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## Digital Badges in 4-H

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## Digital Badges in 4-H

### Abstract

The awarding of digital badges has become pervasive across social media systems. Digital badges are visual representations of individual accomplishments and/or competencies and skills. If done properly, the awarding of digital badges following the recommendations of the 4-H Recognition Model may attract a new generation of 4-Hers and convey to others the value of the 4-H experience.

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## Introduction

This article discusses the idea of incorporating digital badges into the National 4-H Recognition Model (USDA, n.d.). Digital badges have been popularized in the gaming industry and through social media systems as symbols of inclusion and status. However, the current generation of digital badges focuses on awards for participation rather than learning and achievement. The transformation of digital badges from simple awards to representations of skills and abilities is the centerpiece of the National 4-H digital badges for learning initiative. As a major leader in youth development, 4-H is well positioned to adapt digital badging as a part of the overall recognition model.

According to the National 4-H Recognition Model (USDA, n.d.), the systematic recognition of learning provides youth positive reinforcement and the necessary motivation to continue to participate in such learning endeavors and to develop life skills (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Hendricks, 1996). Moreover, the existing 4-H model includes five types of recognition:

1. Participation in educational experiences
2. Recognition of progress toward personal goals
3. Recognition of the achievement of generally recognized standards of excellence

4. Recognition through peer competition
5. Recognition for cooperation

The 4-H Recognition Model is adaptive to meet the individual needs of youth and supports a balanced approach to encourage recognition from each of the five recognition categories. The model is also designed to satisfy both intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) motivational needs of individual youth (Quarrick & Rankin, 1965). In practice, 4-H awards ribbons, medals, conference trips, scholarships, and many other incentives depending on the state and county of the youth participant and promotes the development of internally relevant skills and knowledge through program participation (Forbes, 1992).

With the expansion of social media and the use of digital badging for learning (Antin & Churchill, 2012; Halavais, 2012), 4-H has the opportunity to expand the current recognition model and reach a wider audience. Digital badges also fit in each of the five recognition categories and may provide individualized motivation for youth. In addition, digital badges permit sharing with potential employers and post-secondary institutions to showcase competencies obtained and awarded through the 4-H experience.

## Defining Digital Badges

Digital badges have a wide range of purposes from social belonging and status to representing individual learning achievement. An example of a social belonging badge would be the Google News badge. Google issues readers digital badges at the Google News homepage to help visitors learn about their reading habits and to convey shared interests through social networking (Google, 2012). Google may also use badges as a reward system to keep users coming back to the News homepage. The Google News badge is designed with multiple levels and is earned by reading articles on certain subjects at a rate higher than that of other readers. For example, to earn the Iran News badge, 54 articles were read from the Google News homepage (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

Sample Google News Badge



Digital badges can be found in a number of on-line sites and appear frequently in social networking applications. One example is Foursquare, a website that permits users to provide and share location-based data using mobile devices (Wikipedia, 2012). Within the Foursquare community, badges can be earned for a number of social interactions including the beginner badges for joining and checking in. While not entirely useful for educational purposes, the Foursquare badges may affirm ones

achievements and promote group identification (Huffington Post, 2010).

## Digital Badges for Learning

There is a movement amongst educational institutions, sparked by the 2011 digital media learning (DML) competition, sponsored in part by the MacArthur Foundation, to develop a system of digital badges to communicate learning achievement (DML, 2012). The innovation behind the DML competition is the use of an open-badging system being developed by Mozilla (Mozilla, 2012). The open-badging system allows learners to collect badges from many different educational entities and display them on-line. According to Mozilla (2012), learners are able to share their badges "on their resume, web site, social networking profiles, job sites or just about anywhere."

Perhaps the ultimate outward sign of learning today is the diploma. Whether from high school or college, the diploma is an important signal that an individual has met some benchmarks of learning. However, a diploma may not provide a record of skills and abilities obtained in the formal classroom. Digital badges, on the other hand, may provide an ideal way for lifelong learners to enhance their learning credentials beyond the realm of formal education (Selingo, 2012).

A digital badge for learning can be thought of as a visual representation of accomplishments, certified skills, and abilities (Young, 2012). The relative advantage of digital badges is that they may provide a more detailed view of what the badge recipient has learned when compared to traditional diplomas and can signify learning in informal environments (Selingo, 2012). Under a digital badging system a young person could display dozens of badges, providing a detailed picture of acquired competencies and the skills developed in school and out. Moreover, digital badges may be used to show potential employers not just an earned degree but also a detailed list of demonstrated competences. Such as 21st century workplace skills and important life skills like teamwork, innovation, and leadership.

Digital badges are of great interest to the education community because of their potential to motivate youth to pursue the development of skills and knowledge (Halavais, 2012; Antin & Churchill, 2011). Badges provide an ideal setting for goal setting whereby learners are challenged to meet the criteria established in the awarding mechanism of the badge. Digital badges also provide a blueprint of educational offerings within a community for those new to a community (Halavais, 2012). In the Boy Scouts, for example, badges provide motivation to the earners, but, just as important, they are a recruitment tool for potential badge earners to understand what experiences scouting has to offer. According to Halavais (2012), the process of awarding digital educational badges should lead others to engage in learning.

## Badges in 4-H

So what would a 4-H digital badge look like, what would it represent, and how would it be awarded are questions being answered by an interdisciplinary team from LGUs, 4-H National Headquarters, and National 4-H Council. The first set of badges are being developed for 4-H Robotics learning activities in five areas and will be endorsed by the 4-H National Headquarters and the USDA. It is expected that once the program has been successfully piloted, youth will be able to earn and share digital 4-H badges across the Web. In the future an ecosystem of digital badges will most likely be available for youth in many different 4-H project areas and for adult volunteers and professional

staff to represent areas of training they have completed.

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