FROM A CV TO AN EPORTFOLIO
AN EXPLORATION OF ADULT LEARNER'S PERCEPTION
OF THE EPORTFOLIO AS A JOBSEEKING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

ePortfolios are emerging as an alternative to the paper based CV in the employment recruitment process. This paper reports on the findings of research project that was designed to explore the perceptions of adult jobseekers on the use of an ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool. The research project utilised a qualitative exploratory case study to investigate the jobseekers perceptions over the course of a six week online ePortfolio development programme. The perceptions of jobseekers were investigated in the context of three questions; what was the learner's perception of the ePortfolio as a potential job seeking tool, what was the learner's perception of the ePortfolio development programme and what was the learner's perception of the ePortfolio system. Data was collected through structured online questionnaire, virtual focus groups and observations from the researcher during the programme. The research findings were discussed in the context of a number of themes that emerged from previous research including the importance of a programmatic approach to ePortfolio development, the challenges with institutional ePortfolio systems and the barriers to the use of an ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool. The research project built on a number of existing research themes while also positioning new concepts such as the role of eMentoring and gamification design principles in ePortfolio development.

KEYWORDS

ePortfolios, jobseeking support, ePortfolio development, ePortfolio systems, adult learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of new internet based jobseeking tools and specialised social networking sites such as LinkedIn indicates that the practice of preparing and submitting a paper-based CV in support of employment may become outdated (Garis, 2009). Recent research suggests that ePortfolios are also emerging as a contemporary approach to helping jobseekers present themselves to employers (Kersten, 2004; Yu, 2011; Wuetherick and Dickinson, 2015). Portfolios are generally regarded as compilations of personal and professional work used for describing skills, growth, or development over a period of time. Bollinger (2010) describes ePortfolios as essentially digitised, computer or web-based versions of traditional portfolios.

Bryant and Chittum's (2013) review of the current landscape of ePortfolio studies points to extensive research on the use of ePortfolios within Higher Education. The review however highlights relatively limited research on the use of ePortfolio in adult based learning or further education. Wuetherick et al. (2015) further supports this research gap while proposing that ePortfolios have been significantly underexplored in the context of non-traditional continuing education environments. ePortfolios have a potentially important role to play in supporting adult based learning in a wide variety of areas including work based learning, continuous professional development, career management and the job seeking process itself. This paper will focus on the potential use of an ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool.

This paper will examine and discuss the findings of a research project that was conducted with a group of adult jobseekers engaged in reskilling programmes with SOLAS eCollege in Ireland. eCollege provide a range of high quality interactive online learning courses in areas such as software development, accounting and project management for jobseekers looking to make a transition in their career. Learners who had completed a career development programme in 2014 were offered an opportunity to participate in an online ePortfolio Development Programme over a 6 week period from February to March 2015. The overall aim of the online programme was to help the learners develop an ePortfolio that could be ultimately used as a

jobseeking tool following the programme itself. The learners had access to a dedicated ePortfolio system to assist them with this process. 15 learners registered for the programme with a mixed age profile and work experience background.

The aim of the research was to explore the learner's perception of the ePortfolio as a potential jobseeking tool over the course of the development programme. The research also explored the learner's perception of the ePortfolio system and the development programme itself. The research utilised a condensed exploratory case study to identify some key themes under these areas with a view to building on the existing research in the ePortfolio field and how it might transfer to adult based learning. The nature of themes explored in the research project included; the ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool, using a programmatic approach to ePortfolio development, the role of eMentoring in ePortfolio development, the connection between social networking sites and ePortfolios and the ideal ePortfolio system for adult based learners.

2. BODY OF PAPER

2.1 Literature Review

The literature review will initially set the context for the research project by positioning the potential importance of ePortfolios within the Further Education and Training Sector in Ireland. It will then examine the literature associated with the use of ePortfolios as a jobseeking tool both in terms of the type of content required and its actual application to the hiring process. The review will them move on to examine the literature associated with ePortfolio development particularly the use of a programmatic approach. This will facilitate the examination of some potential emerging trends in ePortfolio development such as gamification, eMentoring and social networking. The review will conclude with a look at the literature associated with ePortfolio systems and the potential ideal fit for adult learners.

2.1.1 The ePortfolio as a Jobseeking Tool

Gordan (2013) proposes that while there are numerous variations to the design and structure of ePortfolios, the majority of ePortfolios fall within one or more of the following types – Assessment Portfolios, Showcase Portfolios, Development Portfolios and Reflective Portfolios. There have been a number of studies completed which have examined the role of ePortfolios in the jobseeking process while highlighting the potential benefits to jobseekers (Hartwick et al. 2014; Whitworth, Deering, Hardy and Jones, 2011; Heinrich, Bhattacharya & Rayudu 2007; Jwaifell, 2013). It provides learners with an opportunity to reflect on how well their learning matches the requirements of employers, it can be helpful in searching for jobs and even in looking for employees. It can also provide opportunities for jobseekers to showcase their talents, creativity, and individuality by displaying information about an applicant well beyond what can be viewed on a paper based CV. The role of ePortfolios in helping adults manage a transition in their career has also been addressed to a certain degree in the literature. Herman and Kirku's (2008) research on the use of an ePortfolio by women at a transition point in their lives concludes that the process can be a life-changing experience that can enhance their employability. Furthermore, Koper and Verjans (2007) study on the use of ePortfolios in enhancing employability of older adults in the UK found that ePortfolios were effective tools in giving participants a better understanding of their skills and attributes, and may well enhance their self-confidence. Despite the proposed benefits of ePortfolios as a jobseeking tool, there is little evidence in the literature of their actual application in the hiring process. This may be due to a reluctance by the employer to use the ePortfolio in the recruitment process. A report by Precision Consultancy (2007) in Australia pointed out that there is very little literature on how employers use ePorfolios, except to suggest that it is not common. Furthermore, Woodley and Sims (2011) highlight the potential barriers to employers in using ePortfolios in the hiring process. This includes a lack of adequate technological skills to examine the ePortfolios effectively, a lack of time to review them and the potential lack of accuracy of ePortfolios given that applicants can self-select items.

2.1.2 A Programmatic Approach to ePortfolio Development

A number of studies have highlighted the challenge of gaining learner engagement and motivation in an ePortfolio development process (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2009; Heinrich, 2007; Yancey, 2009). Equally, engagement and motivation is generally perceived to be an ongoing challenge in field of eLearning (Admiral, Lockhorst, 2009; Cheng, Wang, Moormann, Olaniran, Chen 2011; Beetham, 2002). Laurillard (2002) proposes that effective eLearning delivery requires an underlying pedagogical approach, which is ideally learner-centered and allows for a continuous dialogue to evolve between the learner and tutor. This learner-centered approach has emerged from social constructivist pedagogy, articulated by Vygotsky (1978) as the idea that dialogue, guidance, feedback, and social interactions are drivers for transforming potential development into actual ability. Brown (2010) proposes that the ePortfolio has an important role to play in facilitating this learned centred or personalised learning environment in online learning. However, it is also important important to consider how this type of online environment can be created in the context of an ePortfolio development programme. Koper et al. (2007) propose that a successful ePortfolio development programme is dependent on a programmatic approach. This programmatic approach includes four core factors: access to portfolio technology, an explicit process of content development, mentor support and group collaboration.

2.1.3 The ePortfolio System – Learner Owned or Institutional Specific

Garrett (2011) points to a number of key factors associated with implementation and selection of ePortfolio technology including ownership, ease of use and portability. Heinrich et al. (2007) discuss two directions that can be taken in setting up an ePortfolio system. One is to go for an institutional portfolio setup with a centrally controlled ePortfolio system. The other direction stems from a social networking paradigm where learners have full ownership of their portfolios that reside in systems outside the control of the institution. Herman et al. (2008) feel that adults who are life-long learners have different needs which include learner-owned rather than institution-specific ePortfolios. A successful ePortfolio system for an adult learner should be portable, serviceable throughout a working life and provide flexibility to the end user whose needs and circumstances change over time. Wuetherick et al. (2015) also highlight the importance that adult learners place on the transportability of their portfolio upon the completion of their courses or programme.

2.2 Research Design and Methodology

The aim of this research project was to explore adult learner's perceptions of the ePortfolio as a potential jobseeking tool. This research aim will also be underpinned by an exploration of the learner's perception of the ePortfolio development programme and the ePortfolio system. Based on this the research design was framed in terms of the following research questions.

Core research question
- What was the learner's perception of the ePortfolio as a potential job seeking tool?

Sub research questions
- What was the learner's perception of the ePortfolio development programme?
- What was the learner's perception of the ePortfolio system?

An exploratory case study was chosen as the research methodology for this project due to the investigative nature of the research, the requirement to explore interventions and the need for flexibility. The ePortfolio development programme was delivered online over a 6 week period. The programme included a wide variety of interventions including access to a dedicated virtual learning environment, weekly live virtual classroom sessions, weekly discussion forums, access to an ePortfolio system, pre-recorded ePortfolio demonstrations and access to additional online resources. The programme utilised a Moodle based learning management system to host the various interventions. Participants were given an option of using a Moodle hosted ePortfolio system called Exabis or developing a personalised ePortfolio using a website development such WordPress. Participants were made aware at the start of the programme that support would only be available for the Exabis system. They were equally made aware of the limitations of the Exabis system in terms of portability following the programme.

15 learners initially registered for the programme. All of the participants had previous work experience. 11 of the participants (73%) came from administration roles and were completing reskilling courses in areas such as Accountancy Technician, ECDL and Project Management. 4 of the students came from an IT background i.e. software or website development and were completing software development courses with a view to furthering their careers in this area. There was a mixed age profile between the participant group with 15% between the age of 20 to 30, 40% between the age of 30 to 40, 14% between the ages of 40 to 50 and 30% between the ages of 50 to 60. Overall, 10 of the 15 participants engaged with the programme in terms of participating in the learning interventions and creating an ePortfolio. 80% of this participant group had never created an ePortfolio before while 20% had created personal websites that were used for blogging and showcasing work. 80% of the participant utilised some form of social networking platform such as Linkedin, Twitter or Facebook. Prior to the programme, the majority of participants from a non IT background rated their levels of comfort with technology as moderate to low.

2.3 Findings

2.3.1 Learner Perceptions of the ePortfolio Development Programme

The majority of participants rated the various learning interventions on the programme from good to excellent with the live virtual classroom (VC) sessions rated as the most beneficial support intervention on the programme. The participants indicated that the virtual classrooms provided them with structure, guidance on content and it also provided them with an opportunity to interact with other participants on the programme. There was a marked increase in engagement levels following the receipt of personalised feedback. Overall, the structure and format of the programme with the blend of support structures played an important role in the high levels of engagement in the online programme.

2.3.2 Learner Perceptions of the ePortfolio System

All of the participants opted to use the Exabis system during the programme given the support structures that were available. At the initial stages of the programme, the majority of participants rated the following aspects of the system from good to excellent; navigation, security, accessibility and ease of use. In light of this, the structure and format of the Exabis system was beneficial for participants engaging in ePortfolio development for the first time. As the programme progressed and the participants started to get comfortable with the technology, their perception of the exabis system started to change. The limitations of an LMS hosted system became more apparent particularly in terms of functionality and ease of use. Towards the end of the programme, participants started to question how they would be able to export the ePortfolio outside of the learning management system. In light of this, eMentor support and guidance was provided to participants on making the transition from an LMS hosted ePortfolio to a personalised ePortfolio. This support was greatly appreciated by the participants and it provided them with comfort on the long term use of the ePortfolio.

2.3.3 Learner Perceptions of the ePortfolio as a Jobseeking Tool

At the start of programme, participants were asked to express their understanding of the concept of an ePortfolio. They majority felt that it was an online or virtual CV that could provide more information. When asked what they felt an employer would like to see in an ePortfolio, the participants articulated the following pieces of content; video / audio introductions, blogs, samples of projects, profile picture, soft copy of CV, website links of courses, online certs, personal interests and a personal profile. At the start of the programme, participants indicated that were attending the programme with a view to developing an ePortfolio that could be used as an additional jobseeking tool to help them secure employment. Equally participants felt that the process of developing an ePortfolio would help them develop new skills in areas such as IT, research, selling and self-reflection. Following the programme, 90% of the participant's stated that they were planning to use an ePortfolio as a job seeking tool in the future. The participants outlined a wide range of potential benefits to using an ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool including; scope to showcase a wider range of skills and competencies by providing example of work with reflections, opportunity to stand out from the crowd and it provided more flexibility than the paper based CV. Furthermore, a number of participants indicated that the process of doing the ePortfolio may be more beneficial than the results particularly in terms of career planning and job interview preparation. The participants outlined a number of potential challenges to the

concept of an ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool. The majority of participants felt that employers were not using ePortfolios as a recruitment tool. Based on the above, the participants found it difficult to identify opportunities to showcase their ePortfolio to employers.

2.4 Discussion

The main findings will be discussed under each of the research questions but equally in the context of patterns and themes that emerged from the literature review.

2.4.1 Learner Perceptions of the ePortfolio Development Programme

The challenges with ePortfolio engagement and motivation were discussed in the literature review (Ehiyazaryan-White, 2009; Heinrich, 2007; Yancey, 2009). To overcome this challenge, Koper et al. (2007) propose a programmatic approach to ePortfolio development. This programmatic approach is dependent on four core areas: access to portfolio technology, an explicit process of content development, mentor support and group collaboration. There was strong evidence of all of these factors during this research project. The high levels of engagement in both the learning interventions and the ePortfolio development process potentially validate the ingredients of this programmatic approach. Furthermore, the application of gamification design principles as part of the content development process may also have facilitated the high levels of engagement during the programme.

2.4.2 Learner Perceptions of the ePortfolio System

The literature discussed the importance of providing adult learners with a non-institutional or personalised ePortfolio system that is portable and serviceable throughout their working lives (Heinrich et al. 2007; Herman et al. 2008). The findings from this research project validate the challenges with an institutional ePortfolio and also the importance of a personalised ePortfolio for adult learners. However, the institutional system also played a potentially important role in introducing the concept of an ePortfolio particularly for participants with low levels of IT competence who were completely new to ePortfolio development. The embedded structure and format of an institutional ePortfolio played an important guidance role during the design process. This research has highlighted the potential of transitioning participants from an institutional to personalised ePortfolio system as part of an overall development programme.

2.4.3 Learner Perceptions of the ePortfolio as a Jobseeking Tool

The feedback from participants on the benefits of ePortfolios in the jobseeking process has validated a number of points referenced in the literature such as; enhanced scope to showcase skills, improved interview preparation, an opportunity to stand out from the crowd and the scope to develop new employability skills. The biggest barrier identified by participants was the lack of use of ePortfolios by employers in the hiring process which is also in line with findings from previous studies. Furthermore, the participants initially struggled with the role of the ePortfolio in the hiring process. However, the benefits of the ePortfolio emerged when it was positioned as a supporting resource to the CV and as a platform to showcase social networking sites.

3. CONCLUSION

This research project aimed to explore learner perceptions of the ePortfolio as a jobseeking tool while also exploring their perception of the development programme and the ePortfolio system itself. The research data was analysed in the context of a number of themes that emerged from the literature. The findings from this research project have validated a number of these themes while also potentially identifying topics for further research in the future. The following is a summary of the main conclusions from this research project.

3.1 Gamification and ePortfolio Development

This research project provided further insight into the potentially important role of a structured, programmatic approach to an ePortfolio development initiative. However, the delivery of the programmatic approach inevitable becomes more challenging in an online or virtual learning environment. The utilisation of gamification design principles in this research project and the subsequent positive results in terms of engagement and motivation highlight the potential future role of game based learning in the context of ePortfolio development. The personalised nature of ePortfolio development and the associated content development process potentially fit quite well with a number of the principles associated with gamification. Research in the field of gamification is at early stage and there may be scope in the future to investigate its application to ePortfolio development.

3.2 Transitioning from an Institutional to a Learned Centred ePortfolio System

Previous research has pointed to the fact that there are generally two choices in terms of ePortfolio systems – an institutional system or a personalised learner centred system. The use of a personalised system has been advocated for adult learners developing a showcase ePortfolio due the need for portability and flexibility. This research project has highlighted that the two systems don't necessarily need to be mutually exclusive during a development programme. The institutional ePortfolio can be very useful for learners getting started on their ePortfolio journey particularly if they have low levels of technical competence. The transition to the personalised system can then add significant value at a later stage in the journey. The management of this transition may need further consideration and research. The transition would need to be positioned clearly with the learners at the start of the programme and a number of factors need to be considered in the transition process including technical support, IT skills support, privacy, ownership and accountability.

3.3 Role of the ePortfolio in the Hiring Process

There are undoubted potential benefits in using ePortfolios during the hiring process. This is well documented in the literature and there has been extensive research undertaken on the perceptions of ePortfolio amongst employers and jobseekers. These perceptions have again been validated in this research project. There may now be a need to shift the research from perception analysis to application analysis. This could involve an investigation on the actual impact of ePortfolios on helping jobseekers secure employment. Equally, an investigation may look at the actual use of ePortfolios amongst employers to identify where they may fit into the hiring process. Are they a replacement to the CV? Could they assist the interview process? Are they more suited to recruitment or selection? In the interim, the Further Education Sector has an important role to play in generating awareness of ePortfolios amongst employers and jobseekers by promoting its benefits as a showcase tool.

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