

## ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS: HAS THEIR TIME ARRIVED?

Carole Anderson  
Clarion University of Pennsylvania

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the developmental process experienced by the Department of Administrative Science as we introduced the outcomes assessment portfolio project. It covers the initial attempts through to the current electronic format for the project. Suggestions for implementing such a project in other settings is included.

---

In 1998, driven by AACSB International, the Clarion University of Pennsylvania College of Business Administration, (COBA), determined the need for outcomes assessment. The specific methodology was left to be determined by the individual departments. Following a number of alternative suggestions and discussions, the Department of Administrative Science decided to use the portfolio as a tool to assist us in the assessment process. A portfolio is simply a collection of documents that demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities. We viewed the portfolio as a summative document that would be an excellent measure as well as the least costly method of assessment.

We saw a second benefit of the portfolio, that is, students could use the portfolio in their career search activities. During an interview session students could highlight the discussion of their skill, knowledge and abilities by actually showing the interviewer specific, concrete examples of various related class assignments, projects, and previous work experiences. Having this paper portfolio certainly makes the student stand out from the other candidates and has the potential to make the candidate a bit unique from the others in the applicant pool.

An unanticipated benefit for the industrial relations students resulted from their hands on experiences associated with the creation of their portfolio. They were able to improve their ability to recognize a "good" portfolio applicant from a "weak" applicant in their future career activities. The skills associated with this process were further refined via an in-class assignment to review and critique the portfolios of four of their peers and make a recommendation for hiring based on an imaginary human resource entry level position. This activity provided additional

feedback to the student in the form of a memo to each applicant highlighting strengths and weaknesses observed by their peers.

The initial portfolio project focused on a creation of a paper portfolio. From an assessment perspective this created a bit of a time management problem. Since students need a major portion of the semester to create the project, it leaves a very short time window for the actual assessment process on the part of the departmental faculty. We initially accomplished this by having an "open house" type of session where faculty were invited to come in for refreshments served while reviewing and discussing the portfolios with students. Unfortunately, not everyone was available or able to make the sessions. Because many of the students were either graduating or using the project for interviewing activities, the portfolios had to be returned in a timely manner which also limited access for the departmental faculty.

There were additional drawbacks of the paper portfolio in that students were able to show the interviewer their materials but had nothing beyond their paper resumes to leave with the interviewer. Plus the paper pages often reflected wear as a result of people looking at the documents. Thus, what was initially professional in appearance, became less so with use. To get around this issue several students began using clear plastic protective pages. This was a less-than-ideal solution due to the glare which often makes reading the pages difficult. A second problem with this alternative was that frequently students placed more than one page within the page slips making it cumbersome to read the entire document.

After several attempts to improve upon this paper portfolio project, the department determined that it was time to switch to an electronic portfolio. Since technology was rapidly changing, it became obvious that more and more students were going to be using the Internet to conduct their job search activities and an electronic portfolio may just be the wave of the future.

In 2002 the Department of Administrative Science switched to an electronic format for the portfolio. We initially required all students to publish their portfolio to a web site. For confidentiality reasons and resource restraints (students no longer have access to the university web server once they graduate) we have modified the assignment to where the students now have the option of creating a published web page portfolio or burning the portfolio onto a CD.

There are several benefits to this new methodology. First, students now can submit their project at their convenience. This in turn means that they come in randomly making it much easier to evaluate each individual portfolio. Second, the instructor is now able to provide the electronic links to the other departmental faculty for their ease in reviewing the portfolios. Third, feedback can also be provided electronically via an e-mail message created while viewing the portfolio. Students are encouraged to have an electronic link at the closing of their portfolio for communications of either the potential employer or the instructor.

This procedure has additional values for the student. The electronic portfolio now provides the interviewer with something to "take back" to the office and share with other colleagues. The electronic portfolio is also helpful for job fair visits. Although recruiters may be willing to take the time to view a paper portfolio, if rushed, most would be unwilling to spend the necessary time to do a thorough review of the documents contained in the packet. However, with an electronic format, students can highlight their web link on their resume, or, provide selected job fair recruiters with a CD version of their portfolio along with the paper resume. It is more likely that the student's interest in the firm will be remembered as standing out from all of the other fair visitors and viewed more favorably at the leisure of the recruiters upon their return to the office.

More recently, a number of graduate programs are asking students to include a portfolio as a component of their application package. Having the CD ready gives the student more confidence in their ability to be successful in the application process.

For this project to be successful, one must provide the students with the opportunity to plan their project over their academic career rather than introducing it in their last semester. In our case, the Department of Administrative Science introduces the idea of the e-portfolio to all management and industrial relations incoming freshmen during a group session on "Meet Your Advisor" day and repeats the information during a group advising session for freshmen. Since our majors don't take the upper core and business major courses until their junior year, students basically have two years until they are required to begin actual construction of the portfolio. In Management 324: Human Resources Management (a required course in both majors) students are required to prepare the foundation work. That is, they develop a detailed outline of what their final project will look like. It includes items such as their welcome page, table of contents (index), resume, introduction to the various sections and documents, references, work experiences, professional development activities, community service, and concluding (thank you) page. This assignment is completed on a points basis and is due at the end of the semester. Because the assignment does not involve the actual publishing of the portfolio it is a much easier assignment and gets the students to thinking seriously about what they have been learning over the past three years.

It is not until their senior year that the students are responsible for submitting their electronic portfolio. This requirement is a part of all senior level management courses which are a component of the major course work. Although the department recognizes that we do miss some of the graduating management majors, we know that a significant number of them do take one or two of the industrial relations required courses as an elective for their management major. Evaluating thirty to forty portfolios per semester provides ample evidence of growth and development by our students. It is easy to spot weaknesses in our program if a large number of students have empty areas in their final portfolio.

This portfolio project is not as straight forward as it may initially appear. There are a number of resources that have to be available. One of the major needs is sufficient server space for the students to publish their portfolios. Clarion University provides such space but, the students have to be made aware of the fact that upon graduation, their work is removed. As a result, we strongly encourage all students to save their files onto a CD for future use. Along with the server space is the need for other support tools such as CD burners, scanners (for documents), video and digital cameras to record events or presentations. Software such as Front Page, Dream Weaver and/or PowerPoint also have to be readily available. Most important is the need for support staff to assist in the actual transfer of files from their hard drives to the server.

The important key here is patience. It is a learning process for everyone. Initially we invited a representative of the Computing Services office into the classroom for a one hour demonstration. Each student in the class had access to a computer to work on their files simultaneously with the instructor. The individual demonstrated the publishing process, however, it had several drawbacks. First it took time away from the regular instructional program and second, often the students were not ready to publish when the individual came was present. The result was that when they were ready they forgot the helpful hints presented and / or the procedure itself. Through experience we now know it is essential to have a graduate student dedicated to 10 hours per week to assist students with the publication process. We also have developed a paper guide for students to use as they work on the publishing process.

The question arises then as to whether or not the students are using the final product. The answer is a resounding yes. They are very proud of their final products and have definitely used them in their interviews. An example is where a student was interviewing for a human resource position in a hospital and was asked about her experiences with training. She was able to give the recruiter her CD as she explained about the training practices sessions she and her team-mates created in the employment law class. She received the position offer as a direct result of her portfolio. Other graduates have told us about using their portfolios in career changes. Several recruiters have also provided us with positive feedback. The individual who conducted the

department's five year review provided very favorable feedback on the portfolio as the assessment tool. The answer is yes, students are using the portfolio and the department members are quite satisfied with the final products which reflect a job well done. Further evidence of success with this assessment tool is the fact that the Clarion MBA program is now initiating the electronic portfolio as a requirement for completion of the MBA degree. The Department of Administrative Science sees this curricular change as a validation of our work.