

# E-portfolio implementation in Flanders: building bridges between separate projects

- **Background or context**

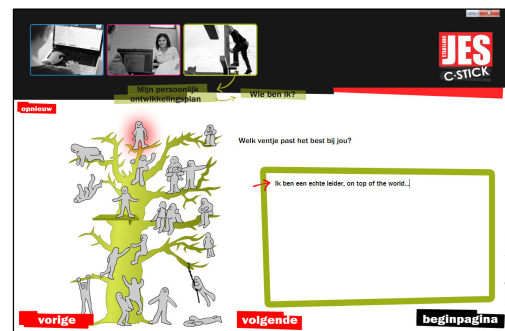
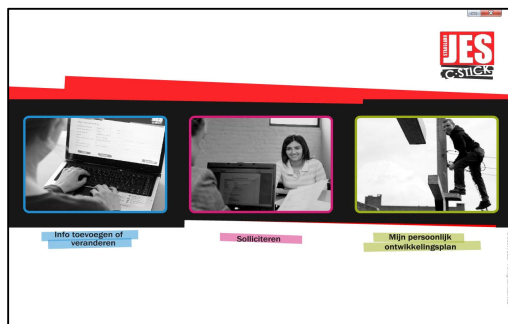
JES is a plural non-profit organisation. Its mission is to create equal opportunities for young people to actively participate in society. JES is based in three Belgian cities: Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. Its main activities include training and guidance, training for youth work volunteers, outreach work, support for youth clubs and youth work initiatives, ... These activities focus on young people, living in large cities, between 6 and 30 years old, of whom a lot are low-skilled and with migrant background.

In 2006-2007 JES carried out the C-stick project. During this project an innovative digital portfolio was developed: the C-Stick. The C-Stick is a central database where young people can gather and store all kinds of relevant information, it provides them with a framework for personal development plans and it contains a tool to create adjusted CVs in a very quick and easy way. In the C-Stick the main focus is on the identification and development of key competencies.

The portfolio was created on a USB flash drive, a very well known and attractive tool to young people that has several other advantages: firstly it can be permanently updated. Secondly it's also a concrete and tangible tool young people can carry with them at any moment, unlike an e-portfolio on a website. However, the C-Stick portfolio on the USB flash drive is also connected via the internet to a server, in order to keep a backup of the data. It's also linked to an administrative system by which tutors can send files and competence assessments to their pupils.



Since we wanted to create a portfolio apt for our target group, an important focus of attention throughout the development was to raise the level of accessibility by creating a very attractive and easy-reference interface and simple navigation structure and by using unsophisticated vocabulary.



- **Objectives**

The C-Stick project is now moving from a very small-scaled pilot at JES to a more large-scaled implementation in some sections of the Flemish Employment Service (VDAB) and integration with their e-portfolio 'Mijn Loopbaan (My Career)'. Other youth organisations and schools also started using the C-Stick. This evolution was not initially planned and grew from a bottom up process, but seems to set standards for future e-portfolio development in Flanders. It might as well be an interesting model for other countries or regions.

In this paper, we point out the main successes and difficulties we met throughout the process and present the model that was developed in Flanders.

- **Summary of results**

The C-Stick project originated from an ESF-call (European Social Fund). The most important strengths of the C-Stick project were some of the preliminaries that underpinned it:

- we wanted to create a portfolio that is accessible for a low-skilled target group
- we wanted to create a portfolio that coincides with existing terminology and data systems, which pushed us to establish cooperation with the Flemish Employment Service
- we wanted to create a portfolio that could be used in different settings: leisure time activities, training and job counselling.

At the end of the ESF-project, many other organisations were interested in using the C-Stick. This was certainly due to the growing awareness in schools and job counselling services on the need for tools that are accessible for a low-skilled target group and that focus on the identification and development of key competencies. Youth organisations on the other hand become aware of the importance of key competencies that are developed in youth work and are looking for tools to identify and recognise these competencies in an attractive way. Finally, to encourage lifelong learning and to facilitate transition, there is a need for tools that create a link between different learning environments (school, work, leisure time activities). The C-Stick is one of the first digital portfolios in Flanders that responds to this need.

Nevertheless, we faced some severe difficulties: technically the C-Stick system was not developed to be used by several organisations, on the juridical side there were no clear agreements with the software developers concerning ownership and finally there was no funding for further development and to cover staff costs.

These problems were solved thanks to funding from the Flemish Employment Service, own investments and successful negotiations with the software developing company.

In order to assure the continuity of the project, a centre was set up at JES to provide training and distribute C-Sticks to other organisations. Training is provided at commercial prices to cover the financial costs of the project.

In the mean time, technical research and development is carried out to accomplish data transfer between the C-Stick and the e-portfolio from the Flemish Employment Service 'Mijn Loopbaan'. Probably this data transfer will be based on an xml-standard. This research should lead to a standard model for data transfer for future e-portfolios.

- **Conclusions and recommendations**

In Flanders, several e-portfolios were developed, but no clear choice was made on large-scale implementation. Awareness grew on the fact that it's impossible to create one portfolio that meets the needs of all target groups. Nevertheless, people should be able to switch from one portfolio to another. Therefore the Flemish Employment Service will develop 'Mijn Loopbaan' as a central, secured platform from which data can be imported and exported from and to other e-portfolios. The only conditions for future e-portfolios will then be to use a shared competence terminology and a shared standard model for data transfer.

To make large-scale implementation financially possible, the following issues should be addressed: respond to the needs of a specific target group or organisation, make clear ownership agreements to avoid expensive licences and a sound business plan to finance continuing training and distribution.