

The Interactive E-folio: A Marketing Tool for Graduating Business Students?

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Is an e-portfolio an effective interactive marketing tool for graduating business students in their search for employment? In the job market today, employers are utilizing online resources to a greater degree. Currently, employers scan online resumes using selected keywords to aid in their selection process. Research has shown that in other personal virtual interactions (i.e., online dating), the “transaction” fails to meet the users’ expectations as people are experience goods (Frost et al 2000). We believe there is a similar stymie in the job market with our graduating students being screened as commodities with keyword searches missing their unique attributes and brand offerings. We believe an interactive e-portfolio would serve as an effective marketing tool for graduating business students in their search for employment. Using research begun in April of this year, we suggest that, although an e-portfolio may serve as an effective tool to advertise the students’ brand, it is not being utilized by students or employers properly or to its full advantage. Thus, this interactive tool fails to meet the desired outcomes for the searching student or the prospective employer.

Communications of all types are increasingly online. From social networking to classes to job hunting, students have especially taken to this type of communication. The Internet age has caused a paradigm shift in how information is communicated and retrieved. Those in their 20s “consume media different from us” (Biegel 2007). The media culture for Generation Y involves more social interaction in a technological context. Thus, this generation is more likely to communicate in a way that integrates this social environment (Proserpio and Gioia 2007). What these students don’t consider is that others, specifically potential employers, also have access to these social platforms and use them in their employment decisions. Also, with the increase in on-line usage, there is an increase in advertising clutter (Biegel 2007). Although employers seeking candidates now have a much larger pool of candidates from which to draw, more clutter is also present.

The authors model this study after the Frost et al (2008) study which looked to improve online dating. The authors posited that “online dating frequently fails to meet user expectations because people, unlike many commodities available for purchase online, are experience goods. Daters wish to screen potential romantic partners by *experiential* attributes (such as sense of humor or rapport), but online dating web sites force them to screen by *searchable* attributes.” For dating this means searchable attributes such as religion or income. Frost et al tested this theory, but in a third study in their research, also tested a virtual environment, “Virtual Date,” that offered “potential dating partners the opportunity to acquire experiential information by exploring a virtual environment in interactions analogous to real first dates (Frost et al 2008).” Participants then tested for greater liking on actual first dates. We posit the portfolio can serve as a “virtual date.” A potential employer can search online for attributes that can be found on a resume (searchable attributes like steady employment and a degree in a certain area) similar to dating web sites. The portfolio can then act as a test drive to ensure greater satisfaction by the employer in bringing in candidates for an interview. This may increase satisfaction on the part of the employer, but could this potentially increase satisfaction on the part of the job-seeking student as well? Just as Frost et al put forward that the Internet has “lowered the barriers to initiating contact (from a painful phone call to a click of a mouse) and simultaneously increased the

number of available options” for online daters, so has the same proven true for job seekers and employers attempting to fill positions (Hunter 2007).

So, what exactly is an e-portfolio? Canada (2002) defines e-portfolios as “collections of student work stored in digital format – on a CD-ROM, for example, or in the form of an Internet site.” Students can include rough drafts, photographs, video clips – visual as well as written forms of communication. The format also allows for access by peers as well as by those outside the institution, such as potential employers. Hunter (2007) emphasizes the importance of e-portfolios increasing with job searches coming to the Internet. E-portfolios are another marketing tool in the job seekers search kit, but the author recommends that this is no substitute for a paper resume.

There are a variety of reasons why, however, the use of e-portfolios is not being effectively used as an interactive tool to market students to prospective employers. Our research is being conducted in three stages; first, students’ informal social networking on-line postings are studied. Although many students don’t consider this social networking as a piece in their job hunt, savvy recruiters do, and many use these postings to learn more about potential hires. Second, we study the use of online, or digital, portfolios through two University Career Centers. Do the marketing students at institutions of higher education in middle-America utilize e-portfolios in their job hunt; if so, how are the e-portfolios used by these students, and what are the students’ expectations of a successful outcome? We also perform a content analysis of the web sites of and depth interviews with Career Centers at universities and colleges in a region of middle-America to assess which institutions provide e-portfolio and on-line job hunting assistance to students. Last, we will survey employers of the students from these particular universities and determine if these firms utilize this technology when searching for new hires from the college market. Students’ e-portfolios will be assessed using both Maxfield’s (2006) and Canada’s (2002) e-portfolio assessment models to determine the quality of the e-portfolio.

Methodology

In the first stage of this research, researchers anonymously visited marketing students’ personal social networking web sites, specifically Face Book. At School #1 the names of 138 declared Business Administration majors with a Marketing concentration were searched on Face Book to determine their informal web presence. Of the 138, 110 were accessed by their name only, as an employer might do to discover information, favorable or otherwise, about the potential employee. Of the 28 inaccessible by their name, one was found using the university network on Face Book, where the student was listed under first name only, and sites giving information about eight others were discovered by searching utilizing Google. Of the 110 accessed, 109 identified themselves as students of their university. Of the 110 students on Face Book, 40 allowed access to their entire Face Book site, and 82 allowed access to their friends list, which allowed viewing of pictures and postings on their friends’ sites. This illustrates the point that a student denying access to a personal site does not guarantee privacy. Secondary sites were found for six students, three of which did not allow access to their personal site, but which gave information about the student to researchers. Of the students Face Book pages, 49 contained pictures of alcohol consumption, two contained pictures of a sexual nature. Seventeen sites contained postings talking about drinking and partying that had taken place, was taking place or was being planned, one referenced drugs and drug use, 20 contained postings with vulgarities, ten contained sexual content, and one contained derogatory statements against the opposite sex.

Only fourteen sites presented the students in a positive light to potential employers – protecting the students' brand. None of the sites contained information from a portfolio. Information is still pending from School #2.

Next, we studied the usage of this interactive marketing medium by Career Centers at institutions of higher education. Although a school's Career Center is evaluated on the ability of Center staff to aid graduating students in obtaining gainful employment, sometimes small universities do not have the resources to stay abreast of technologies that are common tools utilized in the marketplace. A content analysis of the schools' web site was conducted, as well as follow-up with a depth interview to determine the availability of resources to students as well as marketing and technical knowledge of interactive marketing techniques. On the web site of School #1, no portfolios existed; only resumes were posted.

The researchers then conducted a content analysis on resumes from School #1 (n = 154) listed on the schools Career Center e-recruiting site as Business Administration majors with a Marketing concentration. Of the 154 posted resumes, 75 were determined to be students within the graduation dates from May 06 to May 2010. Resumes were considered unusable if a graduation date of prior to May 06 (returning students looking for another position, or had been left on the system), or the students were not marketing majors. Terms that would enable employers to search for potential and qualified student candidates were then gathered from the resumes. Next, 27 job postings on the web site of the Center at School #1 were studied. Once the terms from both students and employers were gathered, they were categorized in the following categories: searchable term, descriptor (86); marketing function term (23); marketing-specific or business-specific descriptor (68); and searchable term, experiential characteristic (26). Inter-coder agreement was 89 %. Initial research does not show high correlations between search terms chosen by students on resumes and those chosen by potential employers. In a depth interview with the Director of the Career Center of School #1, the director stated that they do not utilize on-line portfolios for students as they have been directed by professionals that employers do not utilize them as this is a time-consuming search method. Additionally, potential employers find that fielding one-on-one interviews through initial study of resumes, then meeting the student in person at the university's career fair has proven to them to be the best method of searching for potential employees.

The last phase of the research to be conducted will be to survey the firms who hire business students from these colleges and universities to determine the usage rates of e-folios by the individuals conducting the position searches. We also want to determine if other, less formal on-line information that students post about themselves, such as on Face Book, is referenced by these firms. Initial anecdotal evidence suggests employers have begun to look at the applicants' informational social networking online postings, perhaps without the students knowing. Kirk Elmquist, Vice-President of Sales and Marketing for the Springfield Cardinals, admitted that he reads applicants' Face Book and My Space pages. He said that the reputation of the Springfield and St. Louis Cardinals are on the line when he hires a new person, so he is very interested in everything he can learn about the applicant. Applicants with inappropriate blogs and pictures hurt their chances. He recommends that students use these pages for marketing themselves with pictures, writing about their volunteer activity, people they meet and respect in the community,

and any experience that would sell them to a potential employer. It is more revealing to go to a person's social site than to read a pre-meditated resume (Elmqvist 2008).

Although students post tangible, quantifiable aspects about themselves on-line, much of their brand may lie in their intangible characteristics, such as honesty, optimism, and humility. Statistics show that the majority of those fired are fired not because they cannot do the job, but because of a poor work ethic or bad attitude (ncis.unl.edu 2008). Employers, therefore, should be searching for evidence of the intangible, but continue to search through the tangible "commodity" characteristics of potential employees, thereby reducing the potential success rate of their search. Yet an e-folio, unlike a one-page resume, potentially gives the employer the ability to assess these characteristics more effectively and efficiently. As the demand continues for students with IT skills, this is a call for students to showcase their skills and education in technology; what better way than through an on-line portfolio (Durlabhji and Fusilier 2005).

Managerial implications exist for students, higher education institutions and their Career Centers, and employers. First, this research will provide useful information for students, Career Centers and professors to aid in the use of e-folios as an interactive tool for marketing business students to potential employers. Second, this research may offer insight to managers into best practices when searching for the best candidate to fill a position.

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