Stourbridge College: E-portfolio system and tablet device saves time and reduces workload

Summary

Work-based learning assessors often face challenges surrounding time spent on travelling, administration and reviewing students’ work. Thanks to the implementation of a new e-portfolio solution, and the introduction of a tablet device, (part of a project devised by the Jisc Regional Support Centre West Midlands), Stourbridge College has addressed these challenges which has resulted in time saved, an increase in efficiency and the potential for tablet devices to be used more widely across the college.

The Samsung Galaxy Tablet Device
About Stourbridge College

The college has centres in Stourbridge, Halesowen, Kingswinford, Kidderminster and Brierley Hill where it has recently invested £12m in a new Art & Design Centre.

The college has around 11,000 students and offers a variety of courses including A Levels, Construction & the Built Environment, Art & Design, Vocational and Apprenticeships as well as Academies in Football and Hospitality. It has a dedicated employer training arm, Business Skills, which offers a wide range of training courses including Health & Safety, Gas, Electric, Plumbing and Environmental Technologies, as well as Professional Development.

The challenge

Prior to the implementation of an online e-portfolio, staff and students at Stourbridge College relied on a traditional paper-based system. This presented a number of challenges:

- Assessor administration time – chasing students for portfolios, writing up observations, tracking data and students’ progress with assessments and exams
- Students administration time – time spent on printing photos for evidence, writing reports and keeping track of exam dates
- Reviewing work – progress was difficult to establish without accessing other software or tracking sheets which were updated manually
- Access to appointment schedule – whilst in the field, assessors had no access to e-mail and so were unable to check and make appointments

The activity

Stourbridge College adopted Learning Assistant – an e-portfolio system which allows work-based learners to create online portfolios and submit evidence for assessment. Assessors and verifiers can then review submissions with feedback recorded in the system. Learning Assistant was rolled out across work-based learning with training given to staff and students.

The college then wanted to improve access to online materials, and the ability to video and upload content to the e-portfolio, without having to return to the office. In 2011, Jisc RSC West Midlands devised a project to explore and increase the use of mobile technologies in the work-based learning sector. Interested learning providers were invited to bid for £500 each to be spent on mobile devices that would enhance the learner journey and help the organisation.
Stourbridge College successfully bid and purchased a Samsung Galaxy – a touchscreen tablet device which facilitates web browsing and includes a built-in camera, video and mobile office software for producing spreadsheets, word processed documents and presentations. The Samsung Galaxy has a 7 inch screen, is slimline and is very light which makes it much more portable than traditional laptops.

The college purchased the device to complement the e-portfolio system and give assessors better access in the field to candidates work, calendars and e-mail. Additionally, they purchased a data plan, to facilitate internet and e-mail access where Wi-Fi was unavailable (i.e. on some work placements). The college trialled the device exclusively with the college’s Construction and Plumbing assessor, Matt Thompson.

The outcomes

Learning Assistant has enabled assessors to instantly see the learners’ progress, identify milestones and update via one report instead of previously having to write multiple visit reports.

Matt says, “I can now review progress quickly and add documents to the learners’ e-portfolios which outline what they still have to do to complete the unit. Previously, they would call me to find out. Learners can also instantly upload photos instead of printing them out and no longer have to rely on me to do this – it has given them more ownership of their work.”

He adds, “I no longer have to wait for a learner to bring their folder of work to me. As long as I have access to a computer or the tablet device, I can review work instantly – equally, the learners can submit work in the same way. I can also give feedback throughout the course which means that my workload is more evenly distributed rather than a bulk amount at the end of the course. I also see the learners more frequently so if there are any problems, I can help to rectify them quickly.”

Matt found that using the tablet device further improved access and feels that the college met the aims and objectives as identified in the RSC project bid.

He says, “I can access the e-portfolios wherever I am, either using the college’s or other designated Wi-fi, or via 3G whilst out at the learners’ workplace which is particularly useful. I can give feedback to the learner and employer whilst on site – not just on a single observation, but on overall progress which employers really value. I can upload my report along with any evidence submitted and show the candidate what they need to do next.”

Another major advantage of the tablet is the ability to access e-mails, calendar and contacts whilst on the move. Matt adds, “I can make appointments whilst out in the field. I no longer have to carry a separate paper diary with me to then type these into my Outlook calendar when I am back at the college. There is also a messaging system within Learning Assistant. As the tab is synched with my e-mails, I receive messages sent through the e-portfolio system and alerts when any submissions
have been made. I can therefore give learners a quicker response as I receive the messages 24/7.”

The impact

The college reported significant impact in several areas as a direct result of using the e-portfolio system in conjunction with the tablet device:

- Candidate admin – the new system saves candidates about 20% in time as the e-portfolio does some of the administration for them
- Candidate submissions – learners are interested in seeing their progression percentage increase which has proved a motivator for submitting their work. Submissions are up by 60%
- Evidence – this is easier to gather and takes less time. The assessor on average now saves around 5-6 hours per week
- Completion rates – all candidates completed the NVQ on time compared to 50% who completed on time using paper-based portfolios

Matt says, “The amount of time saved has been hugely beneficial. It has enabled me to improve the learners experience as I have more time to work with them individually. Using the tablet has really helped to revolutionise the way that I work and complements the e-portfolio system very well.”

Alex Speed, Director of IT & ILT says, “If it wasn’t for the Regional Support Centre, we wouldn’t have been able to trial a tablet device. The project gave us a real opportunity and it was important for us to demonstrate some tangible outcomes and benefits. The RSC project took the risk away from the college. We had their support during the project and were able to share experiences with the other successful providers.”

Due to the success of the project, the senior management team increased Alex’s budget which enabled him and his team to look at other projects based around other tablet devices.

Alex told, “We have also trialled a Blackberry tablet as we discovered that college staff could tether their Nokia phones to the device. This saves money as we don’t have to purchase 3G dongles. It also means that staff can see their e-mails in real-time.”

Further future plans include rolling out tablet devices to the Governors for quick and easy access to meeting notes on the college’s SharePoint document management system.
The lessons learned

The college encountered some problems with synching the Samsung Galaxy tablet to Microsoft Outlook, however they plan to resolve these by using Active Sync as part of a wider project under the Bring Your Own Device to work.

Alex has the following advice for other learning providers who may be interested in tablet devices;

“Don’t just think about how the device can be used in the classroom – think about the whole business organisation. If you consider the wider application of the device(s), this will result in further ideas and potentially improve efficiency and organisational effectiveness.”

Useful links

Stourbridge College
Learning Assistant e-portfolio
Samsung Galaxy Tab
Jisc RSC West Midlands

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