

Bridging the Trust Gap: A 4-Layer Model (and Bot) for Open, Credible Credentials

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As this presentation made clear, the Open Recognition movement has transformed how learning and achievement are acknowledged by embracing informal, peer-based, and community-issued recognition alongside formal credentials. This shift has opened powerful new pathways for inclusion, autonomy, and lifelong learning. But as more people issue and share credentials, a key question remains: What makes an open credential trustworthy to someone outside the issuing context—like an employer, university, or platform?

This session introduced the Credential Trust Model (CTM), a four-layer framework that helps credential designers, platforms, and communities build structured trust into open, decentralized recognition systems. Designed to be both rigorous and adaptable, the CTM draws on global credentialing practice and is deeply aligned with Open Recognition values.

The four layers of trust are:

1. Design Trust -- Is the credential clearly described, visually coherent, and structured in a way that reflects meaningful achievement? This layer focuses on metadata, assessment criteria, skills taxonomy alignment, and issuer reputation.
2. Process Trust -- Was the credential earned through a documented, fair, and transparent process? This includes learning pathways, assessment methods, endorsement by quality assurance partners, and alignment with recognized standards.
3. Consumer Trust -- Do external organizations value and use the credential? Examples include employer or university endorsement, integration into job platforms, and credential-based admissions or hiring.
4. Social Trust -- Is the credential visible in the real world? Trust deepens when credentials are shared by earners, supported by success stories, and recognized by peers, thought leaders, and professional communities.

To bring these layers to life, the session included a practical demonstration of how the CTM can be applied to evaluate and improve real credentials. Attendees explored examples from both community and institutional issuers to see how trust signals can be surfaced, strengthened, and made interoperable. Real-world examples were shared and scored manually to illustrate the CTM principles in action.

Participants left the session with a clear understanding of how to apply the Credential Trust Model in their own context --- whether issuing badges in a grassroots learning community,

designing a micro-credential for workforce development, or helping others improve the quality and transparency of their recognition practices. By structuring trust without centralizing control, the Credential Trust Model offers a practical bridge between openness and credibility. It supports the values of Open Recognition by helping ensure that all forms of learning—formal or informal, individual or peer-driven—can be seen, shared, and believed.

Key Words: open recognition, credentialing, Credential Trust Model (CTM), badges, micro-credentials