Nova Training

E-portfolio use helps apprentices take ownership of their learning and improve progression (October 2016)

Summary

Nova Training are using a bespoke e-portfolio system to help apprentices progress and take ownership of their learning. Previously, it was noted that apprentices found it difficult to understand the standards they were working towards and to identify key things like percentage progression and planned end dates. The e-portfolio system has provided apprentices with direct access to relevant information, enhanced communication between apprentices and assessors and has improved quality and monitoring processes.

Nova Training supports young people aged 14-24 and delivers Study Programmes, Traineeships and Apprenticeships as well as training in a wide range of vocational subjects. The company operates from 28 locations in 16 local authority areas across the East and West Midlands and the Eastern regions.

The challenge

The challenge identified by Nova Training in 2014 was two-fold: the assessment processes and portfolio were largely paper based and apprentices had difficulty identifying where they were in terms of progressing through their learning programmes. This made it difficult for them to manage and take ownership of their learning.

Assessors would visit the learners in the workplace, gather and interrogate portfolio evidence and try to quantify progress against a planned end date. While assessors gave feedback, apprentice responses indicated that they didn’t always absorb the feedback or fully understand the standards they were working towards. Apprentices also wanted the opportunity to upload digital evidence and receive more responsive feedback between scheduled visits.

Although ICT is incorporated in apprenticeship frameworks the company felt that greater use of technology could be made. This observation chimed with feedback from apprentices who also felt that
technology could be used throughout their learning programmes to help them develop essential digital skills that could help them progress their careers and wider life ambitions.

Nova Training recognised the importance of using digital technologies, not only to enhance the learner provision, but also to improve the experience of assessors, identifying opportunities to address workflow issues. For example, the sending out of notifications to learners advising on assessment dates and monitoring essential time-bound assessments like those for health and safety that must be maintained for apprentices to continue in the work place.

The solution

“We want apprentices to be confident in what they are doing and to be able to progress in a role with a national qualification behind them.”

Phil Lythgoe, quality and performance manager/safeguarding prevent lead, Nova Training

After researching the features of various e-portfolio systems and not finding any one system that met their needs, Nova Training decided to work with a developer to design their own system. A key feature of the design brief was to ensure learners knew where they were within a qualification and how they were progressing in terms of meeting individual criteria. Learners wanted quantifiable feedback such as what percentage of their qualification they had achieved and to be able to upload evidence and receive feedback between assessor visits.

A working group supports the development of the e-portfolio system and also monitors progress to ensure the system meets the needs of all users. In addition to learner consultation, assessors were asked to identify common problems that they encounter so that the developers could build appropriate solutions into the e-portfolio system and improve efficiency. For example, health and safety vettings are time-bound and any formal assessment cannot take place until apprentices have a valid and current health & safety vetting. A count-down clock now notifies assessors when a health & safety vetting is due giving a red-amber-green (RAG) visual rating to indicate the urgency as the time limit approaches and improve management of the process. Electronic action plans, notifications of assessment dates and learner visits are also built into the system with the agreed date and location exported to the diaries of all concerned.

The e-portfolio system is web-based and users log on to a live website. It can be used on any platform and has a dedicated web address hosted from Nova Training’s own servers. Security is maintained by hosting the e-portfolio system on one server with data submitted to a separate server. The system is mobile compliant and accessible via smart phones, tablet devices and any other technologies.
commonly used, not just from a desktop computer. Employers have logins so that they too can view and monitor the progress of their apprentices and communicate directly with learners and assessors.

The system includes an electronic Individual Learning Plan (ILP). As soon as the apprentice, assessor and employer agree the units that an apprentice needs to take the units are exported to the ILP and the system starts to track progress, turning the ILP into a live record of the learner journey with a clear progression pathway. Apprentices and employers are able to view the apprenticeship standards, check qualification credit values and choose qualifications and additional units that meet employer needs or that meet needs identified during employee appraisals.

“We can work with employers to develop wider skills and be more responsive to what they want their apprentices to aspire and achieve.”

Phil Lythgoe, quality and performance manager/safeguarding prevent lead, Nova Training

Phase one focused on developing the e-portfolio system and the company is now working on phase two to refine the aesthetics and to develop learning modules. Nova Training are working with their awarding organisations to ensure that the required evidence can be made available and have received positive feedback from external verifiers who are given access to the system as part of the verification process. The e-portfolio is being used across a range of learning programmes and the company are sampling plans, tracking, assessment styles and techniques as part of their regular quality improvement processes.

The system is also used to promote links to external information such as Home Office guidance on Prevent duty and British values, equality and diversity information and guidance on employability issues. Apprentices can also receive information on the local job market and guidance on higher level apprenticeship opportunities.

Impact

“What better way to show an employer what an apprentice can do than through a live e-portfolio.”

Phil Lythgoe, quality and performance manager/safeguarding prevent lead, Nova Training

The e-portfolio system is used daily by 650 users and 20 assessment staff and has changed the way apprentices and assessors interact and engage. It has also contributed to improved monitoring and quality processes by providing on-demand access to quantifiable progression data. Identifiable benefits so far include:
Business processes are more streamlined and progression can be easily quantified using a numerical value. Managers can look at group of learners, drill down to individual learners to see how they are doing and interrogate the data when progress isn’t as expected.

Assessor progress is monitored using a RAG rating (red = concern, amber = OK, green = above expectations). This enables assessors to better monitor individual learners and flag up when they are falling behind, triggering advice on what they can do to better manage their progress.

The amount of paperwork is reduced but more importantly, the system facilitates more meaningful monitoring between managers and assessors. Case conferences now focus more on positive interventions and identifying when apprentices are ready for more challenging work rather than whether a visit has taken place.

The relationship between assessors and apprentices has also changed. Because the apprentices are better informed about their progress and able to submit evidence between visits, the time allocated to learner visits can be used to discuss the ongoing needs of the apprentices and the employers, possibly identifying additional units or qualifications that employers might need or to address skills development needs identified during appraisal processes.

Apprentices can use real work examples in their e-portfolios integrating technologies like photographs taken with their mobile phones, web-conferencing and video recordings. They can do this at times that are convenient to them and can more easily add supplementary evidence. This saves time and can be less intrusive than assessor visits and makes better use of visit time.

Learners find the system invaluable for giving them access to authoritative independent information on topical subjects such as the European Union Referendum, what is meant by British values or what to do if they have a work-related grievance. Learner feedback is positive:

“E-portfolio is a great tool to use as it allows me to follow my progress easily. When I was using a paper-based portfolio it was hard to track my progress and I had to rely on my assessor to find out where I was at. I like the fact that e-portfolio has a help section which provides me with all the support and guidance for my qualification and wider needs. I can stay on track with my qualification progress and I don’t fall behind. I can upload evidence for my assessor between visits. This means that if I am struggling with a certain task I can get the support I need between visits.”

Brett Gripton, apprentice and e-portfolio user, Nova Training
"I think e-portfolio is good because it shows me what I have achieved and progressed on without having to find time to contact my assessor. It also shows me what percentage of my qualification I have left before I complete my apprenticeship or upskill to another role."

Jack Walters, apprentice and e-portfolio user, Nova Training

Assessors are also clear about the benefits citing improvements in the ability to monitor the progression of apprentices, their review dates, planning processes and to provide timely feedback and support interventions:

"Use of ICT within the e-portfolio system has had a huge impact on the way that I can monitor my learners. It is so much easier to assess evidence as learners can upload this to the site in between visits and I can then assess and feedback in real time to enhance the learner experience. This allows me to focus and concentrate on other areas where learners may need support rather than just assessing evidence.

Learners who actively use the e-portfolio have found it a lot easier than their previous paper-based version as they can see their progress at a glance. They find this a lot more motivational as the target adjusts each month they are on the programme. Learners also like how easily the system shows their units and what evidence is outstanding.

Overall, the move to e-portfolio has had a great impact on learner motivation and on their progression. They are a lot more engaged and feel they can take control of their own qualification."

Katie Young, assessor, Nova Training
Key points

» The e-portfolio system was driven by a desire to improve the quality of the learning experience and progression monitoring and was developed after analysis of common problems and user consultation.

» Apprentices who use the system are more engaged in their learning than they had been with paper-based systems and feel better able to manage their progression and better informed. They value the help sections that enable them to work more independently and access to information on topics related to their study and employment.

» Apprentices are able to use the e-portfolio to showcase their abilities and achievements to their employers.

» Improved quality assurance and progression monitoring processes mean that managers are able to more quickly identify and respond to problems.

» The system is responsive to the needs of apprentices and employers by facilitating extensions to qualifications or changes in units.

» The e-portfolio has changed the conversation between apprentices and assessors, allowing both parties to use precious visit time more effectively and to focus on wider learning aspects rather than just assessment priorities. Nova Training hope that this will give their learners an experience they will want to continue and one that they won’t forget.

» The introduction of the e-portfolio is just one of the things that Nova Training are implementing in preparation for the forthcoming 2020 apprenticeship reforms.

More information

Visit Nova Training’s website at: http://www.novatraining.co.uk

Contact: Phil Lythgoe, quality and performance manager/safeguarding prevent lead, Nova Training phil.lythgoe@novatraining.co.uk