

PORTFOLIO



Add power to your job search with a portfolio

by Valerie D. Kidd Turner

You have diligently prepared your resume, researched employers, and practiced your interview skills with mock interviews. Now you are scheduled for a real-life, actual, “this isn’t a rehearsal” interview. Even if you have the persuasive skills of a champion debater and a resume that could win awards (if such awards were given), you still have one more marketing tool: a portfolio.

What is a portfolio? It is a portable collection of materials that showcase your skills, achievements, experience, academic excellence, and anything else that is relevant for interviewer to see. While the resume is a great tool for summarizing your background, the portfolio actually proves the existence and the depth of your skill, education, and other experiences. During the interview, the employer may ask you to describe one of your projects, and having the portfolio in front of you enables you to make a “miniature” presentation. It also empowers you with more control as you direct the interviewer’s attention during the interview. The interviewer will be more likely to

remember you because you are showing what you can do, rather than merely telling. Additionally, the evidence of your work adds credibility to your claims eliminates any suspicion of exaggeration or falsification.

Not only can you use the portfolio in your job search, but you also may need it for career advancement, such as promotions and annual evaluations. Why should you use a portfolio?

First, using a portfolio is a growing trend in many occupations. Artists, designers, and writers traditionally use portfolios to market their skills. Within the past few years, education portfolios have become a standard requirement. Now, with more occupations assuming project-oriented characteristics, portfolios have gained importance and are widely used as evaluation tools in business, the sciences, human services, humanities, and of course, arts.

Second, the portfolio demonstrates how well suited you are for the job or promotion. To create the portfolio, you need to have a good grasp of the requirements of the

position or, for career advancement, the qualifications for promotion. The items—called “artifacts”—that you select for your portfolio should demonstrate to the employer your knowledge of the requirements for the job or promotion.

Third, compiling and organizing a portfolio helps prepare you for the job or promotion interview. Even if you never use the portfolio in the interview, reviewing your past projects and achievements refreshes your memory of the situations and brings clarity to your career goals. With each artifact, determine the following: description of the project/achievement; who you did this for and why; when and where you did the project; and how you did it. When compiling the collection of work that you want to showcase, select your best material. This task should give you a better idea of how well you qualify and should improve your confidence in your abilities.

Employers will note the effort you took to prepare a portfolio. Not only does this effort demonstrate strong interest in the position, but it also reveals your level of energy, seriousness, your enthusiasm, creativity, professionalism, and work ethic. An attractive, well organized portfolio will enable you to leap ahead of the competition.

PREPARING THE PORTFOLIO

Step 1: Assessment

For the job search portfolio, research the qualifications of the position and determine which of your skills, achievements, and experiences demonstrate those qualifications. For career advancement portfolios, familiarize yourself with the employer’s or department’s specific guidelines.

Step 2: Content

Once you have determined the employer’s requirements, you then need to gather the items (called “artifacts”) that best prove your qualifications. Again, focus on quality rather than quantity, so don’t include everything you have ever

done. It’s advisable to keep both a “working” portfolio and a “display” portfolio. The working portfolio should be everything you want to keep, organized into file folders. From this reserve is where you will get the content for your display portfolio. As a general guide, six to ten artifacts is a suggestion, but no more than fifteen. Be aware of time constraints and the fact that the portfolio should be *portable*

In his book, *Portfolio Power*, Martin Kimeldorf offers another consideration when compiling your portfolio material. “[D]on’t include anything that could be offensive in terms of politics, religion, lifestyle. . . . [Y]ou need not include bulky items such as large reports, detailed curriculums, and databases. Simply refer to these items and include representative samples, a synopsis, or a table of contents.”

Following are examples of artifacts that your portfolio may contain:

- Table of Contents
- Academic Information
 - resume
 - transcripts
 - test results (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, etc.)
 - licenses, certificates, diplomas
- Professional Information
 - accomplishments
 - conferences/workshops
 - presentations and publications
 - writing samples such as brochures, reports, newsletters, press releases, and articles
 - training materials
 - samples of spreadsheets, databases, and other computer-related items
 - surveys
 - research projects
 - works in progress
 - news clippings, newsletters, and/or magazine articles that feature you

- Honors/Awards
 - educational awards
 - work-related awards/citations
 - nomination to honor organizations
- Service Information
 - volunteer activities
 - organizations (professional and service)
 - committee participation

Step 3: Design and Arrangement

Containers range from leather (or faux leather) zippered cases to three-ring binders. Don’t feel like you have to spend money you don’t have on an expensive case. Many selections come in mid-range and low-range prices. The important consideration is that the container look professional.

Use clear plastic sheets to separate and protect your artifacts. The top-loading type of sheet is a good choice, because it keeps your material from sliding out. Decide



USE CONSISTENCY in your layout. In this example, a bordered caption is placed beneath each item. A clear plastic sheet protector prevents the elements from being damaged and keeps each element with its caption.

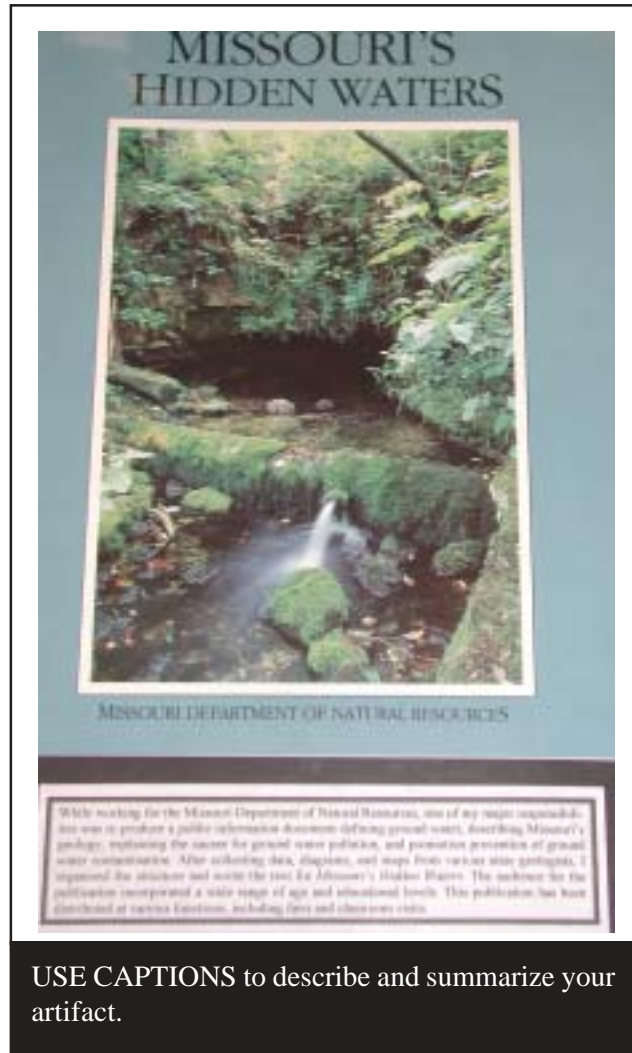
how you want to group your information. A functional organization allows you to group the artifacts into separate skill categories which you know the employer is seeking. For example, if the position requires public speaking and database management skills, you could include a printout of one of your PowerPoint presentations within the “public speaking” section and an Access database report within the “database management skills” section.

Another possibility for organizing your materials is the thematic approach. One way to approach this is to think of the specific roles or characteristics you want to emphasize about yourself. For example, one theme could be “the teaching life” in which you include examples of instructions, educational programs, and training. Another theme could be “the technology age,” in which you provide examples of working with software and hardware.

Of course, you are not limited to these organizational methods. If you devise another approach that works better for you, use it.

Another step in arranging the material is to create a caption for each artifact. The caption explains the piece and why it was created, describes its purpose and intended audience, how it was produced, and skills and tools used to produce it. Following is the caption created for the publication on the right:

While working for the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, I had a major responsibility for producing a public information document defining ground water, describing Missouri's geology, explaining the causes for ground water pollution, and promoting the prevention of ground water contamination. After collecting data, diagrams, and maps from state geologists, I organized the structure and wrote the text and captions for Missouri's Hidden Waters. The audience for the publication incorporated a wide range of age and educational levels, from elementary school children to retirees. This publication has been distributed at various functions, including fairs and school visits.



USE CAPTIONS to describe and summarize your artifact.

Step 4: Review

Know your portfolio thoroughly, because during the interview or evaluation, you will need to find the items quickly and easily. Fumbling for an artifact will only make you appear disorganized. Practice using the portfolio so you will be comfortable with it. Take the time to reflect on your experiences and to consider their importance to an employer.

PORTFOLIOS FOR TEACHERS

The Southwest Missouri State University Professional Education Unit provides information on “Professional Preparation Portfolios” at http://education.smsu.edu/peu/student_portfolios/ Students in the Professional Education programs must complete a portfolio to meet state certification and graduation requirements. Also included at this site are explanations for three designated checkpoints, a scoring guide for the MoSTEP standards, artifact cover sheets, and information/link to ePortfolio, which allows users to produce an electronic format of their portfolio.

Teachers may include in the portfolio a statement of teaching philosophy; syllabi and course descriptions; classroom management plan; sample lesson plans, objectives, and strategies; evaluations of lessons; copies of handouts and manipulatives used in the lessons; examples of students’ work and outcomes; letters/notes from children/parents; references from teaching supervisors and principals; and photographs and visual documentation of bulletin boards and projects in and out of the classroom.

USING THE PORTFOLIO IN THE INTERVIEW

The two ways in which to incorporate your portfolio into the interview are the “up-front” and “wait and see” methods. With the “up-front method,” as you and the employer make introductions, also “introduce” your portfolio. Unless employers have a prescribed interview script they must follow, they may appreciate your use of the portfolio as an “ice breaker.”

With the “wait and see” method, you wait until the discussion presents a good opportunity to refer to the portfolio. For example, the interviewer may ask you to describe a presentation you’ve given. As you describe the presentation, mention that you brought the handouts or printout of PowerPoint slides as an example. The main problem with the wait and see method is that, because it is passive, you potentially could leave the

interview without demonstrating your work. The up-front method allows you to learn immediately whether or not the employer is interested in seeing the portfolio.

You possibly will encounter employers who are unfamiliar with utilizing portfolios in interviews and who may not want to view your portfolio. There may not be enough time or an appropriate time to view your portfolio. However, even if you don't get the opportunity to use the portfolio in the interview, you will feel better prepared after having created it.

Another possibility in an interview is that employers may request that you leave your portfolio with them. Never leave original documents with the interviewer (unless you have an abundant supply of originals). Instead, before the interview make high-quality copies of some of your samples that you can leave if the interviewer wishes. Another option is to leave a digital portfolio with the employer.

DIGITAL PORTFOLIOS

Digital portfolios also are known as online, Web, CD, electronic, or virtual portfolios. Since many portfolio artifacts are originally in digital format, a digital portfolio is logically an effective tool for showcasing your work.

When creating a digital portfolio, begin with a traditional hard copy. After you have created the digital format, don't eliminate this hard copy version. If an interviewer doesn't have computer access readily available, you can use the hard copy. Leaving your CD portfolio with potential employers—or providing them with the Web address—enables them to peruse it at their convenience.

CDs come in various shapes: standard CD-R, Mini CD-R (round like the standard, but smaller—3", with approximately 200 MB storage); Business Card CD-R

(the size and shape of a credit card, holding approximately 50 MB); and Business Card (Rounded) CD-R (credit card size, with rounded corners; holds slightly less data than the non-rounded type).

The low cost of standard CDs is favorable for distributing the portfolio to several people. Costs associated with a Web CD include paying for an Internet Service Provider with which to house your Web site. Current students may publish their Web site to SMSU servers, which allows 5MB of file storage. Realize, though, that once you graduate, you will lose this space and, therefore, need to move your electronic portfolio to another service provide or save it to CD.

Another cost associated with digital portfolio includes software, which may include a Web editor such as FrontPage or Dreamweaver, imaging software, such as Photoshop, and software to convert documents to pdf format, such as Adobe Acrobat. Adobe defines pdf as "a universal file format that preserves the fonts, images, graphics, and layout of any source document, regardless of the application and platform used to create it."

However, if you don't wish to buy the software, pdf distillers (converters) are available, such as Create Adobe PDF Online. This service at <http://createpdf.adobe.com> enables users to subscribe for a monthly fee of \$9.95, which allows an unlimited number of conversions. With the trial version, users receive five free conversions. Some software, such as Adobe PageMaker, comes with a pdf distiller. At <http://www.pdf995.com> you can find a free distiller, which will display a sponsor page in your Web browser each time you run the software.

Of course, if you are not familiar with the software, you will need to factor in the time necessary to learn it. Because of the complexity of some software, you may need to devote a great deal of time to learning.

Design of the electronic portfolio is extremely important. In addition to the relevance of the content, focus upon the interface's attractiveness and ease of navigation. Maintaining consistency in the appearance and navigation makes it easy for the user to understand and demonstrates your organizational skills and professionalism. In addition, check that text blocks are not too large and that users won't have to do too much scrolling.

Consider your font choices carefully. For example, if you wish to present a sedate impression, don't select fonts such as *fürststüff* or *fingerpaint*. In addition, don't go overboard with the number of fonts. Too many fonts would make the site confusing and unprofessional.

Obviously, an electronic portfolio is less secure than hard copy versions; therefore the risk of having your work stolen is greater. However, you can take safeguards to protect your work. For example, you can password protect your Web site, so only people to whom you give the password can see it. You also may want to use the security settings available with pdf conversion.

Also consider the privacy issue. For example, do not include photographs of people in an electronic portfolio, and do not include your home address in a Web portfolio. Other items not appropriate for an electronic portfolio include references and letters of recommendation, personal information, work samples containing confidential information, and group projects without the written permission of the other group members.

Conclusion

Whether you decide to create an electronic or paper portfolio (or both), remember to maintain so it represents your updated projects and skills. When creating or updating the portfolio, take the time necessary to create a quality collection. Since the portfolio's purpose is to prove or demonstrate your skills and accomplishments, you want it to be professional, organized, and accurate—a reflection of the type of employee you will be. 