based hiring and economic mobility can be enabled through the real world application of LERs for a target population, in alignment with the

SkillsFWD Guiding Principles, Rights, Responsibilities and Commitments. Within the grant period, each demonstration will need to:

- Demonstrate the full LER lifecycle (as defined by the LER Ecosystem Map) that connects learners and workers to education and/or workforce opportunities, including verifiable use cases and accompanying user journeys that successfully demonstrate the LER lifecycle and accompanying workflow;
- Meet the expectations outlined in the *SkillsFWD Guiding Principles, Rights, Responsibilities and Commitments* — this document serves as a framework for assessing LER system relationships and components, as well as provides a set of functional requirements for investments and contracting expectations;
- Be applied to sector-based labor/education market challenges (e.g., a regional workforce shortage) including evidence that credentials are effective in providing opportunities for advancement, especially for individuals traditionally underrepresented or excluded from quality job and learning opportunities;
- Be able to track and report on metrics of success for the proposed intervention and activities — applicants should consider both qualitative and quantitative metrics to demonstrate progress and success (even if success will not be fully achieved in the grant period);
- Include participation by key stakeholders and apply user-centered design principles, such as user feedback throughout the grant period;
- Incorporate principles of equity, learner agency, trust and privacy; and
- Propose a plan to scale beyond the scope of the pilot such as by expanding to serve additional population/user groups, industries or geographies at end of grant period.

What are LERs?

Learning and Employment Records are digital records of a person's jobs and skills acquired through education, credentialing, in the workplace, and through service and life experience. The records are verifiable and secured according to web standards, and are controlled by users, who can curate and use them to pursue educational and employment opportunities as they see fit.

What is the LER lifecycle? What is considered end-to-end deployment?

A full LER lifecycle includes four critical stages ranging from (1) development of a collection of verifiable digital records; (2) issuance of the record or collection of records; (3) adoption; and (4) use by an individual learner and worker. All **SkillsFWD** projects will be required to demonstrate the full LER lifecycle that connects learners and workers to education and/or workforce opportunities.

What is the difference between Open Badges, Comprehensive Learner Records, Transcripts and Résumés?

Open Badges are a visual form of recognition that is easily shareable on the web, for example, via social media. Badges are one type of achievement that can be included within a Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR); many others exist. Educators designed the CLR to record more context about learning achievements and the learning journey than is possible with a digital badge. CLR Standard provides the opportunity to contextualize learning achievements and assessment outcomes within a specific program, credential or sequence of learning activities, as in a pathway.

Interested parties can trust that an Open Badge and CLR represent a legitimate, authenticated achievement, the nature of which is described within the badge itself and linked to the issuing organization. Open Badges are verifiable so that a viewer can confirm the credential's issuer and expiration, if applicable. Open Badges can represent a more detailed picture than a CV or résumé and are verified before being displayed. Paper résumés and CVs are static and must be continually updated, while badges are inherently dynamic, as they can be presented in ever-changing combinations, creating a constantly evolving picture of a person's lifelong learning.

What are the functional and technical requirements associated with the SkillsFWD initiative?

The full technical and functional requirements of **SkillsFWD** grantees can be found in the [RFP](#) and the *SkillsFWD Guiding Principles, Rights, Responsibilities and Commitments*. The principles, rights and responsibilities set forth in this document are intended to provide guidance for stakeholders seeking to organize and deploy pathways enabled by LERs. This document serves as a framework for assessing LER system relationships and components, and provides a set of functional requirements for investments and contracting expectations.

Notably, some guidelines include suggested standards or schemas (e.g., W3C Verifiable Credentials Data Model). Applicants are encouraged, though not required, to utilize the standards or schemas listed, but should be prepared to justify why they plan to leverage a different standard or schema and how their alternative will uphold the principle described.

What if the proposed demonstration cannot meet all of the guidelines in the Rights and Responsibilities document? Should we still apply?

Each **SkillsFWD** demonstration will be unique, and thus its capacity to meet all demonstration guidelines at the time of application may differ. Demonstrations are expected to address all principles, rights and responsibilities by the end of the grant period. If applicable, **SkillsFWD** applicants should be prepared to indicate how they will address guidelines that they are currently unable to meet by the end of the grant period. **SkillsFWD** staff will engage each grantee to better understand challenges to addressing the guidelines included and identify opportunities for technical assistance to support grantees.

The SkillsFWD RFP cites interoperability as a key priority among applicants. How will this be measured?

All **SkillsFWD** demonstrations must be prepared to commit to confirming with open standards within the LER end-to-end workflow. Specifically, the demonstration must enable stakeholders to issue, hold, manage, share and verify credentials using the W3C Verifiable Credentials Data Model — using an applicable open standard for VC-compatible credential specifications such as Open Badges 3.0 and/or Comprehensive Learner Record 2.0. The demonstration must also enable shared meaning and semantic interoperability across end-to-end workflows using linked open data, and enable issuers and relying parties to test and confirm interoperability across end-to-end workflows.

Applicants must also be prepared to commit to participating in cross-demonstration interoperability tests during the grant period. This will involve at a minimum, demonstrating with a verified testing partner that issuing and relying parties confirm that a credential issued arrived, is readable (by

both machine and human), and has been proven by various verifiable credentials-compliant data integrity methods.

SkillsFWD Evaluation

Will grantees be required to select their own evaluation partner?

No, SkillsFWD and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors will be responsible for selecting the evaluation partner.

What kind of evaluation will be conducted?

Each grantee is required to propose their own metrics and milestones for measuring success of the demonstration. Therefore, the evaluation will be a "developmental evaluation" or "mixed methods evaluation" and will focus more on preparing grantees for more rigorous evaluation in future, such as collecting the metrics stated in the proposal, and doing qualitative research with grantees.

The RFP cites that up to 2.5% of each grant should be reserved for evaluation activities. How should grantees prepare for this reservation?

Grant recipients commit to participating in a demonstration evaluation developed and administered by a third-party evaluator selected by, and at the expense of, the SkillsFWD initiative. However, 2.5% of the total grant amount (up to a maximum of $37,500 USD for a $1.5m grant) will be retained by SkillsFWD to support grantees' participation in external monitoring and evaluation. This amount will not be disbursed to the grantee until the evaluation agreement has been signed. These funds are preserved to support activities related to evaluation during the last quarter of, or following the grant period, to ensure that demonstration staff have ample capacity to engage in evaluation activities. Grantees should note this retainer within their proposed budget.

Will personally-identifiable information (PII) be used to inform the evaluation? How will the evaluator uphold protections of PII and other data sources of those participating in demonstrations?

Applicants can be assured that the evaluation partner will not be collecting student data or PII without a process to obtain the appropriate data sharing MOUs, ethical review, and informed consent based on the specific project scope and milestones.

Next Steps and Support

What is the timeline for the SkillsFWD RFP process and announcement?

How do I submit a response to the SkillsFWD RFP?

Applicants should submit their **SkillsFWD** RFP responses through Submittable, also linked on the **SkillsFWD** website. Proposals should not exceed 20 pages in total, excluding attachments (e.g., appendices such as tables, letters of commitment, financial documentation, etc.). Proposals must be submitted by November 8, 2023, at 11:59 PM PST. More information about the submission process can be found in the full **SkillsFWD** RFP.

What type of support will be provided to prospective grantees? How can I receive technical assistance?

Technical assistance will be available to prospective grantees through hosted resources on the **SkillsFWD** website, open webinar sessions and office hours to answer applicant questions. See the technical assistance section of the RFP and register for the SkillsFWD Request for Proposals Informational Webinar on October 10, 2023, from 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM EST for more details on technical assistance and upcoming events.

Will there be technical assistance available to grantees? For example, will there be a community of practice for grantees to learn from each other?

Yes, technical assistance will be available to **SkillsFWD** grantees. All grantees will be required to participate in a community of practice hosted by **SkillsFWD** and its network of technical advisors. Topics of technical assistance will be determined by the readiness of **SkillsFWD** grantees and will focus on topics including, but not limited to, user-design based principles, equity and reducing algorithmic bias, LER lifecycle technology development, and sustainability, among others.

If I am not selected for a SkillsFWD grant, how can I stay engaged? Will there be public learning opportunities for applicants?

Yes, the **SkillsFWD** initiative is excited to share lessons learned throughout the grant period with those partners and applicants not selected for a SkillsFWD grant. All applicants will be invited to join a regular newsletter and periodic virtual and in-person learning sessions alongside grantees, technical assistance providers and members of the SkillsFWD funder collaborative.

Who can I reach out to if I have additional questions or require accommodations?

To learn more about **SkillsFWD** and submit questions, please reach out to info@skillsfwd.org.

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