Asset Training and Consultancy: A successful approach to introducing e-portfolios

Summary

Asset Training and Consultancy Ltd has introduced an e-portfolio system to replace paper-based portfolios. The approach taken, through the creation of a development plan and the gradual introduction of technology, is engaging learners more and improving learner relationships with assessors.

About Asset Training and Consultancy

Asset Training & Consultancy Ltd is based in Bootle, Merseyside. Working with eleven sub-contractors across the region, the organisation provides Apprenticeship and Train to Gain programmes in Health & Social Care, Engineering, Construction, ICT, Retail & Commercial Enterprises, Education & Training, Business Administration, and Skills for Life & Work.

The challenge

To enable Asset Training to continue to develop as a learning provider, Quality Coordinator Derek Williamson recognised the need for an e-portfolio to replace the paper-based portfolio system which was being used. The paper-based portfolios did not engage learners, who typically said it was “boring”.

The activity

Derek’s first step was to produce a long-term development plan to:

- justify the proposed e-portfolio development to management;
- schedule preparation for, and implementation of, the e-portfolio; and
- ensure that the needs of learners and other stakeholders had been considered, and would be met.

Included against objectives in the development plan were the benefits (to Asset Training, learners, assessors, verifiers and employers), target dates, success
measures, persons responsible and costs.

Whilst investigating which e-portfolio system would be the most suitable, Derek tested the use of mobile phones with assessors, getting feedback from them before providing each of them with one to record audio and photographic learner evidence.

As Asset Training's existing portfolios were wholly paper-based, there was some initial resistance to using the phones for recording evidence. Derek overcame this, however, through a combination of formal CPD sessions, followed by regular informal training opportunities. The informal sessions would often involve the assessors helping each other in groups, while Derek provided one-to-one training for those who needed it.

When the assessors were competent in using the mobile phones, Derek invested in digital cameras to enable the production of video evidence. Each assessor was also provided with a laptop so that learner evidence could be copied to a CD to accompany the other paper-based elements of the portfolios.

The laptops were all the same make and model (as were the mobile phones and digital cameras), making training – for example, showing assessors how to copy digital evidence to CD – far more straightforward and helping assessors in providing peer support.

Asset Training's search for an e-portfolio that would fully meet the needs of its learners (easy to use, with logical step-by-step processes), as well as the organisation, ended when Derek saw a demonstration of OneFile at a JISC RSC Northwest e-portfolio event.

Derek arranged an initial demonstration of OneFile to get approval from Asset Training management, before arranging another demonstration to promote it to the assessors. OneFile was only made available for the assessors to use, and training provided, when Derek felt they were comfortable in creating evidence via mobile phones and digital cameras.

While assessors began to add evidence into OneFile, and familiarise themselves with its structure and processes, Derek continued with the effective weekly CPD training opportunities. After six months, when they were competent in using OneFile, he sat down with each assessor to cleanse the system of their test data and make it ready for their learners and verifier, to enable a formal 'launch'.

To ensure maximum take-up of OneFile by learners, it was made mandatory for all assessors to use it. Learners were given a choice whether to use the e-portfolio or a paper-based one; to date, over 90% have opted for the e-portfolio.

Assessors have also been provided with mobile broadband via dongles, enabling them to:

- complete and upload assessments with learners, when events are fresh in their minds; and
• provide access to OneFile for learners where availability of a PC is limited, or restricted by their employer.

Despite an easy-to-use, icon-driven interface, some less-confident learners prefer to wait until assessor visits to use OneFile. To assist with this, Asset Training has invested in handheld scanners so that documents can be scanned and uploaded during visits. Assessors can also upload resources into OneFile, such as workbooks to support learners who are having difficulties with numeracy.

![Screenshot of an e-portfolio](https://www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/case-studies)
The outcomes

Almost 500 learners at Asset Training have already gone through their programme using OneFile.

All stakeholders have been positive about OneFile, and Asset Training's recent Ofsted inspection (November 2009) confirms that "learners like...using the electronic assessment and portfolio system". For learners and assessors the benefits have included:

- reduction in assessors' visit times – time which assessors spent responding to learner assessments during visits has been reduced by learners uploading assessments and receiving feedback between visits;

- improved relationships between assessors and learners – synchronous messaging and assessment feedback through OneFile means that contact is no longer confined to visits, and also prompts further contact via phone which did not occur through the paper-based portfolio system; and

- more motivated and enthusiastic learners – they receive more immediate feedback/support for assessments in OneFile, and can monitor their own progress rather than having to wait until the next Assessor visit.

Benefits for other stakeholders have included:

- access to OneFile for employers – to monitor progress of their learners, providing up-to-date information to use in reviews;
• reduced visit times for external verifiers (EVs) – who can access learner portfolios in OneFile from where they are based;

• quicker and more timely completion – for example, EVs can check and sign off units of assessment soon after Assessor/learner sign off, rather than waiting for a six-monthly visit;

• tracking of learner progress – Asset Training has a clear picture of progress, such as dates/times that learners have accessed OneFile and uploaded assessments; and

• streamlined production of learners’ individual learning plans (ILPs) – which can be tailored to requirements in OneFile, whereas their previous ILP system generated unnecessary information.

Derek liaises with OneFile to tailor settings in the system to suit their requirements. The only significant issue has been a 30MB file upload limit, encountered when assessors started producing detailed evidence using their digital cameras. Video evidence is still used, but assessors have learned to record evidence in smaller episodes for upload.

The impact

Although there has been a financial cost to implementing OneFile and other technology to support its use, Derek is confident that the outcomes (for all stakeholders) have been worth it.

He says that his comprehensive development plan was important in justifying the e-portfolio investment and getting the Asset Training management team’s ‘buy-in’.

This included getting support for the weekly training sessions which, whilst taking assessors away from work in the short term, has reaped long-term rewards in relation to their confidence with technology. Derek highlights another reason for assessor confidence: "We let the assessors have a big say in deciding what to use for the best. When we tried the mobile phones, cameras and scanners out, if they said they weren’t of any use, or one was not as useful as another, we listened to that.”

Derek says that the gradual approach that Asset Training took to introducing technology has been pivotal to its success with OneFile: "We wanted to get it right rather than rush it. When we eventually introduced OneFile it worked right from the start, largely because we had already addressed the other aspects of technology that were needed to link it all up."

The Ofsted inspection report highlighted that in 2008/09 Asset Training's overall qualification success rates for Train to Gain were 98% and for Apprenticeships were 81%, and that the success rates for Apprentices and Advanced Apprentices were “high and improving”.

www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/case-studies
Derek is confident that the success rates have been influenced by improved learner engagement and retention from introducing the e-portfolio, and is impressed that they have situations now where learners are online late into the night completing and uploading assessments.

There has also been a positive effect on their learners who are over 25; they have been engaging well with OneFile even though many professed they were uncomfortable at the prospect of using technology.

Derek's views on improved engagement are confirmed by Michael Meaney, Employment Schemes Manager at Liverpool City Council, who highlights how OneFile has helped their learners to develop: "...they visually begin to learn to appreciate the value of how evidence can be matched to multiple units... Through this awareness they become more adept in managing their own progress."

Useful links

- Jisc RSC Northwest
- Asset Training and Consultancy
- OneFile

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