

ePortfolio Success Stories – Wisdom for Trainers

co-authored by

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ePortfolio – do you have one? You do if you are on the leading edge of learning management. You do if you've given thought to assessing your own skills and knowledge, if you've given thought to marketing your competencies with examples of your best work, if you realize that your formal credentials only tell part of your learning story.

The electronic portfolio – ePortfolio - is making waves in the worlds of higher and adult education, training, career and human resources management, lifelong learning, learning management, digital media and eLearning. There are good reasons!

Defining ePortfolio

An ePortfolio is an electronic record of learning acquired from all learning environments – a digitally created and managed archive of acquired skills and knowledge. The term “learning” is used to mean a body of skills, knowledge and abilities acquired from any environment – inside and outside the “classroom.”

The formal definition of an ePortfolio is “a collection of authentic and diverse evidence, drawn from a larger archive representing what a person or organization has learned over time on which the person or organization has reflected, and designed for presentation to one or more audiences for a particular rhetorical purpose”¹. The term “ePortfolio” is shorthand for both process and product. The product is both the digital archive and the presentation drawn from it. The ePortfolio development process includes identification, collection, selection, reflection and presentation of evidence of learning.

The ePortfolio is being used in many contexts:

- in primary and secondary education as a tool for demonstration of learning;
- in higher and post-secondary education for the assessment of learning;
- in lifelong learning to enable continuous “reflective” learning and to inventory all types of learning;

¹ As defined by the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (2003).

- in the workplace for the recognition of work experience and workplace training, for recruitment and targeted training, and for career advancement;
- within eLearning as Learning Management Systems and Knowledge Management through both online tools and web-based services; and
- as organizational and/ or economic development through asset mapping and quality assurance.

Basically, there are three types of ePortfolios – standards-based, showcase, and social networking. Some trainees need to demonstrate their competencies against professional and accreditation criteria – occupational standards can form the framework for an ePortfolio where trainees demonstrate acquired competencies vis-à-vis required competencies and attach supporting evidence. Some job applicants want to provide examples of their best work and use a digital portfolio the way artists always have. Some people find their best jobs and do their best work within a community and use ePortfolio tools for connecting and for references – developing and managing their own social capital. Employers manage their human capital resources with ePortfolio systems – using digital tools to inventory and utilize the bank of competences resident in their workforce.

The ePortfolio has a range of applications in the training setting. For trainers, it can be a tool for teaching skills, both ITC skills and reflective learning skills; assessing trainee's prior knowledge; alternative assessment, to supplement traditional assessment techniques; and learning management, assessing learning against occupational standards. For individuals seeking career advancement or transitions, it can be a demonstration of achievement and change from learning inside and outside the classroom, the beginning of a lifelong learning record. For both, it is a communication tool and a practical application of important ICT and media skills.

ePortfolio Success Stories

For many years, Karen Barnstable helped adults who were unemployed or underemployed to create career portfolios. With FuturEd, she has made the transition from paper-based portfolios to ePortfolio, and she shares these success stories, organized around the top ten points that came through most often from her clients. Karen asked: ***How could an ePortfolio assist you with your career development or your career transition?*** They replied....

It allows me

1. . . . to know myself better and gain confidence

Vera, who is pursuing a career in change management, states that the process of developing a portfolio is a great exercise in getting to know her skill sets. Having a portfolio with examples that prove those skill sets allows her to communicate better, and better means more confident! Vera is also looking forward to idea of using ePortfolios to help organizations that are undergoing change.

Christine, who is seeking work in facilitation and training, says that the process of pulling together an ePortfolio helps to define values and non-negotiables. When changing careers at a later age in life, these non-negotiables are more important than ever; we no longer want our work to compromise those things in life are important to us. The ePortfolio building process leads us to the discovery of what makes our heart sing or what drags us down, therefore clarifying positive career directions.

2. . . . to showcase ALL of my education, training and experiences.

Corinne, who is working as a tutor while she is in transition, says that her greatest accomplishments in life have not been job related. She feels that a portfolio will help employers to see the great potential that she has. Working on her own portfolio had an unexpected bonus when a student she was tutoring needed help with a Graduation Portfolio project. Corinne was able to relate to the student's goal and to help her more effectively with the project.

Carol, who works in the area of marine transportation, found that going through all of her stuff, her old job descriptions and her past job reviews, helped her to realize skills and abilities that she might have missed. She found courses and workshops where she had learned a great deal but could not have demonstrated this on a resume.

Shauna, who is a real estate agent hoping to transition into another field, said that her formal education is a "bit slim". She believes that her experience, professional development and personal development will account for a lot towards this perceived weakness. By having an ePortfolio she will have the evidence to support this statement. It will definitely highlight her informal education. She also liked the idea of all real estate agents having an ePortfolio. She thought it would be very helpful for the sellers and buyers in selecting and working with their agent. You may have seen this on the popular TV show "Buy Me" where clients and agents were

not well matched and the result was a lot of frustration and conflict. Shauna thought that ePortfolios could really help with this problem in her industry.

3. . . . to organize my work and share it more effectively.

Mira, who is a talented financial planner, said that the ePortfolio could help her show others how she organizes her work. Since organization is one of her greatest strengths, she wants to showcase that strength in the most impressive way possible. An ePortfolio certainly indicates that one is well organized. She also stated that her potential is more valuable than her accomplishments so far, and that will definitely not show up on a resume.

Laura, who is seeking work in Communications, has often been disappointed with herself and discouraged after an interview. If the interview questions don't allow us to adequately express our accomplishments, our best skills may be overlooked. She feels that the process of organizing her portfolio has clarified her skills and experiences in her own mind which has helped her have the words to say when she is nervous and feeling tongue tied in an interview situation. Having an ePortfolio to back up your claims is like a lawyer presenting a case with very clear evidence all categorized, labeled and expressed at just the right time.

4. . . . to categorize my varied fields of experience.

Jan, who has many years of experience in writing and communication, said that she had not realized how integral to a job search a properly prepared portfolio is. She has a huge number of tear sheets, media kits, pamphlets, etc., (which she have been collecting for about 30 years!) which she didn't know how to organize. She can now do it effectively with an ePortfolio. It will also be very easy for her to keep her collections or writings categorized and updated as she works on new projects.

Jacque, who works in interior design, has experience with all types of home décor and commercial design. She is very tired of lugging around her scrapbooks of projects she has worked on to demonstrate her skills to potential clients. The showcase section of the ePortfolio is the ideal way for her to show clients pictures of her work.

5. . . . to have a competitive edge over other job seekers when applying for new positions.

Barb, who is transitioning from a career in film/television production as an Editor and am moving into the field of Communications, found the ePortfolio to be a very creative way to showcase her experience and skill sets. She also feels that being able to use a picture on the homepage is a bonus and adds a personal flavour that a resume can't. She still applies for jobs in the traditional way with her resume and cover letter as attachments, but then puts the address of her ePortfolio in the body of the email. Potential employers have commented that this is very professional and classy.

Barb also wondered if you could link your ePortfolio to a number of websites designed to help people find jobs such as workopolis.com or monster.com.

Janet, who works as a financial representative, said that the ePortfolio is a nice clean, updated way to send that extra info about yourself. Janet describes herself as an old paper dinosaur but she feels the ePortfolio is a fast and painless way to bring her into the techie age.

6. . . .to find the employees that I am looking for.

Colleen, who works as an HR VP with a Construction company, said that when she looks to hire skilled trades people from Europe or North America, the more personal information she has, the better. She shared that the 3 people that she recently hired could definitely have used some help with their blogs and other information that they sent in. It was disjointed and hard to follow. It would be have been so helpful to get an ePortfolio that presented a clearer picture of who they are as a person as well as what they can do. It is sometimes difficult to retain these workers after they are trained. If we could get a more accurate picture of what they really enjoy doing, and what their future goals and desires are, we could see if our company is the best place for them to be. Since they are taking a huge step in relocating their families, we would like them to be choosing the best company and best city for all aspects of their lives.

Chad, who works as a recruiter for Sales Management Search Group, says he could save a lot of valuable time if all of his candidates had an ePortfolio. His clients want to know as much as possible about the candidates. The typical hiring process involves at least 6 interviews; this adds up to 12 to hours of the candidates time. If the ePortfolio could eliminate some of this time, this would be a huge advantage to him, the candidate and the client.

Chad places people in sales and sales management. Since image is very important in this industry, a picture is invaluable. To use the words of Chad: *I can place a picture much easier than 2 pages of words. A video that demonstrates presentation skills would be a huge asset in a ePortfolio.* Chad also said that the higher the pay for a job, the more time an HR specialist is willing to spend looking at a candidates information. So, he felt that the ePortfolio could lead a candidate to higher paying jobs.

7. . . to be able to train employees more efficiently and effectively.

Richard, who works for a large chain of retail stores, travels all around B.C. and Alberta, training new managers. His greatest challenge is finding time to train these managers well. He feels that if all new managers had an ePortfolio, he would not enter the training situation “cold”. The ePortfolio would demonstrate their skills and would indicate the workplace environment where these skills were used. This would allow Richard to prepare for the training session more effectively. He would have a more accurate starting point and would not waste time trying to develop skills in trainees that were easily transferable from previous work. The ePortfolio would also help Richard with getting to know the whole person he is training more quickly so that a point of connection could be made through common interests. The more you know and understand the person that you work with, the smoother that work relationship will be.

8. . . have a “TOOL” for communication

A very similar thought came from Catherine, the CEO of a media advertising company called Eagle. Com. She has spent much of her career hiring people, building teams and helping people interact within their work environment. She feels that sometimes we need a “tool” such as an ePortfolio to help us communicate with each other; just discussion is not always effective or appropriate. Often we are hesitant to share our previous work experiences or our new ideas in detail, for fear that we will come across as being arrogant or condescending. The ePortfolio provides a common ground to share and communicate with each other.

9. . . . to have a storage place for work that will benefit others.

Tom, the principal of a large secondary school, had similar comments to Catherine’s’. He said that teachers are encouraged to share lesson plans and new and creative ideas. It doesn’t happen as often as it could. Experienced teachers have so much to share with the new teachers and they really need a non- intimidating way to do this. The ePortfolio has a built in sharing

section where teachers can post prized lesson plans and ideas. New teachers looking for that information can use the search system to find what they need in a comfortable way.

10. . . . to unite organizations with common goals.

Betty, who has worked extensively with many different churches across Canada, had a very interesting point. She said that churches who are seeking pastors or ministers traditionally have looked within their own denominations for new leaders. This is changing and the boundaries between evangelical denominations are diminishing. She thought the idea of ePortfolios for pastors or ministers seeking work would be invaluable. If churches were able to find these portfolios from a database of available people, it would enhance their selection process. The sharing section would be ideal for ministers to showcase sermons or successful church programs. In the same way, churches with an organizational ePortfolio could share creative program ideas and initiatives.

On a similar note, teachers and administrators from different School Districts are continually seeking better ways of sharing ideas. ePortfolios would allow Districts to share locally developed courses, unique programs or best practices and perhaps lessen the trend of everyone “inventing the wheel”.

Karen’s Observations

You may be wondering, at this point, if only positive comments came from the people who answered this survey. There were two red flags that did come up several times.

The first one is in regards to the issue of privacy. As Janet stated, identity theft is a growing problem in our society. I would want to be careful as to who would have access to my ePortfolio. I would not want my information to come up simply through a google search. To use her words, *there are too many weirdoes out there.*

The second warning came from Catherine, who put it this way: *As more and more people acquire ePortfolios, more people will be positioned to leave their jobs. Transitioning to another work opportunity may become more of a “want to” rather than a “have to”. If this becomes the case, employers may need to come up with new and creative ways to retain their best people.*

From this survey, that the benefits of ePortfolios to adults in career transition far out weigh the concerns that exist.

Tips For Trainers

If you are just being introduced to ePortfolios, here are some tips for you. First, brush up on your digital literacy and media skills. You'll need to be able to help trainees scan documents and upload audio files, among other things. You'll need to know (at least a little) about blogging and vlogging (video logging). Second, carefully choose the ePortfolio tool you want to use. There are countless products on the market, in addition to open source tools. Different tools achieve different ends, so... Third, be clear about what you want to achieve. Is it demonstration of learning? Is it for assessment of learning? Fourth, individuals absolutely must be able to take their ePortfolios with them. Ensure that the system you use guarantees that students own their own materials. Encourage your trainees to incorporate all the KSA they acquire from their community and family activities. Help them find alternative ways to use their ePortfolios. Finally, it will be easiest to help trainees and maximize the advantages of ePortfolios if you, yourself, have experienced developing and using your own ePortfolio. You will be able to empathize with students as they create, find or request their own evidence of learning; and you will develop an appreciation for the challenges that are experienced while writing a reflective statement that identifies learning. You will have a record of your personal learning with documents and digital artifacts that can be used to showcase your skills and knowledge to employers when seeking a new position or a promotion. As with all good teaching, you will lead by modeling!

Dr. Chang Barker is a consulting education futurist with eLearning and ePortfolio expertise. She can be contacted at: kbarker@futures.com. For additional sources of information on the ePortfolio in the classroom, see www.lifia.ca for ePortfolio conference presentations, or read "ePortfolios for the Assessment of Learning" - a presentation to TASA - at either www.sae.ca or www.FutureEd.com. Karen Barnstable is an ePortfolio expert and FutureEd eLearning Associate. Her research was reported first at the 2006 conference of the Learning Innovations Forum.