

Paper and Electronic Portfolios: Saleskits for Technical Communicators in the Twenty-first Century

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In the twenty-first century, technical communicators are discovering that portfolios (electronic and/or paper) are indispensable career tools. Portfolios have many uses because they contain a variety of documents that have been developed with the tools and skills claimed on the resume. In addition, portfolios can be instrumental in getting a promotion or winning a contract.

This paper covers the following topics:

- *Features of a portfolio*
- *Importance of portfolios to technical communicators*
- *Project Portfolio—the course*
- *Tips on design and content*

FEATURES OF A PORTFOLIO

While portfolios come in many sizes, shapes, and colors, most portfolios share a common goal. Portfolios are saleskits whose aim is to persuade an employer, supervisor, client, or teacher that you can do what you claim on your resume. By definition, a portfolio is a collection of professional material that demonstrates your technical communication abilities. Portfolios are not comprehensive; instead, they are selections of your best work from your degree program (if you are a recent graduate) or from industry (if you are a seasoned veteran).

IMPORTANCE OF PORTFOLIOS TO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS

In “Reflections on an Explosion: Portfolios in the 90’s and Beyond,” Elbow and Belanoff examine the explosive impact portfolios have had on writing instruction since roughly 1990. The popularity of writing portfolios in the classroom has sponsored research projects that include conferences, journal articles, research reports, and essay collections. The explosion that Elbow and Belanoff comment on is carrying over into industry as students who have been schooled in portfolios graduate and enter the work force. In “Portfolios for Technical Communicators: Worth the Work,” Scott notes that a portfolio can help the technical

communicator find a job because it provides employees with evidence of skills and completed projects.

Portfolios can serve as saleskits before, during, and after the interview particularly if the technical communicator has both a paper and electronic version of the portfolio. If the electronic portfolio is referenced on the resume, the employer can view it during the screening process to decide whether or not to interview the applicant. During the interview, the technical communicator can showcase the paper version of the portfolio in order to link the skills and tools demonstrated in the portfolio to the job requirements. Additionally, the electronic portfolio can serve as a useful selling tool after the interview if the employer wants clarification of a point made during the interview or wants a closer review of pertinent project documents.

Portfolios can also be used for promotions, raises, or job changes. Given the changing nature of the technical communication profession in the twenty-first century, a portfolio is rapidly becoming an indispensable professional tool.

PROJECT PORTFOLIO—THE COURSE

As Elbow and Belanoff note, writing instruction is rapidly becoming portfolio based. At the university where I teach, Project Portfolio is a required capstone course for all technical communication majors. I team-teach the Portfolio course with a colleague of mine whose research specialty is portfolio theory. The course requires each student to design, develop, and present both paper and electronic portfolios to classmates, professionals, and teachers in an Open House that serves as a final exam. In preparation for the portfolio projects, each student submits a marketing plan that includes a professional personal narrative, a detailed company profile, and a time line for designing and developing the portfolio. Each student also completes a career unit that includes paper and electronic resumes, a variety of job search documents (the most critical being the application letter), and a practice job interview.

TIPS ON PORTFOLIO DESIGN AND CONTENT

reviews manuscript submissions for *Technical Communication Quarterly* and has published widely in most of the major technical communication journals.

- Include a current resume and business card (with pockets containing additional copies of each).
- Include a mission statement that identifies who you are and what your plans are.
- Use before and after sample documents.
- Tab the paper portfolio so it is easy to skip and scan.
- Create a well-designed cover.
- Reproduce screens from online and multimedia projects with a cover explaining the projects.
- Use plastic slip-sheets to keep samples smudge free.
- Include testimonials, references, awards, and professional associations.
- Make sure the electronic portfolio is easy to download.

CONCLUSION

Technical communicators are realizing that portfolios (paper and/or electronic) are becoming indispensable tools for the twenty-first century job market. A well-designed portfolio can be instrumental for getting a job, winning a contract, or receiving a promotion. Successful portfolios are representative in nature, containing selections of your best work. They are designed so that they are easy to update and maintain.

Sample portfolios will be shown at this presentation.

REFERENCES

- (1) Elbow, P. and P. Belanoff, "Reflections on an Explosion: Portfolios in the '90s and Beyond," in *Situating Portfolios: Four Perspectives*, Eds. K. Yancey and J. Weiser, Logan, UT: Utah State, 1997.
- (2) Magyar, M. "How to Create A Portfolio," *Newsletter PCS*, Vol. 45, No. 6, November/December 2001.
- (3) Scott, J. "Portfolios for Technical Communicators: Worth the Work," *Intercom*, February 2000.

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