
ePORTFOLIO FOR AN OLDER WORKER WHAT HAS AGE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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Abstract: This document outlines the proposal for a workshop presenting the development of a work package designed to test and pilot an ePortfolio product in the context of support for older workers wishing to review their skills and abilities in a changing employment market. The SWOOP project is set in the context of the ageing population demographics of Europe and age legislation introduced in the UK in October 2006. It will outline the work of SWOOP as an ESF/ Regional Development Agency funded programme targeted at testing and developing with partners, pilot activities aimed at helping older workers into employment and assessing the barriers to work this age group encounter. In addition SWOOP has worked with partners to raise awareness of age related issues with employers in the South West of England.

Keywords: older worker, research, enable, skills, reflection, ePortfolio, IT

Background

As interoperability and feature sophistication advance, ePortfolio technology is moving onwards. From their earliest eclectic days as relatively unstructured online archives, successive ePortfolio developments have gone almost to the opposite extreme with software tightly bound to the requirements of specific qualifications.

In contrast with rapid changes in software development, the profiles of 'typical' learners benefiting through use of ePortfolios have generally not diversified to anything like the same extent. There is a limited range of ePortfolio models across Europe in which student learners far outnumber those in non-educational settings. For these users, ePortfolios are often seen as electronic 'transcripts' or records of achievement replacing paper based student documentation.

Within the UK, ePortfolio uptake has been driven by higher and further education where Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Individual Learner Records (ILRs) have stimulated sector-wide initiatives. More extended models of longitudinal progression for youngsters as in the City of Nottingham Passport, are leaders in good practice. Other area based pilots also target younger learners but do not do much to promote social inclusion nor lifelong learning for adults.

For some employed adult learners, workplace ePortfolios are found as 'Skills Passports'. These act as a form of online assessment and validation of staff competencies and may incorporate progression routines for work based training. Selected industry sectors have adopted this approach differentially, depending on how suitable their occupational skills frameworks are for computer based tracking or to comply with staff training legislation requirements.

The UK eSkills Sector Skills Council looking after IT industry training has its eSkills Passport, with sectoral comparators at state level in the US, South Africa, Australia and Canada. Closer to home, the Europass has long been established as a European standard, and European projects supported by Leonardo da Vinci and EQUAL funding streams have been successfully piloting ePortfolio and e-assessment software.

In the UK the targeted use of European funding to develop such systems has been influential in trialling their use amongst those harder-to-reach groups not necessarily in work or learning. In common with the rest of Europe, the UK faces a 'demographic time bomb' with increasing numbers of older individuals

needing to re-skill to resume or continue their working life. The UK Government has not actively promoted the use of e-learning or information, advice and guidance for adults, but through European funding, ePortfolios are beginning to show real promise to build confidence for older people as they expand their opportunities to build on existing skills and life experiences. This presentation chronicles the achievements of the EQUAL SWOOP (South West Opportunities for Older People) Project in the South West of the UK as it helps older individuals become empowered to take control of their prospects for work and learning.

The SWOOP project has focussed on researching a demographic conundrum. As a community across Europe we are ageing. Yet this ageing society still views the value and skills offered by an older worker as somehow less valuable than those of their younger co-workers. The older worker encounters doubts about their abilities and qualifications becoming less relevant and therefore less marketable over time.

Perceptions of older workers and their value to an organisation also colour the individual's ability to recognise and take advantage of opportunities for personal development in learning new skills, changing career or moving into a new role after a certain 'age'.

Objectives

The SWOOP project was established to test out a number of activities that might contribute to the continued employability of people in the South West of the UK over 45 years old, and to conduct research into the effectiveness and viability of these activities. SWOOP also wished to contribute additional relevant research and comment to the demographic debate. This testing involved a range of different support services to individuals and sought to engage both those employed and unemployed, and those who for whatever reason were unknown as job-seekers, but nevertheless might wish to take part in the labour market.

As part of the SWOOP project an internet based ePortfolio was tested as a tool in this process. Various scenarios were tested where individuals could use the ePortfolio tool along with information and guidance support. After some success, it was felt that to find what might be unique to the ePortfolio approach; a dedicated trainer should plan and conduct a series of ePortfolio workshops.

The software selected for SWOOP is a generic 'vanilla' version of an internet based ePortfolio supplied by ARC Software (www.arcsoftwareconsultancy.com). The project has chosen to focus on those aspects of the product such as interactive quizzes and tutorials that provide a starting point for personal reflection. The summary statements provide information for the individual to reflect on and consider how they can provide evidence for the skills identified. This can then be stored electronically within the system in a variety of formats and used to produce personal statements, CV's, action plans and individual learning plans.

Summary of results

Through a number of initial pilot site partners, it was apparent that the effectiveness of the ePortfolio was dependent on supported introduction through initial training materials and close mentoring. The issues that emerged to inform this view included:

- Seeing the ePortfolio as a quick way of generating CVs and being uninterested or unprepared to value it as a reflective tool,
- The software was felt to be overcomplicated and difficult to navigate unsupported and this negated the users desire to explore it,
- A lack of understanding about what the ePortfolio might contribute, both to the individual and to employers (involved in some of the piloting) as a result of insufficient planning, training and commitment at the introductory stage,
- Where there was one-to-one mentoring, clients and mentors were reluctant to use a product that

they saw as distancing them from the personal approach.

The subsequent development of an outreach programme presented ePortfolio as an opportunity for 'personal discovery' for the client.

The training programme comprised three ½ day tutored sessions for groups of 6 to 8 persons spaced over 3 weeks.

They focused on two distinct aspects: the PRODUCT (ePortfolio software to produce CVs / application letters or Personal Statements) and the PROCESS: using ePortfolio to support older workers to identify their skills and experiences; to aid reflection; and then to support the 'moving forward' and decision making process.

To ensure the lessons learnt were effectively captured, a specific evaluation process was developed by the project researcher. The process allowed for feedback from the outreach participants during the sessions and some time later to assess the lasting effectiveness of the workshop.

Conclusions and recommendations

Older people have such a breadth and depth of experience to consider that completion of even basic details requires collection and collation of a lot of material. However, through evaluating the sessions, it became apparent that clients achieved more if they were taken right through the ePortfolio process and were encouraged to produce some documents even if not in 'final' format. This gave clients an insight into the potential of ePortfolio as an aid to production of CV / Application letter / Personal Statement as well as the opportunity to try uploading and downloading documents – critical to being able to use it effectively for job applications

ePortfolio was also set in context with clients being shown examples of ePortfolio for digital storytelling (H Barratt) as well as for self promotion (Learning Community / Bronson). This was received very positively and with much interest

Further facilitated sessions would be helpful to allow clients time to further build their ePortfolio, fully test the software potential and enable them to access support with any other technical problems or difficulties.

The workshops were particularly designed to cater for the over 45's. Given the resource constraints clients needed to have basic IT skills and to be comfortable using the Internet.

However although the lack of IT skills were initially a perceived barrier to using the ePortfolio effectively, those with little or no IT skills seemed to benefit more from the experience as they treated this as a learning opportunity. This has identified scope for expanding ePortfolio workshops to deliver ICT training

The value of using the workshop approach in this context is the unintentional development of independent client support networks where experiences are shared and peer support is fostered. It would be of benefit to have an ongoing facility as part of an ePortfolio to support this as an online community forum

Group sessions were perceived as 'non-threatening' and gave 'permission' to take time to reflect on skills, experiences and possible future directions. This seemed particularly important for women who were often fulfilling caring roles and who commented that they found it a real 'luxury' to have the time to be able to think about themselves and their needs

There is scope to use these ePortfolio workshops as the start of a personal development 'funneling' activity where clients are able to take initiative to move forward to other support agencies using the ePortfolio as the central reference tool in any consultation process.

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