

CHAPTER 41

WHY PORTFOLIOS ARE IMPORTANT FOR ENGINEERS

From my informal surveys of engineers, I have discovered a very high percentage who do not have a portfolio of their work. When I ask why not, most engineers respond with the same line: engineers don't need portfolios. Then I challenge their thinking by pointing out all the other professional careers that necessitate the use of a portfolio. Lawyers have portfolios, as do architects, doctors, accountants, investment brokers, and politicians, and I am sure there are many more. I point out these professions find it extremely important for their career to have an impressive portfolio, so why do engineers think it is not necessary and never bother to assemble a portfolio? Are engineers missing something?

Yes, engineers without a portfolio are missing an extremely important career aid. As shown in Figure 41-1, having a great portfolio is part of the job search process. Having an impressive portfolio can make all the difference in the world when you are interviewing and is often a key discriminator between you and others interviewing for a job. In this chapter, I will show how you can quickly and easily assemble a portfolio that gets you hired.

WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EXCELLENT ENGINEERING PORTFOLIO?

An overview of a portfolio with some recommended items to use is shown in Figure 41-2. The first task in assembling your portfolio is to visit several office supply stores and look at the presentation booklets. Select one with a high quality cover and which has multiple clear pockets in the inside.

I recommend not buying a cheap book report binder kids use for homework or three ring binder since you are trying to impress people. It should have a sturdy cover and be only about $\frac{1}{2}$ " to 1" thick when completed so that it can be easily carried around during the interview. The clear plastic pockets should be hardbound into the cover and capable of holding $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ " sheets of

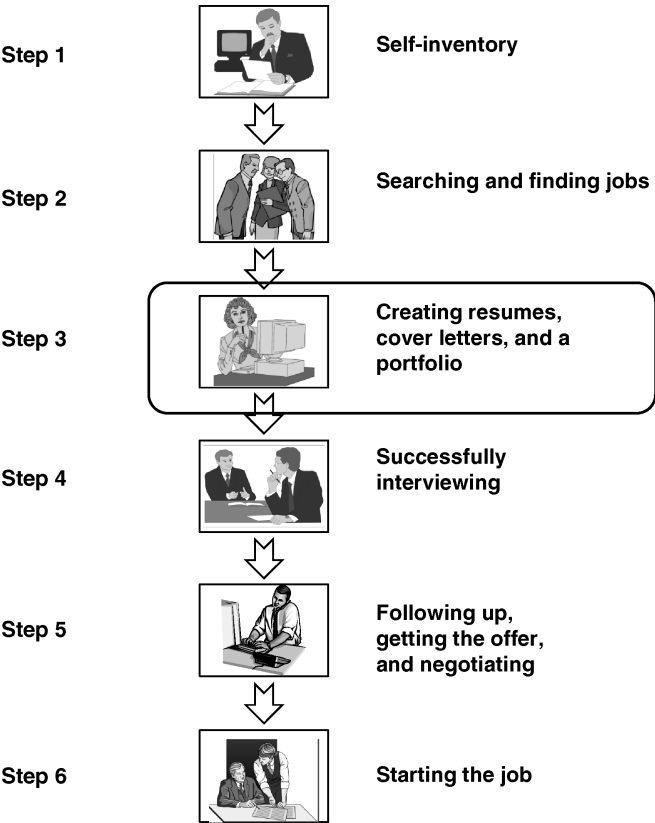


FIGURE 41-1 Job search process step 3—creating portfolios.

paper. I recommend you stay away from 11" × 17" foldouts unless absolutely necessary. You want everything to fit neatly into a pocket and not fall out when you are paging through or if you accidentally drop it. Make sure the portfolio is well-constructed and will hold everything tightly in place.

► **Career Tip.** Buy a high-quality portfolio.

Once you have a portfolio selected, your next task is to collect the material you want to put in. As shown in Figure 41-2, the following are some of the recommended items you may want to place in your portfolio.

Resume. Place your resume in the pocket directly under the cover, so it is the first thing you see when opening up your portfolio. The resume acts like the table of contents to the portfolio. When you are discussing your resume and come to a point you would like to emphasize, you simply flip back a few pages to what you want to show. When you are done showing the supporting material, simply return to the resume and continue. Since the resume acts

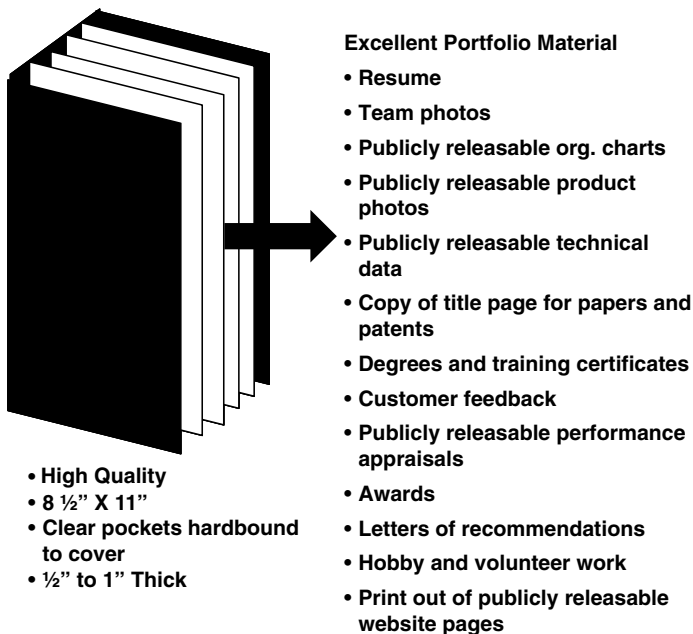


FIGURE 41-2 Portfolio overview.

like a table of contents, the supporting material following the resume should be in the same sequence as you have written your resume. The following are recommended items to put in your resume and are in no particular order.

► **Career Tip.** Arrange the material in your portfolio to follow the order of your resume.

Team Photos. Team photos are excellent for portfolios since they allow people to see the size of the team and at the same convey a very positive team player and people-oriented image. Team photos are great to emphasize especially when talking to Human Resources personnel.

Publicly Releasable Product Photos. Visit your marketing department and pick up a few product brochures or print-out copies from your company's public website.

► **Career Tip.** Make sure all materials in the portfolio are approved for public release by your company. **DONOT** show any proprietary information. Showing proprietary information without prior approval can get you fired.

Publicly Releasable Organization Charts. Any publicly releasable organization charts with your name on the chart showing how you fit into the

organization. This is beneficial since it lets people see the size of your organization and your role. Interviewing managers are most interested in this.

Publicly Releasable Technical Data. Do you have any impressive publicly releasable technical data to show? 3-D graphs are really impressive and interviewers with a technical background like to see the technical depth of your work.

Papers and Patents. Put a copy of the cover page for any significant papers or patents you have published or received. Only putting a copy of the title page keeps down the volume of paper you have in the portfolio. If you have published multiple papers or received multiple patents, do not put them all in, but create a list and put the list in a pocket. Only put copies of title pages for the most important one or two in the portfolio. Again, people with a technical background will be impressed by this.

Degrees and Training Certificates. Put a copy of your degrees above and beyond your basic engineering degree, like an MBA or second technical degree. Did you take any special training and receive a certificate for successfully completing the training? These certificates make excellent portfolio items since they show how you are willing to update and improve yourself.

Customer Feedback. Do you have any letters, notes, or emails from customers who were extremely happy with your work? These are also excellent portfolio items.

Awards. Include any awards you have won from the company. Also include technical awards from outside the company. These are great portfolio items since they show your technical expertise and your work has been recognized not only in the company, but outside.

Performance Review. Do you have a copy of a very recent and publicly releasable performance review where you receive an outstanding rating? These are clear evidence that you are a superior performer.

Letters of Recommendation. If you have on your resume, letters of recommendation available upon request, there is no better place to store them than your portfolio. It's mighty impressive to simply flip to them in your portfolio and briefly show they exist and the excellent recommendations about you.

Community Service and Volunteer Work. A single page showing your community involvement and volunteer work is always good. Human Resources personnel will relate to this.

Only One Page of Personal/Hobbies. Please keep this to one page and make this the very last thing you talk about in an interview since it does not relate to your job. A simple montage of photos of you enjoying your hobbies or family goes a long way in showing your personality type.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERVIEWING WITH A PORTFOLIO TO ASSIST IN GETTING YOU HIRED

There is a strategy to interviewing with a portfolio. This strategy goes along the line of letting you take control of the interview and slowly walk through

your resume and the supporting material in the portfolio. Some people doing the interview will not be receptive to this and want to control every aspect. They have a set way of doing interviews and do not want to deviate from it. If this is the case, then you need to follow their lead and simply fill in the blanks as they march through their process. Trying to get them to do it your way will only make them frustrated and want to move your resume to the bottom of the pile. To effectively respond to this style of interviewing, you will have to jump around your resume and portfolio as they bring up each point.

People who are open to letting you talk will ask questions like, “tell me about yourself.” This is an indication that the interviewer wants to see how well-organized you are and how well you discuss your qualifications. At this point in the interview, ask if you can show your resume and portfolio. If they respond positively you are good to go.

Make sure there is a table or desk you can place your portfolio on where both of you can easily read it. The best is if the interviewer can sit next to you, side-by-side, to review your portfolio. If at all possible, move to the interviewer’s side of the table as you go through the portfolio. If you cannot be alongside the interviewer, then you better be able to point to things and read upside down. Do not be constantly turning the portfolio around so you can read it and in doing so, make the interviewer read it upside down.

Do not go through all the material in your portfolio with every interviewer. You should know the background of the person you are interviewing with and flip only to the pages that you think are of most interest. For example, if you are interviewing with a purely technical person chances are they are going to be most interested in your technical expertise and accomplishments and not your team pictures, hobbies, and volunteer activities; a technical interviewer will be impressed with your papers and patents. However, if you are interviewing with a person from Human Resources, more than likely they are not interested in your technical background as much as people skills, which means they will relate more to your personal items such as team pictures, hobbies, and volunteer activities.

The key to a successful interview using a portfolio is to make sure you emphasize the material that best fits the person sitting across the table from you asking the questions. Correspondingly, an interview killer is to spend too much time on areas in your portfolio that do not relate to the interviewer’s interest.

► **Career Tip.** Tailor the use of your portfolio to match the needs of the person interviewing you and be prepared to review upside down.

Limit the amount of time you spend on the support material in the portfolio. It is too easy to get sidetracked and start telling stories about your experience when showing team photos and products. Limit your discussion to a 1 to 2 minute review per support item and make sure you emphasize why it is

important they see this. You may feel very tempted to discuss what fun it was and the great team party at the end of the project; however this will not get you hired. You can use a team photo to lead into a discussion of how the multifunctional team was comprised of software, electrical, mechanical, chemical, and nuclear engineers all located in separate locations. Your job was to lead the team and they successfully completed the project on time and on cost in spite of being located in three separate sites across the nation. This type of discussion about the team photo will get you hired.

► **Career Tip.** When showing portfolio materials limit the amount of time on any one page and make sure you quickly get to the point.

Portfolios need updating at least once a year and absolutely before a new interview. Your portfolio, like your resume, needs to be specifically tailored or focused to the specific qualifications of the job. Use the job ad to guide you when you update or modify your portfolio.

SUMMARY

Creating a portfolio is easy to do and can be fun. Purchase a high-quality binder at your local office supply store. Identify the items you want to place in your portfolio and start collecting them. Keep your eyes open during your normal work day for items you may want to place in your portfolio. The more pictures, graphs, and awards, the better. Organize your portfolio to follow your resume. Practice interviewing with your portfolio and make sure you can do it right side up and upside down. Tailor your use of the portfolio to match the interviewer's background.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 Describe how you would use your portfolio during the interview.
- 2 Why should you practice talking with your portfolio upside down?
- 3 How often should you update your portfolio?