

Developing Your

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You've been in the industry for a while and have successfully completed a good number of projects. You've also been diligent about updating your résumé on an annual basis—just in case—because, like any good scout, you want to be prepared.

As professionals, we are aware of the need to maintain an updated résumé. But how many of us spend the same time and dedication on a professional portfolio?

A portfolio is a technical communicator's most important marketing tool and is as indispensable as a résumé. It showcases the communicator's talents and abilities in the best possible manner while giving prospective employers or clients an opportunity to learn about a candidate's skills and career direction.

As the focus of technical communication expands, the need for multiple media to present your work and bring life to the timeline of your résumé is inevitable. Whether entering the market, searching for a new position, or hanging out your shingle, portfolios—yes, that was plural—in different formats are necessary to successfully pique the interest of decision makers.

Portfolios are living, breathing things that change and evolve with your purpose and your audience. So, for those of you who think you are going to get a job offer or business by throwing together a few samples of your work, rethink your assumption. With careful planning, or-

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ganization, and ongoing assessment, your portfolio in its various forms—hardcopy and digital—will be an indispensable asset.

Types of Portfolios

Just as there are different types of résumés, there are different types of portfolios with distinct purposes, though all share the ultimate goal of promoting you by showcasing your past work. As you gather your artifacts, or samples, consider the various types of portfolios you will use to market yourself.

The most common types of portfolios include the following:

Archive. Your “master portfolio,” a collection of every possible artifact you can include in your different types of portfolios.

Presentation. A collection of the artifacts that you would want to use in a face-to-face meeting. You should bind this portfolio in a professional manner.

Sample/leave-behind. A smaller collection of artifacts, often only specific samples of your work, used to submit with an application or to leave with a face-to-face interviewer. This collection, while still very professional, is less costly to produce and is intended to leave your hands permanently.

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Digital. Any or all of the above. May accompany a hardcopy portfolio or stand alone. An excellent way to showcase additional talents (HTML, CSS, Web graphics, etc.).

Planning Your Portfolio

Planning is vital to a successful portfolio. You must pay careful attention to the following:

- Your main purpose in creating the portfolio.
- Your primary audience.
- Your artifacts and their portrayal of you.
- Your intended delivery method—hardcopy, digital, or both.

Planning allows you to create a portfolio that is a creative and robust expression of yourself. During the planning stage, you must gather artifacts. Artifacts include, but are not limited to:

- Your résumé.
- Samples of your writing, graphic design, document design, editing, Web design, or anything you can use to promote yourself.
- Certificates or lists of awards and honors.
- A fact sheet outlining your skills, interests, community involvement, and other information that does not fit in your résumé.
- Letters of recommendation or thanks.
- Newspaper articles that address your achievements.
- A reflection on or a process summary of each item.

As you archive your artifacts, you will want to develop some way of organizing them. Without an organized set of materials to draw from, the sudden interview with just an evening's notice (or less) can turn into a nightmarish experience.

In addition, you will need to consider the intellectual property rights of some items and obtain permission to include them in your portfolio. When I was in the corporate world, I was careful to be up-front with my employers about my desire to keep both soft- and hardcopies of completed projects, as allowed by the company's guidelines. My supervisor knew what projects I took with me

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and, because I would use my portfolio to the benefit of the department, never was concerned about their use in my portfolio.

As a consultant, I talk with my clients and include language in our contracts that allows me to use appropriate pieces in my professional portfolio. In exchange for the use of a sample, I include a link to my customer's business Web site from my electronic portfolio or Web site. I've yet to have a client who wasn't excited to have the "free" publicity.

If the intellectual property owner of your project does not grant permission, consider some other way to document the effort. You may do this by completing a similar project for a nonprofit organization or creating a generalized description or a mockup that you can include in the appropriate section of your portfolio. If your niche of the industry commonly has proprietary projects, your prospective employer will appreciate that you don't provide specific examples.

Organizing Your Portfolio

Whether paper or digital, your portfolio should reflect your ability to work on different types of projects while meeting the needs of your audience or clients. *Coroflot.com*, one of many portfolio hosts, advises: "To rise above the rest and truly stand out in an extremely competitive field, your work needs to go

the extra mile.... Keep it simple, let the work stand for itself." Always consider what your audience members or clients want to know about you, as well as how they prefer to receive that information.

As a culmination of your work, your presentation portfolio should be consistent, organized, descriptive, and easy to use as a marketing tool. Arrange your artifacts in a way that works for both you and your audience. Your portfolio will be viewed in many different ways. Most commonly, you will have control of your portfolio and will be able to guide people through it. Sometimes, however, your portfolio will be passed around the room during a discussion or someone else will click through the pages of your digital portfolio. Members of your audience will be evaluating both how well you can organize your own portfolio and how easy it is for them to navigate it.

Use some kind of connecting thread throughout your portfolio to enhance its organization. For hardcopy portfolios, divider pages and tabs help you and your audience navigate your artifacts quickly. A color scheme and logo or other graphical element lends consistency. Chunking similar artifacts together contributes to the usability of any type of portfolio. All of these things make your portfolio memorable and give it a professional look and feel.

Inevitably, you will be asked to provide samples of your work with your application or leave samples after your interview. This can become quite costly when you are doing a full-scale job search. A sample/leave-behind portfolio, in essence a "mini-portfolio," is a good solution that meets the needs of your audience as well as your pocketbook. Rather than original documents, this portfolio contains partial documents copied onto good-quality paper. For independent contractors and consultants, the leave-behind portfolio will take the form of a pamphlet or brochure. As you will not be present when your work is reviewed, it is important that you present the information in a professional manner that will compel the decision maker to contact you for further consideration.

Digital portfolios give your prospective employer or client a different method of reviewing your work. These can be presented via the World Wide Web or on a CD or DVD. Rather than looking through your hardcopy portfolios, users will be accessing your information with limited direction from you. They will make their way through the information as their intentions or interests guide them without your verbal explanation or descriptions.

In your digital portfolio, you have two options for presenting your information. You can provide a snapshot of your work or the complete work itself.

As a consultant, I am very careful to show off my skills without giving them away for free. On my Web site, my clients will find thumbnail images of my representative projects with links to permanent homes on the Web. I am careful not to include documents or artwork in a format that someone can use to “snag” my template or layout without consulting with me. After discussing the project with the client, I then decide whether I am comfortable sharing the native files in a more complete electronic portfolio.

An electronic portfolio allows the prospective client to view the source of your work and see how you work with style sheets, word-processing software, HTML, Web-development software, and page-layout software. Again, you will want to present your information in a consistent, organized, descriptive, and navigable manner. In a digital portfolio, templates and consistent navigation schemes for HTML pages act like divider pages and tabs.

When I share native files with prospective clients or employers, I ensure they understand that all aspects of these works belong to me and have them sign a contract saying that they will not use the information I have provided them. Some technical communicators I know have even gone so far as to charge a consideration fee before providing this type of artifact. Always remember that the purpose of your portfolio is to showcase your skills, not to give them away.

The actual contents of a technical communicator’s presentation, sample/

leave-behind, or electronic portfolio will change according to the communicator’s goals and audience. The one thing that should remain the same is the organized navigation of the portfolios.

Each of my portfolios uses the same navigation structure and color scheme so that the prospective client can recognize my work on a crowded desk. This way, they spend more time learning about my talents and skills than finding a way around my portfolio.

Assessing Your Portfolio

Portfolios are never “complete.” They are continually updated in a dynamic, ongoing process. You should have an update plan in mind even as you start to put together your first portfolio. There are always new artifacts to add, new skills to highlight, and less effective artifacts to remove or replace. Keeping your portfolio up-to-date is important but, unfortunately, updates are frequently usurped by “real work.”

Nonetheless, just as you would update your résumé, you should also make periodic updates to your portfolio—whether digital or hardcopy. To make this task a little easier, consider using some type of reminder system so that you do not forget to include certain artifacts at update time. Reminder systems may include keeping a—

- Special folder icon on your computer desktop and placing electronic copies in it as you finish projects.
- Paper folder close at hand and placing copies of everything you do in that folder.
- Simple list of items with dates and file locations.

Any combination of these will work as long as you use it consistently. This is easier said than done, but it is well worth the extra effort when you begin the process of updating your portfolio.

To be competitive in our information society, you need to be able to present yourself in both hardcopy and electronic formats. With consistency, creativity, and flexibility showcased in your portfolios, you will be able to put your best foot forward and stand out from the competition. ❶

SUGGESTED READINGS

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