Can ePortfolios Help Deliver Training Results?

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Do we know how training affects the bottom line?

In down economies, corporate training leaders are under the gun to show results. It is not enough to provide training that addresses organizational needs; training has to impact the bottom line. Scan the current training publications. You'll quickly find dozens of articles on how training must show bottom line impact.

But most authors tell us that's easier said than done. Part of the problem is training tends to be event-based. It's hard to show a link between how a brief learning event changes employee performance, much less how an event impacts the bottom line.

Think about how training events unfold. Learners arrive as individuals, not as a focused learning group. Trainers have to lay out the session, build common ground, manage expectations, and then move forward. People work together, discuss, ask questions, and practice. The clock runs down and then the session wraps.

What happens next? Group members go their separate ways and get back to work. Work hasn't stopped and tasks have piled up. There are emails to answer, calls to return, work to get done.

It's human nature to dive right back in. For now, training is put aside; skill application is pushed off. Research tells us that the longer we delay using new skills, the less we actually use. Without a planned transition linking training and its use back on the job, training impact is minimized.

We trainers are creative and do their best. When a session ends, many trainers email training follow up items or links to relevant media items. Managers also play an important role to reinforce training, but follow up varies by manager.

Corporate learners are often left to their own devices. Why don't we provide them with a web-based device to help them out? The time is right to take a fresh look at this lingering issue.

Do professors know something we don't?

College students around the globe build and use eportfolios. An eportfolio is a web-based digital archive where students can blog, post what they are working on, discuss peer and professor feedback, and display finished works. Combined with social networking, eportfolios give students a continuous learning space that follows them through their course of study and often after they graduate.

Why don't we put this to work for us? Social networking and group collaboration could help get corporate learning groups started on the right track. Participants could introduce themselves, post their prework, and blog about their learning objectives.

Trainers could facilitate group blogging and get to know their group – well before a session begins. Not only would this shape group dynamics, but it also helps a trainer better tailor content and process. Better fit creates better learning.

Once the session ends, participants could post their training skill application plans, blog about their progress, display documents for peer review, and share key deliverables. A trainer would still facilitate the learning process: blog, give feedback, suggest resources, and prod people along.

To fit corporate training needs, an eportfolio system must be flexible to configure, work on an internal network, and give users control over who can access their work. Several applications satisfy some of these needs. But only Mahara meets these needs and offers additional features.

Meet Mahara

Mahara (mahara.org) is an open source eportfolio system developed in New Zealand. Described as an "electronic three-ring binder," Mahara combines file sharing, group collaboration forums, social networking features, and a resume builder along with blog feature – either on the embedded blog application or through an RSS feed. Mahara can be integrated into other learning systems, including corporate learning management systems. In fact, Mahara is compatible "right out of the box" with Moodle, the popular eLearning application.

Mahara lets users share digital items or "artefacts" in a unique way. Files stored on Mahara cannot be viewed by other community members until the user chooses to display them. A user must bundle artefacts into a "view" and then select who can access the view. Only then, can other users view the content. Users can open a view to the entire community, or just members of a specific group, or strictly limit access to select community members.

Mahara also lets users create multiple views, so users could bundle a set artefacts for one group and reuse the same artefacts for another group. Group members can share either private or public feedback to another member. This feature can sustain an honest dialogue among the group.

This access control structure sets Mahara apart from other eportfolio applications. For training programs where sensitive or personal matters are discussed, this access control structure can keep information confidential. This significant benefit aligns Mahara for the business world.

Who's Using Mahara?

Mahara doesn't have any corporate users – yet. But it does have a respectable university following. Consider that Mahara started as a collaborative venture funded by the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission's and involved well known

institutions such as Auckland University of Technology, Victoria University of Wellington, Massey University, and The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

The Mahara home page displays live examples of how actual implementations. You can see how Tony Hursh at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign uses Mahara in his Online Master of Education courses. His students post work in progress, blog, and display final projects. Visitors can see how these Mahara helps these graduate education students demonstrate their learning results through video blogging.

Then if you look at Mark Osburne's teachers forum, you see how effectively multimedia files can be presented in a Mahara view. You have to see the video tour of the Denver School of Science and Technology, which describes how innovative school structures can impact learning results.

Let's evaluate Mahara

To explore Mahara, I joined the online community: created a login, built a profile, loaded artefacts, created a view, and networked with other members. While a true evaluation would require loading and configuring Mahara to your organization's needs, joining the community will let you experience what Mahara has to offer.

There is always a learning curve with new technology. Early on, I was confused a lack of user support materials. Since version 1.0 was released in late 2008, Mahara has yet to build out this content. To get answers, I emailed the Mahara team. Given the holiday season and time zone difference, I didn't know what to expect. But I was delighted with the patient, speedy, and thoughtful responses the Mahara developers sent me.

As I learned my way around the community and engaged in the community forums, I engaged with many educators. While we work in different contexts, they freely shared experience and pointed me toward additional resources. Overall, it's been a very positive experience.

Here is a snapshot of Mahara's current strengths and weakness:

Strengths	- Open source = no cost of acquisition. - Integrates blog, file sharing, group collaboration, social networking, and resume builder in one application. - Views allow users to manage what content is open to which people. - Active learner community. - Responsive developers provide detailed answers. - Avoids content ownership issues of popular Web 2.0 sites. - Administrator can configure appearance of Mahara site. - Users can configure folder/subfolder structure.
Weaknesses	- Limited installed base, but growing. - Currently few user resources. - Not an out of the box installation. Will require IT involvement. - Implementation roadmap is unclear. - Development funded by grants. Funding continuity is unclear.

Consider the cost of acquisition, factor in the Mahara team's responsiveness, and add in the application's capabilities. Factor the post launch/start up nature of the application. Still, you have quite a bargain here. Just be ready to invest time and resources to configure the application to your needs.

How would it fit in corporate training?

Consider the training you offer: both classroom and online. Which programs most need to show business impact? What skill sets need help getting applied back on the job? What programs are segmented over a weeks or months? Plus consider how well web-based technology fits in your organization.

Mahara should support high potential training, such as sales and leadership development. Skills taught in these programs are complex and would benefit from on-going reinforcement. Often, sales and leadership development training takes place over several sessions, so eportfolios could help link training events to the individual employee's development process.

Mahara would fit equally well in professional services organizations: law, architecture, engineering, and audit firms. These firms hire highly-educated professional trying to make a name for themselves. Mahara can help new employees network, gain informal coaching, and blog about their development process and build a project resume. Also, online profiles and work product could help managers select project staffing.

Job training and apprenticeship programs would also use Mahara to help retain and prepare clients for their professional world. Besides developing web skills, eportfolios could help program members develop communication skills, build a support network, and document skill achievements. While often faced with limited resources, these organizations would benefit from the low cost of acquisition and avoid distractions common to commercial social networking sites.

How do you get started?

Decide exactly where you will integrate eportfolios in your curricula. The more specific you are, the better you can communicate our ideas to training users. If you have implemented an LMS, eLearning, web conferencing, or training to support a major system rollout, you are familiar with the potential issues.

Reach out to stakeholders and training users. Explain the benefits of eportfolio use, rather than the features. Hold focus groups with users and make them part of the process. Get them involved and working alongside you.

As long as a business does not engage in Mahara consulting or hosting services, per the user agreement, Mahara is available at no cost. While you can count on Mahara for support, you need buy in and resources from your IT group from the start. Project user population and longevity, then multiply that file storage requirements to project server and connectivity requirements.

During the development and rollout process, it's natural to feel like you are making it up as you go along. You will have to adjust and revise plans. Set reasonable – not ambitious expectations, try things out, make mistakes, and learn from them. Try to anticipate where problems may occur and try to anticipate back up plans.

Once you go like, it's show time. Sessions leaders need to budget time and energy to read and respond to participant blogs. Consider this if you give a class a blog assignment. Pick reasonable workloads that you can sustain over time, otherwise blogging might overwhelm our training workloads.

Final thoughts

We trainers live in interesting times. We always have to innovate, often are short staffed and with limited resources: just like our peers in education. Let's follow their example, learn from them, and weave eportfolios into our training.

Mahara has a lot to offer the corporate training world. Besides integrating features important to corporate learning, Mahara was build with user concerns in mind. You see the attention to detail in the access control and user confidentiality features.

The Mahara has dedicated talent eager to succeed and will likely fill gaps in their support tools with great speed. Clearly the Mahara team exhibits the personal qualities of highly effective people that training professional can respect.

It's time we solve the transfer of training issue. Now you have a tool set to help address the issue. Go to Mahara.org today. Join the community, create a view, and start networking. You won't know until you go find out.

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Resources

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