by Pauline Dewan

Looking for a Library Job? Create an E-Portfolio

Are you a recent library graduate looking for a job? Or are you a librarian dissatisfied with your current position and considering a move? You might be working on contract, scanning job postings for a new position.

Whatever the reason, you already know that the state of the job market is not encouraging. Although unemployment rates are slowly improving, they are still high (8.3% in Canada and 9.7% in the United States, as of February 2010). Jobs in libraries are few, and the competition for them is steep. Continually shrinking budgets force libraries to make do with less, and force job candidates to become more resourceful. In this economic climate, it is critical to demonstrate your value to employers and differentiate yourself from the competition. You probably have an up-to-date resumé, but have you considered creating an online portfolio?

Just what is an e-portfolio and who is using them?

Fine arts, communications studies, architecture and advertising job candidates have known for years the value of a portfolio. Developed in the mid-20th century, the paper portfolio is a portable container such as a binder or box used to showcase the work of job candidates. Teachers were early adopters of portfolios, using them to document their careers, and including in them such artifacts as awards, certificates, curriculum plans, case studies, rubrics and unit plans. Educators have also long recognized the benefits of portfolios, both electronic and paper, for students. The learning portfolio is used in all levels of education as an assessment, communication and personal development tool, providing "a structure for students to reflect systematically over time on the learning process and to develop the aptitudes, skills, and habits that come from critical reflection."[1]

Career portfolios, as Flanigan and Amiran point out, are "collections of artefacts used to validate claims made by the creator."[2] Think of them as "materials selected by us to help in the presentation of ourselves to others in the way we choose."[3] The career e-portfolio is simply an online extension of the portfolio concept, facilitated by developments in electronic formats – developments that have made these tools far easier to create, use and manage than was previously possible. Although an e-portfolio can be created on a CD or DVD, the most popular format is a website.

Why create an e-portfolio?

Creating a professional online presence is now more important than ever. A 2007 poll indicated that at least a quarter of all employers conduct an Internet search of job candidates before hiring them. A recent survey also found that 72% of companies plan to increase their use of social networks for job recruiting.[4] If employers are searching the Internet for information about you, give them a professionally created website that will increase your chances of getting a job. And since e-portfolio websites can be accessed anytime from almost any place, they are an easy and convenient tool for employers to use.

From an employer's perspective, claims on a resumé are just that: claims. Hiring and training the wrong employee can be an expensive mistake. A candidate can profess to be a talented writer or an innovative thinker but if they create an e-portfolio, they can also demonstrate these claims by supplying samples of their work. An e-portfolio provides proof of skills and competencies, making "key intangibles tangible."[5]

Creating an e-portfolio may help individuals stand out from their competitors, giving them an edge in a tough job market. E-portfolios are self-marketing tools, providing a broader platform than a resumé to showcase talents, achievements and the quality of a candidate's work. A resumé alone may not do justice to educational and occupational experiences. You can list courses and hyperlink to descriptions of them in order to give employers a more complete picture of educational experiences that might benefit their organization. An e-portfolio allows for greater flexibility and versatility of presentation; you can include images, audio and video files to enhance your profile. It can also demonstrate marketing skills and tech savvy, important skills in libraries today.

An e-portfolio can also serve as an occupational repository. By collecting and preserving documents, projects and other artifacts, individuals create a valuable personal repository that can benefit them in a number of

ways. Reports, projects, certificates and other documents that may get lost or misplaced can be scanned or digitally photographed for a permanent record of achievements. Individuals can create a lifelong electronic record of achievements that might otherwise be forgotten. This record can guide resumé creation and boost confidence in interviews. Such a repository can also act as an impetus to professional development, becoming a benchmark and touchstone for career tracking.

As a career development tool that allows individuals to track their progress and achievements, the e-portfolio can serve as a motivational tool, providing direction and purpose. The act of creating one will stimulate personal reflection, self-evaluation and increased self-knowledge, prompting "insights that will influence future activities."[6] With greater awareness of their skills and accomplishments, individuals will start to think in terms of portfolio opportunities.

What format is best?

Think in terms of a dual portfolio. First create a master repository portfolio, one that only you will see. Include within it as many electronic artifacts as you can find about yourself. Store these electronic records in a personal file on your computer. From this large base, create a presentation e-portfolio, selecting relevant material that employers will see.

Why create both? Having a large base of files to work with will give you greater flexibility in customizing your presentation e-portfolio as employment circumstances change. In the future, you may want to apply for a different library position and include other sample artifacts in your presentation portfolio.

Although job candidates can provide employers with a CD or DVD portfolio, they will have better success with a website. In a recent survey, 95% of employers indicated that they preferred web-based portfolios to other formats.[7] What if you do not have the technical skills to create your own site? Google Sites (www.google.com/sites) provides free website templates, and e-portfolio hosting sites such as Coroflot (www.coroflot.com), Carbonmade (www.carbonmade.com) or VisualCV (www.visualcv.com) are also free and easy to use.

What should an e-portfolio include?

What should you include in your large repository? Take pictures of artifacts related to your skills and abilities; scan awards, certificates and documents that demonstrate achievements; collect projects, presentations, documents and research papers from school, work and co-op placements. Do not limit yourself to text; think in terms of a variety of audio, video and image files. When you build your presentation website, anticipate the skills that library employers will want and select examples from your repository that best demonstrate those competencies.

Tips for a successful e-portfolio

To be effective, an e-portfolio should convey its purpose clearly, focus on the needs of the employer, organize content in a logical and intuitive way, provide easy navigation, and convey an authoritative impression. These objectives are the cornerstone of an effective e-portfolio and should underpin every decision regarding it. Keep in mind the following additional points:

- First impressions are crucial. Your portfolio site should be aesthetically pleasing, uncluttered, well organized, and restrained in the use of colours and fonts. Include plenty of white space so that the eye will have somewhere to rest.
- Spelling mistakes, proofreading errors and grammatical mistakes will convey an impression of sloppiness and unprofessionalism.
- Less is more. Avoid the temptation of including too much on your site. Employers are bound by time constraints, so pare your site down to essentials.
- Test your site on different browsers and in a variety of screen resolutions.
- Make sure your site loads quickly. Employers do not have the luxury of time.
- Use PDF files for samples of your work. PDFs are cross-platform formats.
- Do not upload anything to your website that is private or confidential in nature.
- Finally, remember to update your e-portfolio as circumstances change.

Notes

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(2007): 19; Karen Schuele and Roland Madison, "Navigating the 21st Century Job Search," *Strategic Finance* 91, no. 7 (2010): 52.
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7. Chris Ward and Chris Moser, "E-Portfolios as a Hiring Tool: Do Employers Really Care?" *Educause Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2008): 14.

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