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FOR DEVELOPING TALENT



CREATING A CAREER PORTFOLIO

Greg Williams

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT

CREATING A CAREER PORTFOLIO



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Professionals in a wide range of fields have been using portfolios for years. These include artists, graphic designers, website developers, architects, marketing and communication professionals, and K-12 teachers. Think about it. How could an architect really demonstrate what she does by only telling someone what her work looked like? By using actual samples of their work, architects can give clients a much better idea of their competencies, the quality of their work, and the value they may add for an employer.

The learning and development (L&D) arena is no different. We are increasingly pressed to demonstrate what value we add to an organization. Career portfolios are becoming the passport for entry into the world of employment, or to advance in one's career. Because organizations are under pressure to hire the best employees possible, they are increasingly requiring applicants to show evidence of their expertise.

But for learning and development professionals who have never had a career portfolio, or who have used only a paper portfolio, many questions arise:

- What should be in a portfolio?
- What tools can I use to document my expertise?
- How can I be sure I'm making the best use of my portfolio?
- How do I translate my paper portfolio to an electronic format?

This *TD at Work* will explain what a portfolio is, how to design and develop one, how to use a portfolio in the job search, and how to use today's technology tools to assist in the process.

WHAT IS A CAREER PORTFOLIO?

A professional portfolio is a career development tool that can communicate and demonstrate an applicant's knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies with documented evidence of performance.

A portfolio can be used in several different ways—a core one being to get a job. Not only does a career portfolio communicate your

competencies, but it also provides tangible proof of your abilities in real-life situations. Think about a typical interview situation. Candidates are asked to tell what they know and what they can do. Wouldn't it be better for candidates to provide samples of their work? This makes it easier for an employer to assess the applicants' abilities.

You have undoubtedly heard that training is the first thing to be cut when budgets get tight. Portfolios provide an opportunity for learning and development professionals to demonstrate their worth to the organization using documented evidence of performance.

Just as with a resume, 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, which we'll learn in this issue of *TD at Work*. A person who has a well-designed and developed portfolio will stand out when competing for jobs. In a competitive job market, if all other things are about equal, candidates without a portfolio will likely lose out to those who have one.

While portfolios are popular in many different professional fields, this *TD at Work* is specifically intended for professionals in the learning and development arena.

PORTFOLIOS PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT (L&D) PROFESSIONALS TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR WORTH TO THE ORGANIZATION USING DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE OF PERFORMANCE.

WHAT'S IN A CAREER PORTFOLIO?

There are basic elements that should be included in every portfolio, such as a bio. But portfolios are also a reflection of an individual; therefore, portfolios should be tailored to the individual career goals of each person.

Basic Portfolio Components

In addition to the work samples showcasing a worker's competencies, a portfolio includes background information about the individual. A basic career portfolio for learning and development professionals may include:

- a brief biography
- a resume, highlighting competencies and achievements
- a list of references, with names, titles, and contact information
- a client list with project descriptions
- employee evaluations or other measures of your performance
- a writing sample
- five to six examples of your work.

Additional Portfolio Components

The following items are examples of additional materials that may be included in a training professional's portfolio. The list is not meant to be inclusive.

- course design plans or evaluations
- evidence of training delivery (such as videos)
- evidence of projects you have led or managed
- training needs analysis
- multimedia productions or e-learning modules.

SELECTING ITEMS FOR YOUR PORTFOLIO

As already mentioned, it's valuable to have five to six samples of your work in your portfolio. If you have some experience in the field, ideally you will have more than five or six to choose from. To get started, gather as many good work samples as you can find to create a "master portfolio inventory" from which to choose the appropriate items. As with a resume, it is a good idea to customize your portfolio for different jobs. Think of your portfolio

as an outfit of clothing. We all have a closet that contains our clothes. If we want to work out or exercise, we select an outfit and gear for that specific task. If you are going to go to an interview, you select an appropriate outfit for that purpose. Think of your master portfolio inventory as the closet from which to choose the appropriate work samples.

For example, you may want to have one portfolio that emphasizes management of the learning function, while another may be geared for a senior instructional design position. That doesn't mean you have to create entirely new and different portfolios. You can simply choose work samples from your master portfolio inventory as appropriate. Just as you have clothing that can be worn to a number of events, you will have work samples that can be used for several different customized portfolios. See the sidebar, Questions to Ask When Selecting Portfolio Items, to guide you on which work samples to include.

AS WITH A RESUME, IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO CUSTOMIZE YOUR PORTFOLIO FOR DIFFERENT JOBS.

In addition to biographical information, one item in your inventory that you can use in all of your portfolios is a writing sample. Regardless of the position's focus, all employers will be interested in your writing skills. Two types of writing samples work particularly well. One is a sample that describes your philosophy of learning or training. This type of sample not only shows potential employers how you write but also gives them some insight into your personal philosophy. Another sample could be something you've actually used in the workplace. (As I'll explain in further detail later, make sure that the sample does not contain confidential material and that you have permission to share it.) If you are applying to work in an organization that uses proposals to solicit contracts, it would be appropriate to submit a proposal that you have drafted.

In terms of selecting work samples, you should choose work that is relevant to your professional goals as well as the jobs to which you are applying.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN SELECTING PORTFOLIO 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 learning and development needs does the organization have?
- What problems and challenges does the organization have?
- Which items represent my best work?
- Which work samples have shown positive, measurable, and impactful results?
- What work samples demonstrate my professional competencies?
- Do my work samples match up with items mentioned in the job description?
- How will potential employers or clients evaluate my portfolio?
- Does my portfolio match my resume?

And choose your best work. No one is an expert at everything. If you are not a great multimedia developer, don't dwell on that. Focus on what you can do well.

Avoid the temptation to say you have extensive instructional design experience when you don't. You can explain to the employer that you have not had an opportunity to work in that particular area, or that you have not had enough time to develop that particular skill. But let people know that you have at least basic competencies that are required for the job (only if that is true, of course).

REGARDLESS OF THE POSITION'S FOCUS, ALL EMPLOYERS WILL BE INTERESTED IN YOUR WRITING SKILLS.

Let's say that you are applying for jobs that emphasize skills and competencies in instructional design. Choose items from your working portfolio that emphasize those competencies. If you are applying for a training manager position, on the other hand, select work products that emphasize your management capabilities rather than your

instructional design skills. You don't need to have a completely different portfolio for every single job, but you also don't want to have a generic portfolio that you use for every situation.

It's also important to have a well-balanced portfolio. Unless you are applying for a job as a Flash developer, your portfolio should not be filled only with examples of Flash productions that you have created.

Many people will not read your work samples all the way through. You should take this into account when you format and organize your work samples. It is appropriate to include excerpts of longer work samples, and you can use graphics and text formatting to help viewers read your work samples more easily. As always, the use of graphics and bullets, bolding, and italics will make your documents more inviting to read or view.

Finally, make sure you let employers know that you have more work samples than those you included in your portfolio. If a potential employer discusses a particular requirement at the interview that's not covered in the work samples you selected, let the interviewer know that you have experience in that area and would be happy to send a work sample that relates to that need. Providing additional work samples is a good way