Portfolios for Technical Communicators: Worth the Work

Y ou know you're a talented, professional technical communicator, but how do you prove it? As technical communicators seek to expand their knowledge and employment opportunities, the best method for showcasing their talents often remains a mystery. A resume does not always tell the whole story.

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Most technical communicators and employers agree that a portfolio provides an advantage in searching for a job or in seeking placement as a freelancer, but there does not seem to be a single reference source that explains how to assemble a portfolio.

This article attempts to answer two questions posed by technical communicators about portfolios: What do I put in my portfolio? and What do I put my portfolio in? It also briefly discusses employers' responses to portfolios, to convey the importance of a portfolio in the hiring process.

Portfolio Overview

A professional portfolio offers your prospective or current employer real evidence of your skills and successes. Because it gives the employer evidence of your abilities, the portfolio may provide an alternative to checking references.

Above all else, the portfolio should convey a sense of professionalism. In the changing job market, your portfolio may be your ticket to a new job. Your skills and experience (not your job title or tenure) will pave the way to new career opportunities. Of course, you will use your portfolio when you seek a new employer or begin to freelance, but you may also use it to pursue advancement or pay raises with your current employer. Showing skill development or major accomplishments will certainly lend credibility to a promotion or raise request.

What Do I Put in My Portfolio?

As you build a portfolio, your primary goal should be to present your best work professionally. Each portfolio, whether from a recent graduate with no work experience or from a technical communications professional with twenty years of experience, should contain some common items:

Resume

There are many excellent resources available on writing resumes. Many are how-to books that lead the reader through exercises on identifying skills and experiences to include on the resume. Choose the resource that suits your needs. When you have developed your resume, put several copies in your portfolio's first plastic cover to have available at the interview. The employer may not have received the resume from human resources or may have invited others to meet you.

References

Your list of references may include college professors, former employers or clients, and any internship supervisors. Provide the reference's name, address, telephone number, and a brief paragraph explaining what the reference knows about you. Knowing what to ask

each reference concerning your employment history saves the employer time asking questions the reference cannot answer. Again, you may want to include several copies of your references page in the second plastic cover.

Testimonials and Awards

Your testimonials may include letters of recommendation and thank-you letters from previous clients. Also list any awards you have won that pertain to your technical communication skills and abilities. For example, awards in the international technical publications competition and the international technical art competition sponsored by STC are wonderful testaments to the quality of your work.

Group Affiliations

Finally, group affiliations (such as the Society for Technical Communication) can boost your professional image before your employer or client ever looks at your work. Membership in professional societies shows that you care about your career and your profession. Your STC membership certificate is an excellent addition to your portfolio.

Writing Samples

Following these general materials, present different types of writing samples. The primary differences between a professional and a student portfolio are the length of employment experience and the body of work from which to choose samples.

The Professional Portfolio

When deciding what to put into your portfolio, keep in mind that the work you have done for a company or client may be confidential. If so, showing it to your potential future employer may not be appropriate. It could be that the company you're interviewing with is a competitor of the one you last worked for.

Even if that's not the case, your work may be owned by the company or client for whom you were working. The solution is to get permission from your former employers if there's any question in your mind. Usually, they'll agree, and they'll appreciate that you asked. (Just because you're looking for a new job doesn't mean you want to burn any bridges.)

Show Your Products

A professional technical communicator will likely have a body of work from which to pull samples. Often, the most difficult thing to do is pull only the best, most relevant work for inclusion in your portfolio. You want to appear professional and competent but not redundant in choosing samples.

You may want to include articles, training materials, sample pages from manuals, technical illustrations or graphics, or procedure sheets. Show a broad range of skills, but don't duplicate skills in your samples. If a piece presented you with a special challenge, you may want to include a cover sheet detailing the challenge and what you did to overcome it.

Showing multimedia or online work in a portfolio can be difficult. One solution is to reproduce key screens from the project in color and use a cover sheet to explain the project. Another option is to recreate the project on a stand-alone diskette that you can run independently. Use a laptop computer or the employer's or client's equipment to show your project, if he or she is interested in a live demonstration.

Show Your Results

If you have worked in an organization that conducts customer satisfaction surveys, you may want to include the results that pertain to you and your work. They can be very telling about your ability to meet customer expectations and produce a quality product. Customer satisfaction surveys can also be used to show the varied clients you have served and projects you have completed.

If you will be using your portfolio to earn a promotion or a raise at your current position, select samples that highlight your successes, especially on high-profile projects. If you have worked on a project that is particularly meaningful to your boss, select samples from that one. Because you know the company and the people, you will have the advantage of choosing portfolio samples that show your contributions to your department's or your company's success.

What Not to Include

Do not try to include everything you have ever worked on. Even if it is possible to fit it all neatly into your binder, not everything is your best work. Include what is impressive and what best demonstrates your talents and worth to your client. If you are not certain about your choices, ask a trusted friend or colleague to review your portfolio and suggest improvements.

The Student Portfolio

As a student, you may not have vast work experience to draw on in assembling a portfolio, but you probably have more material than you think.

It may be a good idea to include a copy of your transcript behind your resume. This proves to your potential employer or client that you have completed your course of study. It also shows how well you did in your classes.

What to Include

Pull your samples from your class work. Use papers, technical illustrations and graphics, reports, scripts, and lab reports. Always make any corrections suggested by your professor and include the clean copy in your portfolio.

If you have prepared and delivered presentations in your schoolwork, a color printout of the presentation may be an appropriate addition. Use a cover sheet to explain the purpose of the presentation, any special challenges, and what you did to overcome them.

Bulking Up

To bulk up a small body of work, use a cover sheet in front of every sample. When creating the cover sheets, always use the same layout, font, and writing style. No matter how diverse the samples in between, the style of your cover sheets will create a unified whole. Different styles of cover sheets will distract the employer or client from your work.

What Not to Include

A student portfolio, like a professional portfolio, is not the place to show everything you have ever worked on. Include only your best work. If you have trouble deciding, consult a trusted professor or mentor for a second opinion on questionable pieces.

What Do I Put My Portfolio In?

Once you have decided to create a

Portfolio Checklist

This table shows some basic items that students and professional technical communicators might include in their portfolios, and suggests the order of the materials within the portfolio.

STUDENT	PROFESSIONAL
Resume and Transcript	Resume
References *Include a list of references from college professors, internships, and part-time jobs related to the field.*	References *Include a list of references from former employers and clients.*
Testimonials and Awards *Include all letters of recommendation and any relevant awards.*	Testimonials and Awards *Include all letters of recommendation and any relevant awards.*
Group Affiliations *Include documents that show extracurricular participation and activities. Also include affiliation with relevant professional groups or associations—even student memberships.*	Group Affiliations *Include documents that show affiliation with relevant professional groups, such as STC.*
Samples *Include a cover sheet for each sample to help bulk up a small body of work or to explain any special challenges that you faced and how you overcame them.*	Samples *Include a cover sheet for each sample to help bulk up a small body of work or to explain any special challenges that you faced and how you overcame them.*

professional portfolio and have gathered samples of your work, you must decide what to put it all in.

Every office supply store sells leather portfolio binders. Some of them cost $100 or more. A new leather portfolio is impressive looking, but can you afford to replace it when it no longer looks new?

If you purchase an expensive portfolio, you may be tempted to continue to use it even when it no longer "fits" your material. As you progress in your career, you will want to add pieces to your portfolio. If your expensive binder is too small, it may begin to bulge. This is not a professional look. If you purchase a large portfolio to begin with, the few pieces you start out with will look lost.

An excellent alternative is an inexpensive three-ring notebook with a black cover. A good-quality notebook costs around $10 and is available in sizes from 1/2 inch to 5 inches. When it is scuffed and worn, it can be replaced easily. You can purchase a notebook to fit the amount of material you have now and grow into the next size notebook as you progress in your career. You may want to

consider adding index tabs to divide your work samples into categories, such as user manuals, brochures, and help systems.

If you have pieces in your portfolio that cannot be replaced, plastic covers are a necessity. Losing your best work to wear and tear could be devastating. Top-load, three-hole punched, non-glare sheet protectors are available at any office supply store.

If you create stand-alone diskettes for online or multimedia projects, place them in diskette sleeves that can be purchased at an office supply store. These diskette sleeves are punched for three-ring binders and will fit neatly into your portfolio.

Employers' Impressions

Doug Davis, CEO of ProEdit, Inc., a nationwide staffing and placement service, says that portfolios or samples are essential for technical communicators. "When you select a sample, you must ensure that it is perfect," says Davis. He also recommends having two or three other technical writers review your writing samples to make sure they are editorially clean and truly represent your best work. Davis suggests that you

keep the samples short, including a lot of different types of samples. Make sure they are easy to copy, fax, or e-mail. Portfolios are crucial for building your credibility as someone who can do the assignment—the portfolio shows you've done the same type of work in the past. Fancy binding and colored paper don't matter. High-quality samples, free of typos, bad formatting, and grammatical errors, are what will help your odds at an interview.

Jeff Haas, president of Haas Consulting, Inc., agrees. "For hardcopy portfolios, I think it's important for the samples to be flashy yet pertinent. Still, it's important that the samples relate to the prospective employer's business, if at all possible."

Both employers were very enthusiastic about hiring technical communicators with portfolios. Both thought that a portfolio gave an applicant a definite edge over applicants without portfolios.

When you accept an interview for a new position, ask questions about the kind of work for which the position will be responsible. Then move samples that are especially applicable to the position to the front of your portfolio. As you interview and discuss the job requirements, flip to the samples of your work that are similar to the duties of the new position. This will show your prospective employer that you understand the job requirements and that you have experience with similar work.

Conclusion

Though it will take some time and some effort, assembling a professional portfolio will give you an advantage when you are searching for a position. The most difficult thing to do when putting together a portfolio is to remember to choose only your best work to use as samples. Above all, a portfolio should convey your professionalism and organizational skills. Whether you use it to search for a new job or to enhance a current position through raises or promotions, a portfolio highlights your value to the organization. ❶

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