
SMART USE OF E-PORTFOLIOS – HUMAN ASSET MANAGEMENT

Debbie Carlton, Martin Hedley Taylor

Abstract: The UK Fire and Rescue Services (FRS) face continuous new challenges. FRS as with industry and commerce has 85% of their budget absorbed by staff costs. Physical assets such as fire appliances and rescue equipment are subjected to rigorous asset management control, testing regimes and renewal programmes. The same rigour needs to apply to human assets management but how? Smart use of E-portfolios! The traditional approach to development of FRS staff has had to change to a model known as “the safe person concept”. The Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) was introduced across UK FRS in 2003. IPDS was devised following investigations into a number of fatal incidents involving FRS staff. It uses roles rather than ranks with individuals undertaking role relevant development programmes to maintain ongoing competence. This paper will explore the crucial role that E-portfolios have in: (1) providing individuals with a system to join together their learning and vocational experiences; (2) provide managers with a facility to manage human assets; (3) provide a line of sight between the learners journey, organisational risk management and strategic planning; (4) provide a means to manage the transfer of skills and increase employability of individuals.

Keywords: the learners journey, national occupational standards, interoperability, common vocabulary, organisational development, strategic planning, standards, data mining, aggregation, components, role maps

Introduction

This case study will explore the confrontations, frustrations and dilemmas experienced in developing and introducing e-Portfolios to the UK Fire and Rescue Service (FRS), which comprise of 48 individual services. The following are key objectives and outcomes:-

- Providing individuals with a system to join together their learning and vocational experiences,
- Provide managers with a facility to manage their human assets,
- Provide a line of sight between the learners journey, organisational risk management and strategic planning,
- Provide a means to manage the transfer of skills and increase employability of individuals.

Background

The UK FRS are having to prepare for new challenges, as with industry and commerce they have 85% of their budget absorbed by staff costs. Physical assets such as fire appliances and rescue equipment are subjected to rigorous asset management control, testing regimes and renewal programmes. So how can the FRS manage human resources in the same manner? By the smart use of E-portfolios.

The traditional approach to development of FRS staff has had to change and is now driven by the ‘the safe person concept’. This requires that individuals are developed to meet the demands of their role and remain competent within that role. The learning and development for all FRS staff is now aligned to National Occupational Standards and where they exist, appropriate vocational awards can be achieved. The Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) has been developed by national work groups from within the service and a dedicated project team formed to assist implementation. In 2003 IPDS was introduced as the cornerstone of the Governments reform of the human resource management of the Fire and Rescue Service.

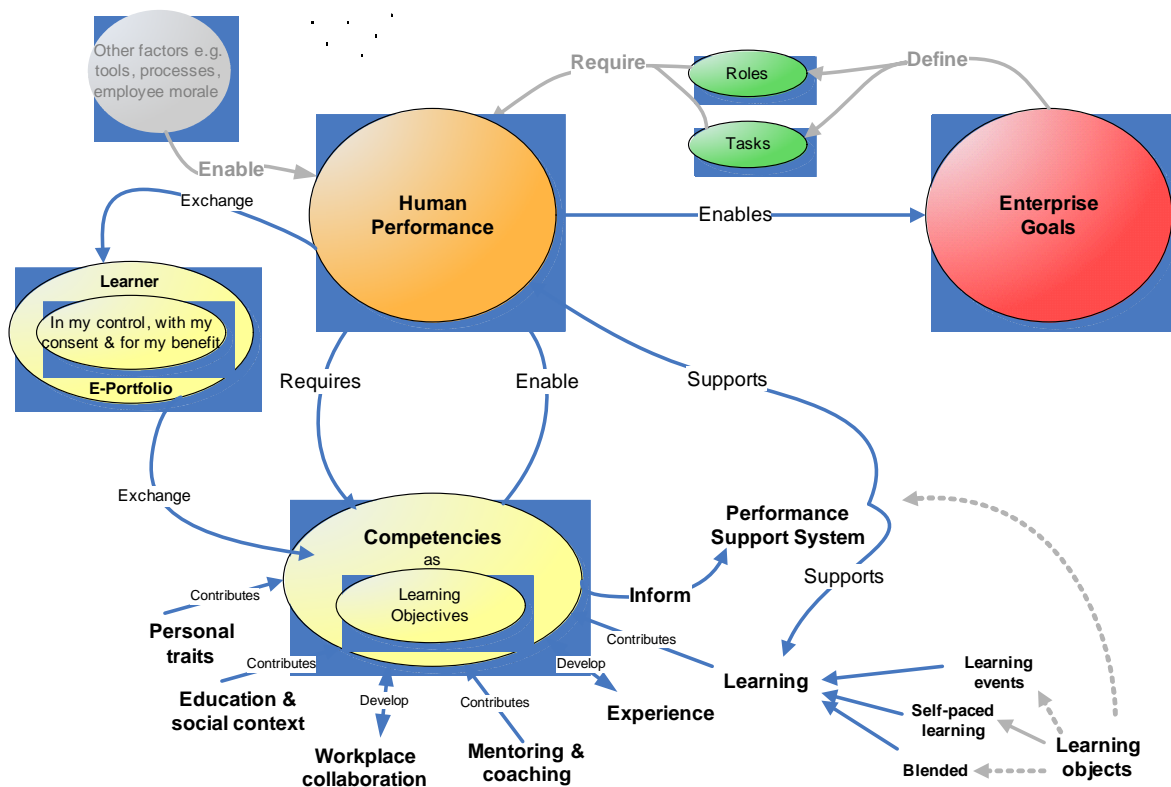
IPDS was devised following investigations and reports into fatal incidents involving FRS staff, where it transpired that basic training and assessment activities were deemed at fault. Subsequent Health and Safety Improvement Notices required:

- The identification of performance standards,
- A way of measuring firefighters against these standards.

The system moved the service into using roles maps (similar to job description) rather than the traditional rank structure with individuals undertaking role relevant development programmes to maintain ongoing competence. The key IPDS principles are:

- Everyone is developed, whether they want to stay in their current role or wish to progress,
- Progression is based on potential and competence rather than formal education or academic qualifications,
- The use of National Occupational Standards ensure fairness and consistency, establishing a level playing field for all,
- Objective and transparent assessment criteria underpin workplace assessment to measure and assess competent performance,
- Individual learning and development supports both the individual and the organisation in their achievement pre-set objectives.

IPDS provides an excellent organisational foundation to move to *'precision skilling'* and thus reduce the time to competency and increase predictive performance. Precision skilling concerns the ability to manage personalised and adaptive competency assessment and learning plans and the resulting assessment results, competency evidence and records that can be stored or reflected in a learner personal portfolio.



FRS thus needs capability that matches the FRS performance management needs (and key KPIs such as reduced time to competency) to learners needs to manage their own employability. As shown by the diagram above the e-Portfolio is at the heart of human performance management. The e-portfolio acts as an exchange mechanism between the learner and employer, as well as other bodies. The e-portfolio enables a *sharable point of view* of a learner's critical performance data within policy, security and legal constraints.

Providing individuals with a system to join together their learning and vocational experiences

Traditionally fire service staff received frequency based training on core skills not necessarily aligned to their job. This one-size –fits-all approach is time consuming and costly. Training based on inputs, not aligned to NOS and with no measure of increased performance or change of behaviour is not sustainable. Records of training events varied in consistency and only recorded what was undertaken and what was required. The recording of vocational experiences has been difficult for individuals and line managers to resolve. In general only successful outcomes are recorded, very seldom are development needs volunteered. Repeated entries for mundane tasks that prove nothing about the individuals competence in role, are recorded with great attention to detail.

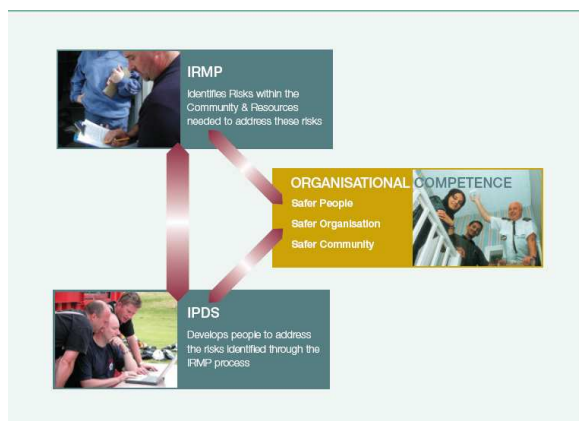
A review of the guidance concluded that an e-Portfolio technical specification be provided that supports FRS to develop or further develop existing PDR systems; and can be used UK Fire Service College *Managed Learning Service (MLS)* project to develop the e-portfolio component of their system.

Provide managers with a facility to manage to manage their human assets

The use of IT recording systems to assist individuals to gather evidence of competent workplace performance has been introduced with disappointing results. In general large quantities of information are gathered and stored. Some use is made of this information but it tends to be at a local level rather than a functional or strategic capacity. If the quality of information being recorded was learner centric against an accurate role profile, and comparable across a population norm, then this information would be relevant to managers through out the organisation.

Provide a line of sight between the learners journey, organisational risk management and strategic planning

Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMPS) was undertaken by UKFRS to determine their Strategic Objectives (business plan), resource requirement and to set local levels of response. This was as part of a Government initiative to reform and modernise the FRS. The combination of IRMP to identify risks and resources and IPDS to develop people to address the identified risks provide organisational competence.



By aligning strategic, functional, team and individual objectives the learner can be developed against a defined role - '*precision skilling*'. If you know and understand what is expected of the organisation, it's functions and individual roles it will be possible to empower people to direct their own development. The e-portfolio is essentially a self-competency management and promotional tool.

Provide a means to manage the transfer of skills and increase employability of individuals

The UKFRS was formed by the Fire Service Act 1947 and created local authority controlled services. These were traditional hierarchal structures where promotion was gained firstly by a combination of passing statutory examinations and interview situations. Entry into this process was governed by the number of years served by individuals.

In 2004 the Fire and Rescues Services Act 2004¹ was introduced. The main purpose of this Act is to deliver a modernised Fire and Rescue Service that responds to the particular demands of the 21st Century. It increased the role of FRS to include Community Safety and all rescue activity including the setting up of Urban Search and Rescue Teams.

A Learning and Development Strategy document that sets out a framework for taking forward fire and rescue services' learning and development over the next ten years has been published. The aim of this strategy is to provide clarity in terms of what learning and development should be delivered at national, regional and local levels, and to ensure that standards are maintained. To assist with this the Fire Service College have a Managed Learning Services Project which will introduce a smarter and more flexible approach to delivering and monitoring learning and development within the fire and rescue service.

Progression in the service is now achieved via the Assessment and Development Centre process. This process has been designed to test whether people have the potential to work as firefighters and to test the potential of people to work in a wide range of managerial roles.

Change has come all at once to the FRS; managers and systems are having to cope with new demands at local, regional and national levels. Typical 'training' has been replaced by more family friendly practices that use an E-enabled approach. Peoples expectations of employment and employers have changed. As a result we will see direct entrants² joining the service bringing with them portfolios containing evidence of knowledge, skills and understanding from past employment. It is of paramount importance to supervise the identification and management of transferable skills to enable staff to progress from role to role and increase employability on leaving the service.

The diversity of knowledge, skills and experience that an individual accumulates during their career needs to be gathered, sharable and in the case of critical performance data persistent. Here both the individual and the organisation can contribute to this process and use the data to their mutual benefit.

Conclusion

The modernisation agenda for the UKFRS as set by the Fire and Rescues Services Act 2004 is to '*deliver a modernised Fire and Rescue Service that responds to the particular demands of the 21st Century*'. For this to take place it is necessary to use 21st century thinking and technology. The solution to this is the provision and use of an e-Portfolio component that provides a *sharable point of view*.

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¹ Explanatory Notes to Fire And Rescue Services Act 2004 Chapter 21

² Direct Entrants. People may now seek employment in the Fire & Rescue Service without following the traditional route of joining first as a firefighter. By using the ADC process it is possible to recruit staff directly into role. As an example there are FRS which have strategic managers who have joined from an Industry and Commerce background