INNOVATIVE PRACTICE PAPER
E-portfolio, a valuable job search tool for college students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to find answers to the following questions: How do employers think about e-portfolios? Do employers really see e-portfolios as a suitable hiring tool? Which factors in students' e-portfolios attract potential employers? Can e-portfolios be successfully used by students in their search for a job?

Design/methodology/approach – A semi-structured interview survey was used in this study. All ten interviewees were HR managers from ten different companies. They were interviewed face-to-face between December 2010 and May 2011. In order to collect a broad range of multiple ideas, the interviewees came from a wide range of industries including tourism, product design, real estate, information and technology, insurance, recruitment service, and others.

Findings – The results of this survey showed that the e-portfolio is perhaps still in its early stage of development. Nevertheless, the employer interviews indicate a high and consistent level of interest by the employers, indicating a promising future of the e-portfolio as a job search tool. In addition, employers can use specific information to conduct to pre-screen candidates. On the other hand, they may include the e-portfolio as a factor in the final phase of the selection process to obtain a deeper and more complete level of information (e.g. learning reflections) that can clearly demonstrate a job applicant's characteristics and potential for career development.

Originality/value – Faculty members and career service staff in universities and colleges should consider promoting e-portfolios to employers as a promising tool for selecting their next employee.

Keywords E-portfolio, Job search, Higher education, Students, Taiwan, Software tools, Employment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The Electronic Portfolio or digital portfolio is rapidly becoming a popular topic in higher education across the globe. The e-portfolio, or web-based portfolio, is a collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a person (Wikipedia, n.d.). Drury (2006, p. 2) defined an e-portfolio as an electronic representation of a person's work- a purposeful digital collection that demonstrates one's effort, ability and progress toward a particular achievement or goal. These collections can be shown in various digital media types such as audio, video, text, and graphics.

From an educational perspective, an e-portfolio is a kind of a personal online space for learning, where students can present digital resources relevant to their own studies and link to other students and teachers for collaboration and feedback (Hartnell-Young *et al.*, 2007). It can be a flexible, evidence-based tool that engages students in a process

of continuous reflection and collaborative analysis of learning. A simple model for the learning-oriented portfolio should contain three foundational components:

(1) reflection;

(2) documentation; and

(3) collaboration (Zubizarreta, 2009).

From an employment perspective, an e-portfolio allows students to showcase their work to potential employers (Yancey, 2001). It can be a valuable tool for students that are searching for a job because it allows potential employers access to work that students have selected to demonstrate their accomplishments (Drury, 2006). Ward and Moser (2008) suggested that colleges and universities should encourage students to post their resumes, references, samples of written projects and presentations in their e-portfolios to showcase their abilities to potential employers.

Also, different schools may implement the use of e-portfolios for a variety of purposes. Kalamazoo College integrated the use of the e-portfolio into their school's curriculum. The faculty of Alverno College accessed the e-portfolios of their students for assessment and advice purposes. The e-portfolio approach taken by Florida State University is one of career preparation and job search. (DeVries *et al.*, 2006). Since a student's employment opportunity is of critical importance in Jinwen University of Science and Technology (JUST), the senior administrators here decided in late 2008 to establish an e-portfolio platform for students to use, referring it as an electronic resume or e-resume. The intention was to encourage students to build their own employment-oriented e-portfolios for their future employment and career needs.

During the past two years, the author sometimes wondered about the usefulness and value of e-portfolios. Thus, in this study a number of employers were interviewed from various industries to find out the answer to the following questions: How do employers think about e-portfolios? Do employers really see e-portfolios as a suitable hiring tool? Which factors in students' e-portfolios attract potential employers? Can e-portfolios be successfully used by students in their search for a job?

Background information on JUST

JUST was originally established as Jin-Wen College in 1990 in Taipei, Taiwan. The institution was upgraded to a university level and renamed Jinwen University of Science and Technology in 2007. JUST is a medium-sized technological and vocational university with around 8500 students. The four academic colleges (Hospitality & Tourism Management, Business Management, Humanities and Arts, and Electrical Engineering & Computer Science) of the university cover 16 undergraduate departments and two graduate institutes. JUST has established an e-portfolio platform (http://eportfolio.just.edu.tw) in late 2008. To date, approximately 80 percent of students have created their own e-portfolio.

Method

A semi-structured interview survey was used in this study. Ten interviewees, all of them HR managers from a different company in Taiwan were interviewed face-to-face between December, 2010 and May, 2011. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to

an hour. Some interview questions were designed to lead interviewees to respond. These questions included:

- Have you ever heard of e-portfolios?
- How do you feel about a web-based resume such as an e-portfolio?
- Do you believe that an e-portfolio is a useful reference for you in hiring an employee?
- What kind of information would you prefer to find on the e-portfolio of a job applicant?

All ten interviewees in this study were HR managers from different companies. As shown in Table I, in order to collect a broad range of multiple ideas, the interviewees came from a wide range of industries including tourism, product design, real estate, information and technology, insurance, recruitment service, and others.

Results

Familiarity with e-portfolios

Six out of the ten interviewees (C, D, E, H, I, and J) responded that they had never heard of an e-portfolio. Since both B and G work in the recruitment field, they were more familiar with the subject. The other two employers (A and F) responded that they only knew a little bit about e-portfolios. It was obvious that most interviewees were not familiar with e-portfolios, and had never used e-portfolios as a tool in hiring an employee.

Acceptance of e-portfolios

Each interviewee received a five-minute introduction about e-portfolios at the beginning of each interview in order to provide them with the basic information on e-portfolios. Some interviewees had browsed a number of student e-portfolios on the JUST e-portfolio platform on their own accord prior to the interview. This did help the interviewer in her communication with the interviewee.

All of the interviewees showed a positive response to e-portfolios after they had listened to the introduction, including those that had browsed some examples of students' e-portfolios prior to the interview. For example, interviewee A mentioned that, "The integration and synthesis abilities of a job applicant can be judged from his/her e-portfolio." C, D, and I indicated that they were excited hearing about e-portfolios, and so they would consider requesting job applicants for internships and/or full-time positions to provide an e-portfolio as a reference in the future. E and H indicated that they would probably use e-portfolios as a selection tool for making their final decision, because they could find out more information and form a more complete

Code	Company type	Interview date	Code	Company type	Interview date
A	Travel agency	December 3, 2010	F	Product design	December 27, 2010
B	Recruitment agency	December 17, 2010	G	Recruitment agency	January 28, 2011
C	Hospitality industry	December 17, 2010	H	Electronics technology	February 23, 2011
D	Hospitality industry	December 20, 2010	I	Estate agency	March 18, 2011
E	Information service	December 22, 2010	J	Insurance	May 6, 2011

Table I.
Basic information of interviewees

picture of job applicants by means of their e-portfolio. However, J remarked that, "The paper resume won't be replaced by the e-portfolio at the present time. An e-portfolio could probably be used as a supplementary reference of the paper resume."

Both recruitment consultants B and G believed that e-portfolios would surely be a popular hiring tool once employers became acquainted with it. In addition, they stated that providing both a paper resume and an e-portfolio (e-resume) for job hunting would soon become a leading trend.

Content of an e-portfolio

According to the interviewees, in addition to one's curriculum vitae, a number of items are necessary on an e-portfolio to showcase the performances and abilities of the student (see Table II). Obviously, any certificate or license that can prove the applicant's abilities in either language or professional knowledge is important evidence to the employer. Records of learning achievements and reflections are also important to an employer. In addition, records related to any extra-curricular activities should be provided in the student's e-portfolio. In addition, interviewees C, F, H, and I mentioned that they preferred to see a short self-introduction video in the e-portfolio which could briefly demonstrate a job applicant's strengths and potentials. Work experiences, instructor's feedback and comments, and autobiographies were also considered a part of a student's e-portfolio.

This study also found that different industries have different preferences for the contents of e-portfolios. For example:

- In the tourism industry, any certificate that can prove a student's language ability and other relevant professional skills are welcomed. In addition, any proof of a student's communication and social skills are important.

- In the recruitment business, they focus on a student's educational records and extra-curricular activities. In addition, they like to see the results of the applicant's career aptitude test.

- In the information and technology industry, employers emphasize professional competitiveness. Consequently, certificates of skills (computer programming of various levels) are crucial.

- In the design industry, the work and projects of the student, as well as different workshops attended etc. are important.

- The interviewees from the insurance and real estate agencies require records demonstrate the student's work experience.

This study also found that different factors are used in different phases of the selection process. For example, since interviewee H works for a very large company, she usually selects candidates for the first round interview based on their certificates and transcripts. However, reflections for learning or working are seen as a more valuable reference for making the final decision. Actually, interviewees A and D mentioned the importance of reflections because it provided clues a job applicant's characteristics and potential for career development.

Finally, interviewees B, C, H, and J all had one significant viewpoint in common, that different job positions will value different factors. For example: Records on extra-curricular activities are likely to be more important when applying for a job in

Table II.
Content of e-portfolios

Rank	Factor	No. of responses	Rank	Factor	No. of responses
1	Certificates and/or licenses	10	5	Extra-curricular activities	5
2	Workshops relevant to learning	9	8	Photos on extra-curricular activities	4
2	Transcripts	9	8	Self-introduction video	4
4	Reflections	8	10	Work experiences	2
5	Projects	5	10	Instructor's feedback and comments	2
5	Record of awards	5	10	Autobiography	2

Note: Other suggested items include the results of any career aptitude tests, classmate's comments, personal Blog, and Facebook, etc

marketing or sales. Reflections for learning or working are probably more important when applying for a job in personnel or business development.

Conclusions

The results of this survey showed that the e-portfolio is perhaps still in its early stage of development. Six out of the ten interviewees had not even heard of an e-portfolio prior to their interview. Nevertheless, the employer interviews indicate a high and consistent level of interest, indicating a promising future of the e-portfolio as a job search tool. Although the e-portfolio has not yet become a popular tool for recruiting employees, this survey showed that even an early form of the e-portfolio created serious substantial interest from all interviewees. This strong level of acceptance suggests a high potential for success for any university or college that might plan to promote the e-portfolio to potential recruiters to improve student job placement. This finding should encourage universities and colleges to be more proactive in promoting the use of an e-portfolio platform to assist students in their job search.

While most interviewees agreed that an e-portfolio should contain a rich compilation of factual credentials, the questions of how, what and why an e-portfolio is used for by potential employers that still varies across different industries and the stage of recruiting. Different pieces of information must be provided in the e-portfolio for the different positions in different industries. Therefore, students should collect as much reference materials as possible for their e-portfolios during their college years. Thus, when searching for a job, students can easily compile all suitable items of information in their e-portfolios depending on the type of job that they are applying for. Conversely, employers may use specific information from the e-portfolio to conduct a preliminary screening, while others may use it to make their final decision.

In sum, the e-portfolio is still not very common but is seen to be promising by recruiters. A number of different aspects of the e-portfolio were explored in this survey. The diversity of e-portfolio applications in job search suggests its embryonic stage. Faculty members and career service staff in universities and colleges should consider promoting e-portfolios to employers. The effectiveness of an e-portfolio when searching for a job will evolve, grow and improve the more it gets adopted by jobseekers and employers alike.

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Ti Yu was born in 1965 and graduated as a Bachelor of Arts from the Department of Educational Medias and Library Science from Tamkang University in Taiwan and continued graduate study in the University of Arizona, Tucson, USA, and obtained a Master of Library Science in 1990. Ti Yu has more than 20 years' experiences in several academic as well as non-profit libraries and has been an active contributor to the library and information community in Taiwan. Currently, Ti Yu is an Associate Professor of the Applied English Department and the Library Director at the Jinwen University of Science and Technology in Taipei, Taiwan. Ti Yu has been studying for a PhD program in the Graduate Institute of Library and Information Studies, National Taiwan Normal University since Fall, 2010. Recent researches include various issues in information literacy, library services, organization and management of library. Ti Yu can be contacted at: tiyuwei@gmail.com