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Preparing a portfolio

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“Why should I hire you?” In this tough job market, it's time to stop simply telling potential employers about the work you have done. You need to show them. To do that, consider compiling a personal portfolio, the natural alternative to an ineffective résumé.

“An accomplishments portfolio sends an important message,” says Andrea Sittig-Rolf, author of “Revolutionize, Revitalize and Rev Your Résumé: Create Your Accomplishments Portfolio and Land Your Dream Job” (Thomson West, 2009). “You're telling someone you're confident, organized and a number of other important qualities. It's like an audition, and you're showing a lot about who you are.”

According to Tim Conway, owner of Chicago-based career coaching firm Ignite Young Adults, personal portfolios began in the 1950s as a way for students studying to become teachers to present lesson plans to prospective principals. Since then they have evolved into resources for many different professionals to show proof of their capabilities. He says portfolios are now viewed as essential in many fields.

To begin, Conway recommends putting aside ample time to collect any material reflecting relevant skills and accomplishments: recent assignments, awards, certificates and more. Significant school projects and papers can also be included.

Next, begin to filter your work. Choose about five examples of your very best work. Though a thick portfolio might feel impressive, it's more important to put the emphasis on quality, rather than quantity.

Finally, consider your portfolio's design. Personal portfolios can come in a variety of forms depending on the industry, experience and technological savvy of a jobseeker. Sittig-Rolf says she prefers notebook portfolios, small three-ring binders containing relevant tabbed sections to demonstrate accomplishments and successes.

“I like the notebook idea because it stands out in a digital age,” she says. “It's a nice, personal way of getting someone's attention because it physically takes up space on a manager's desk. Plus, those managers might be older people who feel more comfortable dealing with a notebook rather than a CD or something online.”

Sittig-Rolf's own portfolio contains the following categories: Résumé, Awards, Testimonials, Reference, Special Projects, Training, Skills Profile and Qualifications.

“Those categories are simply a starting point,” she says. “Put emphasis on the oddities that make you a commodity, the qualities and successes that will make you resonate with employers.”

Conway believes a digital portfolio is best. He says a résumé can only give a potential employer limited insight into an individual's education and experience. By comparison, a digital portfolio can show a hiring

manager the full spectrum of a jobseeker's talents and abilities, providing tangible, visually compelling evidence.

Digital portfolios can come in the form of CDs, USB flash drive or even a personal Web site to house files of your résumé, clips, photos, videos and other important visuals. Conway recommends trying free online services, such as VisualCV.com, to create interactive online portfolios using simple templates.

"A résumé will help open the door, but a portfolio secures a job offer," Conway says. "I think it's a requirement now to present a portfolio because if you don't, you will be out-hustled by someone who does."

A current portfolio can become a valuable tool during many phases of a career, from a job search to negotiating a raise.

"It's a lifelong tool, not a one-time use," Conway says. "Though the initial investment might be hours of your time, the payback is almost endless because it opens so many doors not just for a job candidate, but for any employee."

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