THE IMPACT OF E-PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT ON THE EMPLOYABILITY OF ADULTS AGED 45 AND OVER

Hilary Stevens, SWOOP Project, University of Exeter

Abstract

Purpose

This paper presents the findings of an evaluative case study that used an electronic portfolio to enhance the employability of older adults. The evaluation sought to identify programme effects and highlight the factors that were instrumental in generating them.

Design

Qualitative inquiry methods were employed to gather the views of the mentor and programme participants’.

Findings

The findings suggest that the electronic portfolio programme gave participants a better understanding of their skills and attributes and increased their self-confidence, in particular in marketing themselves to employers. Four features of programme design were identified as instrumental: the electronic portfolio software; the process of reflection and evidence building; and mentor and group support.

Research limitations

The research is based on participants’ subjective assessment of both their skills and the programme’s effects and as such does not provide evidence of actual change in their performance (e.g. at interview).

Practical implications

The findings suggest that the e-portfolio software alone would not have been sufficient in generating improved outcomes for participants. Programmes intending to introduce a technology-based approach to the provision of adult information, advice and guidance should acknowledge the importance of mentor-facilitation and the mutual support provided in a group environment.

Originality

The originality of the study lies in the use of an e-portfolio with a non-traditional (older) audience.

Keywords

Case study, evaluation, e-portfolio, employability, older people, reflection
Introduction

The South West Opportunities for Older People (SWOOP) EQUAL Development Partnership tested the effectiveness of an electronic portfolio (e-portfolio) in supporting the job search and personal development of older people. Representing part of a wider programme that tested innovative approaches to enhancing the employment prospects of older people, e-Portfolio has introduced a technology-based approach to helping adults record, store and reflect upon their skills and personal achievements and market these assets to others. This paper describes how the technology was introduced to this non-traditional e-portfolio audience, what its effects were and what aspects of the programme were considered most beneficial by participants. It concludes with recommendations for the design and delivery of e-portfolio programmes for this audience in future.

Background

Across the European Union, changing demographics have prompted member states to revisit their policies on the employment of older people. Within the United Kingdom, successive government papers have stressed the importance of extending working lives in meeting the challenges of an ageing society (Department for Work and Pensions, 2002; HM Government, 2005). However, the employment rate of men and women declines as they enter their 50s and only just over one-in-ten are working beyond state pension age. Older people are more likely to leave full time employment than younger people (Lissenburgh & Smeaton, 2003) and, once unemployed, older people are less likely to find work. The barriers older people face in finding work are well documented but include ill-health, lack of formal qualifications and lack of confidence, in particular in their ability to find work (National Audit Office, 2004).

In response to this challenge, an innovation programme was established in the South West of England, with funding from the South West Regional Development Agency and the European Social Fund ‘EQUAL’ programme to research new approaches to enhancing the employability of older people (that is those aged 45 and over). As part of this work, and in recognition of the increasing profile for personalised learning in UK and European policy¹, the project funded an evaluative case study of the use of an e-portfolio for employment purposes with an older (non-standard) audience.

An e-portfolio product was embedded within a mentor-supported programme (“SWOOP Forward”) consisting of three, three-hour group sessions. A group interview was carried out at the end of each session to gather feedback on the programme and to explore clients’ progress. Three SWOOP Forward programmes were delivered in the South West of England between March and July 2007.

Conceptual framework

The evaluation of SWOOP Forward was informed by the conceptual model or ‘theory of action’, illustrated in Figure 1. The model is an adaptation of the evaluation model proposed by Steve Ehrmann (1998).

¹ For example, the European Institute for e-Learning (EIfEL) is actively campaigning for ‘e-Portfolio for every citizen by 2010’ and ‘one e-Portfolio for life’. 
Ehrmann uses the model to identify five sets of questions that need to be answered in order to isolate the effects of the technology from that of the activities it supports. These are:

- Questions about the technology per se (e.g. Did users have access to it? How good was the training? Were some users more skilled at using it than others?)
- Questions about the practice or behaviour per se (e.g. What activities did the technology support?)
- Questions about the outcome per se (e.g. What changes are there in terms of the employability of users?)
- Questions about the technology’s use for the practice (e.g. Was e-Portfolio any good for producing CVs?)
- Questions about the practice’s fostering of the outcomes (e.g. Did the quizzes give users a better sense of their achievements?)

The programme’s theory of action is also informed by theories of adult learning and andragogy in particular (Brown, 2002) that seek to explain how programme activities (e.g. reflection on prior experience) transform an individual’s understanding of one’s own abilities, and in turn generates programme outcomes. As SWOOP was an employment-orientated programme, these intended outcomes were conceptualised in terms of enhanced employability as defined by Hillage & Pollard (1998). Thus, the impact of the programme was explored within the following framework of employability:

- an individuals’ assets in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess;
- the way they use and deploy those assets (e.g. career management skills, job search skills and their strategic approach2 to job search)
- the way they present them to employers (e.g. presentation of CVs, qualifications, references, interview technique and work experience).
- the context within which they seek work including an individual’s personal circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities or disability) and/or external factors such as the pattern and level of job openings, labour market regulation, benefits rules and employer recruitment and selection behaviour.

SWOOP Forward

2 being adaptable to labour market developments and realistic about labour market opportunities, including the willingness to be occupationally and locationally mobile.
The SWOOP Forward programme was launched in March 2007 and was specifically marketed at people aged 45 who were looking to make changes to their working lives. The programme aimed to help people reflect on their skills, abilities and experiences, plan their next step, develop a CV and present themselves in a more positive way for job interviews and in application forms. The programme consisted of three, three-hour group sessions, held over a period of three to four weeks. Groups were small - between 5 to 7 people - and led by a professionally trained mentor. The programme ran three times (once in Exeter and twice in Truro), attracting seventeen participants in total. The term ‘e-portfolio’ was not mentioned in marketing literature but would-be participants were informed that the sessions would use an interactive computer programme and, as it was a pilot programme, they would be asked to provide feedback about their experience.

The programme used the ‘vanilla’ version of a commercial system called Vitaelity™, developed by Arc Software Consultancy. The system was selected following a formal tender process whereby several software houses were invited to tender for a fully specified e-Portfolio product. In terms of Barrett’s (2001) typology of e-portfolio use, the product was used for formative (i.e. to support reflection and learning) and ‘marketing’ purposes. It did this by supporting three activities: introspection, action and reflection, self-assessment, and the creation of a record of achievement. The latter was compiled through the use of workbooks and other interactive tools resulting in a flexible personalised repository based around a digital progress file whereby achievement and qualification records, presentation documents (such as a CV) and personal profiles could be stored.

The first session in the programme introduced the software and how it could be used to support self and career development. Clients were shown how to log in and navigate the system and given time to complete on-line exercises and quizzes that were designed to help them identify their interests, key skills, personal qualities, achievements, work-life balance preferences and learning and working styles. The second session invited clients to reflect upon what the quizzes had revealed about themselves and use the software to build a body of evidence supporting the statements made. They were also given time to input details of their education and employment history. The final session used the work of the previous session to individually prepare a CV or supporting statement. Clients were encouraged to bring details of a real job specification to help them match their skills to the requirements of a role. In each session ‘hands on’ computer time was complemented by mentor-presentations on topics such as the application of e-portfolio in other contexts, the value of reflection and job search skills. Upon client request, a follow-up (fourth) session was held in Truro.

Programme participants

Seventeen people attended SWOOP Forward workshops, following advertisements in the local press. The programme was run three times: once in Exeter, Devon and twice in Truro, Cornwall. The Exeter and first Truro group was attended by five clients, whilst seven people attended the second Truro group. Five of the second Truro group also attended a fourth ‘follow-up’ session. This was also open to the first Truro group but no-one from this group attended.

In terms of eligibility, the project was specially aimed at people aged 45 and over, although two people who were slightly below this threshold were accepted onto the programme. The average (mean) age of participants was 54, with the youngest being 41 years and the oldest 64. Participants were required to have had some experience of using a computer, although this requirement was relaxed for one client. Participants’ demographic and socio-economic profile was as follows:

- most participants (fourteen) were women
- almost all described themselves as ‘white’ (with one describing their ethnic group as ‘mixed’)
- two had a long-term disability, health problem or disability.
- seven were working, either as an employee or were self-employed, six were unemployed and three were economically inactive
- time since last worked ranged from just under 6 months to almost 7 years

most (nine) were qualified to at leave NVQ level 3 (or equivalent). This included four who held a post-graduate qualification

most (ten) participants were looking to change or get a job, four indicated that they were looking to explore their options and one was looking to start a course.

Evaluation Methodology

Purpose, scope and focus

This paper reports solely on questions about the outcomes clients derived from the programme. More specifically, the evaluation questions explored in this paper are:

- Did the programme help beneficiaries to better understand and represent their skills, attitudes and attributes? What other effects did it had?
- What was it about the programme that gave it ‘value’?

Data collection and analysis

Four primary sources of data were used: a registration form, a usability observation form, interviews with study participants and a reflective journal maintained by the mentor. The mentor’s journal contained her thoughts on what had worked well and not so well and suggestions for improvements. The registration form collected routine monitoring information such as their contact details, demographic information and details about their economic status and future intentions, highest qualification and computer use. The usability form was intended for use by the tutor to record observations that arose during the session. This contained sections for ‘getting started’, ‘look and feel’, ‘getting around’, ‘system failures’ and ‘other comments and observations’. Whilst the form was used in early sessions, it was later replaced by an approved system of note taking by programme participants.

Participants were given an information sheet and consent form at the start of the programme. The information sheet described the background to the project, explained why the research was taking place and how the results would be used. Assurances of anonymity and the ability to withdraw from the interview (without compromising their participation in the programme) were made clear. A group interview (“debrief”) was held after each session. The session was recorded using a digital voice recorder and the feedback was transcribed verbatim. The four transcripts were then read thoroughly, recurring themes and ideas noted and a thematic framework developed. The data was then labelled using the classification and sorted into a thematic chart (using one row for each participant). The results were then written up grouping similar themes.

Impact of SWOOP Forward

SWOOP Forward clients reflected on their progress at the end of each session. Their responses have been grouped into the following broad outcomes:

Greater understanding of personal skills and attributes

A key aim of the e-portfolio pilots was to help clients better understand their skills, attitudes and attributes. There is evidence that using the e-portfolio software either confirmed individuals self-

---

4 At the start of the programme all participants were given a ‘goody bag’ containing SWOOP branded materials. This included a notebook and pen which participants were encouraged to use to record any problems or observations as arose through using the software.
knowledge by, for example, confirming preferred learning styles or, more commonly, challenged existing notions about what they could or could not do. As one Exeter participant reported, “It is making me think a lot of what I can do. Whereas I always think in my head I can’t do it. But I can. There are lots of things I can do”. Her comments were echoed by another who reflected, “[using the software] made me think about what I can do, what I am good at and so, I think most people did that. You don’t think about what you can do or what your skills are”.

**Improved self-confidence**

The process of skill identification and evidence building provided a confidence boost to several clients. One client in the first Truro group reported, “feeling a bit better about myself” and another, reflecting back at the end of the programme claimed she, “look at myself in a [more confident] way.” Increased self-confidence gave one client the courage to change the direction of her working life: “...to look at something different is bit scary and you think ‘well hang on, am I making an idiot of myself sticking my head above the parapet and saying I’d like to do this’. I think I have learned that actually ‘no, go for it. Let them shoot me down!’”.

**Motivation and outlook**

This growing appreciation of their employability led some clients to conclude that they could apply for a greater variety of jobs than they originally thought and two participants from the second Truro group said that felt more positive about their employment prospects. There is also evidence that the programme helped clients overcome feelings of disillusionment with one Truro client reporting that the programme had helped her, ‘see through the fog’ following her redundancy. She described what it was like for her to lose her job and how she viewed her prospects at the start of the programme: “When you are made redundant your future is behind you. Everything you’d wanted, everything you’ve worked for, everything you’ve learned, it suddenly stops dead. Who you are, what you are, where you are, where you’re going. Well, I’m not going anywhere, nobody wants me at my age.”

**Attitudes about age and employment**

Whilst unfavourable employer attitudes to older job candidates was highlighted as a barrier to finding work, one client felt that the programme had encouraged her not to focus on age too much:

“One tends to use [age] as a bit of an excuse if you haven’t got a job and you are applying for a job. You think, ‘well they are not going to hire me because of my age’ and, ‘oh I can’t do this because of my age’ or ‘you know, there’s no point in me even applying because of my age’. Whereas this shows you that you’ve got a lot of skills. You have a lot to offer. You know you have the qualifications to back it up. You have the examples of the experience to back it up so age doesn’t matter any more. You can do it.”

The realisation that age ‘should not mean shortcoming’ was one of the most powerful lessons that one participant of the second Truro group took from the project and others claimed feeling, “better” about their ability to compete against younger candidates for work. As one participant in the first Truro group described, the programme had, “reiterated that I am just as worthy an employee as you know as a 23 year old”.

**Better understanding skills and competencies valued by employers**
There is evidence that participants’ understanding of the skills and competencies valued by employers increased as a result of the programme. For one Exeter client this process started with a better appreciation of, “what the word ‘skills’ means”. It was not obvious to some clients that they needed to be explicit in marketing skills that they took for granted (e.g. listening, organisational and communication skills). As one Truro client described, “you perform [the skills] daily don’t you and you just do it automatically and you don’t think anything of it really or think it’s anything special.” All groups reflected positively on the fact that employers were just as - if not more - interested in their personality and experience as their qualifications and that evidence of experience could be drawn from unrelated jobs in the past or from domestic or social settings. One Exeter participant who did not hold formal qualifications reported, “it’s just realising that my wealth of experience and things that I’ve done in the past are just as valuable [as qualifications] so that for me, that’s been really, very, really helpful, very valuable”. A fellow Exeter participant also observed, “you don’t think that [an employer] will want to know what kind of person you are.” This was particularly encouraging news for those that had not worked for some time. 

**Evidence-building and recording**

Once clients had completed the quizzes and diagnostic tools, they were guided through a process of evidence building. This involved typing in details of their work experience and educational achievements and providing examples of how and when they demonstrated the skills and attributes they claimed to possess. This had a similar effect to the quizzes in terms of confidence building. As one participant in the first Truro group described, “once you have put all this information down you realise that hey I’m not too bad after all”. He goes on, “it does bring back memory actually seeing it down on the computer what you’ve got and what you can actually offer to a prospective employer”. A very tangible and practical outcome of the programme was a growing body of evidence that clients could draw upon when applying for jobs. As one Exeter-based client reported, “I’ve a lot more information in the programme than I would have had in my other CV”. Another commented that the “electronic CV and backing information” and, in particular, having “everything in the same place” would be “very useful in whatever I wanted to do”.

**Improved self-marketing through CVs, supporting statement and interviews**

Participants had varied experience of producing a CV. Whilst none of the clients had finished a ‘polished’ CV at the end of the three sessions, many indicated that they had made sufficient progress in order to complete the process at home. One Exeter client who reflected on what she had learnt realised that, “I have been doing my letters of application all wrong. It’s sort of like, love me in spite of myself”. Several clients said that they felt more knowledgeable about producing a CV and were confident about tailoring a CV for a specific job. This general feeling is illustrated by the Truro2 client who at the end of the project volunteered that, “I feel confident that I can go away now and with quite a lot of work, put together a really good CV. I know where I’m going and I’ve got the tools available and yes it has changed my view definitely on how I should present myself”.

Taking part in SWOOP Forward helped many clients become more confident about interviews and two used what they had learnt about themselves to prepare for interviews obtained whilst on the programme. One participant in the first Truro group felt that taking part had, “made her think more about answering employers’ questions and needing to have the evidence” and one in the second group felt that attending the first session had “probably” helped her in preparing for a job interview. Another client in the second Truro group, reflecting on two recent interviews, during the follow-up session described how the project had helped her better articulate her talents.

**Employment outcomes**

Four of the nine unemployed or economically inactive programme participants are known to have found employment since completing the project. Positions were secured as a Ward Clerk, a sales assistant at Marks & Spencer’s, an adult basic skills tutor and a paid fundraiser for a local charity. The client who found work as an adult basic skills tutor had done so after taking her CV to the local college. She claimed the reason she went was because, “I was more confident as a result of coming here”. This confidence not only enabled her to approach the college speculatively but also empowered her to negotiate the hours and days she wanted to work, “[that] came directly from ’don’t take what
The client who found work as a fundraiser reported that she was able, ‘approach’ the role ‘directly as a result of [SWOOP Forward]’. It was her ambition to find paid work in a local charity but, ‘never thought I would be able to’. She felt the programme had given her the, “confidence to think actually yeah you can do that. It is not out of your reach. Give it a go”.

What worked?

As SWOOP Forward was an experimental project, it was important to identify exactly what it was about the programme that had helped clients. The discussion identified four broad features that had contributed to the programme’s success: the e-portfolio software, the process of reflection and evidence building and mentor and group support. SWOOP Forward clients were satisfied with what they could do with the e-portfolio software and liked the idea of storing their information in one place. One client in the second Truro commended the functionality of the software, “it has everything on there. It is the package. So it’s got personal statements. It has got the skills. It has got the CV. It has got the tutorial guides which have got quite a lot of information on. So it’s the whole thing about job hunting and evaluating and reassessing yourself”. Another client in the same group liked the fact that is was about, “not just your working life, but you as a person”. A number of clients were pragmatic about the limitations of the software, with one reflecting that, “computer programmes, they are never always exactly right”. There was some interest in a ‘presentation’ portfolio that clients could show potential employers.

The quizzes and diagnostic tools used to identify skills and support the process of reflection and evidence building were universally popular with clients. As one Exeter client observed, “at the beginning it sort of says well no talk about yourself, you know. So it’s a motivational thing to do”. The discipline of evidence building was seen to be a major benefit of the system and some clients had already articulated what they had learned about themselves at job interviews. A participant in the second Truro group acknowledged, “it was good on the e-portfolio having that category so you have to state your skills and then you have to state your evidence. That was good, making you have to do that.” She added it, “helps you focus your mind and it makes you look at it slightly more intense than normal”.

All three groups agreed that the mentor was crucial in introducing the software and supports its use. For example, one Exeter client feared users would, “flit about from section to section without actually starting and getting anything done” if it was not introduced in a systematic and supported way and another admitted that she would have, ‘given up very, very quickly” without any support. A client in the second Truro group reasoned, “You are promoting this to older people with change. You have to introduce that personally. I don’t think a screen would do that”. Clients were overwhelmingly supportive of the programme being delivered as a small group. One client from the first Truro group reflected the feeling expressed in all three groups, “It’s nice to bounce ideas off people and it helps me to think of things in a different way and it also sort of sparks off new ideas for me as well.” Another client, this time from the second Truro group, claimed she, “got lots out of hearing what other people have said”.

Conclusion

The evaluation has shown that the SWOOP Forward programme enhanced individual’s employability. Using the conceptualisation of employability outlined earlier in this report, it is clear that the programme supported clients in identifying their own ‘assets’. The quizzes and diagnostic tools reminded clients of their knowledge, skills and attitudes, although, as these were not assessment tools, the evidence generated was not objective.

Notwithstanding this, the identification of, and reflection upon, personal competencies, skills and achievements was an empowering process for many, boosting their self-confidence not only in terms of what they had to offer employers but also in their ability to find and secure work. The mentor facilitation and group environment were instrumental to this process. As empowerment is one of the leading principles of EQUAL, SWOOP Forward has provided an excellent example of how technology can facilitate this process.
The programme also helped clients to improve the way they used and deployed their assets in managing their career and searching for jobs. In particular, it gave them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and achievements and use this information to make decisions about what they wanted to do next. The support of the mentor was particularly important in this respect. Clients also left the programme feeling more confident about how they presented themselves to employers both in terms of the presentation of their CVs and their interview technique. Whilst the e-portfolio programme provided portability and a useful framework for the self-reflection and evidence-building and presentation, it is unlikely that users would have completed the process without the support of a mentor. Clients appreciated the assistance of the mentor in using the software but also in supporting and encouraging them in their reflection and job search.

References

Author
Ms Hilary Stevens
University of Exeter
SWOOP Project
hilary.j.stevens@exeter.ac.uk