

Can Educational e-Portfolios Help Students Get a Job? Insights from School Principals and HR Directors

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Resumen

Nuestro artículo pretende estudiar el potencial del e-portafolio educativo como currículum vitae multimedia y herramienta de búsqueda de trabajo, el cual se puede enviar fácilmente a futuros empleadores. El portafolio electrónico recoge información sobre competencias y experiencias personales y profesionales tanto formales como informales. Igualmente, presenta trabajos, certificados y otro tipo de pruebas elegidos por el individuo para ilustrar sus habilidades y competencias y evidenciar sus logros. Se analizarán los resultados de una encuesta a directores de colegios y directores de recursos humanos y se demostrará que el portafolio electrónico puede considerarse una herramienta de búsqueda de trabajo muy útil que cuenta con una significativa aprobación tanto en el mundo de la educación como de la empresa.

Abstract

This paper intends to explore the potential of the educational ePortfolio as a multimedia curriculum vitae and a job search tool that can be sent out to future employers. It can be used to present, document, reflect on, and promote students' skills, credentials, certificates and diverse formal and informal experiences in a structured, well-organized and marketable way. The results of a survey carried out among thirty-three school principals and fifty-two human resources directors will be analyzed. The research findings reveal that the electronic portfolio can be considered a very useful job search tool that can count with a significant approval both in the education as well as in the business worlds.

Palabras clave: e-portafolio educativo, portafolio electrónico, tecnologías de la información y la comunicación (TIC), directores de colegios, recursos humanos.

Keywords: educational ePortfolio, electronic portfolio, information and communication technology (ICT), 4school principals, human resources

Introduction

Nowadays a wide range of ICTs for learning and teaching are available. The Bologna Process (Declaration 1999; Crosier & Parveva 2013) recommends implementing technology into teaching methodology in order to promote students' autonomy and lifelong learning. As Dennison (2014) states "information and communication technologies' rapid advancement, coupled with growing demand from a knowledge-driven society, places increased pressure on higher-education institutions to innovate with technology and disseminate the results" (p.1).

The Bologna Process also fosters lifelong learning. Apart from being a European Union requirement, it is a reality and a demand of the labor market which students must assimilate and adapt to in an era of constant and rapid technological change and globalization. Additionally, according to the UNESCO and OCDE, lifelong learning is one of the integral components of "economic prosperity and social stability" (Watson 2003, p. 1). UNESCO also emphasizes the relevance and urgency to develop both specific skills and knowledge, as well as lifelong learning skills that can be applied at any stage of our lives. Delors (1996) defines lifelong learning as "an imperative of democracy" (p. 100) while Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST] (2002) classifies it as "employability in the future" (p. 10). The ePortfolio promotes both formal and informal lifelong learning, as well as the insertion in the labor market.

The ePortfolio is well accepted at the international level in numerous country members of the Council of Europe (CRA 2018; EifEL 2018a; EifEL 2018b; Europass 2018; JISC 2018a) and has evoked great interest in the US, Canada and New Zealand (EPAC 2018; NCEPR 2018; IMS Global 2018; JISC 2018b), giving rise to projects related to the topic, as well as in Australia where it was financed and implemented as a government initiative (Hallam, 2007; McAllister, Hallam, and Harper, 2008; Hallam and Creagh 2010; Hallam et al. 2011; Rowley, 2016).

Barker (2005) stresses that everybody should have a lifelong portfolio that starts in elementary school and continues through the end of a career. The e-Portfolio offers wide-reaching advantages, both for educational as well as workplace settings. Besides being used as an evaluation tool by diverse educational institutions in different parts of the world, the ePortfolio can also serve as an excellent didactic tool, as well as a multimedia CV. Zeichner and Wray (2001) noted that the use of ePortfolios has been a common practice in the US and recognized its great potential to prompt teacher development and teacher assessment. Over half of the U.S.-based students (54%) have used some type of ePortfolio (Brown, Chen, & Gordon 2012; Dahlstrom, Dzuiban, & Walker 2013). Its use is emerging in the education sector and has only recently been applied to other fields such as candidate screening and hiring. Nevertheless, it is said that the difference between what is taught in the academic world and the practical skills that are required by the business sector make it difficult for students to access the labor market (Zhou and Helms 2015). This paper explores the question of whether the ePortfolio can help to reconcile both worlds and enhance the employability of young people into the job market.

Method

Participants

The survey targeted two major sectors: business and education. The participants in the study were 54 human resources (HR) directors and 33 school principals who voluntarily and anonymously completed the survey held between January and July 2015.

A total of 52 HR directors out of 80 responded the survey, representing a response rate of 65% and 32 school principals out of 40 filled out the survey, representing a response rate of 80%. Though the respondents hail from diverse countries, the majority of them work in Spain.

The headmasters who participated in the survey in Spain are in charge of schools that belong to a private institution of 35 educational centers founded in 1963. This group operates both primary and secondary schools. The Spanish education system admits the possibility to offer the two educational stages within the same school. The survey participants who work in other countries are also principals of schools that collaborate with the aforementioned private educational institution and follow the same organizational structure, norms and values as the schools in Spain.

The HR directors who participated in the survey were contacted through the Spanish Association of Human Resources Directors (AEDRH: Asociación Española de Directores de Recursos Humanos) and worked for small, medium and large companies. More information can be found in the Data Analysis section.

Instrument

An 8-item questionnaire was developed to address the topic of the using ePortfolio potential as a job search tool. The questionnaire was comprised of three short open-ended questions and five closed-ended questions. The questions were selected and adapted from validated surveys used in research by Ward and Moser (2008), Australian ePortfolio Project (2009), AAC&U & Hart Research Associates (2013) and Watty et al. (2016).

To control for researcher bias and ensure the data's trustworthiness, the survey items were peer reviewed two times for feedback and validation. The final version was audited by a panel of four experts on education and instructional technology, and a board member of the Spanish Association

of Human Resources Directors (AEDRH) to ensure the clarity, relevance and validity of the items in the survey.

Procedures

This quantitative research analyzed data gathered by means of a survey. Its main goal was to analyze the current use of ePortfolios by school principals and HR directors, as well as to explore the potential of ePortfolios to enhance students' employability.

Once potential participants were identified, an email invitation was sent to the HR directors and school principals containing a link to an anonymous questionnaire. A short description of the ePortfolio and various links to sample ePortfolios were provided at the beginning of the survey for those participants who were not familiar with or had never seen an ePortfolio. The online questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, then collected and transferred into Excel for statistical calculations and graphing. As Wutherick and Dickinson (2015) believe "a questionnaire administered online is a desirable way to collect information as computer access is increasingly widespread, email makes it very easy to contact participants and [...] follow-up reminders are easy and inexpensive." (p.41)

The three first questions address the country where the survey respondents are currently working, the number of their employees in said country, as well as whether they had ever seen an ePortfolio. The survey also solicited responses to five closed questions regarding the issues related to the attitudes of the HR directors regarding the perception and use of ePortfolios as a tool for the selection of candidates for a job post.

Participants were invited to record responses to these questions using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 means totally disagree and 7 strongly agree. The survey takes between 5 and 10 minutes to complete, depending on the prior knowledge and need to view the ePortfolio samples provided.

It is worth adding that any possible correlation between the country of origin, company's size, and gender of the respondent and their corresponding responses was not explored at this juncture as this was not the objective of this investigation, however, these issues will be explored in future research.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of both surveys prove that the vast majority of respondents would use an ePortfolio to select candidates for a job post. In the case of HR directors, they account for 82.7% of the total, 77% claim that they would review an ePortfolio of the best candidate and 86.3% would review it for the three best candidates. Regarding school principals, 80% would opt for an ePortfolio to select candidates, 81.8% would use it to appoint the most successful one and 95,5% would embrace it in order to nominate the three best applicants. As it can be seen, the ePortfolio as a job search tool is widely accepted in both business and education sectors. There are slight differences in the ePortfolio approval rates, the significant one is the use the ePortfolio to select the three best candidates, where school principals would employ it 10% more frequently than the human resources directors. These results are in line with the finding of Ward and Moser (2008) that reveal a higher use of the ePortfolio for recruitment purposes in the fields of educational services and health care/social assistance.

It is worth mentioning that 25.5% of the surveyed HR directors claimed that they would review the ePortfolios of all applicants and 31.4% agree in varying degrees with this statement. This figure is not surprising considering that it is a time-intensive undertaking to review all ePortfolios submitted, especially in large companies or schools. Various research studies (Brady 2008; Theel and Tallerico 2004; Ward and Moser 2008; Werschay; Watty et al. 2016) confirm this as they mention time constraints as one of the major HR professionals' complaints about the use of ePortfolio as a recruiting tool.

With regard to the school headmasters, they seem to be more willing to review the ePortfolios of all candidates for a job post since 40.9% agreed with the statement and 9.1% agreed to varying degrees. That may be due to a smaller number of applicants compared to the corporate world.

Finally, 80% of HR directors and 91% of school principals who participated in the survey consider the ePortfolios used for recruiting purposes to be a valuable tool to obtain broader and detailed information on the candidates for a job position. These findings are consistent with the results of the survey conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) by Hart Research Associates (2013), according to which four out of five (83%) employers consider students' ePortfolios to be a useful screening and hiring tool. They are also consistent with the findings by Ward and Moser (2008), Australian ePortfolio Project (2009), Yu (2012), Werschay (2012), and Watty et al. (2016).

After having analyzed the results of the survey, an essential question needs to be asked: is it worth implementing the ePortfolio in the curricula of college and university degrees? The answer is absolutely YES. All the resources that can help students to get a job and to reduce the existing gap between the academic offer and professional world are most welcome and should be implemented with enthusiasm. Based on the findings of this study which are consistent with the findings of previous research and existing literature, it is evident that HR directors and school principals are very much interested in the potential of the ePortfolio for decision making related to screening and hiring.

The ePortfolio can help to bring the university world closer to the workplace since it can facilitate insertion into the labor market (Flanigan and Amirian 2006). The use of an ePortfolio, which was developed with the aid of professors over the course of a student's studies, can help to demonstrate that the gap between what they have learned and the skills required for a successful applicant is less than what is commonly assumed, as well as that knowledge and skills acquired at the university can be applied directly in the professional world (Australian ePortfolio Project 2009; Okoro et al. 2011; Watty et al. 2015).

The information collected from this study provides a better understanding of the perception and approval rating of ePortfolios as a job search tool in the business and education sectors. The insight gained from this study might encourage leaders of educational institutions to adapt ePortfolios and foster their implementation into curriculum as a part of the higher education system. Ward and Moser (2008, p. 14) also point out that these types of findings can provide useful information to educational institutions and assist in planning and implementing ePortfolio initiatives that meet learning and assessment goals, as well as students' employment needs.

To meet these growing demands, it is increasingly important for universities to encourage faculty to include ePortfolios in their course syllabi and instruct both professors and students as to how to use this tool effectively. On the other hand, it has to be taken into account that most faculty are not IT experts, therefore, a collaboration between IT leaders and educators, as well as induction training and continuous technical support are necessary (Wetzel and Strudler 2005; Meyer and Latham 2008; Kim, Bonk and Teng 2009; Contreras-Higuera et al. 2016). Moreover, the support from institutional authorities is crucial for the successful implementation of ICTs, including ePortfolio (Ajayi 2008; Meyer and Latham 2008; Prasad, Lalitha & Srikar 2015; Isiyaku, Ayub & AbdulKadir 2018).

As mentioned earlier, one of the limitations of this study is the demographic representativeness and generalization of the study findings, in other words, that the vast majority of respondents come from Spain, therefore, this study could be expanded in the future research. The results of the present sampling can serve to obtain an indicative approximation on the topic. Future research might also include a more detailed qualitative and quantitative study on the impact of the ePortfolio on the development of academic and professional competencies, as well as its effectiveness and usefulness as a job search resource.

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