

E-Portfolios for Legal Professionals Analysis

Value of E-Portfolios to Legal Assistants and Paralegals

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Abstract

This study explores whether including an e-portfolio in the hiring process is effective in obtaining entry-level employment for legal assistants and/or paralegals ("non-lawyer legal professionals") by surveying perspectives from current legal professionals and MacEwan University students in the Paralegal Studies and Office Assistant - Legal Major programs where it was further factored into primary and secondary means. Primarily, the research study explored whether e-portfolio implementation within the hiring process would be effective for legal assistants and/or paralegals to gain entry-level employment in the legal industry. The study secondarily explored the impact of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on this demographic of those entering the legal profession. We hypothesize that an e-portfolio will be received favourably by employers and students where the purpose will be to analyze an e-portfolio's value for non-lawyer legal professionals, including MacEwan legal students, to showcase their skills for entry-level employment in an ever-evolving general AI landscape.

Reason and Background

This idea was initially conceived to show the skills worked on and learnt through the education provided by MacEwan University's Legal Office Assistant program. Through a meeting of the minds with the faculty instructor, Ashley Stasiewicz, this concept came to fruition when the question was asked how a student could stand out amongst the onslaught of similarly qualified entry-level candidates to showcase their abilities and writing skills, including the reflective components that e-portfolios can provide. Arguably, writing skills are creative as they allow one to demonstrate one's unique writing style, even in a formal environment such as the legal industry. Similarly, an e-portfolio, by extension, is a way to combine these creative skills and the technical and reflective components to show why specific projects were selected. We believe that e-portfolios, linked by either a cover letter or resume, will show employers the qualities they seek when looking for qualified candidates. As a result, the idea of how this could be applied to other students where this idea of being able for other students to put their efforts and skills was also thought to be a great opportunity when gaining entry-level employment in the legal industry.

In the legal profession, it is imperative that non-lawyer legal professionals (paralegals and legal assistants) not only know substantive law but also technical and writing skills. Thomson Reuters (2024) recently released an article discussing the impact of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on law offices. They indicated that firms would seek out opportunities to increase efficiencies, one of which may impact the role of support staff (legal assistants and paralegals, specifically). Arguably, the rise of AI in law offices will impact how law offices hire legal support staff. As a result, we hypothesize that demonstrating non-lawyer legal professionals' high level of technical competencies will be necessary for law offices when hiring support staff. Technical competencies in an e-portfolio can be shown through memos, reports, letters, and emails, thereby representing an individual's approach to drafting effective communication (O'Mara et al., 2020, p. 102, p. 153). Including undergraduate coursework and other academic or workplace achievements in an e-portfolio for public viewing can further demonstrate the applicant's skills to future employers. Chang (2006, as cited in Gutiérrez- Santiuste, 2022) found that e-portfolios are "useful for entering the labour market, extending one's network of professional contacts, promoting greater visibility on the job market, and helping to contact employers." Therefore, incorporating an e-portfolio as an

additional tool for an applicant's resume or curriculum vitae may add value to prospective employers and for early graduates from legal assistant or paralegal programs for entry into the workforce.

Resources and Content for E-Portfolios

A fictional law firm, Austen Marlow LLP, and numerous guiding resources were created within this project to support future legal professionals in their job search. Resources include 25 fictional scenarios for aspiring legal professionals to develop e-portfolios using the platform Google Drive and the precedents/templates for those scenarios. These scenarios cover drafting emails, memos, and letters. They also follow instructions that comply with Alberta legislation concerning corporate forms and retainer agreements. With a lens to increasing access for those in legal-specific education, these resources hold a Creative Commons license CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0 DEED. As such, these resources, created by Meg Roth, can be integrated with author credit in legal assistant/paralegal programs at post-secondary institutions.

Methodology

A convergent mixed-methods approach was used to conduct a voluntary Google Forms survey on students enrolled in OALS 116 and LEGL 200 classes at MacEwan University and legal professionals working in the Edmonton area between March 24 and April 8, 2024. Students of the LEGL 200 and OALS 116 Winter 2024 classes were sent a Google Forms link within the learning management system for MacEwan University, mēskanās. A link to the Google Forms survey was also emailed to these MacEwan students. The survey was emailed to legal industry professionals with a link to the Google Form.

Quantitative (Likert scales) and qualitative data (short responses) were analyzed before comparing the entire data to determine whether the answers confirmed or disconfirmed each other. The questions asked of respondents are factored into demographics, quantitative (Likert scale), and qualitative sections, as shown in the data table below.

Survey Questions

Demographics

- What is your current role in the legal field?
- How many years of experience do you have in the legal industry?

Quantitative Questions (Likert Scale)

- On a scale of 1 to 5, do you agree an e-portfolio has merit when assessing the qualifications and skillset of potential non-lawyer legal professionals?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, do you agree e-portfolios can make a non-lawyer legal professional candidate stand out when it comes to employment?
- Please indicate your level of agreement with the statement: “An e-portfolio is a more effective tool for evaluating candidates than traditional resumes and cover letters alone.”

- Please indicate your agreement level with the following statement: The use of generative AI in the law office will transform legal processes and the work of non-lawyer legal professionals within the next five years.
- How much do you agree that employers in the legal field are likely to view e-portfolios favourably during the hiring process?
- To what extent do you believe an e-portfolio has usefulness in showcasing academic and professional accomplishments?
- How much do you agree that employers in the legal field are likely to view e-portfolios favourably during the hiring process?
- To what extent would MacEwan University students in Paralegal Studies or Office Assistant - Legal Major programs benefit from implementing an e-portfolio in their job applications?
- To what extent do you agree that including an e-portfolio in the hiring process can effectively showcase the skills of non-lawyer legal professionals?

Qualitative Questions

- Do you think students in Paralegal Studies and Office Assistant - Legal Major programs will benefit by creating an e-portfolio? Why or why not?
- If you are an employer, have you encountered e-portfolios from previous legal professionals during the hiring process? If so, what was your impression of them?
- What specific skills or experiences do you believe an e-portfolio should highlight for legal assistants or paralegals?
- What challenges or concerns do you foresee in implementing e-portfolios within the legal hiring process?
- In your opinion, what specific tasks or aspects of legal work could be significantly impacted by generative AI? Provide a brief explanation.
- How do you foresee generative AI affecting the hiring process for legal assistants, paralegals, and other non-lawyer professionals?
- Has the increased use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) impacted your hiring processes for non-lawyer legal professionals?

Demographic Analysis

The respondents varied, as shown in Figure 1, further segmented in Figure 2, where out of the 17, there was a mix between those in the legal industry and MacEwan students. The secondary question shows that through anonymous data (Figure 3), the years vary from those beginning in the industry with less than a year's experience to those with over ten years of experience. As such, the different responses received from those more experienced in the generative AI questions see this as a trend that will not garner traction as technology advances in the legal industry.



Figure 1: Participant Roles



Figure 2: Professional Roles

How many years of experience do you have in the legal industry?

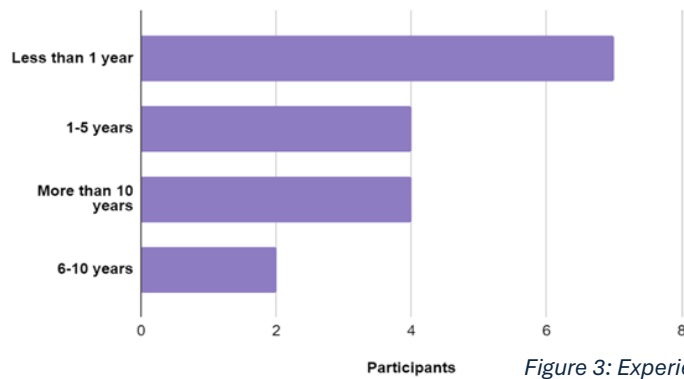
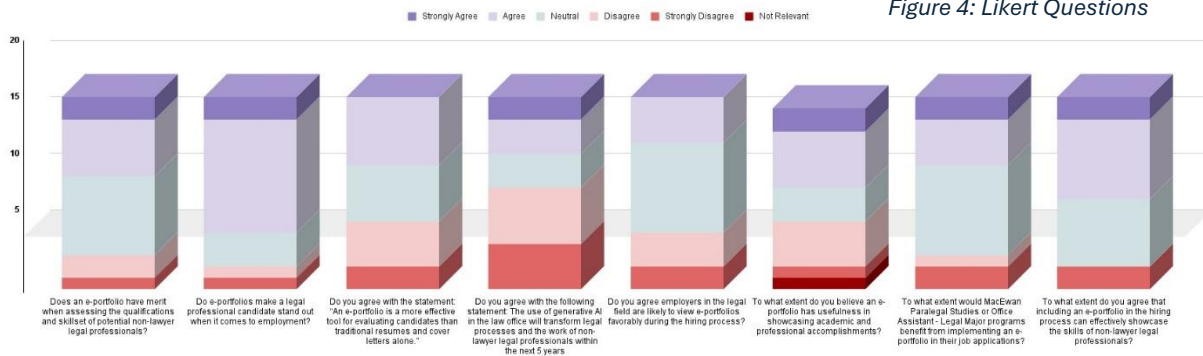


Figure 3: Experience

Quantitative Analysis

Likert Questions

Figure 4: Likert Questions



The responses shown in Figures 4 and 5 were mixed; some vehemently disagreed, and a few strongly agreed with the statements above. Though the range varied, most responses were mixed from neutral to agree, as indicated by the average responses between 2.5 and 3.

One of the highlights was the number of responses, 10 in total, who agreed with the statement, "e-portfolios can make a non-lawyer legal professional stand out when it comes to employment." This response shows that most respondents agree that having one is valuable.

Likert Scale Question Average

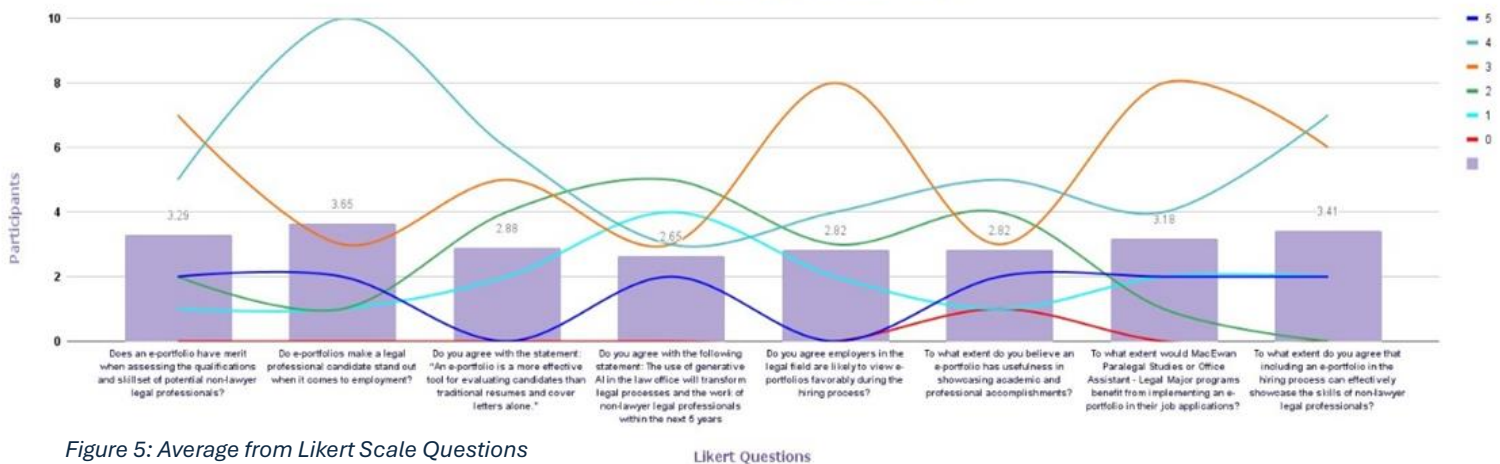


Figure 5: Average from Likert Scale Questions

Qualitative Analysis

The questions below summarize the analysis from some of the short answer (qualitative) data received.

- 1. In your opinion, how does an e-portfolio compare to that of traditional resumes and cover letters in terms of conveying a candidate's qualifications for legal assistant/paralegal employment?**

Respondents' opinions on how an e-portfolio compares to traditional resumes and cover letters in conveying a candidate's skills are varied. Some believe resumes and cover letters serve a different purpose and are more important. In contrast, others see how e-portfolios can showcase a candidate's technical proficiency and provide a more holistic overview of their skills. E-portfolios can expand on traditional resumes to provide more accurate representations of an individual's skills, particularly for those with no legal experience or entry-level students. However, some believe that e-portfolios may be more work for employers and do not accurately represent a candidate's work. Overall, e-portfolios offer an opportunity to elaborate on qualifications and provide a more straightforward example of a candidate's ability to complete a task.

- 2. Do you think students in Paralegal Studies and Office Assistant - Legal Major programs will benefit by creating an e-portfolio? Why or why not?**

Opinions on whether students in Paralegal Studies and Office Assistant - Legal Major programs would benefit from creating an e-portfolio are mixed. Some believe a traditional resume is more beneficial, while others feel an e-portfolio can be valuable in demonstrating a candidate's skills and accomplishments. However, concerns were raised about the *time* it takes to create and review an e-portfolio and whether employers would *actually review it*. Some believe that the portfolio's content would be the determining factor in its usefulness. In contrast, others think it could help students stand out from other applicants and showcase their technical skills.

- 3. What specific skills or experiences do you believe an e-portfolio should highlight for legal assistants or paralegals?**

The specific skills and experiences that should be highlighted in an e-portfolio for legal assistants or paralegals include certifications, education from courses, work awards, and a CORES certification. Writing, proofreading, and editing skills should also be showcased, along with typing speed and accuracy. It is essential to include an overview of skills learned in various classes and strengths and weaknesses. Writing samples, knowledge of specific applications, and certifications should also be included. The e-portfolio should be customized to the type of legal work an individual is seeking and should showcase their best work and accomplishments. Other important skills include effective written communication, legal research, organization, planning, and analyzing files.

- 4. What challenges or concerns do you foresee in implementing e-portfolios within the legal hiring process?**

Implementing e-portfolios in the legal hiring process poses several challenges and concerns. One primary concern is the authenticity of the work provided. Additionally, creating and reviewing e-

portfolios takes time, which may not be feasible for busy hiring managers. There may also be a lack of buy-in from lawyers with less technical proficiency, and not all candidates can create an e-portfolio, therefore creating disparities between applicants. Furthermore, the legal industry needs to adapt to new technologies, and some may view e-portfolios as a cop-out for not following traditional application methods. There is also a concern that e-portfolios may need to accurately reflect a candidate's abilities in an office environment, as students have time to make corrections and receive feedback. The challenges of implementing e-portfolios in the legal hiring process include time constraints, technical proficiency, authenticity, and industry norms. ***The most significant notable response relates to TIME on behalf of the hiring manager/lawyers on the hiring panel, but secondarily on behalf of the applicant.***

5. In your opinion, what specific tasks or aspects of legal work could be significantly impacted by generative AI? Provide a brief explanation.

Most respondents ***currently working in the legal industry*** believe that generative AI will significantly impact legal work, particularly in creating templates, drafting initial templates, generating letters, documents, and forms, and writing, formatting, and proofreading documents. They see AI as a time-saving tool that can maximize efficiency. However, most ***students*** believe that AI is overrated and need to familiarize themselves with generative AI to provide an opinion. **More experienced legal professionals (6+ years) find that gen AI won't impact their role, but those with less experience in their role see the benefits of using gen AI in the legal industry.**

Limitations

After the study was completed on April 8, the results showed that a few limitations occurred from the responses we received. While the emails provided resource links to learn more about the fictional website, Austen Marlow LLP, and to learn more about an e-portfolio, it was apparent from the responses that some respondents concentrated on the survey without reviewing the material asked prior. As such, these responses showed that some needed clarification on an e-portfolio and what one would look like. Even though the survey had 17 respondents, a range of legal roles, from legal professionals (10) to students enrolled in the two programs at MacEwan University (6), existed in the representative sample. However, this study found its way to a lawyer whose response remains an outlier from the data. The other major component that limited this study was the short time frame where it was conducted from March 28 to April 8, 2024. Even though the responses are mixed, an extended reach could be acquired from a more significant audience had there been more time.

Conclusion

The mixed sample shows potential value in having an e-portfolio, where data limitations existed in this study, as indicated above. As a result, we conclude that further research is warranted to analyze this objective, given the sample size in the initial survey and whether AI will affect responses in the future.

References

Gutiérrez-Santiuste E, García-Segura S, Olivares-García M.Á., & González-Alfaya E. Higher Education Students' Perception of the E-Portfolio as a Tool for Improving Their Employability: Weaknesses and Strengths. *Education Sciences*. 2022; 12(5):321.
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