

## WHEN IS AN ePORTFOLIO NOT AN ePORTFOLIO? WHEN IT IS A GPS

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### ABSTRACT

ePortfolios have been defined as being a 'purposeful collection of information and digital artefacts that demonstrates development or evidences learning outcomes, skills or competencies'. Much of the research into ePortfolio practice has examined the use and value of digital portfolios in formal learning situations, for example in academic courses. It is argued that there is a strong role for the use of ePortfolios beyond the domain of formal study, where the focus can be not just on the 'destination', but also on the 'journey' itself. A GPS unit has become a useful device for helping travellers reach their destination, providing guidance about the journey along the way. An ePortfolio can serve as a personal GPS for career planning, to chart a course into the future.

An ePortfolio can support career development by helping the individual articulate their goals, plan their learning strategies and track their success through capturing evidence of their achievements and facilitating critical reflection on the whole process. It can encompass the essential areas of knowledge and experience, as well as the important transferable skills that are a vital part of contemporary employment. The ePortfolio can be shared with managers or mentors, who can provide feedback, guidance and encouragement. Entries in the ePortfolio can be structured to help develop meaningful and relevant responses to selection criteria that can be readily used in applications for promotion or new jobs. Just as a GPS unit represents a navigation system for travellers to help them identify the best route from A to B, or indeed to enable them to dynamically select the best route in real time, an ePortfolio can serve as the individual's own career navigation system: **Goals + Planning = Success.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today's stream at the ALIA Access 2010 conference is entitled *Hidden Treasure: Finding the GOLD in Professional Development*. Delegates are asked to consider what pirates and information professionals have in common: they are both always on the lookout for their personal treasure... all they need is a good map. I wonder, however, what the 21<sup>st</sup> century pirate might equip himself with... If today's libraries 'are more than just books', then surely today's pirates are armed with 'more than just a map'. It is highly likely that your modern day pirate has a whizz bang hi tech global positioning system (GPS). Move over Jack Sparrow. Enter TomTom, who can navigate the dynamic pirate world with ease.

The contemporary environment of library and information services is not only dynamic, but also becoming increasingly complex. Libraries face a number of challenges resulting from social, technological, financial and political changes, driving the demand for new staff roles and the need to rethink the skills, knowledge, understanding and motivation required to design, develop and deliver a high quality professional service [1]. Library staff need to "review and update definitions of profession-specific skills and maintain their professional competence", as well as "address generic staff development needs" [2]. Specific attitudes and values are highlighted as being integral to the LIS professional's skill set, including commitment to service, high ethical standards, intellectual openness and curiosity, effective communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving, teamwork, flexibility, innovation and creativity [3]. Successful information professionals not only have a strong understanding of the disciplinary knowledge and skills of librarianship, but also demonstrate the willingness to change and adapt to a quickly changing environment. Increasingly, there is a realisation that it is critical to "learn about (and integrate where relevant) new developments, practices, skills into your own on-going professional practice" [4]. The ability to remain relevant in this industry means demonstrating a strong commitment to professional development (PD) [5].

...staying relevant to the library and information science profession, as well as to our personal and organizational goals, is part of a regular, ongoing process. It begins at the start of your career, or even earlier, I think, with the idea of becoming a librarian or information professional, and progresses across a series of educational, training and practical work opportunities that lead to new and continuing opportunities for lifelong learning in what is, after all, a dynamic and ever-changing profession... 'Staying relevant' means we never stop 'becoming' or evolving in our roles...

Many library and information professionals are keen to 'stay relevant', documenting the training they have undertaken in their curriculum vitae (CV) or, indeed, recording their activities through the professional development scheme run by ALIA [6]. However, these documents are arguably static, looking at where you have come from, rather than where you are going to. What can our digital pirate do chart a course into the future which he can personally direct and manage? He might well consider a digital portfolio or ePortfolio as his GPS sat nav.

In 2009, a pilot project was established as part of the Australian ePortfolio Project (AeP) [7], in conjunction with ALIA, to encourage library and information professionals to consider the use of

ePortfolios in learning and career development. The self-selected participants included librarians and library technicians, whose roles ranged from students and recent graduates through to the later stages of their careers. They all had the support of employers and mentors.

## 2. THE ROLE OF EPORTFOLIOS

A number of disciplines require their members to undertake PD to ensure that their skill sets remain up-to-date. These skill sets are often mapped to specific professional standards. Examples include the professional associations supporting the disciplines of medicine, nursing, teaching and engineering, whose members are asked to submit a portfolio of evidence of their PD activities in order to re-validate their qualifications. In the digital information environment, there is a growing trend for electronic portfolios, or ePortfolios, to be used as the medium to present evidence of learning. Sutherland and Powell [8] refer to an ePortfolio as “a purposeful aggregation of digital items – ideas, evidence, reflections, feedback etc, which ‘presents’ a selected audience with evidence of a person’s learning and/or ability”. The word ‘purposeful’ requires close attention: JISC [9] outlines the potential range of purposes for an ePortfolio tool:

- Supporting application, eg for study or for a job
- Supporting transition, eg into a new employment situation
- Supporting teaching, learning and assessment, eg the assessment of learning (summative evidence of achievement) or the assessment for learning (a formative process that encourages students to reflect on their learning activities and outcomes)
- Supporting personal development planning (PDP) and/or continuing professional development (CPD).

While research has shown that ePortfolios can play an important role in formal academic settings for teaching, learning and assessment, they also have value in job applications, transitions to new employment situations, personal development planning and continuing professional development. An ePortfolio should not be thought of as a specific software package (although there are certainly many different software platforms that support the development of an ePortfolio), but “a combination of process (a series of activities) and product (the end result of the ePortfolio process)” [10]. The ePortfolio process, which involves the steps of collecting, selecting, reflecting and publishing evidence of learning and development, can encompass technical skills, professional knowledge and self-understanding. ePortfolios support the journey of lifelong learning.

Professional development should not be a random journey into the unknown. To avoid stagnating in an employment backwater and to cope with ongoing changes in their current workplace, library and information professionals should be encouraged to plan their journey. To achieve success, clear and achievable career goals must be established. Effective career planning is recognised as an essential activity if the right skills are to be developed at the appropriate point in time [11]. An ePortfolio can support career development by helping the individual articulate their goals, plan their PD strategies, and track their success: the individual has the opportunity to capture evidence of their achievements and engage in critical reflection on their developmental journey. In the ALIA/AeP2 ePortfolio Pilot Project, the participants all developed an ePortfolio, using the software platform PebblePad [12]. By

focusing on their career planning, professional development and performance review activities, they were able to create a rich portfolio of reflective evidence on their own learning and development over a period of time.

### **3. GOALS FOR THE FUTURE**

Before you commence your career planning journey, you need to take stock of where you currently are and make a personal assessment of your current qualifications, experience, attributes and aptitude: including [13]:

- Level of qualifications held
- Short courses attended
- Any study in progress
- Involvement in professional activities and committee work within the organisation
- Work experience to date
- Personal strengths – what you do well
- Personal weaknesses – what you do not do well.

You also need to be aware of your personal needs and values, and your real and ideal goals in life, in order to explore:

- Preferred career direction
- Preferred sector and specialisation
- Areas you would not consider at this stage
- Level of commitment to working in the field – is library and information work a long-term career or a shorter term goal?
- Are there other factors that are important? Are there other activities outside work that are important to you which limit professional growth?

This listing can form the basis of an ePortfolio: your strengths and weaknesses, study undertaken, professional activities and courses attended should be included [11]; the personal factors may help you capture both the motivators and the challenges that will affect your career goals. Accordingly it may be useful to commence the ePortfolio process with a critical reflection on your current qualifications, experience, attributes and aptitude. You could start by looking at your position description to consider the experience you have gained and the personal and profession strengths you have. PebblePad encourages you to begin by completing the 'About me' tool, which is where you store the range of information that you might typically present in your CV. You can also use the content of 'About me' to dynamically construct a new CV (or indeed different CVs for different jobs). You can then add additional entries to the ePortfolio, for example by recording an achievement, depicting an ability, or describing an experience. Alternatively, the ePortfolio can help people work towards professional standards, such as those presented in ALIA's statement on core knowledge, skills and attributes [14]. The ALIA criteria have been developed into a 'profile' tool within PebblePad, which can be used both as a preliminary audit of LIS skills, as well as to track learning and development over a period of time.

In a relatively structured way, you can highlight your accomplishments, provide appropriate evidence to support your achievements, and reflect on what these achievements mean to you.

Each person in the pilot project used PebblePad to design, collate and format their professional portfolio to suit their own needs, and they collaborated by sharing ideas, assets and activities through the gateway (common space) feature of the software. The ePortfolio allows you to build a picture of yourself that will serve as a benchmark so that you can measure your current level of skills, then identify the new skills you need to attain and the activities you should undertake to reach your goals. Your career goals will inevitably change over the different stages of your personal and professional life, but the process of identifying and recording them in your ePortfolio will enable you to focus on the training and skills that will see your career progress over a period of time.

#### **4. PLANNING THE ROUTE**

The fact that you have established a strong understanding of your qualities and your work experience means you will be in a good position to consider where you wish to head in the future – and how you might get there. It may be helpful to identify the role you would like to see yourself in. You will need to consider the different skills that you will need to acquire, determining the level of these skills that you currently have, and the target level of proficiency you should strive for. The route may not be direct: there may be a series of career steps involved. It is important to determine what strategies will help you reach your goals, acknowledging the potential barriers that may hinder your progress. Do some of the skills you need to develop have a higher priority than others? Are some skills interdependent? What options are there to acquire the skills – can some be gained through formal courses, while others can be developed through secondments or work shadowing at your place of employment? Who can help you along the way: peers, your supervisor, professional colleagues or a mentor?

Conceptually, the term ‘professional development’ is all too often associated with a formal training event, course or conference. However, learning can also be recognised as an everyday activity: Allan [15] states that there is “learning for work, learning at work and learning through work”. In the context of libraries, ‘learning for work’ embraces the academic or vocational qualifications in the LIS discipline, or in another relevant discipline. ‘Learning through work’ can also lead to qualifications, for example a Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificate, which might be achieved through a traineeship or captured through the recognition of prior learning (RPL). ‘Learning at work’ can cover both formal and informal learning activities: “‘Workplace learning’ signifies the inclusion of all the different types of developmental activities associated with the workplace – both the formal staff development and training programs of our workplaces, and the less formalised learning opportunities which occur in our normal working lives” [16].

An ePortfolio can provide you with a tool to assist you plan your development activities and help you monitor your progress. PebblePad includes the facility to build an action plan, which makes you think about the steps you need to take to reach your goals. You can record the current situation (where you are at now) and then outline the ideal situation (where you want to be in the future). What is a realistic timeframe, and how will you get there? You are encouraged to complete a SWOT analysis, to consider your strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats, before you set out. The

resources you need may then be noted – books, journals or web sites, the people who can help, the appropriate training courses or workshops. As you consider your own learning and the directions you should follow, you are prompted to add your reflections about the process. Sutherland and Powell [8] stress the importance of an audience: you may wish to share your ePortfolio with your line manager or your mentor, so that you receive some independent views on your action plan and the path you have proposed. A mentor can provide valuable formative guidance, share your experiences and provide encouraging feedback.

Categories of job advertisements often have common wording in the selection criteria, which can give you some useful guidance for planning your professional development. Special libraries and one person libraries require a broad spectrum of discipline-specific and transferable skills, as illustrated in a sample of selection criteria for a library position in the not-for-profit sector.

#### **Essential selection criteria**

- SC1 Tertiary qualifications in librarianship with at least 2 years' experience
- SC2 Excellent liaison, interpersonal and communication skills across a broad cross-section of clientele
- SC3 Significant expertise and achievement in development, delivery and promotion of library and information services
- SC4 Significant expertise and achievement in electronic information services; familiarity with library management systems
- SC5 Experience in a research and/or educational environment

#### **Desirable selection criteria**

- SC6 Specialised knowledge of allied health field
- SC7 Experience in website maintenance
- SC8 Experience in preparing articles for publication
- SC9 Experience in working with volunteers
- SC10 Demonstrated experience in preparation of successful funding submissions

The effort involved in developing the responses to selection criteria should not be underestimated! The progressive development of your ePortfolio can help you develop a rich resource that articulates your qualifications, knowledge, skills, experience, expertise and achievements – everything that you need to draw on for job applications. You can move beyond the flat textual document to bring to life the personal dimensions of you as the candidate, if you are applying for a new job, or if, as a result of workplace restructuring, you are asked to apply for your current position. Importantly, the ePortfolio can support your planning for and progress towards the type of position that represents your future career goals.

Evidence of formal qualifications can be included through links to assets or artefacts such as digital images of the parchment, photos of graduation ceremonies or personal reflections on the learning outcomes and the sense of achievement resulting from completing the study program. Interpersonal and communication skills can be discussed with the direct support of documents or multimedia files that substantiate your experiences. Participants in the ALIA/AeP2 ePortfolio Pilot Project have been

able to explore the potential of digital portfolios to prepare job applications that communicate a far clearer and deeper picture than possible through the traditional paper-based channels.

## 5. SUCCESS!

ePortfolio processes and tools for organisation and communication are highly valuable in the way they directly support the professional development outcomes of LIS professionals across a broad spectrum of skills. Further value is gained through the increase in self-awareness and self-confidence. The scaffolded development of technical skills, professional knowledge and self-understanding represents a holistic approach to career planning. The individual is able to articulate their goals, plan the right strategies for learning and development, and track their success by gathering the evidence of their achievements and critically reflecting on the whole process. Feedback, guidance and encouragement can be provided by managers and mentors.

The participants in the ALIA/AeP2 ePortfolio Pilot Project reported that their ePortfolio had helped them make positive gains in their professional focus, with some of them directly attributing the fact that they had won a new job or promotion with their current employer to their ePortfolio work. They particularly liked the flexible structure of the ePortfolio that allowed them not to simply on the 'destination' but to also enjoy the 'journey'. Just as a GPS represents a navigation system for travellers to identify the best route from A to B, or indeed to enable them to dynamically select the best route in real time, the participants' ePortfolios served as their own career navigation system: **Goals + Planning = Success.**

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