

Getting the Most from Your Portfolio



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Introduction

"One can never be certain where our careers will lead today. Therefore, use a portfolio to keep track of where you have been. It may just help you get to where you are going next."

Martin Kimeldorf

Congratulations on constructing your portfolio! Hopefully you enjoyed the process of collecting, selecting and reflecting. Now it's time to get the most from your portfolio as you begin your journeys into the workplace or toward further education.

So what's next?

I have been using my portfolio for twenty years. During that time I have used it for job interviews, college placement interviews, university placement interviews, career education presentations, employer presentations, scholarship interviews, soothing disappointments and building self confidence.

I am going to share with you ways that I have found best to effectively use a portfolio to get the absolute most from it. One thing is all that is required to achieve this....
Motivation!

"Why reach for the ceiling when you can reach for the stars"

Samuel Beckett



Stay Up to Date

"The portfolio is designed by you, to help you present the best of yourself to other people"

Anna Graf Williams

As both your private and professional lives continue, so should your portfolio.

Your portfolio is an evolving document that will never be completed.

Your portfolio is a living document that reflects your life's achievements and interests. You need to maintain the motivation to continually update it to get the most out of it, as you would your resume.



So, what should you add?

Over the past twenty years I have added the following;

- Academic qualifications
- Vocational qualifications
- Photographs of clubs, organizations and teams I have belonged to
- Employer and character references/testimonies
- Work samples - project reports, business reports, assignments, exam scripts, etc
- Professional affiliations and memberships
- Military records
- News paper articles that I have appeared in
- Volunteer work certificates of participation
- Social activities - certificates, licenses, qualifications

The best advice here is that you will reap what you sew. Experience as many adventures life has to offer, whether they are academic, vocational or social. Add these experiences to your portfolio as they will improve both your employment prospects and your social skills.



Two Portfolios?

Depending on your intended use for your portfolio you may wish to consider creating an additional portfolio. Let me paint you a picture....

You are excited to receive an invite for a job interview. The interview is expected to last approximately thirty minutes and you plan on taking your portfolio which contains approximately fifty pages.



Do you expect the interviewer to peruse all fifty pages of your portfolio, ask you their list of questions and answer your rebuttal all within that time period?

Not likely!

In my experience of attending and conducting interviews, it is more likely that the most you could expect for is ten to fifteen pages.

Does that mean if I have a thirty page portfolio I should discount the remainder?

Absolutely not! What it means is that you should arrange your portfolio so that the most applicable information is contained within the first ten to fifteen pages. Who knows, you may find an interviewer who wants to view all of it!

If that's the case then a separate portfolio created explicitly for this interview is a suitable solution.



Consider this second portfolio your showcase portfolio.

To keep it simple and flexible there is only one consideration when creating this portfolio.

Tailor your portfolio to the job description. Whatever they are looking for is what they want to see.... So show it them!



Tailoring Your Portfolio



Here is a stereotypical job description for an office administrator's position taken from a Lloydminster news circular.

Full time office assistant required. The successful candidate will be responsible for general office duties, payroll and data entry. The candidate shall possess excellent communication skills as well as organization, the ability to multi-task, have strong computer skills and be able to work as part of a team in a fast paced environment. Some oilfield experience would be an asset.

So let's list out what it is that this employer is looking for;

- Communication skills
- Organizational skills
- The ability to multi-task
- Strong computer skills - payroll and data association
- The ability to work in a fast paced environment - coping with pressures and deadlines
- Teamwork
- Oilfield experience

Let us assume you intend applying for the above position. You have secured an interview and feel confident that you have the abilities to succeed in this position.

There is one thing to keep in mind here. The employer has a wish list of skills and abilities that they are looking for in their ideal candidate.

When they peruse resumes, those are the items/traits they are looking for. When interviewing, these are the items/traits they are looking for.

So if a portfolio was arranged showcasing these traits, there is a good chance that it would be more memorable one and usher you toward the top of their list for consideration.

So how do we achieve this?

Let's take their wish list in order and present the portfolio in sequence. Generally, when people generate a wish list they consciously or sub-consciously prioritise it. Let's play devil's advocate and make some assumptions....

Communication Skills



What type of communication skills are they looking for? What will the “excellent communication skills” be required for?

- Communicating with fellow office colleagues, superiors and clients
- Telephone communication
- E-mail communication
- Generating office memorandums and faxes etc

So the evidence you select should attempt to reflect a skill set for these areas. Refer to your portfolio construction for examples and where possible, highlight these examples when asked for during the interview.

Organizational Skills



Why would these skills be important?

- Maintaining office records
- Adhering to office protocols
- Time management to ensure completion deadlines
- Organization breeds efficiency, efficiency equals profitability

Once again the evidence you select for “personal management” skills should reflect these skill sets.

Multi-tasking

A busy office will consist of many individuals all undertaking several tasks at any one time. The ability to multi-task will be an important aspect of any potential team member. So what sort of tasks would you be expected to manage?



- Daily office duties
- Bi-weekly or monthly payroll processing
- Updating employee information related to pay and or benefits
- Assisting in the preparation of reports regarding the payroll department
- Data entry tasks for databases
- Monitoring time cards, sickness, absence, expenses, transfers or training course placements

Evidence selected here needs to focus on office based tasks.

Computer Skills

Use of computer systems and software is of paramount importance in a computerised office and work place. So what are they looking for here?

- Use of MicroSoft Office - Excel, Word, Access, Outlook, PowerPoint etc
- Use of industrial office software - WinTax, WEB-Based, Open Source, SAPS, etc
- Reasonable typing speeds and accuracy
- Internet searches



Examples of your work and experience are vital here.

Pressure and Deadlines

In today's fast paced environments, work place stress is part and parcel of the working world. Employers are concerned with employees' abilities to cope with work based stress and their ability to thrive and survive.

What sorts of pressures would this position be likely to bring?

- Deadlines - Bi-weekly or monthly payroll deadlines
- Fast paced working schedules
- Multi-tasking pressures
- Dealing with employee pay concerns, queries or complaints etc



Teamwork



The modern office works within a hierarchical profile and require teamwork to accomplish their set goals and targets.

The reasons for teamwork should be self explanatory from this point. Effective teams achieve a synergy that results in productivity and profitability.

Oilfield Experience

As they say, there is no substitute for experience. Previous experiences will aide your transition into a new work force or role and will always be sought by a prospective employer.

Keep in mind that most employers are willing to train the right person. If you have little or no experience, never let that stop you from pursuing an opportunity. It will never hurt to try!



Summary

Hopefully you have an idea of the process that we have just discussed. A summary analysis based upon a job description and proper portfolio preparation could mean the difference between having a good interview, and having a great interview by securing the position.

Arrange your portfolio in sequence displaying the evidence that the employer is looking for. This particular information should be placed at the forefront of your portfolio with any and all supporting evidence to the rear.

If you feel that this amount of work is unnecessary and excessive, I urge you to consider this point....

How badly do you want the job?



The Interview

The purpose of your resume is to secure an interview. So congratulations, because you're half way there. Now all you need to do is shine at the interview. Your portfolio can be the key!



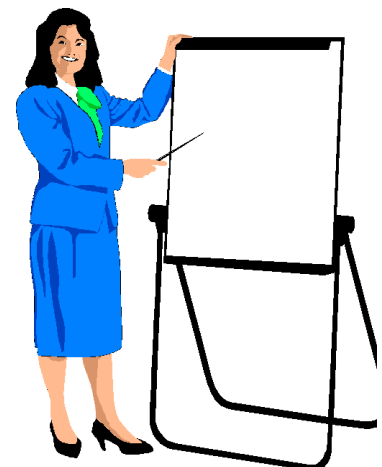
Let's address some common questions and concerns about the portfolio as used before, during and after an interview

1) When is the best time to present your portfolio?

The portfolio is best offered when either asked for, or when given an early opportunity to present it.

Being asked for your portfolio is an obvious and direct cue to present it.

At present it is far more likely that you will need to secure your own segue into presenting your portfolio. The easiest way to do this is to utilise your portfolio as part of an answer model. Let me illustrate by way of an example....



Interviewer: “Please tell me what experience you have with regards to marketing a successful product launch using an internet marketing campaign”?

Candidate: “Well, if you care to view my portfolio (*offer to interviewer*) you will see that I have spent the last three years working for a large international marketing consultant. In this position I was responsible for overseeing all new product launches as well as developing internet marketing strategies employing multi-faceted approaches, chief of which involved multi-level marketing.

In the previous example the candidate referred the interviewer to their portfolio. This strategy is best employed by answering an early question regarding position specifics. By securing a portfolio presentation opportunity at the earliest point, the interviewer will not be pressed for time when perusing your portfolio.

The interviewer must be interested in perusing your portfolio. In the previous example the candidate responded to the question without offering too many details. This is deliberate as it's the hook needed to intrigue the interviewer into perusing your portfolio.



Once the interviewer is perusing your portfolio, feel free to expand greatly upon your answer.

Your portfolio is far too important to remain seated in your lap throughout the interview. **Use it!**

2) *Should I leave my portfolio with the employer?*

My personal choice would be a resounding **no**. Your portfolio contains original documents and if lost would prove costly, time consuming and nearly impossible to replace.

I have never before been asked to leave my portfolio. I have secured many second interviews where the interviewer will allocate more time so that they may view the portfolio in greater detail or indeed invite others to view it also.

Ultimately however it is your decision as to whether you choose to leave your portfolio with a potential employer or not.

3) *Should I send copies of my portfolio to a prospective employer?*

A bespoke resume should be sent to prospective employers, your original portfolio should not. Please refer to questions 2) and 4).

4) *Should I create an electronic portfolio?*

Technology is an ever expanding constant in our lives. With the advent of *e-portfolios* it makes a great deal of sense to take advantage of as many methods of transmission as possible.

Documents may be scanned and digital photographs may be included alongside MicroSoft Office documents.

The portfolio may be saved in a variety of formats. An ideal format would be as a pdf file. Almost every computer system will be able to access a pdf file.

There are also software packages and websites available to assist you in creating an e-portfolio that will use other formats.



A huge advantage with an *e-portfolio* is that you can burn it to a CD-ROM or DVD-ROM which could then be sent to a prospective employer.

Another method would be to upload your portfolio to a host site where employers may view your portfolio on-line once provided with a URL address.

5) *Should I index my portfolio to assist the reader/interviewer?*

Again this is ultimately your decision. I know my portfolio inside and out. I know every piece of evidence I put in my portfolio and can tell you where it is, what I learned from it and how it improved my employability prospects.

As my portfolio continually morphs I find an index or contents page an unnecessary addition as the viewer often scans not reads.



Reflections Reflections

*I keep six honest serving-men
They taught me all I knew
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*

Rudyard Kipling



The final stage of your portfolio construction was to reflect upon your entries.

These reflections are what you must be prepared to discuss with the reader. Familiarity here is vital so there is no pause or hesitation in your responses. Familiarity may be achieved through rehearsal and preparation.

What do they want to know?

Many interview questions are open ended as they want to hear about you, the words and phrases you choose to use, your body language, your interests and aspirations, etc. A template that often proves useful in presenting is an old standard.... Who, what, where, when, why and how?

Who?

Who was involved? Which organisation or company, which social club?

What?

What happened? What did you learn from this from experience? What qualification did you obtain? What are your ambitions for the future? What motivated you to undertake this? What would you do differently if you were to repeat it? What would you change to improve the experience? What was the timescale? What were the circumstances that led to this experience?

Where?

Where did this take place?

When?

When did this happen?



Why?

Why did you choose this experience? Why did you select this piece of evidence for your portfolio?

How?

How did this happen? How did you hear about this experience?

How do I practice my responses?

In a mirror, with a friend, with a colleague, in the shower, whilst driving to the interview, in a mock interview, with a digital recorder, etc. Be creative!

Career Planning



Are interviews the only setting for my portfolio?

NO!

The uses and applications of your portfolio are only limited by your imagination. Here are several applications you may wish to consider;

Academic or Work Reviews

Many positions require performance reviews. These are often performed annually, but it all depends upon the organization you are working for. The purpose of the review is to discuss your yearly progress and to set new goals for the upcoming year. Typical areas of discussion may include;

Did you accomplish the goals that were set?

Did you complete the training courses that you requested or required?

Did you pass the examinations/audits that were set?

Has your performance level increased matching productivity?

How are you interacting with members of your team and other associated colleagues?

What are your plans/goals for the following year and do they match those of your employer?

Many companies call this process an **SAR** (Self Assessment Review). You are asked to complete a form that presents a selection of questions. This form accompanies you to the review and assists you in justifying your answers and addressing any employer concerns.



So how does my portfolio help with that?

Your portfolio can be used to chart your progress and growth.

A **personal mission statement** can be produced at the start of year. The mission statement is what you intend to achieve and how you intend to achieve it.

A **Gantt chart** (timeline) can be used to set time scales and deadlines to assist you with time management.

Monthly reviews can be added to report upon your progress compared to your mission statement.

Reflections of training courses can be generated with projections onto the next year.

Finally a well informed and detailed SAR can be written at the end of the year.

How does that help? It seems like a lot of work!

Most people when writing their SAR have trouble completing it. They are required to remember back over the year and write down specifics of events that happened a long time ago.



Ambiguous and convoluted SAR's portray an unorganized image. Almost all employers are looking for organization skills (*remember back to the job description*). Why stop displaying them, simply because you already have the position?

If your portfolio has tracked the entire year, how easy and how professional will your SAR look?

Your annual review like your interview should be a memorable one. When it comes time to promotion or bonuses, which employee do you want them to remember?

Career Focus and Confidence

Stuck in a rut, not too sure of where or what to do next?
What are you interested in, where do your passions lie?

Consult your portfolio!

Your career portfolio is a reflection of your thoughts, interests, experience and attributes. Consciously or sub-consciously we covet what we are interested in.

All too often we accept positions that we are not suited for.

Interest levels wane and unhappiness is sure to follow.

Your career portfolio can help you to decide the careers that most interest you!

Look back through your portfolio and develop your own personality profile...

Consider the following;

- Is there a pattern to the choices you've made?
- What motivated you to undertake your portfolio entries?
- Did you enjoy your work experience or job shadow?
- What subjects most interested you at school or college?



- Is your portfolio pointing to a particular career path? Academic, clerical, practical, trade, technology, etc
- Which portfolio entry/experience did you enjoy the most?
- What social activities have you most enjoyed?
- Which exams did you score the highest mark on?
- If this were someone else's portfolio, what advice would you give them?

Try to be critical and impartial throughout this process. Like your portfolio this experience can be an interesting voyage of self discovery.

Choices you've made in the past have shaped you into the person you are today. Are you happy at present or do you wish to change or improve your current circumstances?

If you wish to improve upon your current circumstances.... **IMPROVE THEM!**

Grab life by the horns and pursue your happiness, your portfolio can be your guide!

What about confidence?



All too often we self deprecate. We beat ourselves up over the choices we've made or we let our reach be considerably shortened by our self disbeliefs.

Like our portfolios we are unique! There is no one else on this planet like us. We have a unique blend of strengths, interests, attributes and weaknesses.

Your portfolio showcases your talents and presents these to whoever may read your

portfolio. Extract all that is good and be proud of it!

I guarantee you, there are employers out there looking for someone just like you! Believe it, say it, go out and get it!

Look back through your portfolio. You must be proud of your entries, for every one of them is an accomplishment. Every one of them took effort and motivation; you learned new skills and broadened your horizons because of them. You are an amazing person who deserves others to know it too, so shout about it!



A Final Word

Your portfolio is arguably the most important document you will ever own. Cherish it, nurture it, promote it and **USE IT!**

Within this brief guide, I have shared with you my thoughts regarding this wonderful document.

By no means is this the end.... It is only the beginning, how this story turns out is entirely up to yourself and your portfolio.

Good luck and have a successful journey!

