Developing a
Web-Based
Portfolio

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After years of assembling, maintaining, distributing, and occasionally losing paper-based portfolios, technical communicators should be ready to consider transitioning their portfolios from paper to a Web-based medium. Web-based portfolios are personalized Web sites that use modern technology (such as HTML, word processing applications, and Adobe *Acrobat*) to present examples of your skills to potential employers.

Benefits

On first consideration, building a Web-based portfolio may seem like an arduous task that promises little reward. But in reality, it will streamline the future tasks and reduce the costs associated with maintaining and distributing your portfolio. The benefits of a Web-based portfolio include portability, the ease with which it can be updated, the ability of prospective employers to review your portfolio prior to an interview, the opportunity to

show functional examples of your skills, and reduced production costs.

Portability

Let's face it: Lugging a comprehensive paper-based portfolio containing hardcopies of your work (several-hundred-page manuals, magazines, Web site and online help printouts, for example) to a job interview is a cumbersome task. While interviews alone can be stressful, you only exacerbate the stress by having to carry and keep track of all your portfolio material.

With a Web-based portfolio, your samples, whether stored on a Web server, CD, diskette, or laptop computer, are much easier to transport to job interviews. Although it is important to have a few extra hardcopies of your résumé handy during an interview, you do not need to bring much more if you use a Web-based portfolio. In all probability (as I'll discuss later) your interviewers will review your portfolio prior to your interview, but if they do not, you can reference specific samples using an interviewer's PC. Since there is no guarantee you will have access to a PC during your interview, I recommend storing your entire portfolio on a laptop computer and bringing the laptop (with fully charged batteries) to your interview.

Easy Updates

Since Web-based portfolios present samples in electronic format, updating portfolio content is as easy as updating individual documents and ensuring that the portfolio references them properly. In paper-based portfolios, updating one section could involve modifying a document, printing the document, photocopying the printed document, removing the outdated content, inserting the new content, and rebinding the entire portfolio. Your time would be better spent on more worthwhile endeavors.

Prior Review

One of the most compelling benefits of a Web-based portfolio is that interviewers can thoroughly review your portfolio prior to your interview. Otherwise, in many instances, an interviewer's first exposure to your samples comes during

Michael Shay/Taxi

> # Your portfolio itself is an example of your expertise.

the actual interview. For various reasons, interviews do not present the best opportunity for potential employers to consider your samples. Reviewing portfolios during an interview can lead to awkward page-flipping through your portfolio, cursory glances at material, and lack of focus on interview questions.

In contrast, access to a Web-based portfolio lets interviewers consider your samples thoroughly, leading to targeted interview questions that enable you to expound on specific assignments and skills. You can use several methods to invite interviewers and potential interviewers to view your portfolio. You can include your Web-based portfolio's URL on your résumés, cover letters, and business cards; specifically mention your Web-based portfolio in your cover letter; and include a CD- or diskette-based copy of your portfolio when submitting your résumé and cover letter to potential employers.

Functional Examples

It has always been difficult to present examples of online design and writing skills in a paper-based portfolio, and in many cases, it just does not make sense to present online material on paper. According to Mike Oboryshko, an independent consultant who uses a Web-based portfolio, "A lot of my best work is online and was never intended to be printed, so I make it available on my Web site." Furthermore, for the skilled Web designer (or for the novice designer with a little practice), the Web-based portfolio itself presents a functional example of Web design and communication skills. Your Web-based portfolio can be built with industry-recognized online help or Web design software packages, or can be

written in HTML with a text editor. Whatever the method, your portfolio itself is an example of your expertise. "Nowadays, it's not enough to list skills on your résumé—you have to show the goods, too," Oboryshko says. "If you don't have an online portfolio, an employer may suspect you don't have online skills."

Not only does the actual portfolio provide a representation of your Web design skills, you can also link to other online sites that show off your design and writing expertise. With permission from the copyright owners, you can link to Web-based online help systems you created; Web sites you designed, edited, or wrote content for; online articles you wrote; or any other samples of your work that exist on the Internet.

Reduced Production Costs

There is no need to drop a few bucks at your local copy center preparing your paper-based portfolio the night before your big interview. Your Web-based portfolio will eliminate the costs of printing and binding multiple paper copies. Using a Web-based portfolio also eliminates the risk that a paper-based portfolio will not be returned after you leave it with an interviewer, potentially saving further costs.

In addition, you can save money on mailing costs. If your Web-based portfolio is hosted or distributed via e-mail, no mailing costs are involved with submitting it to prospective employers. Even if you choose to mail CD- or diskette-based copies of your Web-based portfolio, these mailing costs are significantly less than those of mailing your paper-based portfolio. You can also eliminate the self-addressed stamped envelopes that are recommended when mailing your portfolio or leaving it with interviewers.

Creating Online Portfolios

Creating a basic Web-based portfolio is fairly straightforward, assuming that you have some basic Web design experience. You can design your portfolio using markup language in a text editor, or you can use any Web design tools with which you are familiar. Your site can be as simple or as complex as you desire, but it should include the varied samples nec-

essary to present an adequate overview of your skills, and it should be designed so that the reviewers can easily discern what they are viewing.

Components

Web-based portfolios should include your résumé and samples of your work that show your experience in writing varied topics for varied audiences and varied media. Explanatory text should accompany each entry or section so that the reviewer understands what the sample is, what tools were used to create the original piece, and any other relevant information.

When including links to sample documents in your portfolio, it is important to provide the documents in a format that is easily viewed with common software applications. For example, rather than linking to a document that is saved in *FrameMaker* format, it may be beneficial to convert the document to PDF and link to it. Linking to the PDF version enables reviewers without *FrameMaker* to view your sample using the Adobe *Acrobat Reader* application available free from *www.adobe.com*. Likewise, it is a good idea to include a statement in your Web-based portfolio explaining your use of PDF and providing a link to download *Acrobat Reader*.

Layout

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the fundamentals of Web layout, it is important to offer some layout tips for your Web-based portfolio. Do the following when creating your Web-based portfolio:

• Use easy-to-follow navigation.
• Group like samples together.
• Create separate documents (.pdf, .doc, etc.) for each sample.
• Use links from Web pages to the sample documents.
• Open linked sample documents in new browser windows.

Ease of navigation could determine how thoroughly a prospective employer reviews your Web-based portfolio. A reviewer who has difficulty navigating your portfolio site may spend little or no time actually reviewing your samples. As

Figure 1. This portfolio example provides a table of contents for easy navigation.
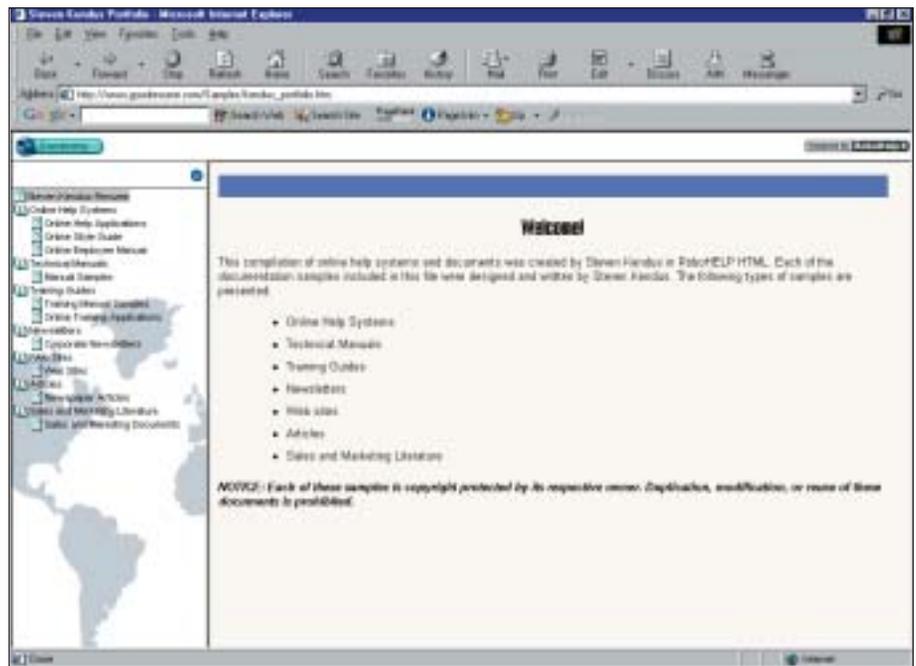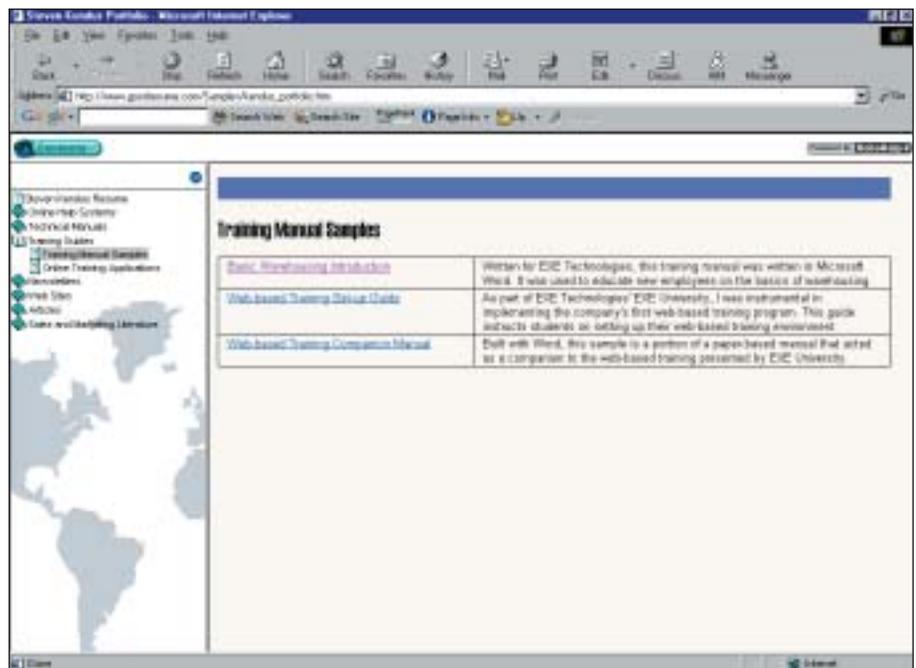

Figure 2. This portfolio example groups similar work samples together.

general rules, use no more than two levels of navigation unless absolutely necessary, and provide navigation elements (menus, tables of contents, buttons) that are accessible from all pages of the application. Figure 1 shows how a table of contents provides simple navigation regardless of the page displayed.

Grouping samples also enhances the usability of your Web-based portfolio. To

enable reviewers to quickly find samples that address their specific needs, it is best to group like samples together. For example, create separate pages or sections for technical documents, training material, and online help. Figure 2 shows how like samples can be logically grouped in a table of contents. Notice how the table of contents references the related page (in the right frame of the window) and pro-

Figure 3. This portfolio example opens an online sample in a new browser window.

vides links to each sample.

Creating separate documents for each sample reduces clutter and enables reviewers to distinguish samples more easily. For example, rather than copying text from multiple training document samples and pasting it into one *Word* document, create a separate *Word* or PDF document for each sample. Likewise, instead of pasting the text directly onto a page of your Web-based portfolio, link to each document individually from the main training documents page.

For the more advanced Web developer, creating links to documents and other sites that open in new browser windows is a useful technique. Opening your linked samples in browser windows separate from the main portfolio window allows reviewers to maintain your portfolio and its navigation as points of reference. Navigating away from the main portfolio site can create confusion. Figure 3 shows a sample displayed in a new browser window that partially covers the main portfolio window.

Tools

As with most documentation tasks, the tools used to build your Web-based portfolio are less important than the portfolio's content. Use any Web design tools you feel comfortable with, as long as they enable you to adequately present your skills and samples to potential employers. Generally, your software library should include three basic tools to assist you in building your Web-based portfolio:

- a Web design application, such as *Dreamweaver*, *FrontPage*, or *RoboHelp HTML*, or a text editor
- an image-editing application, such as *PhotoShop* or *Paint Shop Pro*
- Adobe *Acrobat* (full version that enables PDF creation)

Hosting

For prospective employers to view your Web-based portfolio via the Internet, a Web-connected server must host your portfolio site. Issues of Web hosting are beyond the scope of this article, but know that there could be fees associated with hosting your portfolio and that there are additional tasks involved with managing your files and transferring them to Web servers. Many Internet service providers grant registered users free hosted Web space, and a multitude of hosting companies exist that offer competitive hosting rates. Research Web hosting with your ISP, and ask your friends and colleagues for recommendations. Be sure to choose a hosting provider that not only offers affordable rates but also provides good customer service, since you may need assistance until you become comfortable with Web publishing.

Words of Caution

Although your Web-based portfolio offers many benefits, you should consider some important issues that do not apply to paper-based portfolios. First, anyone with an Internet connection can potentially view your Web-hosted portfolio at any time. Therefore, it is important to maintain some control over how you publicize your portfolio's URL. Password-protecting access to your Web-based portfolio may be necessary in some cases.

Second, potential interviewers can review your material before they ever speak with you. You should strive to include as many diverse samples as possible in your portfolio, since a potential interviewer may be looking for examples of a specific skill. In face-to-face portfolio reviews, interviewers can ask you questions regarding skills they do not see exemplified. In a remote review of your Web-based portfolio, they may conclude that you simply do not have a skill that is not exemplified.

Third, technology is not foolproof. Due to the nature of the technical aspects involved with producing your Web-based portfolio (such as Web hosting and CD burning), there are no guarantees that your portfolio will be accessible where and when it is needed. If a reviewer cannot access your portfolio, it is important to offer an alternative access method and/or a phone number or e-mail address where you can be contacted. As with all of your electronically stored material, be sure to back up your portfolio files often. ●

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