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E-Portfolios

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The tool that can increase your marketability and refine your skill development efforts.

ALTHOUGH most of the attention on e-learning has focused on using the computer as a teaching and record-keeping tool, another potential application is as a coaching and advising tool. Skills management tools built into many learning management systems are one such example. Various online mentoring programs, like MentorNet.net, which pairs female college students with successful women professionals through an email-based program, are another example.

But a third, more employable for the masses, example is electronic portfolios. According to the e-portfolio page of the Pennsylvania State University website, e-portfolios are "personalized web-based collections" of previous work with "reflective annotations and commentary related to these experiences." Like their paper counterparts, e-portfolios let people showcase their work and skills in ways that aren't possible through the mere listings of credentials permitted by resumes and curriculum vitae. Workplace learning and performance professionals can use e-portfolios as an innovative means to exhibit their skills and capabilities or as a method to review the developmental possibilities of their clients.

The components

Your professional e-portfolio consists of many parts. First, it contains your résumé, reporting the highlights in your career. Second, it provides a record of the education and training that you've received. That includes formal education, training, and informal learning. Records of formal learning and training include course titles, lengths, and completion and enrollment dates. Records of informal learning identify the skills and knowledge developed, the manner in which that happened, and the source of learning.

Next, your e-portfolio presents all or sample sections of assignments to which you've served as a primary contributor. For example, an electrical engineer might include the functional specifications for the component of a computer she designed. A retail manager might include the annual plan for the store that he managed and samples of any advertising that he oversaw. A course designer might include the instructor and student guides for a course she designed.

Before presenting the sample, you should provide a brief commentary on the project showcased. The nature of the commentary varies, depending on the purpose of the portfolio: showcasing work for the purpose of getting a job or receiving developmental feedback.

Next, you should provide all or sample sections of projects on which you served in a supporting role. Usually, the extent of the sample and the commentary is significantly abridged. For example, the electrical engineer might include the functional specifications for the component of a computer on which she aided the lead engineer on a design review. The retail manager might include an annual plan for a store developed by a new manager that he coached. The course designer might include instructor and student guides that she peer reviewed. Those supplemental samples provide insight into additional skills and show how you're able to play many roles on a work team.

The uses of e-portfolios

The heart of the portfolio is the commentary mentioned earlier. The nature of that commentary differentiates the purpose of the portfolio, for job-seeking or developmental purposes.

Job-seeking purposes. If you plan to use the portfolio in a job search-as a "showcase portfolio" that you'd leave behind after a job interview or a website to which you'd direct prospective employers -the commentary would be brief, no more than one page in length. You'd present all information in a scannable format and identify

* the name and purpose of your project

* the role that you played on the project

* a description of the major contributions that you made

* special issues that the person reviewing the portfolio should consider.

The table below shows an example of such commentary for a piece in the portfolio of a technical writer.

That commentary provides a hiring manager with additional information about your capabilities and strengths, by showcasing skills in the context of everyday work. For example, although you claim to be "innovative" on your résumé, a hiring manager can see evidence of that innovation in the work sample and related commentary.

Developmental purposes. If you plan to use the portfolio for developmental purposes, such as receiving career advice, you'd present a two- to five-page commentary identifying

* the name and purpose of the project

* the role that you played on the project

* a description of the major contributions that you made

* a list of skills that you used while working on the project

* major accomplishments on the project

* key lessons learned.

Learning professionals could use that information for a variety of purposes. They could help you identify skills you possess that aren't listed on your résumé, strengths you bring to a position, developmental opportunities, and alternate types of positions for which to apply. Your e-portfolio should provide space for review comments.

For example, when reviewing the developmental commentary in the electrical engineer's e-portfolio, a career advisor might notice that the engineer oversaw all testing of a component in addition to the design, but she had to ask someone else to conduct the tests because she didn't feel comfortable completing that task. The advisor would be prompted to explore whether the engineer needed technical training on how to conduct the component tests, lacked the confidence, or a combination of the two. Then the advisor could suggest appropriate developmental opportunities.

Similarly, when reviewing the developmental commentary about an advertising campaign that a store manager initiated, a career advisor might notice that the manager wrote and designed the ad. That should prompt the advisor to investigate whether the manager would be interested in work in other marketing and advertising jobs.

Benefits

From a learning perspective, e-portfolios provide for authentic evaluation because they deliver real examples and the opportunity for reflection. That authentic evaluation has specific implications and uses for the adult learner.

Kathryn Chang Barker, a Vancouver, British Columbia-based champion of e-portfolios, explains that a career advisor can use your e-portfolio as a tool to acquaint you with developmental needs within an existing job or career, or as a tool for making a change. The developmental commentary is helpful because it assists in extracting your skills and abilities.

Often, you'll identify abilities as part of your commentary that you might not label as skills on your résumé. In the discussion of challenges in the commentary, however, a career advisor might see developmental opportunities: skills, experiences, and attitudes on which you need work.

An advisor cross-checks that list of developmental needs with your education record to determine whether you've attempted to develop those skills. The advisor can determine if pursuing further education would help or suggest a different approach.

That type of evaluation is especially helpful in certain situations:

Mid-to-late career professionals. Sometimes more experienced professionals find that their careers have been made obsolete by changes in the market or technology. As those individuals attempt to find new careers, most hiring managers treat and compensate them as entry-level employees. A career advisor might find ways to position the worker as a more experienced person by highlighting skills and experience not evident on a résumé.

For example, suppose a skilled laborer works on a product that's no longer manufactured. A detailed investigation might identify that he spent his last three years on the job training other workers, even though his job title was senior manufacturing technician. A career advisor could work with that individual to better position him as a manufacturing trainer with three years of experience in the field and 20 years of experience in business.

Highly skilled professionals. If a person is a trained professional-for example, a doctor, dentist, or engineer-who obtained his or her credentials from a university outside of the United States, that person may have a hard time finding a U.S. position. Generally, accrediting agencies in one country don't recognize profe59, no. 5 (May 2005): p. 70-75ssional credentials from other countries.

The person would, of course, need to become familiar with the local language, laws governing the profession, and operating practices, but their skills could be quickly and easily certified through the use of e-portfolios (if the skilled worker provides evidence of expertise).

Moving portfolios online allows people to send, their portfolios to advisors and certifying groups in other communities more easily. Another advantage is that e-portfolios let advisors and certifying groups provide detailed feedback to the individual-not only because the portfolio allows for comment but also because the evaluators and certifiers have more substantive material on which to base their comments.

Barker notes a third advantage: Moving portfolios online lets people keep a more complete record of their past. She advocates each person having a lifelong portfolio, which begins with elementary school and continues through the end of a career.

The volume of content shouldn't pose a problem because, each time you submit a portfolio, you would prune it to the needs of the intended reviewer. For example, your supply of work samples grows as you gain experience and work on more projects. No career advisor can look at every sample, so the reviewer might ask to see all of your samples from the past three years or from your five favorite projects.

In fact, the choice of sample is an important part of presenting portfolios. Many e-portfolio guides focus on helping you select samples that are appropriate for the situation. In some cases, you may use the e-portfolio as a place to store all of your samples, but you'd present unique e-portfolios for different purposes.

Consider the e-portfolio of a classroom trainer who has a part-time career as an actor. Her portfolio contains samples of all her work, but, for a teaching position, she might include video clips of a lesson; for an acting opportunity, she might include video clips and reviews of a performance.

The ability to include samples in addition to printed documents is a fourth advantage of using online portfolios. E-portfolios can contain multimedia samples, such as video and audio clips.

Challenges

E-portfolios also present challenges:

Technology E-learning courses that are developed on one platform using a particular authoring software can exhibit difficulty working on different platforms and software. E-portfolios have similar difficulties with interoperability. Although e-portfolio systems exist (and some are available free), the portfolios they produce may not be interchangeable. But interoperability can be fixed through standards, which are beginning to emerge from groups like IMS, and procedures

for verifying authenticity can be developed by evaluators.

Authenticity. Like other job-seeking tools, the opportunity exists for people to include samples on which they didn't work or to misrepresent their contributions. As a result, evaluators of e-portfolios need to develop strategies for confirming whether a person is showing a valid work sample.

Evaluation. This third challenge proves more difficult to overcome. Although much advice exists on how to prepare e-portfolios, considerably less advice exists to help hiring managers, career advisors, professional certification specialists, and others evaluate them. Because some of the criteria for evaluating portfolios are unique to disciplines and other criteria need to be developed to help reviewers search for hidden talents, developing those criteria will prove challenging.

E-Portfolios and the WLP professional

As skills management gains importance, and as managers increasingly rely on skills management tools to identify and track the skills of their workforce, workplace learning and performance professionals need a tool that identifies the full range of skills possessed by workers. E-portfolios provide such a tool. Not only do they provide a means for tracking known skills, but also e-portfolios help workers identify latent skills. That knowledge helps to advise workers on their skills development needs. That, in turn, drives performance improvement efforts.

More

To learn more about e-portfolios, consult these resources;

Pennsylvania State University. For general information about e-portfolios, visit Pennsylvania State University's e-portfolio site, http://portfolio.psu.edu,

LIFIA. For general information about e-portfolios and their application in Canada, visit the Learning Innovations Forum website, Kathryn Change Barker's not-for-profit corporation whose mission is to "promote learning innovations as they benefit learners, organizations, and communities." Pay special attention to the Consumer's Guide to E-Portfolio Services, www.lifia.ca.

IMS. For the of standards of technical standards for e-portfolios, visit the IMS standards on e-portfolios, www.imsglobal.org/ep.

eFolio Minnesota. Residents of Minnesota can use eFolio Minnesota's software free of charge to create their e-portfolios. Visit www.efoliomn.com.

Showcase Portfolio

The commentary you present in a showcase portfolio, such as the example below for a technical writer, provides a hiring manager with additional information about your strengths and capabilities.

Quick Facts About the Project

Name of the Project

Omega 12 User's Guide, a 112-page guide for accounting professionals that explains how to use the Omega 12 Auditing System.

Role Played

Lead Technical Writer

Major Contributions to This Project

* Wrote the entire guide.

* Performed all of the desktop publishing.

* Was the first project to implement the company's new style guidelines.

Issues to Consider When Reviewing This Piece

The entire programming staff conducted a technical review, the departmental editor edited the guide, and the user-experience staff conducted a usability test of the software and included this guide as part of the test.

To contain printing costs, delivered the guide to customers on a DVD, with a file in portable document format (PDF).

Kathryn Chang Barker, a Vancouver-based champion of e-portfolios, advocates creating a lifelong portfolio: beginning with elementary school and continuing through the end of a career.

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