

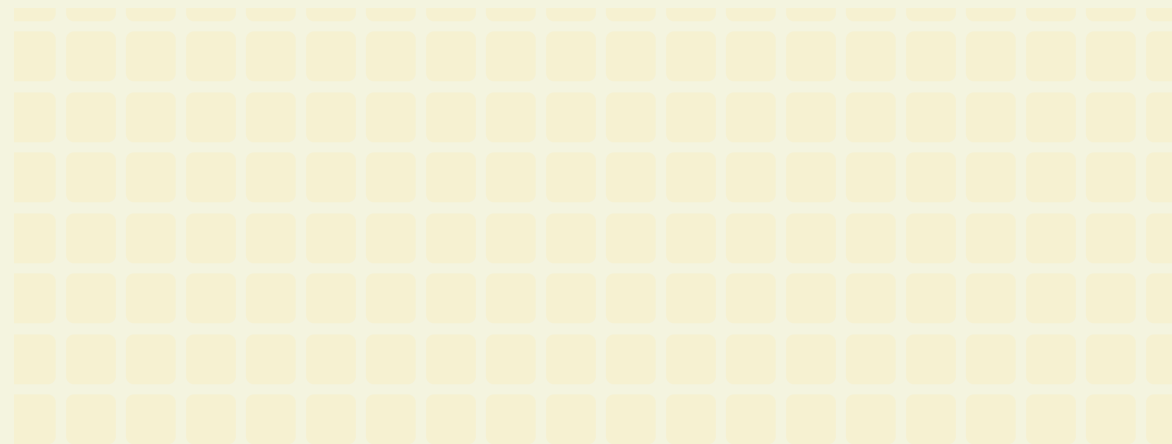
WELEARN



The next chapter for credentialing organizations

Year-round engagement, AI,
and what comes next.

A WELEARN + KAWEST PARTNERS EBOOK



FOREWORD

Bill West, KaWest Partners

The conversations I've been having with credentialing CEOs over the last year all land in the same place. They know their members are asking for something more than a moment-in-time recertification process. They know their boards want an AI strategy and aren't sure what one should look like for them. And they know the firewall between credentialing and learning, which served the field well for decades, can sometimes constrain opportunity.

I've led credentialing organizations, and have supported credentialing organizations at the senior level long enough to know what they're capable of and where they tend to overthink. Most boards are tying themselves in knots over whether they're even allowed to offer learning to their members and still meet ISO 17024 or NCCA accreditation standards. They can, and we know how. Outside of that, credentialing bodies are free to offer continuing education, specialty programs, or ongoing engagement with their members. Members don't want a different



credential. They want an ongoing relationship with the body that holds the standard.

Credentialing bodies have held a unique place in professions for as long as the field has existed. The challenge now is keeping it. Sean and I put our thoughts together for the boards working through what comes next.

— **Bill West,**
Co-Founder & Chief Strategy Officer, KaWest Partners

FOREWORD

Sean Stowers, WeLearn Learning Services

Most credentialing bodies are sitting on something corporate L&D has spent years trying to create — a validated body of knowledge, decades of relationship with their profession, and authority earned by their work. What most haven't built yet is the infrastructure to engage their members between exams.

That infrastructure is exactly what corporate L&D has been figuring out for over a decade — moving from event-based training to continuous development. We've watched organizations learn the hard way that “we built it” isn't the same as “people used it,” and that buying tools doesn't make a capability. Credentialing bodies have a chance to skip some of those years.



What Bill and I would like to tell credentialing CEOs is that they already have what L&D has been working to build. The harder work now is the operating discipline that turns that authority into a year-round relationship with the people who hold the credential.

— **Sean Stowers,**
CEO and Founder, WeLearn Learning Services

SECTION 1

The gap between certification and practice

For most credentialing bodies, the engagement with a member looks like this: candidate prepares for the exam, takes the exam, gets certified, returns three to five years later to recertify. Between those moments, the credentialing body may or may not be engaged in a meaningful way in the certificant's career journey. A separate professional association, or a private course provider, delivers whatever ongoing education the member pursues.

That model assumes a profession that changes slowly enough for a recertification cycle to keep pace. Many don't — not nursing, financial planning, IT, the trades, or anything in healthcare that touches a treatment guideline amidst rapid change in technology or professional practice.

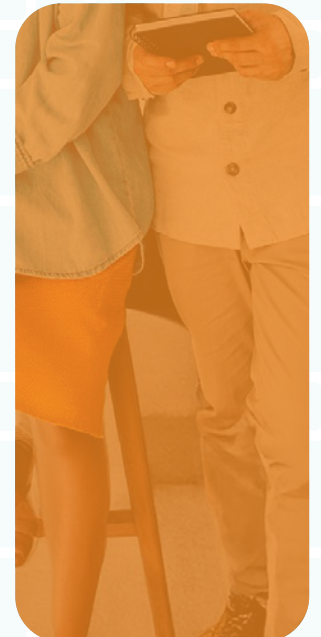
Here's an example to illustrate the point: a nurse three years into practice opens her certifying body's site looking for help with a clinical situation she's never seen before. She finds a study guide for a recertification two and a half years away — nothing else. By the end of the week, she's following three TikTok creators, has joined two private Facebook groups, and has bookmarked a vendor course she'll probably never finish. That's the gap. Members are working in real time, and their credentialing body shows up every few years. So members go elsewhere — and the body that holds the actual standard isn't part of the conversation.

Employers see the same gap from another angle. A hiring manager asks a candidate any question aligned to the certification exam and the response they get is accurate. When they ask one 'adjacent' question requiring interpretation or analysis (in the same domain, and not on the exam) then the candidate may or may not be able to respond. The candidate has the credential but not necessarily the applied capability behind it. The distinction between possessing a credential and demonstrating real-world capability is becoming a topic of discussion in the boardroom.

SECTION 1

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) has been tracking member demand for ongoing professional development for years. It's the top desire members have from their associations. What's new is how visible the gap between that demand and the credentialing body's response has become.

According to the Credential As You Go (CAYG) higher education initiative, a driver of change to the nation's credentialing system is "Rapid Credential Expansion — they cite Credential Engine's research that [more than a million credentials are now in circulation in the U.S.](#) Demand for them is higher than ever, but consumers — members, employers, hiring managers — can't always tell the rigorous ones from the noise. That ambiguity creates market confusion, an uneven set of stakes, and uncertainty about what to expect by earning or having earned a credential. The credentialing bodies with real validity have the most to gain. They also have the most to lose.



SECTION 2

What members and employers want

Members are looking for more from the body that holds their credential. They want it to show up between exams — to help them advance in their careers, stay current with the work, and find their next role. The professional association down the hall might be running webinars and building career-aligned learning paths. The body that holds the standard is sending a recertification renewal reminder.

Employers are asking a sharper question: can this certified person actually do the work? They want a credential that confirms the person is fully capable. In many professions, the credential, when built to accreditation standards, does communicate readiness according to the standards the industry has defined, but doesn't necessarily deliver the outcomes employers value. Hiring managers are filling the gap one interview at a time.

The same gap appears at the entry point of a profession. A community college runs a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program that feeds into a nursing degree. The traditional pathway treats the clinical rotation as the moment a candidate demonstrates their critical thinking abilities. But a CNA who's been working under a nurse's license for a year has often proven their critical thinking skills long before the rotation begins. Skill validation should account for what someone has already shown they can do, including the work they do in their role before any test or rotation.

Workforce shortages make all of this urgent. They run deep across healthcare, education, the skilled trades, cybersecurity, and the space economy. Credentialing bodies have traditionally focused on certifying people qualified to do the work according to industry-defined knowledge, skills, and abilities. The shortages open a second role: building the entry pathways — apprenticeships, stackable credentials, foundational certifications — that bring more people into the profession in the first place.

SECTION 2

The credentialing bodies that take that opportunity will sell something different in three years than they sell today. The ones that don't will sell the same thing to a smaller and smaller audience

Earning a certification represents a snapshot in time.

Continuing to skill and upskill learners, both pre- and post-certification, is the real driver of outcomes and the desired changes that are needed to maintain relevancy in the workplace despite the pace of change. – Bobbi Vernon, Chief Learning Officer, KaWest Partners



SECTION 3

What credentialing bodies have that no one else does

Credentialing bodies, those in line with ISO or NCCA accreditation standards, hold something an employer academy or a vendor certification can't replicate quickly: validity, governance discipline, a body of knowledge maintained against an actual professional standard, and decades of trust with the people who hold the credential. That comes from doing the work over a long time, under external scrutiny.

That position is the asset, and the question is what credentialing bodies do with it next.

Members are going to get year-round professional development from somewhere. Right now, most are getting it from platform companies, vendor courses, and employer academies.

None of those carry the validity the credentialing body's standard carries, or the governance behind it. But they have the production values, marketing budgets, and the convenience — and they're filling the space credentialing bodies have left empty.

That's the risk.

The alternatives don't replace the credentialing body's authority overnight. But over ten years, or more rapidly now with AI tools and resources, the field gets defined by what's available. Members and employers stop expecting year-round capability from the credentialing body because the body never provided it. Their relevance narrows to the recertification moment. The standard stays intact. Meanwhile, the credentialing body's role around its own standard shrinks.

The work, then, is for credentialing bodies to extend what they already do well — rigor, validity, governance — into the year-round capability the market is now asking for. In practice, that means building career pathways into the profession with credentialing tools at multiple levels: microcredentials, specialty credentials, applied evaluation, with the flagship certification at the center.

SECTION 3

It means offering continuing education and ongoing development that members access from the credentialing body that holds the standard. And it means accumulating data across the profession that informs the next generation of programs and helps employers calibrate their HR strategies to the credential.

This is the work credentialing bodies are uniquely positioned to do. The bigger question is whether they choose to.

One credentialing body that chose to. Before 2020, the Board of Certification for Emergency Nursing was a certification board that provided practice exams for individuals to prepare for their credentials, but didn't have continuing education to support their lifelong learning for credential holders. With WeLearn, BCEN built and executed a three-year learning strategy that made the body a year-round learning partner for emergency nurses. The board took ownership of continuing education end-to-end and built engagement that ran across each member's career. [Read the BCEN case study →](#)



SECTION 4

How a credentialing body should think about AI

AI is showing up in nearly every credentialing conversation, often surrounded by productivity claims that overstate what the technology actually delivers. For a credentialing body, the impact is more specific. Where AI changes the work for a credentialing body is in specific operations:

- **Operations work** like eligibility evaluation, transcript review, and foreign-credential review moves faster — days instead of weeks.
- **Assessment work** like job task analysis, item generation, and item bank development scales. AI trained on the body of knowledge produces more drafts for SME review at the same SME hours, which means item banks grow at a different rate than they did before.

- **Learning content development** accelerates. The outlines, structures, and first drafts of new learning products that used to need an instructional designer at the start now need one at the polish.

For a certification board or association — typically smaller than ten staff and often not-for-profit — these are real capacity gains. AI gives the staff access to capability they couldn't afford to hire for. The same staff stays in place; the volume and quality of the work it produces changes.

There's a category of work in every credentialing body that AI doesn't do, in part because it shouldn't — the work that holds the credential's meaning. The relationships with members, certificate holders, and volunteers don't move to AI. The final review and leveling of content, the packaging of what gets shown to the public, and the decisions about what the credential measures, what counts as evidence, what standard the profession has agreed on — that work all sits where it always has, with the humans who do it.

SECTION 4

In most organizations, AI deployment has meant giving staff a Copilot or ChatGPT license, sending a memo about responsible use, and asking the team to find ways to apply it. A year in, staff are using the tool well enough, but no one has gotten better at knowing whether the tool actually delivered what they asked of it. The use cases that should anchor each team's work never gets mapped. Discernment never gets built into the workflow.

Doing this well starts with the recognition that different teams in a credentialing body need different things from AI. An education department running annual meetings, a credentialing department building high-stakes exams, and a membership team all have different use cases and need different discernment processes. Treating them as the same is how AI capability stalls; treating them as separate is how it builds.

The credentialing field also has specific risks to address as it moves into AI. AI has opened a new world of cheating that delivery environments weren't designed to prevent. The harder question, which almost no one is asking yet, is how the credential itself needs to change now that candidates use AI in the actual job. For some professions, ethical AI use becomes a competency to assess. None of these have settled answers. This is a huge opportunity for credentialing boards.

The productivity story for a credentialing body, taken whole, is about capacity gained. The staff can do more, more often, with better material. The standard at the center of the credential stays where it always has — with the humans who hold it.



SECTION 5

Where to begin

A credentialing board considering AI right now is fielding pressure from several directions at once: board members who've read articles about AI's productivity gains, staff who've started using AI tools informally, and vendors offering platforms with AI features. The instinct under that pressure is to make a decision quickly — usually a tool related decision.

The decision that creates impact starts somewhere else: with a question about what the credential is supposed to mean for the profession in five years, and what the credentialing body needs to do to support that meaning. Once that question has an answer, the rest of the work has a sequence to it.

1. Strategy first. Map what the credential is meant to mean five years out before deciding which tool helps build it. The strategy work isn't optional — it's what makes the tool decisions defensible later.

- 2. Use cases second.** The education department's needs are different from the credentialing department's needs, and different again from the membership team's needs. Each team maps its own AI use cases against its actual workflow. Each team builds its own discernment process for verifying what AI produces. Credentialing bodies that skip this step end up with staff using AI but not building efficiencies.
- 3. Tools third.** The platform decision is consequential, but it's a third-order question for good reason. The organizations that build their strategy and use cases first know what they're buying (and why) when they buy it.
- 4. Governance throughout.** Credentialing bodies already understand the discipline of human-in-the-loop from item validation. The same discipline applies to AI use. Bias, hallucination, cheating in delivery environments — these are real risks, and they're addressable with the rigor the credentialing field already brings to other parts of its work.

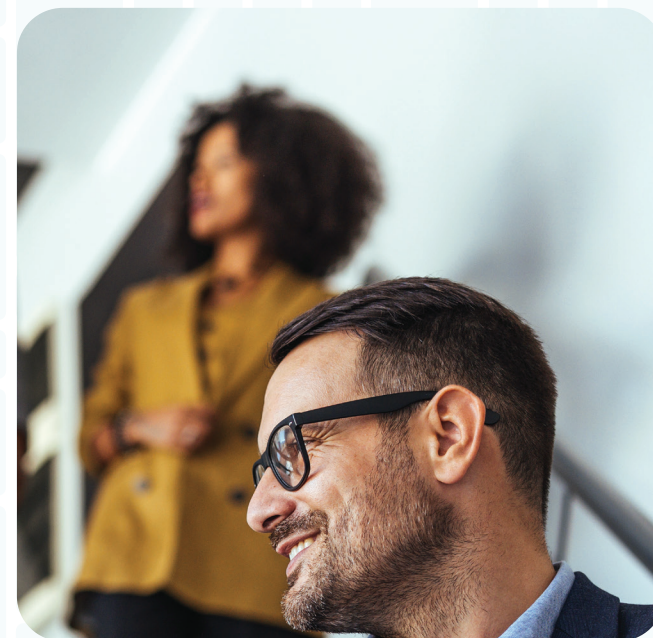
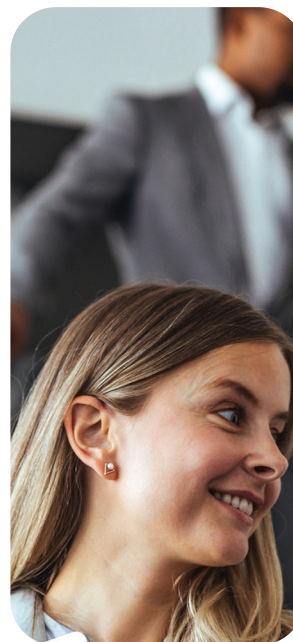
SECTION 5

The first ninety days of this work should produce one thing: a clear strategic recommendation a CEO can take to the board with a defensible go-or-no-go decision attached. That recommendation has to be grounded in the credentialing body's actual context, supported by the strategy work and the use case mapping behind it.

About KaWest and WeLearn

KaWest and WeLearn are partnering to help credentialing boards build year-round member engagement with the rigor accreditation requires.

The combination brings industry expertise, governance literacy, learning strategy, and AI enablement into one team — with the capacity to develop learning programs at scale.



Get started

For credentialing CEOs and boards weighing what year-round engagement and AI adoption could look like in their context, the most common starting point is a four-to-six-week Accelerated Discovery Sprint. The sprint produces a decision-ready recommendation in ninety days that a board can vote on, with a clear scope of work attached if the answer is yes.

Most credentialing boards don't have the in-house team to do this work alone, we bring expertise from serving nearly every profession with credentialing and learning services.

To start a conversation, or discuss
a Discovery Sprint, contact
WeLearn + KaWest Partners

