What Is A Portfolio?


A professional portfolio is a career development tool that can be used for a number of purposes. Most people think of portfolios as a way to demonstrate their abilities to employers and potential employers. Like a résumé, there is no one right way to create a career portfolio. There are no standard specifications, but there are strategies and approaches that separate good portfolios from bad ones. A person with a well-designed and -developed portfolio will stand out when competing for jobs. If all other things are equal in the competition for a job, individuals with a portfolio will win over those who don’t have one.

Your portfolio should include artifacts. Artifacts are actual work examples that demonstrate or corroborate knowledge that you have, a skill that you possess, or a personal competency you demonstrate. Artifacts can be in a number of formats, such as electronic files (documents, PowerPoint slides), multimedia products, paper (hardcopy), video and audio, or websites (that you created or that contain your work).

BASIC PORTFOLIO ELEMENTS

There are basic elements that should be included in every portfolio. Portfolios are a reflection of an individual; therefore, portfolios should be tailored to the individual career goals of each person. Accordingly, each portfolio and its contents will be different. A basic career portfolio for learning and performance professionals may include (in the following order):

- table of contents
- brief biography and contact information
- career goals and objectives
- résumé, highlighting competencies and achievements
- list of references, including names, titles, and contact information
- client list (if appropriate)
- employee evaluations or other measure of your performance
- five to six artifacts of your work.

Portfolio Benefits

Professionals are increasingly pressed to demonstrate the value they add to an organization. We always hear that training is the first thing to go in tough financial times or when budgets get tight. A portfolio is an opportunity for professionals to demonstrate their worth to the organization using documented evidence of performance. By using tangible samples of your work, you can give clients a better idea of your competencies, the quality of your work, and the value you add for an employer.

Not only does a career portfolio communicate your competencies, but it also serves as substantial evidence of your abilities in real-life situations. In a typical job interview situation, candidates are asked to tell what they know and what they can do. Portfolios make it easier for an employer to assess your abilities, as it showcases them in a tangible way, using actual accomplishments. Portfolios serve as a

- tangible means to demonstrate your value to potential employers or clients
- tool to market yourself
- rationale for getting selected for key projects or to demonstrate your value to current employers
- tool to assess and differentiate job candidates
- basis for a meaningful interview.

Portfolio As Self-Assessment

As a learning and performance professional, you know the importance of lifelong learning and professional development. A career portfolio can be used to assess your learning and professional development in several ways.

One way to use a portfolio is as a means to reflect on personal learning goals and to assess your progress in reaching those goals. Reflecting on your own work is an important part of your professional development. Although doing high-level thinking about our own development is important, reviewing specific examples is even better. It is especially important to look at actual products and share them with your professional colleagues for feedback and ideas.
Another strategy is to track competency trends in the profession, and then compare how your portfolio matches up with the competencies and types of work samples that are in demand. Some ways you can track trends are by

- attending your local ASTD chapter meetings
- looking at job descriptions in the profession even if you aren’t seeking a new job
- reading profession-specific publications
- reading the blogs of noted luminaries in the field
- attending conferences.

Tracking competency trends in your industry can help you to take time to reflect on your own knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies and benchmark them against prevailing industry practices. For example, your dream job may require that you have knowledge of instructional design. You may want to take a course or workshop on that topic and then produce a portfolio item that demonstrates your competency in that area. This type of personal assessment can be very valuable in your career development.

**Types Of Portfolios**

There are two kinds of portfolios: working portfolios and presentation portfolios. It is important is to know the differences between the two to determine when each should be used.

A **working portfolio** contains all of your portfolio items. Think of it as your portfolio inventory master file. A **presentation portfolio** (sometimes called a showcase portfolio) is what most people think about when they think of professional portfolios. It contains selected items customized for a particular job. For example, you may have a number of presentations relating to instructional design. However, if you are applying for a job that focuses on instructional design within the context of e-learning, you should choose portfolio items that reflect your work in e-learning.

The chart below helps to display the differences between a working portfolio and a presentation portfolio.

**Build Your Training Portfolio**

By Greg Williams, Copyright The American Society for Training & Development © 2009, Publisher: ASTD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORKING PORTFOLIO</th>
<th>PRESENTATION PORTFOLIO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only seen by you and a selected few</td>
<td>Seen by employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contains all your artifacts</td>
<td>Contains selected artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only one</td>
<td>Can have several versions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A work in progress</td>
<td>A finished product</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identify Potential Artifacts**

You likely have a few of the elements that make up your portfolio ready to go, such as your résumé, bio, and list of references. In many ways these items represent who you are and what you can do for an employer. Determining what to collect and how to document items that demonstrate meaningful competencies is critical.

You need to get in the habit of documenting things that you do on the job. These do not have to be things that you create from scratch. It is acceptable to use documentation that already exists such as

- annual reports
- emails
- financial data
- memos
- performance appraisals
- reports
- status reports.
Be sure not to use any proprietary information in your documentation.

Ideally, you will have a number of artifacts in your working portfolio to select for your presentation portfolio. It is a good idea to customize your portfolio for different jobs. Choose artifact items from your master portfolio inventory as appropriate. Some items can be used to serve more than one purpose.

Your Top Ten Career Accomplishments

One good way to start creating items for your portfolio is to draft your top ten career accomplishments. These accomplishments will give you an idea of which work samples you should use as artifacts, and they can create a solid base for other things such as your résumé, preparation for interview questions, and performance appraisals.

Here are some examples of job and career accomplishments.

- Created first e-learning course for department of human resources.
- Managed the design, development, and implementation of “New Supervisor” training program.
- Reduced training vendor cost by 23 percent while maintaining same level of service and production.
- Developed and implemented inaugural employee coaching program at the Ajax Company as a way to address employee performance at no cost other than staff time.
- Created blended employee orientation program for new employees. Program enabled staff to begin their jobs faster. Received 85 percent satisfaction rating from supervisors compared with previous rating of 53 percent.
- Ideally, your accomplishments should be specific and quantifiable. They should address business issues. Remember that employers don’t just want to hear what you did. They want to know how you can solve problems for them.

Common Mistakes

- Being too modest. As a competent professional, you likely have many accomplishments to be proud of.
- Assuming only monumental accomplishments should be included. Remember that we are talking about your entire career. You don’t need to have a life-changing accomplishment every single year.
- Excluding team assignments as important accomplishments. They count. In reality, most accomplishments are not achieved only by you. It is fine to list team accomplishments as long as you describe your role truthfully and accurately.

Drafting Your Accomplishments

- Look at it as a brainstorming exercise. Initially, there are no bad accomplishments. Just get your ideas on paper. Don’t rule out accomplishments; assess and edit your accomplishments later.
- Interview your friends and co-workers to help you determine your most significant accomplishments.
- Look at copies of your résumé, past performance evaluations, reports, and letters of reference for ideas. All these can give you ideas to get started.
- Use Internet search tools to locate résumés of professionals doing similar work; often these résumés are wonderful idea sources for accomplishments you may be overlooking.

Organizing Your Accomplishments

- After you draft your initial accomplishments, you need to organize them. Here are some things to consider.
- Link your accomplishments to jobs you want. An accomplishment not linked to a goal will make employers say “so what?”
- Categorize your accomplishments in areas such as design, delivery, project management, e-learning development, and so forth.
- Have accomplishments in a variety of competency areas. Most employers want a mixture of competencies.
- Update your accomplishments on a regular basis.

Here are some questions to consider when selecting items:

- Who is going to see my portfolio? Are they training professionals, or are they managers who have limited exposure to the training field?
- What needs does the organization have? How do those needs translate into professional competencies?
- What problems or challenges does the organization have?
- What portfolio items demonstrate my professional competencies?
- Does my portfolio match up with items mentioned in the job description?
- How will they evaluate my portfolio?
- Does my portfolio match my résumé?

Tips For Selecting Artifacts
Much of what you put in your portfolio will depend on the type of job you are applying for. You should choose work that is relevant to both your professional goals and to the jobs that you want. No matter what, always choose your best work. Here are some tips to help you as you narrow down your artifacts.

1. Be Honest

Sometimes it is tempting to fill out your portfolio with items in your professional background that you see as having gaps. If you do not have strong instructional technology skills, it may be better not to include an example at all. No one is good at everything. You can always explain to the employer that you have not had an opportunity to work in that particular area.

2. Be Economical with Your Selections

It is possible that the items that you choose to display in your portfolio will demonstrate more than one competency, and this is a great thing. Be economical about the number of items in your portfolio. Nobody wants to look at a portfolio that has dozens of items. If you choose the proper items from your working portfolios to place in your presentation portfolio, then you don’t need many items.

3. Emphasize Multiple Purposes and Roles

In today’s complex workplace, there is a good chance that you are being asked to work on a project for which you perform more than one role and carry out several different tasks. You should use examples such as these for your professional portfolio.

For example, you may have assessed the need for a particular training course; then you designed it, and then you developed and taught the course. That would cover a number of different competencies (for example, e-learning developer and project manager).

4. Gear the Portfolio to the Job Description

If you are applying for jobs that emphasize instructional design, you should choose items from your working portfolio that emphasize those competencies. In contrast, if you are applying for a training manager position, you should choose items from your working portfolio that will emphasize your management capabilities. You don’t have to make a different portfolio for every single type of job, but gear your portfolio toward the type of job that you want, instead of having a generic portfolio that you use for every situation.

**E-Portfolio Preparation Checklist**

Whether you create your own e-portfolio or have someone help you, there are some things that you will have to do to prepare. Here is a checklist of some items to get ready to take your portfolio online:

- Gather as many original artifacts as you can in electronic format.
- Convert hardcopy artifacts to a digital format using scanners or screen capture software.
- Use tools such as “SnagIt” to label artifacts electronically.
- Delete or omit any proprietary information.
- Obey copyright and intellectual property laws where appropriate.
- Create back-up copies of everything.
- Decide if it will be public or private.
- Decide if and when you will make updates.

**How To Use A Portfolio**

**As a Job Seeker**

- As a way to get an interview; include information in application packet (website link)
- As a way to focus the interview discussion on your competencies
- During a job interview to illustrate your responses
- As an interview follow-up; send a sample of a project that they asked about.

**As an Employee**

- As documentation for your performance appraisal
- As a record of your achievements
- To let your boss’s boss know what you are accomplishing
- As a visible rationale to get choice projects or assignments
- As an example of knowledge management, a subtle way to market yourself
- To demonstrate your value to the organization for pay raises.
As a Consultant or Contractor

- As tangible proof of accomplishments and capabilities
- As a means to attract new clients
- As a method for clients to assess the quality of your work
- As a vehicle to market your services.

Presenting Your Portfolio

Your portfolio is a career tool. It won’t do you any good unless you know how to use it properly. Just like your résumé, you need to be familiar with the content. In an interview, you should be able to talk about your accomplishments by using artifacts in your portfolio. This means you have to practice your portfolio artifact presentations. Ideally you should be able to discuss your portfolio without having it right in front of you.

First, you should identify real needs in the organization, and match them with items in your portfolio that can address them. Anticipate the questions interviewers will ask about these needs.

Second, you need to develop talking points. Craft a response that demonstrates how you have addressed similar needs in the past. Your responses should be short and focused (about one minute long). These mini-presentations should talk about an issue that the organization has, what you did to address similar problems using your competencies (as demonstrated by your artifacts), and what the result was.

Third, you need to practice. Try role-playing with a colleague or friend. Interviewing is a skill. As with any other skill, you will get better with practice. Your audience will not always be familiar with all aspects of training and learning, so keep your presentation short, simple, and free of jargon.

Always include your contact information in the portfolio. It would be a shame to drop off a portfolio for review and leave no way for an employer to contact you.

Never leave your full presentation portfolio behind to be reviewed by another person. A portfolio is a representation of your talent, but it cannot replace the powerful dialogue that happens in the context of a conversation with you as the portfolio’s author. When faced with this request, you can say: “Thank you for your interest. I am very interested in this position/contract/project, and I will make it a priority to return to meet with this person so I can be sure to answer any questions she may have about my work. What day and time shall I reserve for this next meeting?” As a last resort, a smaller “leave behind” portfolio can be developed with a résumé and one or two small samples; but in general, it is best to arrange an in-person meeting.

Additional Resources:

http://www.hrdocs.uga.edu/BuildingYourCareerPortfolio.pdf

Create a Web Portfolio (Arruda)

Developing a website can be the best way to create a controlled, on-brand presence online without having to constantly generate new content. With a Web portfolio, you can provide a comprehensive picture of who you are professionally and what your relevant accomplishments are.

When we use the word portfolio, we’re not talking about oversized black leather cases with zippers that secure three of the four sides. We’re talking about cyberspace. A Web portfolio is the traditional paper portfolio concept reinvented for the online medium, with links and multimedia content. For example, if you’re a marketing executive, your Web portfolio might contain your brand bio, case studies, links to press coverage of your initiatives, audio testimonials, and a video clip of your recent presentation for the American Marketing Association. Portfolios are more than Web-based resumes in that they contain tangible evidence of your professional achievements.

Like the creators of any other website, you want your Web portfolio to attract traffic—something you can accomplish, in part, by ensuring that the site is easy to use and inviting to the eye. Because many Web-based career “portfolios” are poorly designed, you have a valuable opportunity to further impress visitors by ensuring that your site looks polished and professional. You’ve probably noticed that a lot of websites intended to support their creators’ careers look amateurish. Many also mix personal information (religion, politics, lifestyle) and family photos with career-related content. Or, they provide no information beyond what’s already in the person’s resume. Avoid these gaffes, and you differentiate yourself from others even further.

Tip Before including any content in your Web portfolio, ask yourself if your manager, potential employer, or
Proving Your Mettle

In a Korn/Ferry online survey, 44.7 percent of respondents said they believed that resume fraud among executives is increasing. Web portfolios protect you from being seen as fraudulent by enabling you to provide evidence of your achievements, not just tell visitors about what you’ve accomplished. For example, if you claim to have strong presentation skills, you can show a video clip on your website. Articles, awards, white papers, press releases, and schedules of speaking engagements are just some of the additional ways in which you can prove your expertise. Lance Weatherby shows his expertise with click-and-play Flash video clips of his interviews on CNBC and Tech Now. Figure 11.1 provides an illustration.

Figure 11.1: Multimedia Proof of Performance

Through your website, you can also provide tangible, multimedia evidence of your ability to follow through on your promise of value. Once you’ve fostered virtual rapport with visitors by supplying this evidence, your telephone or in-person meetings will begin at a deeper, more productive level. And it helps you weed out no-win situations by revealing more about you earlier in the evaluation process. For example, Alexandre Guéniot’s singing Flash CV (www.flashcv.com), which contained an on-brand presentation, netted him an internship at Microsoft. A creative approach like this certainly wouldn’t work for everyone. And that’s the point. What would work for your brand?

Of course, people are busy and want to quickly find information about you online. Thus, it’s always better to be clear than clever in how you design your website. After all, hiring managers don’t have time to figure out how your skills and experiences might benefit them. You have to tell people, in straightforward terms, exactly what you want to do for them and why you’re the most qualified to do it. That’s why clarifying your brand must always precede your Web-development efforts.

So, how do you grab visitors’ attention quickly online—and keep it? A clear brand statement/tagline, compelling design, and easy-to-navigate information architecture are keys to keeping visitors on your site long enough to want to learn more.

Heather Henrick’s Web portfolio design and content reflect her creativity and passion for pushing the limits—whether it be in her work, volunteer activities, or adventurous outdoor pursuits. Her area of specialty is immediately evident in her tagline. See more at www.heatherhenricks.com (Figure 11.2).

Creating my Web portfolio is, without question, one of the best career moves that I’ve made. Executive recruiters frequently call me with incredible opportunities even while I’ve been happily employed.

—Heather Henricks

Carefully consider the design and layout of your website. Even if the content is well written and compelling, the wrong design—one that doesn’t reflect your brand—will only work against you. For instance, if your brand says “trustworthy financial planner,” you wouldn’t want your site to look too creative or quirky. Before you build your site, know which brand attributes you want the site to reinforce. If you are unsure about your authentic brand attributes, get some input from those around you with the 360°Reach personal brand assessment that is included with this book. And if you decide to hire a website development company to design and build your site, take care that you select a good one. The box on the facing page offers helpful tips.
In addition to developing your own website and blog and having a profile at online networking sites, you have numerous other opportunities to build your online presence. To become digitally distinct, you want to ensure that there’s a great deal of content on the Web that consistently expresses your personal brand. Here are some ways to generate that content:

- **Publish:** Publishing articles online about your passions and interests is a great way to increase your visibility during a Google search. There are many article banks and Web portals that will accept your articles. ArticleAnnounce (a Yahoo! Group), for example, takes articles of all kinds and makes them available to those who need content for magazines and e-zines. Find the right places to post your articles, and regularly submit content that will drive members of your target audience to your website or blog.

- **Post:** Post your reviews of books that are relevant to your area of expertise at Amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com, and other online bookstores and provide links in the reviews to your website or blog. But remember: If your area of expertise is nuclear physics, posting a review of your favorite cookbook will only dilute your brand message.

- **Participate:** Join professionally oriented online forums and information exchanges such as Yahoo! Groups or Google Groups. By sharing your expertise, you increase your visibility at the same time. You’ll also start to build your brand community with others who share the same interests.

- **Pontificate:** Comment on other people’s blogs that are relevant to your personal brand. Get mentioned on others’ websites and blogs. Linking with other like-minded individuals improves your Google ranking and further increases your visibility.