Creating Your Professional Online Portfolio Doesn’t Have to Be Hard

by Ross Wade

Creating an online portfolio can be daunting. Traditionally photographers, designers, film/video editors, and other creative types have used portfolios, but I think everyone should have some kind of online portfolio. Now don’t freak out – ha! Your industry and career goals determine the kind of portfolio you will have and the tools you will use, which leads me to an important point: Not all portfolios should be the same.

Some answers and ideas to some common portfolio questions:

Do I need a portfolio?
The short answer is…Yes! Whether you are an artist, entertainer, event planner, PR specialist, or biomedical engineer, you should consider an online portfolio or some kind of online presence reflecting your work. After all, isn’t an “online presence” a kind of professional portfolio anyway? There are a bazillion different platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Behance, Instagram, and Weebly) to choose from, so you must think strategically (Who is your audience? and What do they need/want?) as to which type is best for you. Portfolios are a no-brainer for some industries—they’re a professional standard. For example, a graphic designer needs a platform that will show his or her work in a very dynamic and visual way, while also sharing the work with others. Therefore, Behance or Carbonmade, platforms specifically for visual arts and networking, are a couple of strong platforms worth consideration. But what about non-artsy-fartsy careers…like, say…a career adviser (that’s me)?

As a career adviser, I have an online portfolio/presence, and yes, there are some visual and artistic pieces, but when determining what platforms to use, I had to consider my audience (students, peer career advisers, employers) and their needs/wants (tools for learning, inspiration for the job/intern search, paths of communication for sharing talent and opportunities). LinkedIn, for me, is a must, as it allows me to share my experience chronologically and visually. My LinkedIn profile is, by all intents and purposes, a virtual resume, but I’m also able to share writing, presentations, and design. I see many of my students and clients not maximizing LinkedIn by adding examples of their work, and I feel like they are selling themselves short. My social media platforms are added to my LinkedIn profile, but in addition, I use About.me as a fun and creative hub for sharing all of my social media. You may be thinking…”Are social media skills portfolio worthy?”…Yes! Social media skills (e.g. strategy, writing, curating content) are highly valuable, and should absolutely be a part of your portfolio.

What should I put in my portfolio?
Think strategically. Who is your audience, and what do they need/want? Portfolios should contain your best work—not all of your work—and be sorted by skill. Spend some time thinking about and writing down all that you do professionally, and then sort by skill and the level of
importance to your audience; or try re-organizing your resume by skill. These two exercises will not only clarify the more obvious skills you use, but will also bring to light other skills that you may not have considered before. Even a photographer can breakdown his skills so they are more apparent to his audience. Photography is more than “point and click”—different styles require different skills. The portfolio of a photographer could be sorted into many skills/styles including: journalistic, portraits, landscapes, fashion, and black and white.

Writing, career development programming, poster/flyer design, social media, and presentations are the skills I reflect in my portfolio/online presence. I use LinkedIn to share my presentations and design; WordPress for my writing; Twitter and LinkedIn for content curation; and I bring it all together in one package on my About.me profile.

One tip for reflecting programming or events in portfolios is to have a picture of the event/program and discuss it using a variation of the good old S-T-A-R method—challenge, action, result.

Note: Always make sure that you get employer consent prior to posting work examples from a past internship or job.

What are some resources for creating an online portfolio?
Don’t recreate the wheel by trying to build your own website from scratch (unless you are a web developer). We want viewers to see your skills and work, and not get sidetracked by a poorly designed and constructed site. There are many free and intuitive resources out there to choose from. Weebly and Wix are good drop-and-drag resources with templates for creating websites. Carbonmade and Behance are great for design/branding/photography/fashion portfolios. Of course if you are a financial analyst or an accountant, LinkedIn may be all that you need.

How do I share my portfolio?
There are some basic and advanced ways of sharing your portfolio and professional work. Start by adding your portfolio link to your e-mail signature, business card, resume header, and LinkedIn profile. More advanced methods include engaging with other professionals through social media. Example include writing a blog post and tweeting it or posting photography on Instagram with strategic tags to draw a greater audience. I’ve had students create portfolios and ask for feedback from professionals through LinkedIn groups or Behance.

A few other thoughts.
Academic portfolios are different than professional portfolios. I understand some universities have, or are in the process of considering, requiring an academic portfolio piece for students. The purpose of this requirement is to assess students’ learning over the course of their college careers. These academic portfolios may include reflections on experiences (e.g. study abroad, volunteer service), graded writing from first year through senior year, general professor feedback on assignments, and more. It shows growth of skills and learning within an academic context.
However, a *professional* portfolio reflects your best work (meeting the needs and standards of an industry/employer).

Could academic portfolios be repurposed into professional portfolios? I don’t see why not—in fact I love the idea! It would be a wonderful learning experience for students, as they would directly see how their academic and developmental experiences translate to professional skills—connecting college to career.

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*Courtesy of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.*