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Employers’ Support of the Use of E-portfolios by Job Applicants

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which employers support the use of e-portfolios by job applicants and attempted to answer the following additional questions: (1) What e-portfolio features do employers prefer? (2) What e-portfolio delivery systems do employers prefer? and (3) What are types of companies prefer that applicants use e-portfolios when applying for a job? A sample of 110 business, government, and educational institution recruiters were surveyed and a 31.8% return rate was realized. The findings indicate that less than a half of employers support the use of e-portfolios by job applicants. They prefer that e-portfolios contain the following features: resumes, descriptions of employment experiences, descriptions of internship experiences, and references. Employers prefer that e-portfolios be delivered through an Internet link. Finance and Insurance companies most often support the use of job application e-portfolios.

KEYWORDS

e-portfolio, features, job applicants, employers, support, delivery system

INTRODUCTION

The term “folio” has been used for quite some time. It is known as a collection or package consisting of documents, photographs, and work samples either in print or in audio, video or other formats. The concept of “portfolio” represents a more portable form of folio. The portfolio evolved into an electronic format in the mid 1990s as teaching-training institutions desired to have students demonstrate teaching skills and competencies to potential employers in a more efficient manner. (McCowan, 2005)

E-portfolios have been discussed by information systems professionals participating in the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). In a publication entitled “e-Portfolios: An overview of JISC activities,” it is noted that “…learners create e-portfolios and use them for a variety of purposes (depending on the system they are using).” These purposes include supporting: presentation, transition, and learning. E-portfolios that are used to support presentation and used for application to study or job, induction, appraisal, or assessment, while e-portfolios used for transition support learners as they move between and across institutions and sectors. E-portfolios used for learning help to guide and develop learning over time in education, training, and employment. (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2007)

Today there are a variety of types of the portfolio. Mihram (2004) defines the three basic categories of e-portfolios as structured, learning, and showcase. These categories were originally identified by Greenberg (2004). Structured e-portfolios are pre-defined for work that is yet to be created and includes learning matrix, standards-based for teaching education, and faculty/community. Learning e-portfolios are used so that work is created dynamically and include catalyst, and the folio thinking project sub-categories. Finally, Showcase e-portfolios are used to organize and present accomplishments and include job applications, examples of student work, career, and project-based types. (Mihram, 2004)

It is the Showcase e-portfolio that this paper uses as the basis of the research. According to the definition of European Institute for E-learning (2003), this type of is defined as follows: “An e-portfolio is an extended, dynamic CV, establishing links to an online database, which contains personal and professional achievements, team results, references and all relevant evidence of competence obtained in the course of work and learning. It provides an opportunity to reflect on one’s own professional practice and to share the lessons learned with others.” The e-portfolio is distinguished from other online tools, such as, online assessment systems, because of its differences in terms of purpose, data structure, type of control, and type of technology skills required for creation. E-portfolios tend to be created for a multiple purposes, varying data structures, are controlled by the student, and require advanced technology skills. (Barrett, 2005)
This paper deals with research that attempted to answer the following questions: (1) Do employers support applicants’ use of e-portfolios? (2) What e-portfolio features do employers prefer? (3) What e-portfolio delivery systems do employers prefer? (4) What are the industry classifications of the companies that prefer that applicants use e-portfolios when applying for a job?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

No specific research could be found that is comparable to the present study and the assessment of employers’ acceptance or non-acceptance of e-portfolios by job applicants. Although there is a lack of research on the use of e-portfolios in the workplace, evidence that they do exist is reported by a number of authors (Dagley & Berrington, 2005 and Sanders, 2005).

A limited number of research studies exists that attempt to deal with the use of e-portfolios by educational institutions. Blair and Godall (2006) surveyed high school students who created e-portfolios using a course management system such as BlackBoard and WebCT. Nearly two thirds (64%) indicated that the process was easy.

Penn State University, identified nine e-portfolio initiatives at the university in a report entitled “Using e-Portfolios at Penn State to Enhance Student Learning: Status, Prospects, and Strategies.” One of the initiatives in the report was the On-line Resumes and e-Portfolios in the Earth and Mineral Sciences Program Seminar. After instructing students in this seminar in the production of job-related e-portfolios, these students were surveyed to determine whether or not the program should be continued. Ninety-one percent (91%) of the students surveyed recommended that the assignments be continued and seventy-five percent (75%) expected to continue to link examples of their academic work to on-line resumes. (DiBiase, 2002)

**METHODOLOGY**

Research was initiated in September 2006 to determine the degree to which employers support the use of e-portfolios by university students who use them as a part of the job application process. The population for this study consisted of recruiters from organizations who have hired Bloomsburg University students for jobs in industry and government, and education. An online survey instrument was developed and it was reviewed by the Human Subject Research Committee at Bloomsburg University and approval was given.

The survey form was used to conduct a pilot study consisting of a sample of fifteen (15) employers who were members of the College of Business Advisory Committee at Bloomsburg University. The pilot study allowed for the determination of reliability and validity of the survey instrument. Face validity techniques were used to make changes to the survey instrument. Cronbach’s Alpha was used to ascertain reliability and a .865 was achieved. Any value above .70 indicates acceptable reliability.

The survey form was emailed to the main population, consisting of 110 business, government, and educational institution recruiters and a reminder email was later sent to encourage the recruiters to complete the survey. A total of thirty-five (35) usable surveys were submitted for a return rate of 31.8%.

**FINDINGS**

The following represents the findings of the research.

**Question 1: Does your company encourage the use of e-portfolios when applicants seek employment for positions?**
The findings show that approximately 46% of the respondents in this study support the use of e-portfolios by job applicants when they are seeking employment and 54% do not support this use. Although the term “e-portfolio” was defined in the instructions for the survey, it is possible that some respondents did not fully understand the term. This is somewhat supported by some of the reasons that the respondents provided for their non-

Question 2: Approximately what percentage of applicants for positions currently submit e-portfolios?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0% - 25%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26% - 50%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51% - 75%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76% - 100%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings to this question show that 77% of the respondents reported that that only 50% or less of the applicants for jobs do not use e-portfolios. This is another reason why the many of the respondents may not have been fully familiar with e-portfolios.

Question 3: If you answered ”No” to #1, why doesn't your company encourage the use of e-portfolios when applicants seek employment for positions? (Check all that apply).

The two top reasons why employers in the study do not encourage the use of e-portfolios were that there was “Need paper records for files” (23.1%) and “Specific application process” (15.4%). Not part of the survey was a determination of why employers felt that they needed paper records for files and why they did not simply print the records from the e-portfolios. It is assumed that the “Specific application process” response refers to an application policy that excludes electronic media such as letters of application, resumes, and supporting materials.
Response | Frequency | Percentage
--- | --- | ---
Need paper records for files | 6 | 23.1%
Specific application process | 4 | 15.4%
Online Only | 2 | .77%
Takes too much time to access | 1 | .38%
Online application process | 1 | .38%
Must utilize the civil service application and hiring process | 1 | .38%
We do not use electronically submitted resumes, but an additional profile takes time | 1 | .38%
Very specific application | 1 | .38%
Just began actively recruiting—limited knowledge of e-portfolios | 1 | .38%
Have never received one to date | 1 | .38%
We do accept electronic versions of resumes emailed, but do not require the additional documentation included in e-portfolios | 1 | .38%
Resume is sufficient...if the applicant is invited for the interview, they will be asked to provide certain information for further review | 1 | .38%
information for further review | 1 | .38%
We have applicants apply online on our website. | 1 | .38%
Just haven't pursued this option yet | 1 | .38%
There are only two ways they can be hired by any state agency, Civil Service or non-Civil Service. Both are done by completing applications for either depending on position | 1 | .38%

Table 3 - Question 3
Reasons Why Company Doesn’t Encourage Use of e-Portfolios by Job Applicants

Question 4: If an applicant submits an e-portfolio, would you prefer that he/she also submit a paper resume and other supporting materials?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 - Question 4
Employers Who Prefer Applicants to Submit Paper Resume In Addition to an e-Portfolio

The findings show that a majority of the respondents (51.4%) would prefer that job applicants also submit a paper resume and other supporting materials in addition to the e-portfolio. In addition, 34.3% do not feel that it is necessary for a job applicant who has submitted an e-portfolio to submit a paper resume and 14.3% indicate that submitting paper materials is optional.

Question 5: Would your company hire an applicant who submits an e-portfolio over a student who does not submit one?
The findings show an overwhelming majority (74.3%) of the respondents indicate that no preference is given to applicants who submit an e-portfolio, while only one respondent (2.9%) indicated that a preference would be given and 22.9% indicated that it might give this preference.

**Question 6: What e-portfolio features does your company prefer? (Select all that apply)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resume</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Employment Experiences</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Internship Experiences</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Goals</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description/Examples of Extracurricular Activities</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Communication Samples</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Technology Competencies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Class Assignments and Projects</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicant’s Photograph</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be careful with applicant’s photo - it is of course illegal for employers to request this - would definitely be out of the ordinary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings show that respondents, when asked for their preferences in terms of e-portfolio features, 94.3% indicated that a resume should be included. In addition, the respondents indicated that the following should be a part of the e-portfolio: a description of employment experiences, 60%; a description of internship experiences, 54.3%; and references, 51.4%. To a lesser degree, 34.3% indicated that employment goals should be included; description/examples of extracurricular activities, 31.4%; and 28.6%, recommendations.

**Question 7: What e-portfolio delivery system does your company prefer?**
Response | Frequency | Percentage
--- | --- | ---
Internet Link | 16 | 45.7%
No Preference | 14 | 40.0%
Both Internet Link and CD-ROM | 2 | 5.7%
No Answer | 2 | 5.7%
Haven’t done them yet | 1 | 2.9%

**Table 7 - Question 7**
Preferred e-Portfolio Delivery System by Employers

When asked what delivery system (form) for the e-portfolio would be preferable, 45.7% indicated “Internet Link,” while 40% had no preference.

**Question 8:** Have you hired Bloomsburg University business graduates for positions in your company during the last 5 years who have used e-portfolios?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid 1.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes = 1; No = 2; Don’t Know = 3

**Table 8 - Question 8**
Employment of Business Graduates Who Have Used e-Portfolios

A majority of the respondents (54.3%) indicated that they had not hired Bloomsburg University business graduates who had used e-portfolios as a part of the application process, while 17.1% indicated that they had hired graduates who had used e-portfolios and 45.7% indicated that they didn’t know whether they had hired these applicants.

**Question 9:** If you answered "Yes" to #8, what Bloomsburg University business major did the applicant using e-portfolios possess? (Select all that apply)

Respondents to the study indicated that Accounting majors (41.7%) and Finance majors (25.0%) had most frequently used e-portfolios when making job applications. In addition, 16.7% of the respondents indicated that they didn’t know the business major of the job applicants.
Table 9 - Question 9
Business Major of Applicants Using e-Portfolios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Education</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Information Systems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Information Systems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Information Systems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 - Question 10
Non-Business Major of Applicants Using e-Portfolios

A majority of the respondents (50%) to the study didn’t know the non-business major of the job applicants. Approximately 21% of the respondents indicated that Health Science majors who applied for jobs used e-portfolios, while 14.3% of the respondents indicated that Liberal Arts graduates used e-portfolios.

Question 11: Which of the following Standard Industrial Classifications (SIC) best describes your company?

The largest group of respondents (23.5%) worked for Finance and Insurance Companies. Five (15.2%) of the total number of respondents in this classification supported the use of e-portfolios by job applicants and 3 (9.1%) did not support their use. In addition, 14.7% of the respondents were employees of Health Care and Social Assistance Companies and 6.1% of the total numbers of respondents were not e-portfolio supporters, but 9.1% supported their use. Finally, five (15.2%) of the respondents represented the Other Services classification. All five of the respondents (or 15.2% of the total number of respondents) did not support the use of e-portfolios by job applicants.
A point to consider is the reasons why employers do not appear to prefer the use of e-portfolios by job applicants, despite the increased access to digital materials. One possible reason might relate to their desire to have employment application materials in hard copy format in order to keep track of them. Although it was not addressed in this study, it may be more desirable for applicants to send a hard copy of their letters of application and vitae in addition to providing supporting materials via an e-portfolio. Another reason for employers’ non-support for e-portfolios may be that they are simply unfamiliar with them. Schools need to provide human resource associations consisting of employer representatives with information relative to e-portfolios and the advantages of accepting them.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be made based on the findings of this study.

1. A majority of the employers in this study do not encourage the use of e-portfolios when applicants seek employment for positions.
2. A minority of applicants currently who seek employment submit e-portfolios.
3. The most frequently given reason by employers for not accepting e-portfolios by job applicants are the need for paper records for files and the fact they have specific application processes that don’t include e-portfolios.
4. Most employers who accept e-portfolios as a part of the application process prefer that these applicants also submit paper resumes.
5. Most employers who encourage the use of e-portfolios by job applicants prefer that the e-portfolios include resumes, description of employment experiences, description of internship experiences, and references.
6. The most frequently preferred e-portfolio delivery system by employers is an Internet link.
7. A minority of employers indicate that they have hired business graduates who have used e-portfolios in the application process.
8. Employers have received e-portfolios from job applicants most frequently receive them from Accounting and Finance majors.
9. Employers who have received e-portfolios from job applicants most frequently receive them from Health Science and Liberal Arts majors.
10. Employers in the Finance and Insurance industries most often support the use of e-portfolios by job applicants.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The following recommendations are consistent with the findings.

**Employers.** Employers should be encouraged to consider the advantages of e-portfolios in the job application process. Accordingly, employees should be asked to review their current procedures to determine if the reasons for not accepting e-portfolios are valid.

**Colleges and Universities.** Students should be encouraged to create both e-portfolios and paper job application materials (i.e. resumes). Students should be instructed to include resumes, descriptions of employment experiences, description of internship experiences, and references in e-portfolios and how to make them available through an Internet link. Schools and Colleges of Business should encourage students who major in all business majors to consider using e-portfolios. Students who major in non-business areas should also be encouraged to consider using e-portfolios.

**REFERENCES**


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


