
DEVELOPING AN EPORTFOLIO-DRIVEN SME AS A COMMUNITY CHANGE AGENT - ABSTRACT

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Abstract: Don Presant is President of Learning Agents Inc., a Canadian SME producer of multimedia solutions for career and workplace learning. He will describe the current state of Learning Agents' transition from a home-based "cottage industry" to an ePortfolio-driven studio-based service facility, flexibly configured to provide multimedia services for ePortfolio and related applications. This multimedia presentation of Learning Agents' "journey in progress" will include how it is merging ePortfolio with its own digital identity, changing such practices as the way it hires and develops staff (using facebook and PLEs), the way it markets itself to the world (ePortfolio), and how it will advocate for ePortfolio in the future (community approach, digital lifestyle, Web 2.0, leveraged spinoffs). In this way, Learning Agents is becoming a change agent in its larger community by modelling, internalizing and transforming the behaviour it advocates.

Keywords: SME, community, multimedia, service, Web 2.0

Background

Don Presant is President of Learning Agents Inc., an independent producer of multimedia for learning. It is a private Canadian corporation which works with non-profit and government stakeholders on predominantly community-based solutions for career development and workplace skills. Learning Agents has been working with various organizations, such as LfIA (the Learning Innovations Forum, now dissolved) to advance the cause of ePortfolio in North America.

Currently, Learning Agents' core business is based on applications of its "Career Destination" solution. These online galleries of multimedia career success stories provide useful examples of best practices, lessons learned and career path paradigms based on documented experiences of people who are finding career fulfillment. (www.careerdestination.ca, immigrantsandcareers.mb.ca, destination-carrieres.on.ca).

These story-based learning resources are used to address the adult learning needs of specific pre-employment groups such as Youth and Immigrants. The career biographies have also provided informal benefits to their subjects as highly-facilitated ePortfolios, especially for small business and the self-employed, whose online digital identity is a factor in their ongoing business success.

The next 12 months represents a developmental watershed for Learning Agents. The volume of scheduled "Career Destination" work has both enabled and necessitated the hiring of two Assistant Producers, bringing previously outsourced work in-house and freeing up senior management for more strategic activities. Hiring these two people means moving out of a home-based business into dedicated office facilities, making the transition from a "cottage" to an "atelier" (boutique) operation.

At the same time, Learning Agents' management is aware that the maturing "Career Destination" learning solution, though now expanding and seeing success in adapting to new markets, may begin to lose its allure in time. With this in mind, Learning Agents is piloting such innovations as a "Hands-On ePortfolio" workshop, which uses accessible digital hardware and emerging Internet technologies to enable learners to capture their own artefacts and begin the creation of distributed Web 2.0 ePortfolios.

Through new strategies like this, a new vision for the organization is emerging, one which will transform Learning Agents into an ePortfolio-driven organization that not only helps permeate ePortfolio thinking in its community, but one which lives and breathes ePortfolio as an integral part of its identity. In this way, Learning Agents will combine visionary thinking with businesslike pragmatism to begin to show the way forward to funders and other stakeholders, rather than ask for permission to proceed.

Objectives

Learning Agents has decided to bootstrap itself into an “ePortfolio-driven organization” over the next 12 months by:

- Using the concepts of distributed ePortfolio and digital identify to inform the hiring and ongoing development of its new staff,
- Leveraging the new need for office facilities to build a simple studio for capturing digital artefacts for ePortfolio and related purposes,
- Using the new multi-purpose studio space to offer “Hands-On ePortfolio” workshops to enable clients and career counsellors at different stages of their development,
- Developing an ePortfolio-based website for Learning Agents that can be an inspiration for the creation of sectoral or regional galleries of small business ePortfolios.

Results to date

By July 15, 2007, Learning Agents has:

- Committed to leasing office/studio space,
- Begun planning for the building of an affordable studio space, working with a designer/architect and contractors,
- Engaged two assistant producers by:
 - advertising the jobs in the marketplace of the Winnipeg network of facebook,
 - examining the crafted and uncrafted digital identities of the applicants as part of the hiring process (facebook, MySpace, YouTube, freewebs),
 - collaborating with them on their ongoing learning ePortfolios.
- Begun rewriting the Learning Agents website as a small business ePortfolio

By October 15, 2007, Learning Agents will have:

- Held an Open House at its newly-constructed office/studio facilities,
- Begun recording interviews for its “Career Destination” biographies in the new studio,
- Launched the reinvented Learning Agents ePortfolio website, including sub-portfolios for the assistant producers,
- Begun marketing a “Hands-on ePortfolio” workshop for clients and/or career counsellors,
- Begun planning for studio technology improvements to enable quick setup/quick-turnaround video capability.

Goals and achievements

Goals and achievements beyond the above will be driven by demand, opportunity and (hopefully) further inspiration. Future options to investigate include:

- Working with RPL/PLAR counsellors to provide an evidence-gathering environment for such pre-employment client groups as “older workers”, “career transition” and “return to work”,
- Providing a demonstration and learning environment for EAL (formerly ESL) instruction of immigrants,
- Working with local teachers and high school students to develop learning and graduation portfolio workshops and courses,
- Developing post-industrial content broadcasting solutions by Internet-enabled means, such as audio and video podcasting, possibly in partnership with local “over the air” broadcasters,
- Working with community groups to develop “legacy” family and community portfolios,
- Adapting the model to the needs of succession planning and knowledge transfer in business by debriefing retiring employees,

- Working with employers who wish to be “Employers of Choice” to create learning portfolios and PLEs for their employees,

The presentation will conclude with a discussion of these alternatives and lessons learned to date.

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