
THE COMPETENCE PORTFOLIO: REFLECTION FOR ORGANISATIONAL RENEWAL

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Abstract: The reflective exercise inherent in a portfolio process is key for organisations as much as individuals to gather a vision of their past, present and future. This paper shares the experience of accompanying a self-run art centre in Quebec in the development and implementation of its organisational ePortfolio. At the heart of the process is the evaluation of the organisational competences of the art centre via a competence reference framework and performance indicators. The resulting ePortfolio serves as a tool to be integrated into the regular functioning of the organisation and is a source of pride for the organisation. In this case, the ePortfolio was used for strategic development of the organisation, specifically in the areas of communication, maintaining the organisational memory and integrating technological practices to enhance efficiency and visibility. The experience should contribute to the long-term sustainability of the organisation. In the end, the development and use of an organisational ePortfolio is somewhat similar to the development and use of an individual ePortfolio except that it applies to an entity, in this case an art centre, and is carried out by a representative group of persons rather than an individual.

Keywords: organisations, competences, strategic development

Context

Using ePortfolios as a tool to help document and develop one's competences can be a valuable and empowering exercise for an individual. The same can also be true for a team or an organisation. This paper introduces the concept of self-reflection and portfolio building in the context of an organisation undergoing a retrospective of their 25 years of accomplishments.

The reflective exercise inherent in a portfolio process is useful for organisations to collectively take stock of how they developed over time. The ePortfolio can serve as a tool to help the organisation strategically move forward to ensure sustainability and success. We would like to share the experience of accompanying a self-run art centre in Quebec through such a process: (1) evaluating the organisations' competences, (2) using the exercise to develop the organisational ePortfolio, and finally, (3) using the ePortfolio as a tool for organisational development. While similar to an individual ePortfolio development, the exercise focuses on the organisation's collective competences as well as the services and the internal processes that enable it to fulfil its mandate.

Organisational Culture

The process begins with an ethnographic act of understanding the organisational culture by (1) visiting the organisation, (2) analysing core documents and (3) working with a group of representatives to clarify questions. In the case of the art centre, the working committee was comprised of junior, senior and founding members, key employees and representatives from the board of directors. The clarifying session was focused through two questions: "What brought you to the organisation initially?" and "Why are you still here?". The result was the following general portrait of the organization.

Created in 1982, the art centre has grown organically over 25 years, in its effort to fulfil its mandate to encourage the production and distribution of printmaking. The art centre manages a dynamic balance between the preservation and transmission of the timeless techniques of printmaking and stimulating creative expression and experimentation. For the first 20 years it was really about access to quality space and equipment. The keystone of the centre is the master printer who provides technical assistance. All autonomous artists, with basic mastery of printmaking techniques, may become members for a small fee. The self-run art centre is a far cry from a product or service based organisation striving for performance or

market edge. Rather, it deals with a humble, dedicated group, committed to principles of accessibility, non-elitism, and freedom. Overtime the organisation matured: they now run their own gallery, are projected into the larger scene of printmaking, organise contests, host international artist residencies, maintain an education program with schools, offer courses etc. In short, they are becoming a cultural institution, yet they are still run on a mixture of volunteer energy and part-time employees.

Competence Frameworks

The European Network on Competence defines a competence as a “disposition of an actor”, a “latent attribute”, that is situational and “defined in a community of practice”. A competence framework lists all the competences of an entity and provides a common set of vocabulary for describing each. Finding, developing and adapting an appropriate competence framework can be a simple or complex task depending on the community of practice and the context of use. Fortunately, there exists a competence dictionary for self-run art centres developed by the Quebec ministry of employment. Given that it’s intent was to describe the job of director of an art centre, the framework required some tweaking to be able to apply it to the organisation at large. To develop their familiarity with the competence framework, committee members participated in an activity of placing the competences in order of importance with which the organisation addresses each competence, both for its present functioning and its future ideal functioning. It became evident that artistic production was the heart of the organisation and should remain as such, but that artistic orientation and management needed to be better addressed in the future.

Activities Inventory

The competence reference framework is then used to methodically document current and past activities of the organisation for each competence. For example, supporting the artistic production involves the provision of space, equipment, expertise and assistance. During the 25 years of the organisation there has been significant improvement in this realm. Today the art centre occupies a large space (11,000 square feet) with all the appropriate equipment (12 different types of printing presses, scanners, an in-house store etc.) with employees who provide expertise. Enumerating the broad range of activities of the centre in such a thorough manner helps the organisation to see the significant work it has achieved over time and develops a sense of pride for its members and employees.

This collective memory serves to better understand the logic and history underpinning different orientations of the organization over time. It also helps to identify fragile zones: for example, the master printer, key to the functioning of the art centre, is a rare expertise in Québec and would be difficult to replace if one day the need arose. Much of the work in this phase was carried out by the committee members in small groups; however, an outside perspective was helpful in identifying activities that members often take for granted.

Evaluation of Competence

Competences can only be evaluated by first determining performance indicators for each area of competence and then rating each using impressions and objective evidence. The evaluation part of the process means leaving the daily “state of business” and taking a step back to analyse the organisation’s success in each of its areas of competence. Given the level of objectivity and distance required for this type of exercise, it is best led by a third party. Rating each of the competences via the performance indicators generates a portrait of the strengths and challenges of the organisation. For example, the art centre excels in supporting creativity and research but struggles with communication of information, decision-making and the integration of the internet into its practices.

ePortfolio

Evaluating the organisational competences is an intense process involving a significant time investment from many people. It is essential then that the results not be simply archived, but recorded in a way that the process becomes an on-going facet of the organisation. This is where the ePortfolio serves a key role. We entered the mass of information in a protected wiki belonging to all members of the art centre. The diverse realities and needs of the centre would have difficulty fitting into predetermined boxes and the wiki technology is a simple technical solution that affords the necessary flexibility to allow the ePortfolio to grow organically, with offshoots as needed. The intention is that the ePortfolio become a tool for the organisation, for example to help prepare the board of directors in its reflective processes. New orientations should find their place in the organisation's collective memory, accessible by all, an organisational knowledge management system of sorts. The art centre members were highly supportive of the process, recognising the various advantages for the organisation.

Practical use of the organisational ePortfolio

This rich organisational portrait can be put to use for various purposes: from clarifying roles and responsibilities of individuals to strategically thinking the future. In our case, we had decided to use the exercise to analyse the art centre's use of the web to fulfil its mandate. By analysing the web site, competence by competence, all sorts of useful realisations became apparent. The web site was not reflecting artistic production, the primary competence of the art centre, nor was it being used by the primary clients of the art centre, the artists. Different propositions, linked to the development of the organisation, were made to adjust the web presence of the art centre, from included images from each of the artist members, to uniting the divers activities in a single calendar, to presenting the different techniques mastered by the art centre. The web presence would be used to provide credibility and visibility of the multiple expertise and activities of the centre developed over time, projecting it further into its role as cultural institution and facilitating financing.

Keys to success

Adaptation and innovation are the challenges of all organizations. An ongoing organisational reflective memory in the form of an ePortfolio can help organisations learn from their activities and strategically plan for the future. At the heart of its development is an analysis of the organisation's competences, ideally with a competence reference framework. For internal credibility the process needs to be collective and work with consensus. To be accepted, the content need to belong to all, and therefore be editable by more than one person. Indeed, the more the ePortfolio is kept up to date the more it will be a useful tool and a source of pride for an organisation. For maximum benefit, the ePortfolio needs to be used for organisational development.

Conclusion

This brief paper has illustrated the process and potential benefits of identifying and evaluating competences in an organisation's ePortfolio. As with personal portfolios, the value of the portfolio is in its use as a reflective planning document as well as an archive of past accomplishments and current capabilities. Introspection should be an investment in the future.

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