

Let's make the most of learning technology!

According to the latest research, the UK is better placed than ever to take advantage of the potential technology has to offer the vocational education sector. BECTA's Harnessing Technology Review 2007 found that 57% of people now have Internet access at home, with 40% of these using broadband. And wider recognition of the role IT has to play is gaining increasing acknowledgement. Over 65% of E2E learners and Modern Apprentices interviewed for a recent independent survey said that technology helped them to perform better during the assessment process.

Further research suggests strong foundations exist for this to grow in the future. Last year's Impirica Report showed the UK in first place with 67% of schools having good access to the Internet and reporting student users are competent and well-motivated. This compares to just over 40% among new EU member states. Significant performance improvements have also been reported by colleges using ICT for vocational learners, with Gloucestershire College being one shining example.

So, if awareness of and access to technology is widely available, what do learning providers and assessors need to do to continue in the right direction? A key point is the need to make imaginative, and indeed, the best use of the technology now available. E-portfolios are a case in point. Their benefits are widely understood, but to be effective, they need to be well designed to support existing processes and the way people actually work. There is a danger with electronic systems, that the technology drives the assessment, and the challenge for a technology company is to form a thorough appreciation of the assessment process and apply this to assessment practice. For instance, many NVQ e-portfolios are designed around counting and weighting the evidence presented and using this as a measure of whether there is sufficient evidence.. Because any IT based system is essentially a form of database, this can be an easy trap for a software developer to fall into. But in reality what is important is having a technology which will support an assessor in judging a candidate as vocationally competent. In other words, enabling an assessor to confirm they can do the job because they visibly know what they are doing.



Their professional knowledge is implied by the body of evidence submitted, which can only be considered subjectively. An authoritative decision needs to be made as to whether the evidence submitted is of sufficient quality, not simply on the quantity presented. The e-portfolio technology supporting the process needs to enable these judgements to be made. This can be achieved by the assessor being able to select a particular performance criterion, filter the available evidence contained within the e-portfolio and review this against the different criteria to make a judgement.

As well as allowing for subjectivity in the decision making process, another important aspect is quality assurance. A previous criticism of NVQ as a qualification has been its quality, due to a perceived lack of consistency among different awarding bodies and assessment centres.

Using an e-portfolio helps to combat this by ensuring greater standardisation across all levels and more stringent, replicable assessment procedures. Thus using an e-portfolio can only help to increase the quality and wider reputation of NVQs as a whole, with the added benefit of enabling quality assurance to become more straightforward and less time consuming. E-portfolios present a fantastic opportunity to examine assessment practice and to enhance and improve it. Nowadays the latest generation of e-portfolios mean that an external and internal verifier need only access a single page to view the audit trail of actions associated with assembling the evidence in order to verify the authenticity of the entire process. This translates to much faster feedback for the learner and leads into the next benefit of using e-portfolios, which is based around the improved ease of use they offer.

In the past it has been a challenge to engage other key people in the workplace in the assessment process. Inviting an expert witness to comment on a candidate's work was often only obtained in writing, and could take months to arrive. Meanwhile the candidate was left in very de-motivating, limbo situation. Today's e-portfolios allow independent experts to be invited to comment on a candidate's work and their opinion is available for all involved to view almost immediately. As well as further improving quality assurance, speeding up the process in this way can make a big impact on overall completion rates. In a recent survey conducted by the ALP and LSC, 67% of candidates said they were more likely to finish their programmes because they are using technology to help them learn. It is therefore reasonable to draw a similar conclusion that if technology can assist the learning process, it will also be deemed beneficial by the candidate in helping to manage coursework collation and the final assessment itself.

Longer term it is important that NVQs are not running in isolation of the normal professional development process, and need to support a wider range of competency assessments. E-portfolios can make a huge difference to the learning experience and efficacy of the competence testing process for everyone involved in the NVQ system, and present a very valuable opportunity to examine current assessment practice and to enhance and improve it.

About the Author

Chris Peat OBE is Director of Business Strategy at Axia Interactive Media. Chris was awarded the OBE in 2002 in recognition of his services to Adult Learning in Leeds where he was instrumental in establishing the Family Learning Centres that have gained a national reputation for encouraging adults to successfully access learning and achieve. At these Centres he also led the team which created the Job Guarantee model that uniquely received major awards from the private and public sectors for Innovation.



About Axia

Axia Interactive Media (AIM) are specialists in web-based solutions to support lifelong learning and professional development. The company develops interactive solutions to support learners across all stages of the professional or vocational learning cycle, from initially providing careers information, advice and guidance through to actually delivering e-learning and monitoring competence. Axia (AIM) works in partnership with trade and professional bodies, learning providers and employers within the corporate sector. The company offers both generic and sector based NVQ technology platforms – Forward, and NVQ.Now - which are used by the Council for Administration and endorsed by City and Guilds and OCR.

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