Shropshire Council County Training – Assessing the impact of technology on organisational efficiency

Summary

Staff at Shropshire Council County Training were required to make cost savings and make the most of existing technologies to maximum effect, and so reviewed their business processes in line with the existing technology they had in place. The result was more efficient ways of working for assessors, the phasing out of redundant technologies, with the benefit of identifying significant savings, time, resources, and paperwork.

About Shropshire Council County Training

County Training is the largest independent work-based learning provider in Shropshire with six sites around Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin. Vocational areas for work-based provision include Social Care and Health, Child Care, Hair and Beauty, Hospitality and Catering, IT, Business Admin, Customer Care and Waste Management and Equestrian services.

Although work-based learning constitutes the core business, County Training also provides adult and community education, family learning and extensive DWP employability services.

The challenge

Like so many other learning providers, Shropshire Council County Training faced a number of challenges due to the economic climate; changes in funding, intense competition and multiple business re-structures. Staff were facing an increased need to deliver a high quality service whilst reducing cost and producing savings. Instead of investing in new technologies, the decision was taken to review existing technologies with the aim of identifying the effectiveness of current practice, the factors that make technology effective and the impact that it has on the business.

County Training operated two different e-portfolios, OneFile and Fusion, but their use was limited to only two vocational teams. The benefits were hard to identify and their use did not make any real positive impact for learners (achievement/retention) or for the organisation (quality of delivery).
The activity

In response to a discussion with the Jisc Regional Support Centre West Midlands about identifying the evidence (and contributing factors) of technological impact, Irina Matthews, ILT Co-ordinator & Quality Improvement Officer IT, led a review of the business process behind the e-portfolio systems. This involved:

- Shadowing assessors from all vocational areas to see the practical use of the e-portfolio in a variety of vocational settings
- Discussions with assessors, quality improvement officers, curriculum managers
- Attendance of classroom-based sessions to collect learners’ views on using an e-portfolio
- Examination of the products - OneFile, Fusion, SmartAssessor, Learning Assistant

Irina says, “It became evident that there were a number of areas where the business process was failing. IT infrastructure at the time was not sufficiently accommodating to provide easy access to online e-portfolios for both staff and learners. Some assessors were also not fully aware of how e-portfolios could be used. As a result of such issues, assessors were still using paper-based resources as well as the online portfolio and spending too much time completing administrative tasks. This was not beneficial for learning, and provided no inspiration or motivation to move towards a more effective use of already existing technological solutions.”

The outcomes

After reviewing and identifying gaps in the business processes behind the technology, Shropshire Council County Training made the following changes:

- Creation of a dedicated customer services team, utilising existing resources, to ensure capture of quality data, and ensure that the learners have a positive experience.
- Switching over to one e-portfolio system (rather than maintaining two) – this resulted in streamlined license fee costs and removal of inconsistent working practices.
- Taking advantage of OneFile offline applications (Nomad) – this allows assessors to capture a variety of assessments on a mobile device, removing the need to type up notes later on.
- Phased in introduction of Android tablet devices to facilitate the use of Nomad – Android devices proved to be more cost effective than the use of individual devices (digital cameras and voice recorders) that have been phased out.
• E-portfolios usage rolled out to all vocational teams (from 2 to 6) with the emphasis on using it as a learning tool (in a more learner-centred way) rather than a depository of evidence. Staff development is centred upon peer support and exchange of good practice rather than formal training.

The impact

Re-aligning the business processes around initial assessment, diagnostics, ILR and ILP completion has led to a 90% reduction in paperwork that assessors were required to complete.

Other improvements include:

• Time saved whilst assessing and spent on administration tasks

• Assessment efficiency increased

• Reduced paperwork is more sustainable

• Projected cost savings over time

• Improved organisational cohesion and lowering of ‘silos’

• Support from staff in the use of the e-portfolio which has led to a more positive approach to adopting technology in the future

Irina Matthews says, “This project was about understanding the impact of the technology and seeing it as an enabler and not a driver. Simply having the technology does not mean that people will necessarily use it. We discovered that there are multiple factors that release technological potential both internally and externally. Internally, it’s about looking at the organisational culture: changing it, and finding solutions that fit our business needs (teaching and learning). Externally, we need to consider the economic landscape, increasingly ubiquitous use of technology – its impact on all aspects of life; issues of accessibility (and/or divide), compatibility of new technologies and the existing practice of IT management.”

The lessons learned

Irina suggests the following considerations for learning providers when assessing the impact and potential of technology to improve teaching and learning and organisational efficiency:

• What are the implications of introducing the technology for all stakeholders (externally as well as internally)?

• What internal processes may be affected and will require re-alignment to release the technological potential?
• What practical issues and pedagogic concerns have prompted use/introduction of a proposed technological solution?

• Review and compare available products: consider functionality vs. expected benefits, flexibility to accommodate further changes, levels of support (including training for staff and students), cost benefit analysis.

• Consider (and plan for) outputs and outcomes: what has changed as a result of introducing the technology (look for the unplanned/unforeseen as well as the expected)?

Useful links

OneFile Nomad

Shropshire Council County Training

OneFile e-portfolio

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