Adult Learner Motivation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused immense challenges for staffing at companies and organizations across the United States. Coined "The Great Resignation," the mass exit of employees across many major industries has surmounted to 4.3 million people leaving their jobs in August 2021 alone (U.S. Department of Labor). Employees must determine if their pre-pandemic career still aligns with their goals and personal needs as we enter 2022. This paper will discuss the motivational factors and theories for adult learners returning to education as an outlet for personal growth and career advancement. As online and blended learning programs increase, digital credentialing platforms are presented as a strategy for adult learners to embrace as part of their career advancement goals.

1. Introduction

Within the last two decades, the value of higher education has become inevitable for job seekers as they persist in the workforce. Since the beginning of the global pandemic, many have also lost their jobs or have decided to choose alternative career paths. The rising costs of higher education presents an opportunity for alternative and supplementary means for learning the skill sets desired by employers. Educators must understand the motivational factors for adult learners returning to education in order to stay ahead of the recent shifts in global workforce.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on Learning and Advancement

The recent global pandemic has created many challenges for colleges and universities as they meet the needs of students seeking a return on investment. To best understand how education must adapt in a post-pandemic world, it is important to understand how career paths have shifted during this unprecedented time.

2.1. Career outlook

Before the pandemic, the increase in job availability in the United States was thriving. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "by the end of 2019, payroll employment in the United States had been growing steadily for over 9 years, marking the longest recovery and expansion in Current Employment Statistics (CES) history" [1]. In January and February 2020 alone, the nation saw an expansion of 604,000 jobs [1]. However, COVID-19 brought about changes to the workforce, some of them permanent. In January 2020, The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced its first case of COVID-19 and, by the end of March 2020, the number of Covid-19 cases would exceed 22,000 [1]. In March 2020, state and local government restrictions began which included stay-at-home orders, social distancing requirements, capacity limitations, school closure, and travel restrictions. Some places of employment simply could not financially withstand the consequences of mandated closures and the other restrictions imposed by local and state governments. Consequently, the employment numbers plummeted. Ansell and Mullins [1] stated "After reaching a peak in February 2020, employment fell by a combined 22.4 million in March and April, a decline of 15 percent". Many people were left with the decision of having to work remotely from home, find other employment, or receive unemployment.

2.2. The Great Resignation

Due to mandated closures and social distancing requirements, many employees had to switch to remote work. The great migration into remote work during Covid-19 changed how people regarded work. Handwerker et al. [6] revealed, "Using April and May Google Consumer Surveys of 25,000 people, Brynjolfsson et al. [24] states that about one-third of all U.S. workers shifted to remote-only work by April 2020, with little further change between April and May" [6]. The pandemic changed how people felt about their work situation. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 4.3 million quit their jobs in August 2021, alone [3]. By the last half of 2021, more than 20 million people quit their jobs. Many workers reconsidered their priorities and the values of their job and began prioritizing their families and physical and mental health over their employment. Millions of people decided their jobs simply were "not worth it." Some individuals found a love for remote work, which they were able to embrace during the pandemic. Still,

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other individuals decided to start their businesses, find employment opportunities they enjoyed, or seek a new career path altogether. "The pandemic forced [people] to take stock of their lives and allowed them to reimagine it," stated Anthony Klotz, a management professor at Texas AandM University. He coined the phrase "Great resignation" [3]. Klotz's research found that people enjoyed the flexibility and autonomy of remote work, which sparked a great interest in freelance [4].

2.3. Higher education

Amongst other effects of COVID-19, another area that took a significant hit was the field of higher education. Historically, higher education has had to handle several types of risks, but many were unprepared for the effects of Covid-19. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) Summer 2021 report titled "The impact of the Coronavirus on Higher Education," over 1,100 colleges and universities in all 50 states canceled in-person classes in 2020. With these closures, "the pandemic seriously impacted higher education enrollment, life on campus from athletics to housing issues, and created concerns about the quality and challenges of online education in colleges and universities" [21]. This number was detrimental to many students who struggle with a fully remote course load. The numbers continued to dwindle; in Spring 2021, undergraduate enrollment was down 5.9% compared to Spring 2020 [19]. It got to the point where many students decided not to enroll in courses in the fall of 2021 for several reasons. For instance, 63% of students stated that they could not pay higher education expenses due to pandemic-related changes to their income. Additionally, 46% of students experienced COVID-19 or had concerns about contracting it, so they canceled all their classes. Finally, 59% of students had to care for others due to COVID-related problems or complications and consequently canceled all their classes [11]. All of the percentages reported were based on data obtained from a survey from the U.S. Census Bureau titled "Total Population 18 Years and Older in Households Where at Least One Adult Was Planning On Taking Classes This Fall From a Post High School Institution, March 3-15" [12].

3. Adult learners and motivation

Motivating adult learners in online and blended learning environments requires strategy to support higher-order thinking. Educational systems should facilitate intentional interactions amongst instructors and peers, which contributes to active learning and engagement [16]. Fostering connection and sense of belonging amongst adult learners will build lifelong learning communities. Adult learners also come from a place where intrinsic goals will drive results and achievement. Self-efficacy and their expectancy of goal accomplishment can support an adult learner's ability to persist in online and blended learning [23].

As such, it is a pivotal time for adult learners amidst the global pandemic's inevitable career shift. While this population considers whether to return to education in order to advance or alter their career trajectory, several factors may impede on their ability to persist. The need for job security, financial concerns, limited time and availability, and lack of engagement with active learning could be detrimental in their pursuit [19]. Adult students have become caretakers for older family members due to COVID-19, which has had a significant impact on their ability to not only return to school but also return to work [16]. Additionally, many adult learners who come from low socioeconomic environments have found themselves without the resources needed to successfully complete educational programs with the limited access to college campuses due to COVID-19 [10]. Attending a college or university for a several-year degree program may not be a feasible option given these constraints. Adult learners pursuing digital credentialing programs could be an affordable and high-impact opportunity that teaches them the skill sets desired in this post-pandemic workforce.

4. Opportunities in Digital Credentialing

Colleges and universities have opportunities in adapting to the needs of students as they navigate a post-pandemic career shift. Digital credentialing offers an affordable and effective return on investment for adult learners.

4.1. Defining the trend

The last 10 years have been instrumental in the wave of digital credentialing as an opportunity for career advancement. In 2011, Peer 2 Peer University and The Mozilla Foundation co-authored a paper to define digital credentialing and its new place in education [8]. This paper described this practice as a benchmarked way to justify skills learned, and recommended design principles for credentialing companies to utilize when offering badging programs. After publication, The Mozilla Foundation proceeded to develop one of the first open technical standardized digital credentialing platforms called Open Badges, which served as a common system for issuing, collecting, or displaying badges across various websites and non-profit organizations [7]. Since this inception, several more credentialing organizations have begun issuing digital badges to learners across a variety of industries. These badges can be visually represented and documented on a learner's resume, online portfolio, or networking platforms, such as LinkedIn, to demonstrate the skills learned along with

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a certification date.

Despite the hardships of degree inflation, some companies have indicated a need for change in hiring standards. Enrollment in short-term digital credentialing classes increased by over 70% over last year across major online platforms, while freshman at traditional-aged college enrollment dropped by 16% across the nation [18]. This staggering data reflects the financial priorities of job seekers in contrast to how they would like to pursue learning employer-desired skills pertaining to their industry. Additionally with the pandemic's shift to remote work, the United States saw nearly four million people quit their jobs in April 2021, which remains a monthly average throughout this year [7]. A recent survey of 903 employees across the country found that half of them also would like to make a career change, citing the personal needs adapting from the pandemic [6]. For adult learners, digital credentialing for new skill development can be an affordable and helpful option as they ponder leaving their current place of employment.

Skill-based versus degree-based hiring is a major topic of conversation due to the pandemic's impact on staffing challenges across many companies and organizations. Randall (2020), in collaboration with a Forbes study, suggests that 60% of industry experts believe that more employers will migrate to skills-based hiring by selecting candidates based on what they are able to do, as opposed to their degree [15]. IBM is an example of this, recently deploying an extensive digital badging program linked to acquisition of knowledge and skills within their own platforms and services [15]. The company uses this credentialing attainment to promote within their own chains of command, ultimately supporting retention of staff and professional development goals of employees.

Digital credentialing also brings opportunities for adult learners to develop soft skills that they may not otherwise have interfaced with in educational or work settings. Randall [15] in collaboration with the Deloitte Access Economics study, forecasts that soft skill-intensive occupations will account for two-thirds of all roles by 2030, compared to half of all jobs in 2000 [11]. Colleges and universities often provide the industry-standard requirements in classroom settings, but a learners' involvement outside of the classroom often supports soft skill development. By scaffolding digital credentialing in this way, learners could rely more on trusted badging organizations to show they are a strong communicator, demonstrate managerial skills, or delegate through project management as soft skills.

4.2. Career advancement

COVID-19 caused many businesses to dive into a rapid transformation of their operational processes. This transformation was responsible for a sharp increase in the need for skilled professionals in the technology disciplines. In the industrial setting employers could find potential employees that demonstrated specific skills; however, in a college degree the transcript is not indicative of the actual accomplishments of the student or the mastery of specific needed abilities. In the University sector, the certification can guarantee that a program is following industry demands [17]. As a result, many of these positions demanded higher compensation in the forms of salary and benefits [2]. In 2022 the list did not change drastically. For example, AWS Certification moved into the top position pushing Google Certification to number two [20]. Information Technology's highest demands were employees with certifications in AWS, CCSP, and CDPSE [14]. Shown in the table below, is a report from Global Knowledge Study enumerating the top fifteen positions by salary or compensation level.

Table 1. Most Valuable IT Certifications, 2021

Certification	**Annual Salary**
Google Certified Professional Data Engineer	$171,749
Google Certified Cloud Architect	$169,029
AWS Certified Solutions Architect – Associate	$159,033
CRISC – Certified in Risk and Information Systems Control	$151,995
CISSP – Certified Information Systems Security Professional	$151,853
CISM – Certified Information Security Manager	$149,246
PMP – Project Management Professional	$148,906
NCP-MCI – Nutanix Certified Professional – Multicloud Infrastructure	$142,810
CISA – Certified Information Systems Auditor	$134,460
VCP-DVC – VMWare Certified Professional – Data Center Virtualization 2020	$132,947
MCSE: Windows Server	$125,980
Microsoft Certified: Azure Administrator Associate	$121,420
CCNP Enterprise – Cisco Certified Network Professional – Enterprise	$118,911
CCA-V – Citrix Certified Associate – Virtualization	$115,308
CompTIA Security+	$110,974

(Source: Global Knowledge Study, 15 Top-Paying IT Certifications for 2021)

The digital certifications do not require any college degree and can be acquired by credentialing exams. To pass the exams, there are synchronous courses offered by non-collegiate institutions. In fact, some of these certifications can be acquired by purchasing a self-study guide and completing the course work asynchronously.

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In the non-technical subject areas digital credentials or certifications exist in areas like Human Resources (PHR, SPHR, SHRM), Sales, Language, and Content Writing. If a candidate is interested in applications or software there are credentials in many offerings that include: Salesforce, SAP (Manufacturing), Oracle or SQL (Database), and EPIC or Cerner (Healthcare) [22].

In May of 2022, Indeed updated an article from 2020 to mention some other top, non-technical, certifications that are in demand. These include Project Management (CAPM and PMP), Business Analyst, Supply chain certifications, Marketing certifications, and even skill trade certifications like HVAC, carpenters, and welders.

In the colleges and/or universities over thirty percent of the course work for a basic bachelor's degree includes general education courses (GenEd) in which students have shown little to no interest. Many students, according to studies, perceive these GenEd courses a waste of time and money as they cannot gain any marketable skills. This contrasts with self-study or synchronous certification courses which dive into the subject matter directly and the students perceive there are no "fluff" courses. The students in this setting see a direct correlation to their career and the job market [13].

5. Conclusion

There is significant value and opportunity for digital credentialing as a practice to be embraced in higher education. The increase of demand in affordability, portability, and stackable skill development amongst learners, job seekers, and employers is inevitable with a push to digital learning environments. Though there is much still to be forecasted for the future of the workforce and the changing needs of education, the use of digital credentialing is a viable co-curricular addition that adds to educational technology. By being able to offer learners new ways to engage with concepts, digital credentialing can produce significant rewards with employers. When embraced, this practice has the potential to aid in transforming education into a modern credentialing system that allows learners to articulate their skill sets and match them into the workplace.

In the post COVID-19 era there is a ripe area of research on the impact of digital certifications. There are opinions that colleges and universities need to develop a new paradigm from the "lecture on-line" to attract and prepare students for their work life. [9]

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