Certify

GUIDE

GUIDE FOR PROGRAMME OWNERS

How to design a digital badge programme people trust

A badge is only as credible as the decisions behind it. This guide walks through those decisions in the order you should make them, from what the programme is for to who is allowed to change it.

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Online version: https://www.certify.one/guides/designing-a-badge-programme

THE SHORT ANSWER

Start with what the programme is for, then decide which achievements deserve a badge. Write criteria that describe what someone did and how it was assessed, attach evidence where you can, and group badges into levels or pathways only when learners genuinely progress through them. Decide who owns and changes the programme before you launch, not after.

What should a digital badge programme achieve?

Decide on one or two main goals before you design a single badge, because the goal shapes everything else. A programme meant to prove compliance needs strict criteria and expiry dates. One meant to attract new learners needs badges people want to share. One meant to recognise progression needs a clear pathway.

Common goals, and what each one implies:

Goal	What it means for design
Prove competence or compliance	Assessed criteria, evidence, expiry and renewal
Recognise progression and development	Levels or a pathway that stacks into something bigger
Increase enrolment and completion	Visible, shareable badges that link back to your courses
Show the value of training to leadership	Consistent data on who earned what, and what happened next
Give members or customers recognisable status	A small, well-known family of badges with strong branding

Write the goals down in one sentence each. They will be the test you apply every time someone asks for a new badge.

Which achievements deserve a badge?

Issue a badge when the achievement would mean something to a person outside your organisation, and when you can say how it was assessed. That test rules out most attendance-only activity and keeps the badges you do issue credible.

Questions to ask about each candidate:

- Would an employer, client or peer understand what this badge represents from its title and description?
- Did the learner have to show something, such as passing an assessment, completing a project or demonstrating a skill, rather than simply turning up?
- Is it a meaningful unit of learning, or a small step that would be better recognised as part of a larger badge?
- Would the learner be proud to put it on their profile?

Attendance can still be recognised. It is often better recognised as a certificate of attendance, or as part of a larger badge that requires several sessions plus an assessment, than as a badge of its own. Issuing badges for every small interaction is the fastest way to make all of your badges look less valuable.

How do you write badge criteria people trust?

Describe what the learner did, how it was assessed and to what standard, in language an outsider can understand. Good criteria read like a short, specific promise. Weak criteria read like a course title.

Weak criteria	Strong criteria
Completed the Data Protection course	Passed a 20-question assessment on UK GDPR principles with a score of 80% or more, and completed a case exercise on handling a subject access request
Attended leadership training	Completed four workshops on coaching and feedback, and led a recorded coaching conversation assessed against a published rubric
Customer service skills	Demonstrated handling three simulated customer complaints, assessed by a trained assessor against the service standard

A few rules help:

- **Use verbs that describe observable actions:** passed, demonstrated, produced, led, completed and submitted.

- **Say how it was assessed and by whom:** an exam, a marked project, an observed task, a portfolio review.
- **Include the standard where it matters:** a pass mark, a rubric, a framework or a named standard.
- **Link to more detail:** a public page describing the course or assessment helps anyone checking the badge.

What evidence should a badge carry?

Attach evidence when it helps someone checking the badge understand the achievement, and when sharing it is appropriate for the learner. Evidence can be a link to a project, a summary of an assessed task, a portfolio or a short description of the work.

The open standard most badges are built on, Open Badges (https://www.1edtech.org/standards/open-badges) from 1EdTech, has fields for criteria and evidence, so they travel with the badge rather than sitting in your own systems. Two cautions: don't publish anything that includes other people's personal data, and don't make evidence public without the learner knowing. Where evidence is sensitive, describe it rather than linking to it.

How should levels, stacking and pathways work?

Use levels when the same skill genuinely deepens, and pathways when several different badges add up to a bigger achievement. Both help learners see where they are going, and both work best when the structure is simple enough to explain in a sentence.

- **Levels** suit a single skill that grows: foundation, practitioner and expert, for example. Each level needs clearly harder criteria, not just more hours.
- **Stacking** lets several smaller badges combine into a larger one. Three module badges might stack into a programme certificate, which is how our own Digital Badge Practitioner pathway in Certify Academy (https://academy.certify.one) works.
- **Pathways** show a recommended route through badges towards a goal, such as a role or a qualification. They are a good way to encourage learners to come back for the next course.

Keep the first version small. Three to six badges with a clear structure are easier to launch, explain and maintain than thirty. You can add more once you know which ones learners value.

How should you name and design badges?

Name the badge after what it proves, keep the visual family consistent, and make sure it reads at small sizes. The badge image is often seen as a thumbnail on a LinkedIn profile, so detail that looks good on a poster will be lost.

- **Names:** describe the achievement, such as "Data Protection Practitioner", rather than a marketing phrase. Avoid internal course codes.

- **Consistency:** use the same shape and layout for every badge in the family, with colour or a single word showing the level or topic.
- **Legibility:** no more than a few words on the image, with high contrast, and nothing that relies on colour alone to carry meaning.
- **Issuer:** your name or logo should be clearly visible, so the badge is recognisably yours.
- **No dates or learner details on the image:** these belong in the badge's data, where they can be verified, not baked into the picture.

Should your badges expire?

Set an expiry date when the skill or permission a badge represents genuinely goes out of date, and not otherwise. Safety-critical training, regulated competence and annual CPD requirements are good candidates. A completed course or a one-off achievement usually isn't: it happened, and it stays true.

If a badge expires, plan the renewal route at the same time. Decide what renewal requires, when learners will be reminded, and what the badge page will show once it has expired, so anyone checking can see the badge was valid but has lapsed.

Who should govern the programme?

Name an owner, agree who can approve new badges, and write down how badges are changed and retired before you launch. Programmes without clear ownership tend to accumulate badges nobody can explain, with criteria that no longer match what is actually taught.

A light governance model covers:

- **An owner** accountable for the programme as a whole.
- **Approvers** who sign off new badges against the programme's goals and quality test.
- **A badge register** listing every badge, its criteria, its owner and its review date.
- **Change control:** when criteria change significantly, issue a new version of the badge rather than silently editing the old one, so existing holders keep an accurate record.
- **A corrections and revocation policy** for mistakes and misconduct.
- **An annual review** to retire badges that are no longer taught or valued.

Regulated issuers, such as awarding bodies, universities and professional bodies, need to go further. Our guide to governance for regulated issuers (https://www.certify.one/guides/badge-governance-for-regulated-issuers) covers that in detail.

What goes into a programme charter?

A one-page programme charter records the decisions above in one place, so everyone involved works from the same rules. Keep it short enough that people actually read it.

Section	What to write
Purpose	The programme's one or two goals, in a sentence each
Audience	Who can earn badges, and who the badges are meant to impress
Quality test	The questions every new badge must pass
Structure	Levels, stacks or pathways, with a simple diagram
Criteria standard	How criteria are written and what evidence is expected
Expiry	Which badges expire, and how renewal works
Ownership	Owner, approvers, and the review cycle
Measures	The few numbers you will use to judge success

CERTIFY ACADEMY

Learn it in Certify Academy

Module 2 of the free Digital Badge Practitioner pathway, "Designing a badge programme", covers use cases, criteria and evidence, levels and pathways, naming, visuals and governance. Its practical task is designing a badge for your own organisation, and you earn the Designer badge when you pass.

Start the free course → (https://academy.certify.one/en/pathways/digital-badge-practitioner)

Frequently asked questions

How many badges should a new programme start with?

Start small: three to six badges with a clear structure are usually enough for a first launch. A small family is easier to explain to learners and employers, easier to design consistently and easier to maintain. Add more once you can see which badges learners claim and share.

What is the difference between a badge and a certificate?

A certificate is a record that someone completed something, usually as a document. A digital badge is a verifiable online record that carries data about who issued it, what the learner did and how it was assessed, and that anyone can check. Many programmes issue both, with the certificate for a larger achievement.

Should badges be issued for attendance?

Usually not on their own. Attendance says little about what someone can do, and attendance badges are rarely shared. It is often better to recognise attendance with a certificate, or to make it part of a larger badge that also requires an assessment or a piece of work.

Can we change a badge's criteria after we have issued it?

You can, but significant changes should create a new version of the badge rather than edit the old one. That way, people who earned the original keep an accurate record of what they achieved, and anyone checking a badge sees the criteria that applied when it was issued.