The Ultimate Guide to Microcredentials: A Strategic Path to Macro Impact

BenchPrep

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Picture this:

Kim is a mid-level IT staffer at a large payments firm. Looking to move up the org chart, she decides to learn new skills that might boost her chances for a promotion. Cybersecurity is a hot topic around the company and industry, so she invests in two quick, affordable microcredentials offered by her professional association.

When she completes the microcredentials, Kim proudly displays the associated digital badges on her social media profiles.

Shortly thereafter, she secures a promotion. As peers and colleagues rush to congratulate her, she sings the microcredentials' praises and explains that her association offers a wide range of similar learning opportunities. She forwards the relevant information.

The Opportunity for Learning Businesses

Kim's microcredentials success story may be fictional, but the general outline of her experience is unfolding across a wide array of companies and industries. And this presents a huge revenue-driving opportunity for learning businesses, such as professional associations and credentialing bodies.

Specifically, these learning businesses can use microcredentials to...

Increase affinity among learners: By offering in-demand microcredential opportunities specifically tailored to their learner audience, organizations can help cement their reputation as the learning provider of this "new kid on the block" of professional learning. This is where early-career professionals are likely to look first for new microcredential options.

Boost long-term learner engagement: Microcredentials are a highly accessible and digestible form of education, allowing learning businesses to deliver value to learners throughout the learning lifecycle. Many members will be more likely to engage more often with their professional association if it is continually rolling out new microcredential offerings.

Uncover a new source of recurring non-dues revenue: As the enhanced value learners get through microcredentials inspires them to expand their connection to and engagement with their association or credentialing body, they'll likely continue to seek out additional opportunities.

The Appeal: "Instant Gratification" Professional Learning

Why are microcredentials so in demand right now? Because these short-term, skill-focused credentials emphasize targeted, actionable skills rather than broad academic achievements. And in doing so, they give learners an opportunity to quickly and economically gain and showcase specific competencies to employers.

Those qualities have helped lead to tremendous growth for microcredentials. As many as 28 states, for example, are funding short-term credentials via state budgets. To date, 59 state-led initiatives in short-term credentials total more than $3.8 billion in investments.

Further, a 2022 report from Credential Engine found more than a million secondary and postsecondary credentials offered across the US, which is more than triple the number that were available in 2018.

That is a trajectory worth capitalizing on. In this guide, we'll explain:

- Why microcredentials present a tremendous opportunity for learning businesses.
- Why learners and employers are so excited by microcredentials.
- How to launch a microcredential program to maximize your odds of success.

Let's start with a look at why microcredentials are seeing such outsized demand.

Meeting the Needs of Today's Employers: The Industry Case for Microcredentials

The growth of microcredentials is being driven in large part by the needs of employers. This group recognizes that up to 44 percent of an individual worker's skills may need to be updated to keep up with the fast-shifting landscape in their industries. In fact, 70 percent of US firms are already reporting talent or skills shortages, and are increasingly expecting their employees to upskill quickly and efficiently to close these perceived gaps.

The Growing Need for Microcredentials

44%

of each worker's skills need to be updated to keep up with changing workplace demands

70%

of US firms report talent or skills shortages
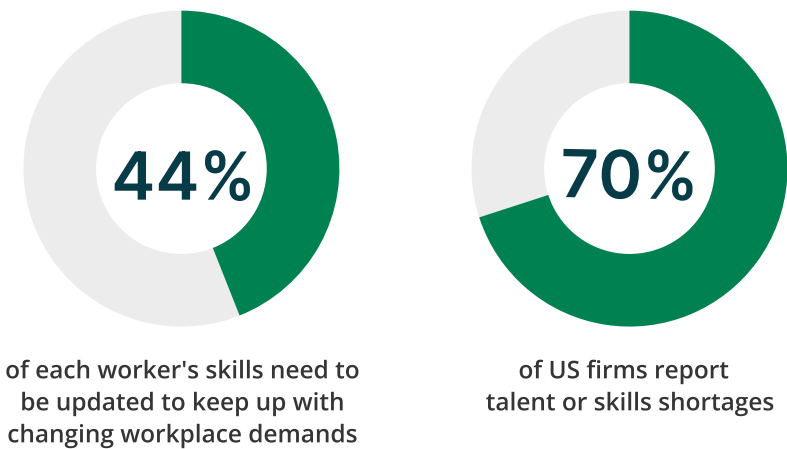
But most traditional degree and certificate programs are too broad and time-intensive to fit that bill. Employers instead are looking for more specific skills— and they want employees to get them in a hurry.

For example, a small content marketing firm that focuses on written output may want to expand into visuals to keep pace with evolving consumer preferences. But busy writers don't have time to get fully trained in design, and adding full-time design talent to the staff is expensive. Investing in a design microcredential for the writing team—limited in scope, quick to complete, and inexpensive— could be the solution.

This is where the nimbleness of microcredentials really shines, allowing employees to add niche skill sets both quickly and cost effectively.

The Cybersecurity Fundamentals microcredential from ISACA, for instance, allows IT professionals to focus on a very narrow, but critical, aspect of their broader work. And at only eight hours of learning time and $160 for ISACA members, it's a manageable and affordable way for learners to add those critical skills to their existing knowledge base.

Microcredential Spotlight

What: Cybersecurity Fundementals

Who: ISACA

Cost: $160 (members)
$220 (non-members)

Timeline: 8 hours to complete

This is why microcredentials are such an attractive option for employers. When current employees are able to get the updated skills they need quickly and easily, the company is able to save the cost and hassle of constantly recruiting new outside talent or funding traditional certification courses.

But it's not just employers who like microcredentials. Employees have found a lot to love as well.

A Career Edge: Why Professionals Like Microcredentials

The job market is tightening, and companies have clearly indicated they're looking for employees with deeper and more specialized knowledge and abilities. These two facts should serve as a clarion call to current employees and jobseekers alike: it's time to upskill.

Microcredentials are a way for professionals to demonstrate additional competencies and therefore present themselves as more marketable. And one big reason for their broad popularity is that they represent a lifelong learning opportunity that spans the full employment horizon.

Career explorers and early workforce entrants can use microcredentials to:

- Build a path into their chosen profession.

- Sample several specialties in their chosen field without committing significant time or resources.

- Differentiate themselves at the outset of their career journey.

Mid-career and more senior professionals can use microcredentials to:

- Stay current with the evolving demands and technology in their profession.

- Add new skills and specialities as they continue to climb the corporate ladder.

- Satisfy their continuing education requirements.

For both of these groups, microcredentials represent a more digestible and affordable pathway to further career opportunities than something like an advanced degree or a time-consuming certificate program. Microcredentials are:

- **Faster:** Learners are not required to commit to a multiyear journey.

- **Less expensive:** Smaller programs mean lower costs.

- **More flexible:** Modular training and compact programs allow for a better lifestyle fit.

- **More forward-looking:** Stackable credentials allow learners to build resumes over time.

Despite the appeal of microcredentials, however, many professionals may still be unsure about things like which offerings best align with their career goals or how to go about earning them. That's where their association or credentialing body can step in.
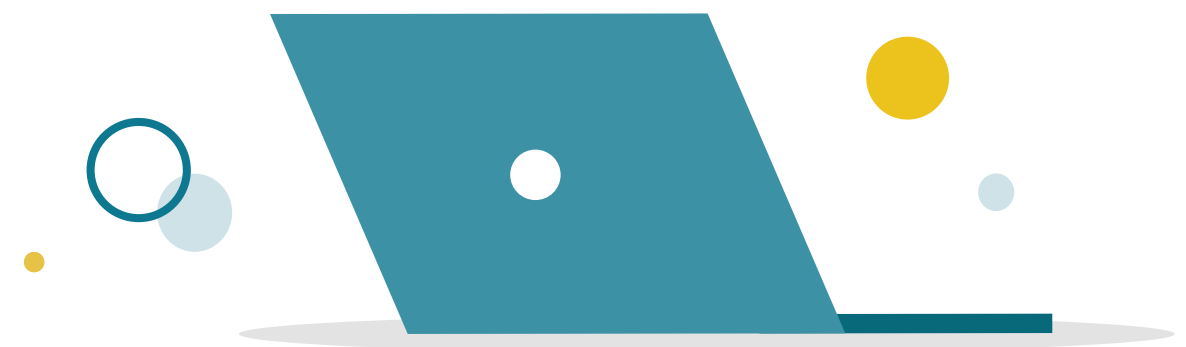
Sustained Engagement, Increased Exposure, and Additional Revenue: The Microcredential Value Proposition for Learning Businesses

Microcredentials are becoming wildly popular, but as of now they're still a newer type of professional learning. This represents a huge opportunity for learning businesses.

By offering guidance about how to understand the microcredentialing universe, identify best-fit microcredential offerings, and use microcredentials to advance careers, learning businesses can become a trusted go-to resource in this crowded field.

Let's consider three specific ways that organizations can benefit by adding microcredentials to their learning options.
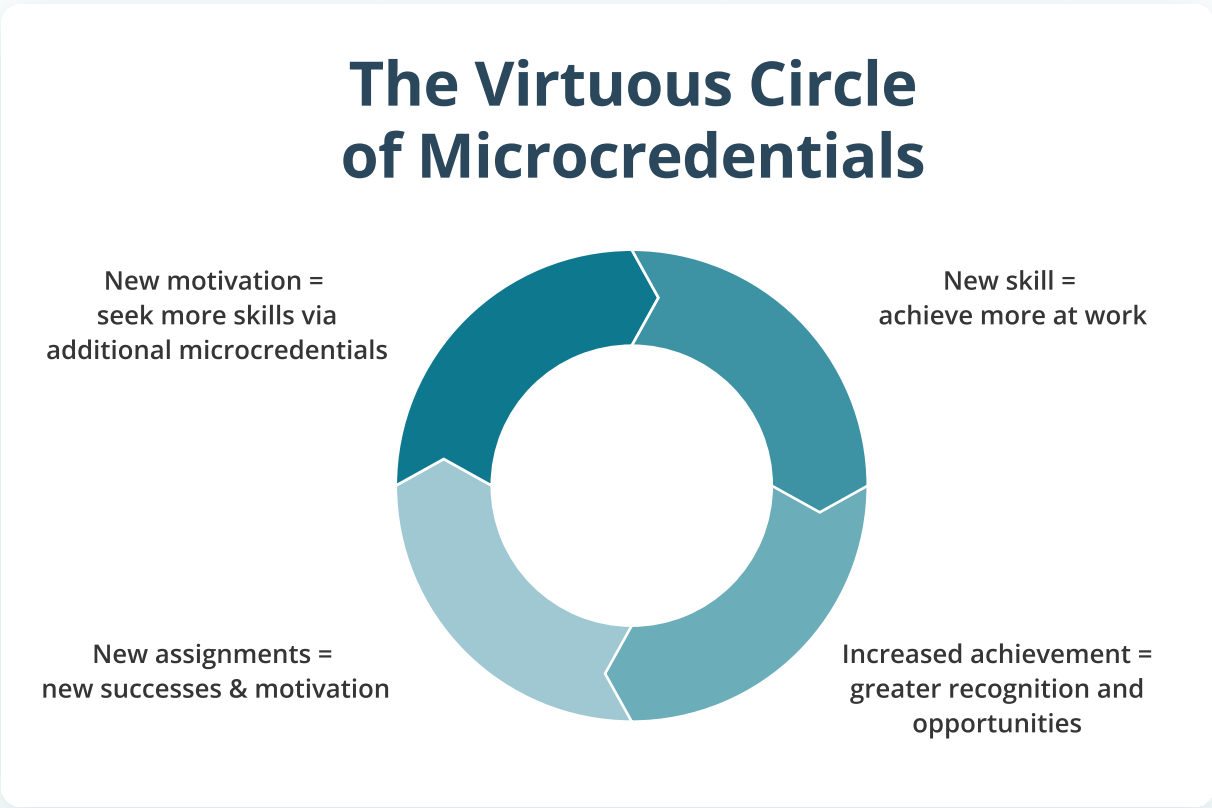
Three Ways to Grow with Microcredentials

	1. Top-of-funnel entry point	**2. Learner re-engagement**	**3. Stackable microcredentials**
Organization benefit	Acquire new learners at the career exploration or entry-level stage.	Re-engage and upsell existing learners with compelling continuing education content.	Convert new learners into lifelong learners by encouraging higher-level certifications and professional development opportunities that build over time.
Learner benefit	A quick, affordable upskilling option that can provide early-career stepping stones along an individualized career path.	Relevant additional skills for veteran learners within a low-risk framework from a trusted source.	Flexible, accessible, and affordable option for professional development.
Example	The CFA Institute's Investment Foundations Certificate provides an accessible entry point for those looking to explore finance as a career path by giving learners a foundational understanding of the finance industry without the need for a full Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation.	CompTIA's CloudNetX certificate offers IT pros a low-commitment opportunity to deepen their expertise in a specific marketable area without having to go through an entirely new certification process.	The American Medical Technologists' Registered Medical Assistant (RMA) certificate lays the foundation for a career path that could include ECG, Registered Phlebotomy Technician, and Immunization microcredentials, allowing learners to advance at their own pace and providing multiple entry and exit points along their learning journey.

Enhanced Skills, Increased Engagement: How Microcredentials Fuel a Virtuous Circle of Engagement

Microcredentials may offer quick wins for learners and their employers, but the learning businesses offering them can enjoy benefits that last for much longer.

Think of it as enabling a kind of professional development snowball for learners: with each new skill, they're able to achieve more at work. With those increased achievements come greater recognition and opportunities. With those new assignments come additional opportunities to prove themselves—and additional motivation to seek new skills.

The Virtuous Circle of Microcredentials

New motivation = seek more skills via additional microcredentials

New skill = achieve more at work

New assignments = new successes & motivation

Increased achievement = greater recognition and opportunities

At this point, of course, they seek out additional microcredentials. This becomes a virtuous circle of revenue-generating opportunities for learning businesses, especially as individual success ripples out:

Happy learners are more likely to remain subscribed to email lists, which means they'll see more offers for new classes and microcredentials.

As learners enroll in and complete new microcredential offerings, they'll add the digital badges they earn to their social media profiles, providing exposure for the learning business to their network.

Satisfied learners may be more likely to recommend membership to their colleagues, as well as to mention in professional conversations how they obtained their new skills.

Microcredentials, in short, offer a way for organizations to not only get new learners in the door. They also provide both new and existing learners with a compelling reason to stay engaged across their lifelong learning journey.

How to Build a Microcredential Offering That Drives New Revenue, Attracts New Learners, and Boosts Engagement

Despite their popularity, microcredentials aren't something that a learning business can roll out overnight. It's important to have a strong gameplan for showing learners why your offering is their best option.

Remember: there are thousands of microcredentials out there competing for learners' attention. That's why any organization looking to stand out from that growing crowd will need to focus on engaging content to draw learners in and to encourage them to pursue additional microcredentials.

As you set out to build a microcredential program, aim to answer these three questions:

Why:

Define the goal of the microcredential program: attract new learners, engage existing ones, establish a new source of revenue, etc.

What:

Design the program, set pricing, and outline a go-to-market strategy.

How:

Determine the resources, budget, timeline, and potential industry partnerships that will be required to bring the plan to fruition.

For learners, beyond affordability (which should be baked into any offering), the attractiveness of a microcredential program will largely depend on its content and delivery. Learning businesses are well-versed in specific topics and areas of expertise which needs to shine through in the material.

A few checklist items to keep in mind when developing your offerings:

MAKE THE CONTENT INTERACTIVE

Learners get the most benefit from microcredentials when they offer tangible upskilling. The more interactive your content, the more likely learners are to pick up those needed new skills. Things like chat functions, gamification, and instructor feedback can give your microcredential offerings the kind of interactive feel that helps keep learners engaged.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND INCENTIVIZE ACHIEVEMENTS

Digital badges are a great way for learners to track their progress as they collect additional microcredentials, providing a clear illustration of their learning journey (and a nice pat on the back). And when learners proudly add those badges to their social media profiles, they tie their achievements back to your organization. This is a great endorsement for their followers and observers who might be considering some upskilling of their own.

BOLSTER MICROCREDENTIALS WITH CE CREDITS

Many microcredential offerings provide both new skills and continuing education credits. This more-bang-for-your-buck quality is definitely a selling point with many learners. In particular, seasoned professionals, who might not be as naturally drawn to microcredentials as career explorers, will likely be intrigued by the possibility of adding a new certification to their CV while completing their mandated continuing ed. As you develop your offerings, consider creating microcredentials that can also work toward learners' CE requirements.

BUILD THE CASE FOR STACKING MICROCREDENTIALS

Associations and credentialing bodies are uniquely well-positioned to organize and prioritize the right microcredentials for their learners' professions or industries. Consider creating bundles or promoting "pathways" that involve stacking multiple microcredentials to develop a more robust skillset. Not only will this help learners see how accumulating complementary skills can benefit their careers, they'll also recognize that your organization is the best place to do the stacking.

KEEP THE CONTENT TIMELY AND RELEVANT

Nobody needs a certification in a dying programming language or an outdated managerial concept. Make it clear to learners that your microcredential offerings are focused on where their profession is heading, not where it's been, by focusing on trending topics and emerging specialties. This means not only regularly updating content in your current microcredential offerings, but also continually rolling out new courses that speak to today's professional needs.

CLEARLY DEMONSTRATE LEARNER ROI

Learners will appreciate that your microcredentials are affordable and accessible, but ultimately they want to know what's in it for them. That's why learning businesses need to make a clear case for the enhanced professional prospects their microcredentials can lead to. Highlight specific job titles and career paths that can benefit from the skills different microcredentials provide, ideally with average salary information.

The Power of Technology: How Your LMS Can Make or Break Your Microcredential Program

Even the best microcredential content will fall flat if the learner experience is clunky. Your learning management system (LMS) isn't just a delivery vehicle—it's the engine that powers your program's success.

Think of it this way: Learners drawn to the convenience and manageability of microcredentials are certainly going to expect the same from the platform they're using to earn them. Whether they're shopping online, ordering a rideshare, or just browsing the web, they're used to dealing with easy-to-use, intuitive tech. And that's exactly what they'll want from your microcredential platform.

When it comes to education in this context, learners expect a multimodal learning experience that involves content delivery across multiple channels, including visual, audio, and text.

A few years ago, a simple webinar may have met most learners' needs.

Today, however, expectations have changed. Learners expect:

- An interactive chat function during the course.
- A recording and transcript they can review after the fact.
- Portal-based follow-up reading and practice questions.
- Opportunities to communicate with other learners.

If your association or credentialing body already has a platform that incorporates things like video, streaming, and text-based materials for continuing education offerings, tapping into these elements for microcredentials shouldn't be much of a technical stretch. But an organization that can't easily coordinate this type of seamless delivery will have a hard time establishing itself as the microcredential option of choice for learners.

And, most importantly, they want everything to be connected.

Today's learners expect a seamless, multimodal learning experience
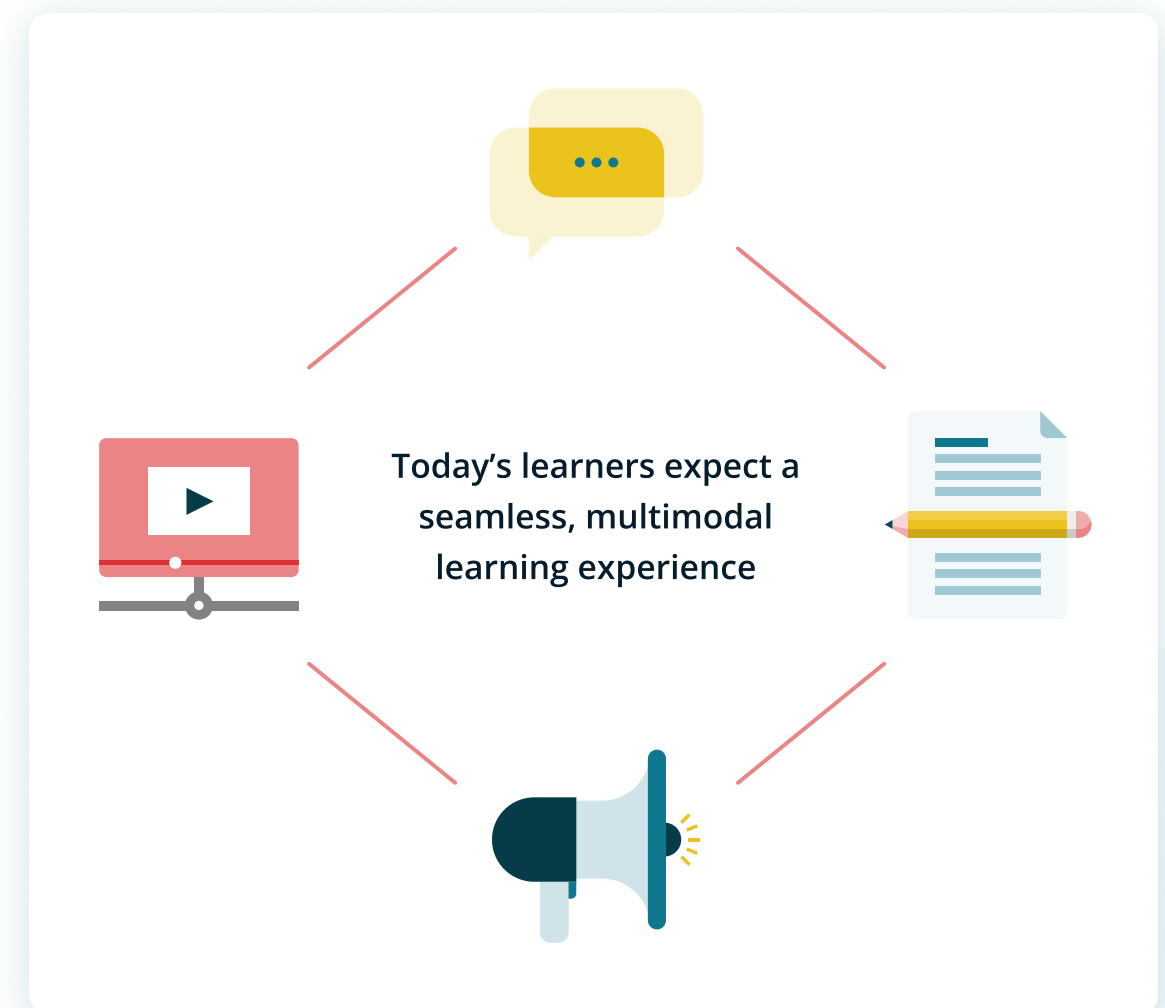
Picture this:

Our learner Kim, largely drawn to the idea of microcredentials for their purported ease of use and flexibility, comes to your association to get started. Excited by your broad range of choices but disappointed by a clunky, disjointed platform, she'll likely move along to some other provider—one whose technology seems more current and intuitive. That's a big miss.

Meeting the expectations of today's tech-focused learner requires more than an ad hoc approach to your microcredential platform. Learning businesses looking to stand out as much for their easy-to-use tech as for their teaching will want to consider the streamlined convenience of an all-in-one LMS.

A unified LMS can help your organization provide personalized support to learners throughout the learning lifecycle—exactly why you're probably looking to add a microcredential offering in the first place. A good LMS will seamlessly bring together many of the features and elements that can help distinguish an attractive microcredential program—for both learners and your staff alike—including:

Content management capabilities that allow you to create new content quickly and easily, helping to ensure your microcredential offerings are always as current and relevant as possible.

Learning technology that highlights things like individualized learning pathways, progressive microcredential stacks, gamification options, and continuing education crossovers.

Data-driven insights, such as engagement metrics and at-risk warnings, that help you better understand your learners as they take their microcredential journey.

Administrative tools that make it easy to quickly launch new microcredential courses, analyze learner data to track engagement and progression, and keep your data secure.

Microcredentials Can Boost Revenue for Learning Businesses by Attracting and Retaining Lifelong Learners

Microcredentials are kind of a big deal right now—and it's clear why.

As companies scramble to meet the evolving demands of their fast-changing industries, they know they need their employees to quickly ramp up their capabilities. Employees, meanwhile, recognize that specialized skills not only make them more valuable to their current employers, but more attractive on the job market at large. Microcredentials fit the bill for both sides of this equation as a fast, manageable, flexible, and affordable way to upskill.

That's where associations and credentialing bodies come in. Their trusted brands, deep industry expertise, and established credibility make them uniquely positioned to become a go-to source for microcredentials.

But in order to take advantage of this opportunity to both attract new learners and re-engage existing ones—and to enjoy the revenue boost that comes with it—learning businesses need to understand what it takes to develop and deliver a winning microcredential offering.

About BenchPrep

BenchPrep is an award-winning learning management system (LMS) with a mission to transform traditional learning. Specializing in certification training, exam preparation, microcredentialing, and continuing education, we offer an interactive and personalized learning experience. We enable associations and credentialing bodies to grow their education programs and better support their learners throughout the lifelong learning journey.

BenchPrep is more than just a technology provider; we collaborate closely with organizations, helping to design and implement interactive online courses, and providing comprehensive project support alongside a versatile self-service admin portal for streamlined course management.

Many of the world's leading learning organizations trust BenchPrep to power their learning programs, and more than 12 million learners have used BenchPrep to attain academic and professional success.

Experience the transformation BenchPrep can bring to your learning programs.
Visit **benchprep.com** today.

Additional Resources

We hope you find this guide useful and encourage you to explore more great BenchPrep content.

Microcredentials: Do's and Don'ts for Your Association

3 Proven Strategies to Develop High-Impact Microcredential Programs

10 Ways to Level Up Your CE Program

3 Stages of Creating a Continuous Learning Journey for Your Candidates' Long-Term Success

From Bit & Bytes to Insights: a 5-Step Guide to Refining LMS Data into Actionable Intelligence

CLO Secrets Revealed: 5 Learning Leaders Share Secrets to Transform Your Certification Program