Employers' Perceptions of the Benefits of Employment Electronic Portfolios

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The purpose of this study was to examine employers' perceptions of the effectiveness of employment electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) when evaluating potential job candidates. For the purpose of this study, ePortfolios were defined as a collection of electronic files that demonstrates one's qualifications, abilities, and experiences that are applicable to the workplace. Eighty-five recruiters completed a survey about their perceptions of the use of ePortfolios. Independent sample t tests were conducted on two groups based on length of recruiting experience and length of employment. Recruiters with less than two years of recruiting experience were significantly more likely to visit ePortfolio links on students' cover letters or e-mail signatures than recruiters with three or more years of experience recruiting. In addition, 85 percent (72/85) of recruiters reported that if students followed up with them via e-mail with a link to a relevant part of their ePortfolio, they would visit the link. Overall, recruiters had moderately favorable perceptions of the use of ePortfolios in the job search process.

With increasingly rapid technological development, today's job market is becoming more competitive and complex (McCabe, 2017). Traditionally, employers review paper resumes to understand each applicant's relevant skills. However, recent trends have suggested that paper resumes and portfolios are gradually becoming less popular as a tool for college graduates to obtain their first job (Mirrer, 2010; Willis & Wilkie, 2009). This rapid expansion elicits a new way for college graduates to stand out in an increasingly digital world.

The current study examined whether or not employers perceive employment electronic portfolios (i.e., ePortfolios) as beneficial for job applicants. For the purpose of this study, *ePortfolios* are defined as a collection of electronic files that demonstrates one's qualifications, abilities, and experiences that are applicable to the workplace. Although students acquire numerous work-related skills through higher education courses, many struggle to identify and verbalize these skills while applying for professional careers or graduate school (Whitfield, 2011). ePortfolios not only allow potential employers to see the applicants' skills, but they allow applicants to better understand how to talk successfully about their abilities during an interview.

Researchers have outlined the benefit of a well-prepared ePortfolio during the employment process (Okoro, Washington, & Cardon, 2011; Woodbury, Addams, & Neal, 2009). Woodbury et al. (2009) stated that ePortfolios "may be the hammer that nails down a successful interview" (p. 13). While students are often able to submit electronic versions of their resume, this study examined whether employers believe an applicant's ePortfolio is beneficial in the application process. In an educational setting, students may become more comfortable creating ePortfolios; however, employers may not have as much experience reviewing ePortfolios as applicant have in creating them.

Okoro et al. (2011) argued that, although ePortfolios are still in their very early stages, with time, they have the ability to replace the traditional resume and portfolio. ePortfolios may be perceived differently by employers based on their level of comfort with technology. Due to the novelty of ePortfolios, very little research has been done to understand employers' perceptions about ePortfolios. Because most ePortfolio research has been done in an educational setting, we do not know how recruiters use students' ePortfolios in their decision-making. The purpose of this study was to survey employers' perceptions of the effectiveness of ePortfolios when evaluating potential job candidates.

Review of Literature

Schawbel (2011) predicted that within 10 years, resumes will be replaced by various online communication sources, such as the ePortfolio. Similarly, a large body of research exists surrounding the importance of maintaining a positive online presence in an increasingly digital job market (McCabe, 2017; Mirrer, 2010; Worley, 2011). Yancey (2001) stated that ePortfolios have the potential to connect "college curriculum and the world beyond college" (p. 19). Although such literature recognizes the potential of an ePortfolio, few studies have been designed to understand how beneficial employers perceive ePortfolios.

Kennelly, Osborn, Reardon, and Shetty (2016) conducted a series of mock interviews and evaluated them through a skills matrix. This matrix determined students' abilities to recognize and outline their transferable skills through the creation and implementation of their ePortfolios. While they were unable to find consistent results on whether or not ePortfolios were helpful in the identification of transferable skills during the interviewing process, they provided suggestions for future researchers. "Moving

beyond self-report to objective external reviews would strengthen further studies" (Kennelly et al., 2016, p. 123). Employers are external reviewers of ePortfolios. Therefore, this study went beyond students' self-ratings on efficacy of ePortfolios in examining transferable skills. This study focused on the perceptions of recruiters and employers, rather than those of students.

In another study of ePortfolios in the college classroom, Willis and Wilkie (2009) concluded that ePortfolios "provide visual integration of students' knowledge, skills, and capabilities as a unique showcase to prospective employers; such portfolios also provide evidence of students' progressive development during their college careers" (p. 79). In a study of both employers and students, Blair and Godsall (2006) discovered that only 56% of hiring managers said they would expect to use ePortfolios in the future. However, this finding was largely due to the novelty of digital communication and inexperience with ePortfolios. Blair and Godsall found that 75% of employers stated that their reason for not using ePortfolios was that they were unfamiliar with ePortfolios. Length of recruiting experience may be a factor in the acceptance of ePortfolios. Millennial recruiters may be more comfortable using ePortfolios because they have grown up using technology, whereas employers who have been recruiting for 10 or more years may have a process that works and not perceive any benefits of applicants' ePortfolios. While Blair and Godsall (2006) uncovered these perceptions in 2006, in the current research, we attempted to understand further whether or not employers are open to viewing prospective job candidates' ePortfolios in the current employment environment.

Last, very few studies have been done to examine strictly the perceptions of employers and recruiters regarding ePortfolios (Ambrose, 2013; Yu, 2011). Yu (2011) interviewed 10 human resource managers from 10 different companies. Out of those 10, only four of the managers had previously heard of ePortfolios. Knowledge or lack thereof may affect employers' perceptions of the benefit of ePortfolios. Although not commonly seen by hiring managers, there was a high and consistent level of interest in the development and advancement of ePortfolios (Yu, 2011). These results encourage future research and suggest a high potential for universities that plan to promote the use of ePortfolios as a tool for post-college job placement. However, characteristics of recruiters also need to be examined. Because Blair and Godsall (2006) found that employers were not familiar with ePortfolios, we need to examine how willing employers are to use ePortfolios. Employers' total years of employment may affect how willing they are to change what they review in the application process.

Finally, Ambrose (2013) conducted a focus group with 11 recruiters and found that eight out of 11 employers agreed or strongly agreed that an ePortfolio of student work would be a valuable tool for recruiting.

Because this research was published seven years after the work of Blair and Godsall (2006), there may be more significant changes in employers' perceptions about the use of ePortfolios. The current research expanded on Ambrose's (2013) study by evaluating a larger pool of recruiters in order to predict more accurately employers' opinions of ePortfolios.

Hypothesis

Based on the relative newness of ePortfolios, recruiters' years of experience may be a significant factor in their perceptions of ePortfolios. Perhaps recruiters with fewer years of experience may be (a) younger in age and more comfortable navigating digital resources such as the ePortfolio, or (b) more willing to try different recruitment strategies to gain additional information about job candidates. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: Recruiters with fewer years of experience will have more favorable perceptions of ePortfolios.

Method

The current study partially replicated Ambrose (2013) by surveying recruiters about their perceptions of employment ePortfolios. While Ambrose conducted a qualitative study using a focus group with 11 recruiters, this study used a quantitative survey to collect data.

Participants

Surveys were completed by 85 recruiters garnered through two methods of data collection. There were 37 recruiters at two career fairs held at a Midwestern, comprehensive university who completed hard copy surveys during the career fair. In addition, 48 recruiters completed the same survey online, which was shared through social media sites and e-mail. Length of time subjects had been recruiting ranged from three months to 22 years, with a mean of 4.19 years. Total years of employment in all positions were labeled as length of employment. Length of employment ranged from one year to 43 years, with a mean of 11.73 years. National, regional, and local employers were surveyed. Some of the organizations recruiters represented were CenturyLink, Enterprise, Fastenal, Foot Locker, Hormel, Manpower, Skyward, Target, Quad Graphics, and Walmart.

Measure

Recruiters completed a survey about employment ePortfolios using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*). Survey questions also

included items related to other perceptions of ePortfolios, including an overall rating of the importance of ePortfolios in recruitment (see Appendix). The seven Likert scale items were created based on results reported by Ambrose (2013) and produced a Cronbach's alpha of .81.

Sampling Procedures

Recruiters at the career fairs were approached when they did not have students at their tables. They were asked if they would be willing to complete a hard copy survey about their perceptions of ePortfolios. The researchers noted the companies who completed the survey in order to avoid duplication. Subjects were also recruited using social media and direct e-mailing. Qualtrics was used to create and distribute the online survey. Participation online was entirely voluntary, and subjects remained completely anonymous.

Research Design

Independent sample t tests were conducted on two groups based on length of recruiting experience and length of employment. Groups were created based on frequencies of responses, trying to create similar sample sizes in each group. Therefore, there were different cut off points for length of recruiting experience and total length of employment. Length of recruiting experience was divided into two groups—fewer years recruiting (two years or fewer, $n = 47$) and more years recruiting (three years or more, $n = 38$). Length of employment was also divided into two groups—fewer years employed (nine or fewer, $n = 51$) and more years employed (10 or more, $n = 34$).

Results

The hypothesis stated that recruiters with fewer years of experience will have more favorable perceptions of ePortfolios. Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations of ePortfolio survey items based on length of recruiting experience. A t test was run to see if there was a difference between how long recruiters had been recruiting and their likelihood of visiting students' ePortfolio links (see Table 1). Recruiters with fewer than two years of recruiting experience were significantly more likely to visit ePortfolio links on students' cover letters or e-mail signatures than recruiters with three or more years of experience recruiting.

Table 2 represents the means and standard deviations of ePortfolio survey items based on length of employment. A t test was run to see if there was a difference between how long recruiters had been employed and their likelihood of visiting students'

ePortfolio links (see Table 2). Recruiters with nine or fewer years of employment were significantly more likely to visit ePortfolio links on students' cover letters or e-mail signatures than recruiters with 10 or more years of employment. A t test was run to see if there was a difference between years of employment and if recruiters would visit students' ePortfolio links on the top of their resume (see Table 2). Recruiters with nine or fewer years of employment were significantly more likely to visit ePortfolio links on the top of students' resumes than recruiters with 10 or more years of employment.

Frequencies and percentages of all recruiters' "strongly agree" and "agree" responses were examined across all questions. The results are presented in order of preference:

- 85% (72/85) of recruiters reported that, if students followed up with them via e-mail with a link to a relevant part of their ePortfolio, they would visit the link;
- 73% (62/85) of recruiters reported that, if students had a link to their ePortfolio on their e-mail signature or cover letter, they would visit it;
- 72% (61/85) of recruiters reported that, if students put a link to their ePortfolio on the top of their resume, they would visit it;
- 71% (60/85) of recruiters reported that ePortfolios would be a valuable tool for their company's recruiting; and
- 69% (59/85) of recruiters reported that, if students offered to show them a relevant part of their ePortfolio during a job fair via a tablet, they would be interested.

Finally, recruiters were asked to rate the importance of ePortfolios in recruitment from 1 (*not at all important*) to 10 (*extremely important*). The mean of all participants for importance of ePortfolios in recruitment was 6.05. Recruiters with two years or fewer of recruiting experience reported a mean of 6.30 ($SD = 2.08$), while recruiters with three or more years of recruiting experience reported a mean of 5.74 ($SD = 1.96$). Those who were employed for nine years or fewer reported a mean of 6.45 ($SD = 1.94$), and those with 10 years or more of employment reported a mean of 5.44 ($SD = 2.05$) for importance of ePortfolios in recruitment.

Discussion

The hypothesis predicted that recruiters with fewer years of experience would have more favorable perceptions of ePortfolios. Overall, recruiters had moderately favorable perceptions of the use of ePortfolios in the job search process. This study supports a qualitative version of Ambrose's (2013)

Table 1
Descriptives Using t *test for Equality of Means Based on Years of Recruiting Experience*

Item	Two years or fewer of recruiting experience (*n* = 47) *M* (*SD*)	Three years or fewer of recruiting experience (*n* = 38) *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*df*
If students followed up with me via e-mail with a link to a relevant part of the ePortfolio, I would visit it.	1.51 (0.72)	1.92 (1.05)	ns	–
If students offered to show me a relevant part of their ePortfolio during a job fair via a tablet, I would be interested.	2.00 (1.02)	2.37 (1.13)	ns	–
If students put a link to their ePortfolio on the top of their resume, I would visit it.	1.87 (0.95)	2.16 (1.10)	ns	–
If students had a link to their ePortfolio on their e-mail signature or cover letter, I would visit it.	1.77 (0.69)	2.32 (1.16)	-2.69**	83

Note. ns = not significant; in the survey, 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *undecided*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*.
** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Descriptives Using t *test for Equality of Means Based on Years of Employment*

Item	Nine years or fewer of employment (*n* = 51) *M* (*SD*)	10 years or more of employment (*n* = 34) *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*df*
If students followed up with me via e-mail with a link to a relevant part of the ePortfolio, I would visit it.	1.47 (0.73)	2.03 (1.02)	ns	–
If students offered to show me a relevant part of their ePortfolio during a job fair via a tablet, I would be interested.	2.04 (1.03)	2.35 (1.13)	ns	–
If students put a link to their ePortfolio on the top of their resume, I would visit it.	1.96 (0.89)	2.06 (1.21)	-0.43*	83
If students had a link to their ePortfolio on their e-mail signature or cover letter, I would visit it.	1.90 (0.83)	2.18 (1.14)	-1.28**	83

Note. ns = not significant; in the survey, 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *undecided*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*.
** $p < .005$.
* $p < .05$.

study pertaining to employer perceptions of ePortfolios. In this study, 85% of surveyed recruiters reported that if students followed up with them via e-mail with a link to a relevant part of their ePortfolio, they would visit the link. These findings confirm the previously suggested potential of ePortfolios from the crucial point of view of the employer.

This study aimed to understand not only employers' perceptions of ePortfolios, but also the factors that may contribute to their willingness to utilize them. We predicted that recruiters with fewer years of experience may be more comfortable navigating digital resources such as ePortfolios. Because of this divide, organizations may need to train their more seasoned

recruiters to help them understand the benefits of ePortfolios in the recruitment process.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, results indicated that recruiters with fewer years of experience were significantly more willing to visit ePortfolio links on students' cover letter, resume, or e-mail signature than recruiters with more years of experience. These findings contribute to the idea that recruiters with fewer years of experience have more favorable perceptions of ePortfolios. This research fills a gap in existing ePortfolio research by examining strictly the perceptions of employers and recruiters in regard to their years of experience. Although this study provided relevant and positive conclusions about ePortfolios, there were some limitations and implications for future research.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study incorporated the perspectives of 85 different recruiters, it would be beneficial for future researchers to study more employers. We chose to split groups as evenly as possible based on the mean years of experience. These data could have been analyzed differently. After reviewing the hypothesis and findings, it is apparent that inferences were made based on years of experience. These inferences may have led to inaccurate assumptions by correlating recruiters' years of experience with their age. In addition, comfort with technology was presumed based on age. However, this was not asked in the survey. Future research should ask questions about an employer's age and perceptions of technology in order to account for potential generational differences. Additionally, in order to obtain employers' perceptions about ePortfolios, future researchers could provide links to students' ePortfolios and get specific feedback about content and layout.

Conclusion

This study provided empirical data about employers' perceptions of ePortfolios. The results indicated that overall, regardless of years of experience, recruiters had a moderately positive impression of the use of ePortfolios. While ePortfolios are still relatively new in recruitment, employers have expressed a high level of interest, indicating a promising future for the use of ePortfolios in the job search process (Yu, 2011). As employers and applicants begin to adopt this job-search tool, ePortfolios have the potential to change the way we view application methods. Although the use of ePortfolios in the job search is relatively new, in the final open-ended question of the survey, one employer highlighted how ePortfolios can be used as a tool in the employment process:

In my current role I hardly see ePortfolios from candidates. However, if a candidate did send me a link to the ePortfolio prior to their interview, I would definitely look at it. As a job seeker, you want to do everything you can to get to the interview stage. The ePortfolio, along with a strong resume and references, could be used as a great reason for an employer to bring you in and interview you. If used effectively, I believe it could be a useful tool.

Based on the results of this study, educators may wish to encourage their students to use ePortfolios in the job search process on their cover letters, resumes and e-mail signatures.

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Appendix
Survey About Employment ePortfolios

Directions: Please answer the following questions.

How long have you recruited potential employees?

Including your current and previous employment, how long have you been employed?

Please circle your level of agreement with the following statements:

1) Electronic portfolios are useful to communicate applicants' skills necessary to succeed in our organization.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

2) Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) would be a valuable tool for our company's recruiting.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

3) If students followed up with me via e-mail with a link to a relevant part of their ePortfolio, I would visit it.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

4) If students offered to show me a relevant part of their ePortfolio during a job fair via tablet (e.g., iPad), I would be interested.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

5) If students put a link to their ePortfolio on the top of their resume, I would visit it.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

6) If students had a link to their ePortfolio on their e-mail signature or cover letter, I would visit it.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

7) I use the internet to examine potential recruits' digital footprint.

   Strongly agree   Agree   Undecided   Disagree   Strongly disagree

8)   When is the best time for students to introduce their ePortfolios?
        A. An e-mail preview prior to the interview
        B. During the interview
        C. An e-mail follow-up after the interview
        D. Other (please explain).

9) Rate the importance of ePortfolios in recruitment.
                1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
            Not at all   Extremely
            Important   important

10) Is there anything else you would like to add that would be helpful for college students to know about recruitment at Career Fairs?