

Professional portfolio development

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Continuous professional development is a concept which most professionals view as a daunting task. Creating a professional portfolio enables any professional to track professional development and to document the development and achievements regarding one's career. Literature on the subject of professional portfolios mostly refers to the teaching profession. However, the basic principles remain the same and this article attempts to set a guideline for occupational health and safety professionals to create professional portfolios.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of using a portfolio originated in occupations where creativity is a necessary skill. Employers seeking to hire persons in jobs related to art, advertising, and journalism often require a portfolio in the hiring process to demonstrate their work.¹ However, a portfolio helps to document work experience, achievements and skills in any profession. In fact, developing a portfolio while still studying should help a portfolio owner to evaluate him/ herself and his/her career decisions. Following completion of study, the portfolio can serve as an invaluable tool to demonstrate skills to a potential employer during an interview.²

Creating a professional portfolio is essential in today's employment marketplace. A portfolio is a medium to sell a person to a potential employer by showcasing that person's skills and experiences. It can be either electronic or paper based. A well-designed portfolio can give a potential candidate an edge over other candidates in the job market. It also allows a person to prepare for an interview by organising his/her thoughts about successes and challenges.

WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO?

A professional portfolio is a record of goals, growth, achievement, and professional attributes.³ It illustrates goals and development over time, and not simply the highest level of achievement. It is a showcase for the portfolio owner's achievements and talents, which can be used to show samples of work, certificates, diplomas, degrees, awards, letters of commendation, etc.^{3,4}

Portfolio development involves the complex processes of self and collaborative evaluation. Portfolio development also requires decision-making and analysis concerning the selection and arrangement of the documents to be included as well as the development of presentation skills to facilitate communication concerning professional development.^{2,5}

A professional portfolio should not be confused with a *curriculum vitae* (CV). A CV lists accomplishments at each organisation (in reverse chronological order), but a portfolio shows the work the portfolio owner has done.² It is a collection of work accomplishments, using specific examples to show those accomplishments in much greater detail than a CV.⁶

THE PURPOSE OF A PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO

- As professionals continually create and revise their professional work they can examine their own development and growth.
- The portfolio is a record of professional accomplishments that can be shown to others and discussed in professional situations.
- It is a record and display of professional goals, growth, and achievements.
- A portfolio is a foundation for career-long self-directed professional development.^{2,5,7}



THE ADVANTAGES OF USING A PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO

- It allows the portfolio holder to expand on his/her CV in a more comprehensive manner. It is often necessary to limit a CV to one or two pages. Having a portfolio allows a person to expand as fully as desired on any area of his/her expertise.
- A portfolio can demonstrate tangible proof of a person's skills and abilities.
- It helps to keep all essential work-related samples and documents in one place and protected.
- A person can be more creative in his/her portfolio than in producing a CV and cover letter. Most experts recommend using plain white paper for CVs and cover letters. In a portfolio, a person can use a variety of paper, graphics, and colours to display his/her work to its best advantage.^{1,8,9}

GETTING STARTED

Developing a professional portfolio is a complex, thought-provoking process of self-evaluation, reflection, decision-making, and goal setting that takes place over time and in authentic contexts.⁹ If begun as a student, it has the potential to be a vehicle for career-long professional development and a source of unrivalled personal satisfaction.²

Before assembling a portfolio, begin planning by thinking about the purpose and audience. Professionals develop portfolios for a range of specific purposes – job searches, departmental reviews, award nominations, and

other situations – and each brings an audience with a unique set of expectations and needs.^{6,10}

WHAT GOES INTO A PORTFOLIO?

Many people set up their portfolio in a binder or file with labelled sections separated by tab dividers. Examples of what might be included are shown hereafter.^{2,4,10,11} In addition, Figure 1 provides a schematic illustration of the content that could be included in the portfolio.

- *Summary of career and goals:* A description of what the owner stands for (such as work ethic, organisational interests, management philosophy, etc.) as well as short and long-term goals.
- *Professional philosophy/mission statement:* A short description of the guiding principles that drive and give purpose to the portfolio holder.
- *Résumé:* A brief summary of education, achievements and work experience, using a chronological or functional format.
- *Skills, abilities and qualities:* Sections containing information on skills and experiences related to a specific area such as management, marketing, training, clinical skills, etc. Include checklists of critical skills related to this area. As different levels of competency are attained with each skill, an instructor or employer can sign off on the ability to perform the skill. There are usually pre-existing checklists of skills standardised by an organisation.
- *List of accomplishments:* A detailed listing that highlights the major accomplishments in the portfolio holder's career to date.

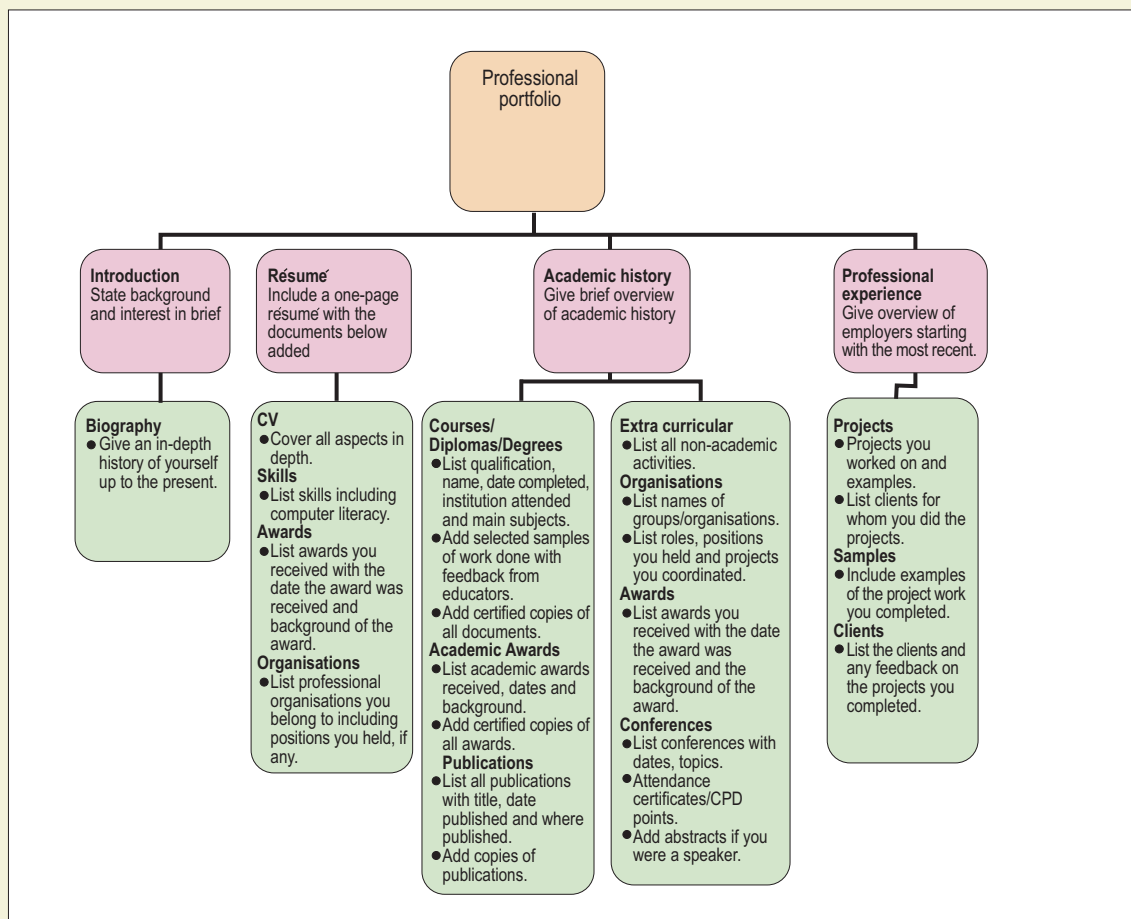


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of the possible content of a portfolio

- *Work samples*: Examples of best work, including reports, papers, studies, brochures, projects and presentations. Besides printed samples, CDs, videos, and other multimedia formats can also be included.
- *Research, publications, reports*: Include copies of research papers, articles published, reports written etc. to illustrate written communication skills.
- *Testimonials and letters of recommendation*: Insert letters of recommendations from customers, clients, colleagues, past employers, educators, etc.
- *Awards*: Include certified copies of any awards.
- *Degrees, diplomas, licences, and certifications*: Give a description of degrees, diplomas, courses etc. with certified copies of the qualification obtained. Add your annual receipt and licence to practice, as well as copies of professional body membership.
- *Professional development activities*: A listing of professional associations and conferences attended – and any other professional development activities. Include a description of all conferences, seminars, and workshops participated in, as well as copies of papers presented. Add copies of certificates of attendance with CPD points, if applicable.
- *Volunteer/community service*: Give a description of any community service activities, volunteer or pro bono work. Letters of recognition, photos of projects completed, programmes and brochures relating to community service projects.
- *References list*: A list of three to five people (including full names, titles, addresses, and phone/e-mail) of people who are willing to provide a reference.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ORGANISING PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIOS

The following are guidelines for ease of assembly and effective organisation of a portfolio.

- Use a good quality file.
- Begin with an identification page that includes name, address, and telephone number.
- Place multiple-page or otherwise irregularly shaped entries in plastic sleeves or pockets. Do not damage any document in order to include it; rather place it in a plastic sleeve.
- Remember that portfolios are representative, not comprehensive. Make sure all entries are securely attached within the portfolio.
- Include a Table of Contents that identifies the overall organisation of the portfolio. Indicate and label the sections clearly.
- Within each section, include a Table of Contents and note each entry.
- In general, arrange the portfolio in a way that makes it easy for reviewers to identify the set goals and subsequent progress or achievement related to these goals.
- Remember that portfolios are dynamic – so continue to develop yours.^{2,5,6,7}

OTHER GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING A PORTFOLIO

Items of a personal nature that are related to a person's personal life (for example marriage or divorce certificates and photographs of personal nature) should NOT be in-

cluded. All items in the portfolio should be a clear illustration of the portfolio owner's work-related skills and achievements. Permission to use copyrighted material must be obtained and there must be a distinction between own personal creation and what was shared with other people.⁴ A portfolio is a work-in-progress and should be updated with each new achievement and each new project that is completed. Portfolio owners should not be concerned if there is not initially a lot to put in it as it will grow over time. Whenever the person participates in a project or committee, or produces something, it should be analysed and if appropriate added to the portfolio to represent that achievement.^{5,6}

THE ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO

Electronic portfolios are typically designed as web pages and are posted to an Internet location or burned onto a CD to be used as a tool to SUPPLEMENT the hard-copy version of a portfolio. It is important that an electronic portfolio has a professional appearance and is easy to navigate.^{1,3} A poorly made electronic portfolio could present a person negatively to a prospective employer.

CONCLUSION

Although it can be hard work to get a professional portfolio started, once the first major job of assembling the necessary items and creating the master portfolio has been completed, it will then become a simple job of merely adding new items as they become available. Therefore, a professional portfolio, if updated regularly, will be a valuable career tool.

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